Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine

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DEMOCRACY AND THE DYNAMICS OF DEATH

ORTHODOX REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN, PURPOSE, AND LIMITS OF POLITICS

Perry T. Hamalis

The phrase “shadow of Constantine,” which appears in this volume’s title, can be interpreted as encompassing at least two reflective trajectories. The more common of the two is Constantine’s legacy as the first emperor to self-identify as a Christian. Here, Constantine’s “shadow” includes the sociopolitical repercussions of the coincidence of supreme political power and Christian faith. As other essays in this collection demonstrate, this trajectory raises historical questions—what really happened and why—as well as normative questions—how should the “Constantine event” shape our beliefs and practices today regarding Christianity and politics? A second trajectory of reflection pertains to the Christian theological-ethical tradition, which developed extensively during the remarkably long (1,100+ year) existence of Byzantium and continued, especially in the East, in various Orthodox Christian communities. Again, there are historical and interpretive questions within this trajectory—who developed particular theological claims, why were they developed, and what did they mean—as well as normative claims—how should Byzantine theology be appropriated, applied, and communicated in present-day contexts?

Today’s Orthodox Christian leaders and thinkers unanimously affirm their commitment to preserving and sustaining the “second trajectory” of Constantine’s shadow, Orthodoxy’s theological tradition; however, their
attitudes toward the “first trajectory” lack consensus. Some argue enthusiastically for the compatibility of Orthodoxy with American-style liberal democracy; others call for a neo-Byzantine symphonia model headed by an Orthodox king or queen; and still others express ambivalence over whether or not Orthodoxy can endorse any form of government without significant caveats. For those within or leaning toward the pro-symphonia view, whether rooted in the legacy of Byzantium, Tsarist Russia, or another Constantine-inspired regime, there are ample historical examples and theological-political resources from which to draw, beginning in the early fourth century with Eusebius of Caesarea (260–339 CE) and continuing through the early twentieth century with various pro-imperial or pro-monarchy voices in Russia and the Balkans. For those within or leaning toward the pro—liberal democracy view, however, the case is more difficult to make, since far fewer authoritative sources exist within the Orthodox tradition that explicitly defend—or even critique—democracy using theological arguments. Elizabeth Prodromou refers to this as “the theory gap,” which, she contends, contributes both to the ad hoc quality of Orthodox communities’ strategies for democratization and to the dismissal of Orthodoxy’s tradition as not meriting the attention of scholars. Yet, as Nikolas Gvosdev states, “If democratic forms of government are to take root in cultures that have been shaped by the values and practices of Orthodox Christianity, there must be some [historical or spiritual] foundation upon which such institutions can be constructed.” Put differently, Orthodox thinkers must work to fill “the theory gap” if we hope to better understand both the promises and the pitfalls of democracy for Orthodox Christian communities.

Recent contributions toward this goal have tended to take two forms. Some, like Gvosdev, have started by identifying the defining characteristics of a democracy (popular sovereignty, processes of deliberation/debate, open and free elections, etc.) and have then mined both trajectories of Constantine’s legacy for support. Notwithstanding this approach’s contributions, some general criticisms of it are that it can be anachronistic and, at times, unconvincing in connecting elements of democracy with counterparts in the Orthodox tradition. Representatives of the second approach, like Aristotle Papanikolaou, have argued that one or more core theological-ethical teachings (theosis, the Holy Trinity, personhood, etc.) are expressed well through democratic forms of government. For example, in *The Mystical as Political*, Papanikolaou constructively examines a core theological
Papanikolaou’s strategy is to carry insights from the “second” reflective trajectory of Constantine’s shadow (Eastern Christian theology) into the “first” realm of his shadow (Christian political thought), responding to the question: *On what theological basis, if any, can Orthodox Christians convincingly endorse modern democracy?* Again, while such efforts have yielded important insights, they have also been criticized for their tendency to sanctify democracy as a divine form of government, to advance a rationale for democracy that is wholly unconvincing to non-Christians (if not to non-Orthodox), or to extrapolate theological claims to the realm of politics in ways that are somewhat naïve, if not politically and theologically dangerous.

In what follows, I aim to bridge and complement the two existing approaches by focusing on a theme that is basic to both: the dynamics of death. This term, “the dynamics of death,” encompasses both the predicament of human death and the ways in which the reality and awareness of death shape human life in personal and political contexts. Given the massive scope of this theme and the space limitations of this essay, what follows is a necessarily suggestive argument for the value of “the dynamics of death” as an interpretive lens for examining democracy within contemporary Christian ethics and for building a fresh rationale for democracy from an Orthodox standpoint.

Like Gvosdev, my argument takes seriously the characteristics, potential, and tendencies of real people and real governments. I start with observable human phenomena and historical data that political decision makers must address. Specifically, my points of departure are the drive of human selfishness, the fact of human violence, and the acknowledgment that governments have both prevented and inflicted death on a massive scale—truths pounded into our consciousness by the events of the past century, but nonetheless requiring frequent recollection . . . and prayerful lament. My approach, then, is characteristically modern; Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau have taught me much, and they all began by “taking men as they are and laws as they might be.”

Yet my point of departure also encompasses a set of theological-ethical claims that frame Orthodoxy’s normative vision: (1) Humanity’s predicament
is constituted primarily by the problem of physical and spiritual death; (2) the presence and awareness of this problem forms our lives in profound ways; and (3) the aim of Christian life is resurrection. Thus, like Papanikolaou, I seek to employ a theological-ethical theme drawn from within the Orthodox tradition for reflection on contemporary political thought. Yet, whereas Papanikolaou starts with the telos, or *summum bonum*, of “divine-human communion,” with the fulfilled potential of human persons, or with the “way things ought to be,” I begin with the *summum malum* of human death, with the depths of humanity’s brokenness, or with the “way things are.” This difference carries some important implications. Most significantly, by grounding my account of democracy’s legitimacy upon the given human condition instead of grounding it upon the aim of *theosis*, I am better able to avoid granting democracy an ultimate or sacred status—as the apotheosis of political life—and thus better able to critique some of democracy’s dangers. In addition, the theme of “the dynamics of death” lies at the foundation of modern politics, and of human experience more broadly, in a way that “divine-human communion” does not. This shared ground not only bridges the two general approaches to democracy among recent Orthodox thinkers; it also gives Orthodox theology a political relevance, realism, and appeal to those outside the tradition that is lacking in themes like “divine-human communion” and “communion in otherness.”

My argument in what follows is simultaneously interpretive and constructive. I both demonstrate the value of “the dynamics of death” as a lens for studying Christian political philosophy and defend democracy by utilizing the resources of modern social contract theory, social scientific data, and selected resources of the early Christian, Byzantine, and post-Byzantine tradition. To start on a realistic note, I begin in Part 1 with a discussion of the dynamics of death theme in the writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). While later social contract thinkers like Locke and Montesquieu influence present-day democracies more directly than Hobbes, Hobbes develops the “dynamics of death” theme with an unparalleled incisiveness and lucidity. In addition, some of Hobbes’s most “undemocratic” and dangerous claims become clear through the lens of the dynamics of death, providing an important basis for my critique of his proposal. In Part 2, my focus shifts to several Orthodox sources, examining them against the Hobbesian backdrop. My hope is that the constructive analysis I offer will help identify lineaments of an alternative Orthodox case for democracy and spur additional exploration in this area of inquiry.
The Dynamics of Death: Lessons from Thomas Hobbes

The Predicament of Death and the Origin of the State

At least one major trajectory in modern political philosophy, the social contract tradition, begins in Hobbes’s work with a mythic “state of nature,” characterized by violent death, from which the state/commonwealth is born as a therapeutic response.12 “During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe,” Hobbes writes, “they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.”13 For Hobbes, the pre- or postcivil state of nature is a state of total war, a bellum omnium contra omnes, which allows for no exceptions. It is a most miserable state of affairs, a true “predicament,” which he famously depicts as follows:

In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.14

At its core, the Hobbesian state of nature is an ontological predicament, a state of all-inclusive war and violent physical death. Life is “nasty,” “brutish,” and—most importantly—“short.” Elsewhere in Leviathan Hobbes observes that human beings will risk their lives defending themselves rather than suffer the “greater evil” of a certain and present death.15 A fortiori, Hobbes, in another work, identifies violent death as “the supreme evil [summmum malum] in nature.”16 While violent death is Hobbes’s principal concern, other passages suggest that Hobbes views not merely violent death but death per se as the fundamental human problem.17 He describes death itself as “the greatest of all evils”18 and “that terrible enemy of nature.”19 For him, humanity’s predicament is constituted most fundamentally by the ontological problem of mortality and violence. Second, the state of nature for Hobbes is a predicament not merely on the physical level, but also on the psychological level. It is a state of unceasing danger and “continuall feare.” As such, Hobbes contends, it is a condition of perpetual war: “For Warre, consisteth not in Battell onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract
of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known.”
Thus, on top of actual physical violence, the Hobbesian account of humanity’s state of nature encompasses knowledge that death threatens perpetually, and the continual fear of death that this knowledge fuels. The presence of this intense fear severely limits the ability of human beings to trust one another, to collaborate, or to develop toward any higher possibilities. The Hobbesian view of humanity’s prepolitical condition can be characterized by the “dynamics of death,” wherein death, violence, and continuous fear together comprise a state of misery from which deliverance is urgently needed.

In light of this realistic—if not excessively pessimistic—account of the “way things are” in the state of nature, Hobbes goes on to articulate both the purpose of politics and the primary means through which this purpose is achieved. In doing so, he inaugurates the modern social contract tradition, which is subsequently developed by Locke, Rousseau, the American founders, and many others. With respect to the purpose of politics, Hobbes unambiguously contends that government exists—first and foremost—to protect the lives of citizens. The significance of this point cannot be overstated. Death is what drives humanity’s political impulse; it is the problem that spurs human beings to construct a commonwealth. The legitimacy of the sovereign authority thus stands or falls with its ability to protect the physical lives of its contracting members. “The office of the Soveraign (be it a Monarch, or an Assembly),” Hobbes writes, “consisteth in the end, for which he was trusted with the Soveraign Power, namely the procuration of the safety of the people.” For Hobbes, the state arises as a man-made therapeutic response to the ontological dimension of humankind’s predicament. In light of this, the legitimacy of the state’s sovereign authority depends upon its effectiveness in delivering a life-saving cure. So long as a sovereign authority ensures citizens’ protection, citizens are obligated to recognize its legitimacy and obey its laws. Political legitimacy, for Hobbes, hinges not on the procedural integrity of political institutions but on the sovereign’s effectiveness in providing protection and maintaining peace.

Protecting citizens and maintaining peace might strike us as a truncated political telos—shouldn’t a government do more than this? For Hobbes, a government should establish the conditions of peaceful coexistence where, within limits, human beings can pursue their private happiness and collaborate on endeavors of mutual interest. Like other moderns, he rejects
the view that a universal and comprehensive account of humanity’s *sum-mum bonum* can be known. Hobbes simply expects the civil sovereign to stop the perpetual war and terror that defines the state of nature. Although clearly not a supporter of democracy, Hobbes refuses to articulate a single, substantive account of human felicity, leading some even to identify him as a “proto-liberal.”25

Since death lies at the core of Hobbes’s account of evil, the protection of life effectuated by a government carries tremendous normative value. As others have noted and as Hobbes himself writes,26 the state assumes the role of an artificially constructed “savior” in his proposal. “This great Leviathan, which is called a Commonwealth, or State, is a work of art; it is an artificial man made for the protection and salvation of the natural man, to whom it is superior in grandeur and power.”27 We will return to this striking claim below, but first we should consider how another Hobbesian teaching intertwines with the dynamics of death.

The Fears of Death and the Social Contract

In Hobbes’s teaching on the means through which a government originates, two elements, popular sovereignty and the mechanism of the “social contract,” are vital. He writes:

> Before the institution of Commonwealth, every man had a right to every thing, and to do whatsoever he thought necessary to his own preservation; subduing, hurting, or killing any man in order thereunto. . . . In the making of a Commonwealth, every man giveth away the right of defending another; but not of defending himself. Also he obligeth himselfe, to assist him that hath the Sovereignty, in the Punishing of another, but of himselfe not.28

Through the mechanism of the social contract, each natural individual, motivated by self-preservation, becomes an author and member of the commonwealth by entering a covenant with the other members to transfer her or his natural right to a single sovereign authority. Thus the Hobbesian commonwealth, which is composed of either a single individual or a small assembly, is erected by the combined power of all the covenenting citizens. Here Hobbes breaks decisively from the Divine Right of Kings theory, which dominated political philosophy in both Western and Eastern Christian contexts. Not God, but the governed people’s consent now grounds the
commonwealth’s sovereign authority. Yet Hobbes also rejects democracy, seeing it as too diffuse, destabilizing, and cumbersome in attaining political aims. In his proposal, the civil sovereign receives from its people all rights to judge all means and take all necessary measures to preserve citizens’ lives and maintain common peace, a teaching that has generated much criticism in the wake of subsequent authoritarian and totalitarian states.

Entering the social contract seems to be a rational and easy choice for any person whose only alternative is the state of nature; yet Hobbes acknowledges that there is still a major obstacle to participation in this saving covenant: pride. The problem with pride, according to Hobbes, is that it prevents natural human beings from seeing their need for the commonwealth. Pride blocks individuals from discerning the fragility of their existence in the state of nature. Michael Oakeshott writes:

The precondition of the deliverance is the recognition of the predicament. Just as, in Christian theory, the repentance of the sinner is the first indispensable step towards forgiveness and salvation, so [in Hobbes], mankind must first purge itself of the illusion called pride. . . . The purging emotion (for it is to emotion that we go to find the beginning of deliverance) is fear of death. This fear illuminates prudence; man is a creature civilized by fear of death.

The dynamics of death, specifically a sobering or humbling type of mindfulness of physical death’s imminence, seems to be a cornerstone of Hobbes’s proposal. The remembrance of physical death cuts through human pride and intensifies natural human beings’ fear of physical death. For Hobbes, it is this fear that drives people to enter the social contract and create the commonwealth.

A second role for the fear of death emerges once the commonwealth has been created. Recall Hobbes’s description of the state of nature: “During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe.” A commonwealth achieves its purpose most basically by “over-awing” citizens into civil obedience. By constructing the commonwealth, citizens express their confidence that this governing body will severely punish or kill anyone who transgresses the law—anyone who dares to attack the life, property, or liberty of a citizen. So long as citizens fear the commonwealth as the enforcer of the law, they no longer need to fear each other; and so long as the commonwealth has sufficient power to inspire awe, both those
inside and those outside its borders will fear the consequences of acting against any of its contracting members. The dynamics of death lie at the foundation of the social contract’s effectiveness.

Finally, in Parts 3 and 4 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes’s proposal includes an extensive series of laws and theological teachings, enforced by the commonwealth, that strive to minimize—if not eliminate—citizens’ fears of the afterlife, of divine judgment, or of eternal punishment. Such fears, he contends, are susceptible to terrible abuses by religious leaders and fuel religious conflict among citizens, since they are based on doctrines that can never be convincingly adjudicated. Most importantly, religious fears undermine the ability of the commonwealth to awe people into obedience. In a telling passage, Hobbes writes:

> It is impossible a Common-wealth should stand, where any other than the Sovereign, hath a power of giving greater rewards than Life; and of inflicting greater punishments, than Death. Now seeing Eternall life is a greater reward, than life present; and Eternall torment a greater punishment than the death of Nature; It is a thing worthy to be well considered, of all men that desire (by obeying Authority) to avoid the calamities of Confusion, and Civill war, what is meant in holy Scripture, by Life Eternall, and Torment Eternall; and for what offences, and against whom committed, men are to be Eternally tormented; and for what actions, they are to obtain Eternall life.

The commonwealth’s ability to “protect and save” human beings—and hence its legitimacy—hinges on its ability to shape the actions of both insiders and outsiders, deterring illegal activity through a supreme fear of retribution. The social contract is strengthened and the power of the state is enhanced when citizens remain mindful of the real possibility of physical death/punishment (should they transgress the commonwealth’s laws) and forgetful of the real possibility of anything worse, like eternal suffering in the afterlife. Hobbes therefore makes sure that the Christian doctrines and practices that his civil sovereign endorses minimize fear of eternal death, thus buttressing the civil sovereign’s ability to command ultimate obedience.

Within a Hobbesian framework, then, the state originates through the dynamics of death: It arises as a cure to the natural predicament of death and terror; it is constructed through a social contract that is motivated and sustained by the desire for self-preservation; its legitimacy rests on its
effectiveness in protecting citizens’ lives; and it achieves its aim by employing the fear of violent physical death and minimizing the fear of eternal death in order to promote law-abidingness internally and deter outsiders from acting against its citizens.35

*Death and the Limits of Politics*

The lens of death’s dynamics reveals two raw truths related to the limits of government. The first is the simple but crucial acknowledgment that, although the state is born out of its contracting members’ mutual desire for self-preservation and its primary purpose is to protect citizens’ lives, no state can ultimately protect those in its care against violent physical death. Human beings are too complicated, or too corrupted; no matter how massive and awesome the commonwealth’s power is, human passions—anger, jealousy, wrath—will, occasionally, trump the fear of retribution, and citizens will be killed. Furthermore, even in a hypothetical (or real) totalitarian regime where violent crime between citizens has been eliminated, no government can protect its citizens from physical death *per se*. Mortality sets a necessary limit on politics. As Epicurus said eloquently, “Against all else it is possible to provide security, but as against death all of us mortals alike dwell in an unfortified city.”36

Hobbes knew this, of course, as we all do. Yet what is striking is the extent to which these uncontroversial truth claims could rock the very foundation of government within a social-contractarian framework. Recall Hobbes’s teaching on political legitimacy, which many subsequent (and democratically oriented) political theorists share: *A government’s legitimacy rests on its ability to protect citizens’ lives*. Within this framework, every violent death of a citizen undermines, to some extent, the legitimacy of a government. Whether it comes at the hands of a fellow citizen (a jealous lover, a drive-by shooter, etc.) or at the hands of an outsider (an attacking enemy soldier, a foreign terrorist, etc.), the civil sovereign’s legitimacy erodes each time a citizen dies violently.37 Yet, notwithstanding this undeniable limit on a government’s ability to fulfill its purpose, people are eager to forfeit a significant portion of their freedom and to enter the social contract. Some security, it seems, is better than no security, even if it comes at the expense of liberty.38 We turn easily to the state, the Leviathan, seeking a cure for our predicament. Yet even if Hobbes’s prescription for civil peace and salvation were to be followed completely—from the forfeiture of all rights (ex-
cept the right to self-defense, which is inalienable), to the concentration of absolute power in a single ruler, to the reinterpretation of religious claims about the afterlife, martyrs, and the real possibility of eternal suffering in hell—it would not provide salvation from what he himself calls “the greatest of all evils” and “that terrible enemy of nature,” human death. In light of this, one wonders whether any civil sovereign within such a framework can claim full and unequivocal legitimacy.

A second raw truth that emerges pertains to the horrifying capacity of governments themselves to engage in killing, especially when their authority is absolute. While each major form of government has entered wars that have led to millions of violent deaths, social scientists have demonstrated that very rarely—if ever—does a stable democratic state go to war against another stable democratic state. The “democratic peace thesis,” as it is called, has been described by one political scientist as “the closest thing we have to an empirical law in international relations.” While the democratic peace thesis does not contend that democracies have resisted wars in general (i.e., against nondemocracies) at a higher rate than other forms of government, the near nonexistence in the historical record of wars between stable democracies provides strong support for cultivating democracy as a way to reduce violent death.

Another empirical finding that strongly supports democratic forms of government concerns the phenomenon of violent death being inflicted by a state upon its own people. In his masterful studies, *Death by Government* and *Power Kills*, R. J. Rummel provides a detailed analysis of “democide,” defined as “the murder of any person or people by a government, including genocide, politicide, or mass murder.” The data Rummel reports are jaw-dropping. In the twentieth century (1900–99), an estimated 262 million people were murdered by their own governments. Perhaps even more shocking is that this number is six times larger than the estimated total of battle dead from all of last century’s interstate and civil wars. Democides, in other words, are much more deadly than wars. Heading up Rummel’s list are four “decemegamurderer” regimes: China (PRC) 1949–87 (77 million democide victims), USSR 1917–87 (62 million victims), Germany 1933–45 (21 million victims), and China (KMT) 1928–49 (10 million victims). There is much that could be said about these shocking statistics, and much that is beyond words, yet one dimension of Rummel’s analysis should be repeated and underscored: Of all forms of governance, totalitarian regimes are most likely and democracies are least likely to engage in democide.
While many factors distinguish totalitarian regimes from democracies, and many forms of governance dot the spectrum between these two extremes, history indicates that the closer a government moves toward absolute power, the more likely it is to murder those within its borders. Embellishing Lord Acton’s famous words, Rummel writes:

Power kills; absolute Power kills absolutely. . . . The more power a government has, the more it can act arbitrarily according to the whims and desires of the elite, and the more it will make war on others and murder its foreign and domestic subjects. The more constrained the power of governments, the more power is diffused, checked, and balanced, the less it will aggress on others and commit democide. At the extremes of Power, totalitarian communist governments slaughter their people by the tens of millions; in contrast, many democracies can barely bring themselves to execute even serial murderers.45

While Hobbes identifies violent death as the greatest evil and his political proposal aims—first and foremost—at protecting citizens against violent death, history has taught us that the nondemocratic form of governance he proposes is much more likely to exacerbate the problem than to solve it. Those committed to preventing democide should favor democracy.

**The Dynamics of Death: Lessons from the Shadows of Constantine**

_The Predicament of Death and the Aim of Resurrection_

In another work, I examine the phenomena of death, fear of death, and remembrance of death as a lens for assessing and comparing ethical visions.46 I also argue that many voices from the Byzantine theological-ethical tradition advance ethical visions that are thanatomorphic, “formed by death.” Thanatomorphicity, as I define it, carries three distinct but interrelated levels of meaning, which can be identified in a wide range of worldviews. The first level is ontological, the second is agential, and the third is noetic. According to the concept’s first level of meaning, an ethical vision is thanatomorphic when it is framed by the problem of human death.47 This applies to many representative voices from the “second trajectory” of Constantine’s shadow because they posit that spiritual death and physical death together comprise the core of humanity’s predicament, our **summum malum**, and that salvation consists in both spiritual
and physical resurrection from the dead. For them, humanity’s brokenness is an ontological brokenness, a brokenness that, in turn, requires an ontological cure, the live-giving action of the Holy Trinity.

Some may find it curious that many Eastern Orthodox theologians describe not only spiritual death but physical death—mortality itself—in a sharply negative manner. Georges Florovsky calls human mortality “a deep tragedy,” a “painful metaphysical catastrophe,” and a “mysterious failure of human destiny.” Kallistos Ware contends that physical death is “profoundly abnormal” and even “monstrous,” reflecting a world that is “distorted and out of joint, crazy, écrasé.” And Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov writes, “All of us have a single enemy—our mortality. If man is [merely] mortal, if there is no resurrection, then the whole of world history is nothing but senseless creature suffering.” In defending this view, Orthodox theologians sometimes appeal to the biblical accounts of Christ weeping for his friend Lazarus and agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane. Humanity’s predicament, from an Orthodox perspective, is formed by the problem of spiritual and physical death. Correspondingly, salvation entails deliverance from both spiritual and physical death; it entails holistic resurrection. As Florovsky summarizes, “The death of our Lord was victory over death and mortality, not just remission of sins, nor merely a justification of man, nor again a satisfaction of an abstract justice.”

I emphasized above that Hobbes’s account of humanity’s predicament is ontological and that the summum malum in his vision is violent death. Within the Orthodox tradition, the core problem from which human beings seek deliverance is, similarly, ontological; for it is constituted by spiritual and physical death. Thus, notwithstanding some important differences, both Hobbes and Orthodox Christianity frame their ethical visions by starting with the conviction that the reality and the possibility of death constitutes humanity’s most basic problem. Furthermore, both Hobbes and Orthodox Christianity articulate normative proposals that aim to save humans from the death that torments us. Given the wars, democides, and other death-related horrors of the past century, one is hard-pressed to find fault with this shared basic concern.

The Dynamics of Death and the Purpose of Politics

In Hobbes’s work, a description of the state of nature and the problem of death leads to his proposal for deliverance by a saving Leviathan. Does the
Orthodox tradition share Hobbes’s view on the purpose of politics? I believe that the debate between “pro-monarchy” and “pro-democracy” camps within the Orthodox community stems in part from different accounts of government’s purpose; in addition, different rationales for government may be found within each of these two broad camps. As I noted earlier, many more resources within the Christian East are available that reflect normatively upon politics within an imperial or monarchical framework than within a democratic one. Yet using the “dynamics of death” lens reveals resources for understanding the purpose of government from an Orthodox perspective that might otherwise be overlooked.

Well before Constantine, St. Irenaeus of Lyons (130–202 CE) writes the following in his major work, Against Heresies:

For since man, by departing from God, reached such a pit of bestiality as even to look upon his kinsmen as his enemy, and engaged without fear in every kind of disordered conduct, murder, and avarice, God imposed upon mankind the fear of man, as they did not acknowledge the fear of God; in order that, being subjected to the authority of men, and under the custody of their laws, they might attain to some degree of justice, and exercise mutual forbearance through dread of the sword suspended full in their view [see Romans 13:4] . . . .

Earthly rule, therefore, has been appointed by God for the benefit of the nations . . . so that under fear of it men may not eat each other up like fishes.54

Notice, first, that Irenaeus begins with a reference to humanity’s Fall (“by departing from God”), and his description of the postlapsarian and pre-political condition paints a dark picture of human tendencies and capacities. Selfishness and the fear of one’s own physical death are dominant forces in human agency and root causes of an array of “disordered conduct.” Irenaeus begins, in other words, with “the way things really are.” Second, government, in Irenaeus’s judgment, is a postlapsarian institution provided by God. Human beings are not political in our prelapsarian condition (although he believes we are social), and will not have structures of human government in our postmortem condition. This teaching is significant for many reasons, not the least of which is that it reminds Christians that government is an accommodation, an institution of penultimate and temporary value; it is not a component of humanity’s original condition or of our hoped-for eternity. Third, while government’s necessity stems from hu-
manity’s brokenness, Irenaeus points more directly to humanity’s lack of “fear of God” as being a main reason why God’s provision is required. Since corrupted humans have a deficient fear of God, the compulsion of human laws and the “dread of the sword” are necessary. The dynamics of death theme thus emerges vividly in Irenaeus’s social thought: (1) The reality of death in the fallen condition drives selfishness and self-preservation; (2) a severely diminished fear of God, which is another characteristic of the fallen condition, is not capable of “awing” people into peaceful coexistence; and (3) the government is ordained by God to provide the “awe” that is necessary to prevent continuous violence. Thus while Irenaeus undoubtedly teaches that government has a divine origin, he also teaches that government is born as a response by God to the predicament of death, violence, and the real behavior of fallen humanity. Finally, we should note that Irenaeus’s hope regarding government’s effectiveness is refreshingly modest. He suggests that some degree of justice is possible when human beings are under the “authority of men” and “under the custody of their laws.” For him, this is not an embarrassing revelation—an exposé of the state’s limits; instead, it is a simple acknowledgment that full deliverance from humanity’s predicament is only possible through God. The government cannot ultimately save its citizens or deliver fully on its protectionist purpose. Yet, while Irenaeus here suggests that the state can neither fully protect its citizens nor administer full justice, he also suggests that it can contribute toward these aims. Government cannot offer a cure to the predicament, but it can mitigate some of the predicament’s effects.

The subsequent Byzantine period generated a plethora of writings praising Christian emperors and articulating a more comprehensive vision of the purpose of government, lending support to a pro-symphonia stance. Yet this period also includes thinkers like St. John Chrysostom who, like Irenaeus, articulate a more modest rationale for political power. Consider Chrysostom’s homilies “On the Statues,” wherein he responds to riots within Antioch that had erupted in 387 CE when Emperor Theodosius imposed a steep new tax. He writes:

For if, whilst there are magistrates and soldiers living under arms, the madness of a few individuals, a motley crew of adventurers, hath kindled such a fire among us, in so short a moment . . . suppose the fear of magistrates to be wholly taken away? To what length would they not have gone in their madness? Would they not have overthrown
Like Irenaeus before him, Chrysostom begins with fallen humanity’s proclivity for lawlessness, exploitation, and mutual destruction—even before a total breakdown of governmental power. Chrysostom then highlights the role that instilling fear in citizens plays, providing a rationale for politics that centers on the government’s ability to protect citizens and maintain order. Government’s purpose, he suggests, is compatible with the Church’s thanatomorphic aim of fighting against death; but it is also a purpose that is focused, restrained, and limited to protecting human life and promoting peace amid a deeply broken humanity. Irenaeus and John Chrysostom are not “prodemocracy” thinkers, and reading them as such would be anachronistic; yet their affirmation of a limited protectionist telos for politics provides, I believe, a more modest and promising alternative grounding for an Orthodox defense of democracy.

The above discussion of Irenaeus and John Chrysostom reaffirms the illuminative potential of the “dynamics of death” lens. In addition, considering these teachings against the backdrop of Hobbes brings out valuable points of consonance and dissonance regarding the purpose of politics, the basis of political legitimacy, and the methods by which a government fulfills its purpose. First, both the Hobbesian tradition and selected representatives from early Christianity share a dark account of prepolitical human nature, one that highlights the problem of death and the selfish and violent tendencies that our mortality fuels. For Irenaeus, Chrysostom, and other Eastern Christian voices, humanity’s Fall grounds this reality, suggesting that humanity’s predicament is contra-natural and providing a basis from which to critique such tendencies and to hope for a restoration of natural peacefulness and community. For Hobbes, humanity’s predicament is the “state of nature,” making critiques more difficult to defend (since no pristine natural condition preceded it) and shifting the historical narrative in ways that would distort the Christian gospel.

Employing the lens of “the dynamics of death” also helps to demonstrate that, like Hobbes, some historical Orthodox voices teach that a pri-
mary purpose—if not the primary purpose—of government is to protect human life. This shared claim grounds Orthodoxy in political realism and opens a path for understanding political legitimacy in a way that is less dependent upon explicitly theological claims, but also not contrary to Orthodox theology. In addition, whereas both Chrysostom and Irenaeus state that government is “ordained by God” as a response to the fallen condition (see Romans 13.1), Hobbes does not. For him, government is constructed by and draws its authority wholly from individuals transferring their natural rights to the commonwealth via the social contract. Yet, while Irenaeus and Chrysostom attribute a divine origin to human government, they resist the temptation to give the state or the emperor a sacred status that might easily go too far. Irenaeus and Chrysostom do not regard the attainment of political power as an expression of God’s favor on a specific person or people; nor do they regard a specific form of governance (monarchy, democracy, etc.) as the fulfillment of divine providence or the apotheosis of Orthodox theology; in doing so, they provide a much-needed space for critiques of political leaders and political systems that have failed to fulfill their primary responsibility.

The dynamics of death lens also reveals that Hobbes, Irenaeus, and Chrysostom all emphasize the basic role that the fear of punishment and death play in effective governance. Government achieves its purpose because it is capable of deterring violence and disorder through the awe-inspiring power it wields. Chrysostom’s claim, “Were you to deprive the world of magistrates, and of the fear that comes of them, houses at once, and cities, and nations, would fall on one another in unrestrained confusion,” could just as easily have come from Hobbes’s pen. Yet attention to the fear of death also reveals a core difference between the Orthodox thinkers and Hobbes. For Hobbes, the fear of God and the fear of eternal death are part of the problem; thus his proposal strives to undermine any fears that might trump a citizen’s fear of death by the state and systematically reinterprets traditional Christian teachings on death, afterlife, hell, and martyrdom in order to maximize the power and effectiveness of the civil sovereign. In sharp contrast, Irenaeus teaches that too little—not too much—fear of God and of eternal death is the problem. For him, a deficient fear of God fuels the human predicament and moves God to ordain human governments. Thus Irenaeus and other Eastern Christian voices teach that the fear of God and the fear of eternal death (rightly understood) are not part of the problem; they are part of the cure.
The points of continuity and difference noted above, I believe, can contribute substantially to an alternative rationale for democracy within Orthodoxy. However, a crucial step must still be made in the argument, one that draws from the preceding discussion of Orthodox sources and returns to the issue of limits discussed in my analysis of Hobbes.

*Death and the Limits of Politics*

I have used the lens of the “dynamics of death” to argue that representative voices from the Eastern Orthodox tradition and the Hobbesian social contract tradition share at least three basic convictions: (1) Human death constitutes the core of humanity’s predicament; (2) government is born as a response to humanity’s predicament and its primary purpose is to protect the lives of those in its care; and (3) the principal means by which government achieves its purpose, and thus establishes its legitimacy, is fear—the fear of suffering severe punishment or physical death for breaking the laws that protect citizens and promote peace. Among these three convictions only the second is understood in nearly identical ways by Hobbes and the Orthodox thinkers here in focus. The first conviction is understood differently because, for Hobbes, humanity’s predicament is constituted by physical death alone, with violent physical death being the sumnum malum. For the Orthodox sources, humanity’s predicament is constituted by both physical death and spiritual death. Yet, while both types of death are “the enemy,” the sumnum malum is eternal spiritual death, not physical death, a point to which the Church’s martyrs bear witness. And the third conviction, related to the political role of the fear of death, is understood differently because, for Hobbes, minimizing—if not eliminating—the fear of eternal death is a cornerstone of his proposal. He sees traditional Christian teachings on the afterlife as a threat to the absolute authority of the civil sovereign and believes that such absolute authority is necessary if the civil sovereign is to fulfill its purpose and maintain its legitimacy. The Orthodox sources here considered agree with Hobbes on the importance of the government’s use of the fear of physical death, but oppose him on the impact of the fear of God and eternal death, regarding the lack of these fears among citizens as a root cause of the predicament, not a prescription for its cure. What can these points of consonance and dissonance teach us about the limits of government?
Recall that Hobbes’s teachings led to two raw truths that evoke serious doubts about his proposal. The first is that even if we were to grant Hobbes everything he asks for, the Hobbesian Leviathan cannot ultimately fulfill its purpose—it cannot prevent all violence, and it certainly cannot prevent all death. Yet, in order to attain this imperfect solution, Hobbes asks for nearly everything from citizens. The only inalienable right is the right to self-preservation; all other liberty, including religious liberty, is forfeited to the state. It seems undeniable that the Hobbesian state demands citizens’ ultimate allegiance in exchange for a cure that never fully heals. While Hobbes may call the Leviathan “an artificial man made for the protection and salvation of the natural man,” it is not capable of saving human beings from the fullness of our predicament. In the Orthodox sources here considered, the state’s capability and effectiveness are expressed more modestly. Yes, the state’s aim is principally citizens’ protection, but its limited ability to fulfill this purpose is acknowledged. Furthermore, there is an important thread within the Orthodox tradition that reminds the civil sovereign of its inability to ultimately save human beings from death—either physical death or spiritual death—the most significant strand of which is its communal worship. Yet, in addition to the liturgical tradition, there are several more explicitly political sources. From the ritual use of the akakia, a small silk sack of dirt held by emperors to remind them of their mortality and need for God’s salvation,\(^\text{58}\) to the “mirror of princes” genre exemplified in the work of Agapetus the Deacon,\(^\text{59}\) to the striking icon of St. Sisoes standing before the tomb of Alexander the Great and acknowledging the transience of all earthly power,\(^\text{60}\) there are several Orthodox sources whose purpose was to communicate a message about the limits of government—even within the context of Byzantium. While a full discussion of these fascinating “remembrances of death” lies beyond our present scope, their existence alone within the shadow of Constantine is salient. Taken together, and regardless of the actual impact they may have made on political leaders, these resources communicate a sharp critique of the absolute claims and expectation of allegiance found in the Hobbesian state and many others. They bear witness to the limits that death places upon politics, and point to the need for a true Savior—lessons that are just as important today as they were in Byzantium. For, as Stanley Hauerwas has written, “Our task [as Christians] is not to make these nations the church, but rather to remind them that they are but nations. From the world’s
perspective, that may not seem like much, but the perspective of the people formed by the story of God’s redemption shows us how important a task it is. For the idolatry most convenient to us all remains the presumed primacy of the nation-state.” While I would not recommend sending our president—or each member of Congress—either an akakia or a copy of the icon of St. Sisoes, especially given the Leviathan’s surveillance capacities, there is a lesson vital to healthy governance that these works of Christian art teach: Know and remember your limits.

The second raw truth pertains to the political lessons we have learned since the time of Hobbes. Historically, the kind of concentrated power for which Hobbes’s proposal calls has made possible the most massive and horrific crimes against humanity ever known. Governments wielding such power are much more likely to generate violent death among those under their care than a government in which power is limited and separated, as it is in contemporary democracies. While there is no doubt that Byzantine emperors wielded near-absolute power in the civic realm, Irenaeus and John Chrysostom have reminded us that it is not the form of a government that gives it legitimacy, but rather its ability to fulfill its entrusted role. In other words, there is no singular “Orthodox” political system; neither a monarchy, nor a democracy, nor a specific church-state relationship is, in itself, sacred, pure, or always best. Instead there are governments that are better and worse, or more compatible with and less compatible with Orthodox Christianity’s normative vision. If my argument thus far holds, and a case can be made that (1) from an Orthodox perspective, the primary purpose of government is to protect the physical lives of citizens; (2) democracies are, overall, much better at protecting citizens against threats to their lives (especially against democides); and (3) the Orthodox tradition does not identify a specific form of government as “sacred,” then it follows that democracy can and should be supported from an Orthodox perspective. Winston Churchill’s famous words resonate with this conclusion:

Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

There is, however, a major objection to democracy from an Orthodox perspective that we have not yet considered. If one grants the Orthodox
teachings that (1) the human predicament is constituted by both physical death and spiritual death, and (2) while both forms of death are “the enemy,” spiritual death is the *summum malum*, then what if democracy, while minimizing violent physical death simultaneously promotes spiritual death—the greater evil? What if there is a form of government that may not be as effective as democracy is at protecting citizens’ physical lives (especially against democide), but that is significantly more effective at protecting citizens’ spiritual lives? Should this form of government be preferred from an Orthodox perspective? With these questions, I have arrived back to this study’s starting point—the pro-monarchy/symphonia Orthodox and the pro-democracy Orthodox; yet, I have arrived here having identified an alternative grounding for each, one that has emerged by considering the origin, purpose, and limits of Christian politics through the lens of the dynamics of death. I conclude now with a summary and synthesis of why, in my judgment, democracy is the best option for Orthodox today.

**Conclusion**

My aim has been to draw out lineaments of Orthodox Christian political philosophy by utilizing the theme of “the dynamics of death” as an interpretive lens and Thomas Hobbes as a conversation partner. The “dynamics of death” theme focuses our attention on the telos of politics and the telos of Christian life. It also helps us to understand the methods through which governments are constructed and sustained, for good or for ill. Finally, the dynamics of death theme helps us to see, and remember, the limits of politics. Yet I have also argued that the “dynamics of death” are basic to a normative Christian vision of political life and, therefore, hold promise for constructing an approach that complements and critiques existing arguments for and against democracy. I return, now, to the question with which I began: *On what theological basis, if any, can Orthodox Christians convincingly endorse modern democracy?*

The most significant finding that the “dynamics of death” lens has revealed, I believe, is that the Orthodox tradition’s *thanatomorphicity*, its identification of the human predicament with the problem of physical and spiritual death and its identification of the telos of human existence with spiritual and physical resurrection, provides a theological basis for
cautiously supporting modern democracy, unless it can be shown that democracy is significantly more likely than its alternatives to promote spiritual death among its citizens. To be sure, the Church does not need the state’s cooperation or support in order to fulfill its sacred and sanctifying mission. Neither an Orthodox monarchy nor democracy is a requisite condition for the possibility of living a fully Christian life. Saints have emerged out of every political context. However, the Church should not hesitate to express a strong preference for a government that protects human life over one that does not. The Byzantine *symphonia* model grew, in part, out of the conviction that it is better to have a government that is not hostile to Christians and to a Christian moral vision than to have a government that persecutes Christians and advances a moral vision that Christians regard as evil. I agree. But on this side of modernity there is a third option: modern democracy.

Orthodoxy should support modern democracy because it has proven to be more effective at protecting human life than nondemocratic forms of government. Given the extreme violence and terror that people have suffered at the hands of nondemocratic regimes in countries that, historically, have had large Orthodox populations (Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, etc.), the Orthodox community has a strong experiential basis for critiquing authoritarian and absolutist regimes. Especially in light of the fact that the second most murderous regime in history—the Soviet Union—emerged in a region with the largest population of people self-identifying as Orthodox in history, Orthodox would do well to underscore the responsibility of government to protect human life and to prevent violence against its citizens.

Orthodoxy should support democracy because democracy, especially through its affirmation and protection of religious freedom, acknowledges its limits and its penultimate status. Governments cannot ultimately save people from death; they cannot offer the fullness of resurrected life. Thus a legitimate government must give space for people to freely pursue full salvation. While Orthodox Christians affirm wholeheartedly that the Church accomplishes this desired salvation by being the body of Christ and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, there is nothing un-Christian about resisting the opportunity to establish Orthodox Christianity and affirming religious freedom as a civil right. Again, my reason for this stems from Orthodoxy’s acknowledgment of the depths of human corruption and the potential for abuse when power is concentrated. Better to have a Church that is separated from the government, and that can both critique political
power and be critiqued by citizens, than to have a Church established and supported by the state.

Finally, Orthodoxy should support democratic governance not because democracy is the fulfillment of an Orthodox theological-ethical vision but because it is not inherently opposed to an Orthodox theological-ethical vision, so long as it stays within its limits. To elevate democracy as the apotheosis of Orthodoxy is neither consistent with Orthodox tradition nor spiritually wise. Democracy is our best available option; however, it is an option still wrought with spiritual dangers that must be continuously identified and sharply critiqued in our communities and our hearts. The “dynamics of death” lens has provided lineaments of a fresh argument for democracy, even as it reminds us that, without Christ, “all of us mortals alike dwell in an unfortified city.”

Notes


2. Aristotle Papanikolaou surveys Orthodox Christian perspectives on democracy in “Orthodox Political Theology through the Centuries,” Chapter 1, in The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).


5. See the appeals to patristic writings in Nikolas K. Gvosdev, Emperors and Elections: Reconciling the Orthodox Tradition with Modern Politics (Huntington, N.Y.: Troitsa Books, 2000).

6. One example is the attempt by Gvosdev to connect democratic election processes with Orthodoxy’s emphasis on a conciliar form of ecclesiastical governance and with the Orthodox Church’s use of local assemblies in identifying candidates for the episcopacy. See his “Rendering Unto Caesar . . . an Orthodox Perspective on Democratic Transitions in Eastern Europe,” St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly 37, no. 1 (1993): 79–89.


10. This expression comes from the opening sentence of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*.

11. For a defense and discussion of this claim, see Hamalis, “The Meaning and Place of Death.”


21. In the opening line of *Leviathan*, Part 2, *Of Commonwealth*, Hobbes writes, “The final Cause, End, or Designe of men (who naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others,) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, (in which we see them live in Commonwealths,) is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of Warre” (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 117).


23. A full discussion of political legitimacy in Hobbes lies beyond our present scope; however, this is one of the concepts that Orthodox thinkers have not yet sufficiently examined.

24. Hobbes states that the objects of passions, the private good, will likely differ from individual to individual (see Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction, 10).


26. For a good example, see the writings of William Cavenaugh, especially his *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), Chapter 1.


30. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 120. I will return to the dangers of such a concentration of absolute power below.


34. For present purposes, I am stipulating that “eternal death” refers to an unending state of spiritual death, and that “spiritual death” refers to a state of affairs in which the nonphysical dimension of a human person is in a condition of radical separation, rupture, or alienation from God, either prior to or after the person’s physical death.
35. In the writings of subsequent social contractarians who are more supportive of democracy, such as John Locke, one nonetheless finds a very similar account of the dynamics of death in the functioning of the social contract and in defining the origin and purpose of government. See especially Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1690).


37. An exception to this, of course, is when the government takes the life of a citizen who broke the social contract by threatening to kill (or killing) another citizen, or by committing some other serious crime. In such a case, legitimacy is strengthened, not weakened, by the state’s successful fulfillment of its responsibility to protect.

38. Recent examples of this within the American context are abundant. Consider the PATRIOT Act of 2001 and, more recently, the US surveillance program controversy, both of which clearly express the state’s need to deliver safety in order to remain legitimate and the state’s insistence that citizens forfeit more of their rights in order to enable the state to do so.


44. In *Death by Government*, Rummel provides the data for 169,198,000 victims of democide between 1900 and 1987. In his subsequent work and on his website he revised this number upward by ~92 million to include Mao’s famine in China (~40 million), colonial democide (~50 million), and the totals for 1988–99 (1.34 million). See http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/20TH.HTM (accessed: 22 July 2014).


46. See Hamalis, *Formed by Death*.

47. Given this essay’s limited scope, I will save detailing the second and third meanings of *thanatomorphicity* for a future study.

48. See note 34 above for stipulated definitions of “eternal death” and “spiritual death.”


52. See, for example, Boris Bobrinskoy, “Old Age and Death: Tragedy or Blessing?” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (1984): 237–44.


56. Gvosdev elaborates on this point in Chrysostom’s work, arguing that Chrysostom teaches that government is ordained by God, but that he also suggests a type of “popular sovereignty.” See Gvosdev, “St. John Chrysostom and John Locke,” 152.

57. As I noted earlier, these are temptations to which many existing Orthodox political theologies are susceptible, both among “pro-monarchy” and among “pro-democracy” authors.


60. The text within this icon translates as follows: “Sisoes, the great ascetic, stood before the tomb of Alexander the Great, Emperor of the Greeks who of old had shone with glory. Astonished and horrified by the inexorable passing of time and the vanity of this transient world, he cried out: ‘Beholding thee, O grave, I fear the Judgment of God and I weep, for the common destiny of all mankind comes to mind. How can I cope with such an end? O Death! Who can escape thee?’” For an analysis of the image, see George Galavaris, “Alexander the Great Conqueror and Captive of Death: His Various Images in Byzantine Art,” *Revue d’Art Canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 16, no. 1 (1989): 12–18.


64. See Epicurus, *Fragments*, Vatican Collection 31, cited above.