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You Cannot Have a Church Without an Empire

Political Orthodoxy in Byzantium

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At the end of the fourteenth century, the Byzantine Empire had been reduced to a handful of possessions consisting of the depopulated city of Constantinople, a few port towns in nearby Thrace, the independent empire of Trebizond on the southern coast of the Black Sea, some northern Aegean islands, and parts of the Greek Peloponnesus. The grandeur, military might, and economic dominance that once had made Byzantium the envy of the medieval world was gone. By 1371, Emperor John V Palaiologos had begun to pay an annual tribute to the more powerful Ottomans. It is rather remarkable that Byzantium would survive for another three generations. Yet, even within such a bleak political and military existence, the rhetoric of empire continued. In 1393, Anthony, patriarch of Constantinople, penned a letter to Basil I, grand prince of Moscow. Anthony had learned that the Muscovite prince was not offering the liturgical commemoration of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425). In this oft-quoted letter, Patriarch Anthony expresses his dismay at such an oversight and expresses the conventional imperial ideology of Byzantium:

My son, it is not possible for Christians to have a Church and not have an empire. Church and empire have a great unity and community. It is not possible for them to be separated from one another. For the holy emperor is not as other rulers and the governors of other regions are; and this is because the emperors, from the beginning,
established and confirmed true religion (eusebia) in all the inhabited world (oikoumene). They convoked ecumenical councils . . . and [they] struggled hard against heresies.

Though not part of the imperial orbit of the dwindling eastern Roman Empire, Moscow was, at the very least, a member of the larger Christian Orthodox world, the Orthodox oikoumene that had already begun to replace the soon-to-be-defunct political entity on the Bosporus, and as such, Moscow, in Patriarch Anthony’s view, ought to remember and pray for the emperor. In a clear reference to the first Christian emperor, Anthony argued that emperors had always been involved in defining orthodox doctrine over against misguided teachings. Though written within the context of ecclesiastical relations between Constantinople and the metropolitanate of Russia, Anthony’s letter offers a succinct exposition of the imperial responsibility as defender of Orthodoxy.

Byzantine emperors had a long tradition as defenders and protectors of the faith dating back to the enshrined deeds of the first Christian emperor, Constantine. Imperial proclamations in support of the early Ecumenical Councils make this role abundantly clear. Emperors were generally required to profess their doctrinal orthodoxy at their coronation, the first attestation of such a profession being that of Anastasios I (491–518). The Byzantine emperors had the authority and right to call ecumenical councils and to enforce synodal and canonical decisions made by the Church. Further, emperors, most famously Justinian I (527–65) and Leo VI (886–912), promulgated legislation that was directly related to the affairs of the Church. Regarding issues of dogma, emperors were expected to defend the Church against the encroachment of heresy. Though key concepts in the self-definition of the Christian Church, the constructs of heresy and orthodoxy were not exclusive domains of the Byzantine Church but were at work in creating and sustaining imperial ideology as well. In this paper, I suggest that the concept of “orthodoxy” was as much, if not more, important to the political and cultural identity of Byzantium as to the defense of the proper teachings of the Christian faith. This “political orthodoxy,” especially from the eleventh century onwards, became critical to Byzantine political identity in ways that it had not been in the earlier period.
Before defining what is meant by “political orthodoxy,” three relatively undisputed and rather prosaic observations about church and state in Byzantium are in order. First, Byzantium lacked detailed or systematic political treatises defining the theoretical foundations of its political legitimacy. There was no constitution per se, nor did any great thinker produce the equivalent of a *City of God* as Augustine had done in the West. Rather, in the East it was politics as usual. That is, the imperial office (and its holder) was the justification for and the legal basis of the Byzantine political machinery. Even the dynastic principle, though at times operative during the history of Byzantium, was unnecessary to validate authority. Imperial legitimacy rested primarily on the imperial office itself, and whoever held the office of emperor held absolute authority.

Second, the Byzantine emperor played a significant role in the life of the Byzantine Church. The emperor possessed longstanding privileges: He presided at Church councils and gave them the weight of civic (imperial) law; he could formulate rules for the proper governing of the ecclesiastical hierarchy; and he had the right to be involved in the election of bishops to vacant sees as well as to initiate episcopal transfers, most significantly that of the see of Constantinople. His right to appoint and remove the patriarch of Constantinople was never seriously challenged. In addition, he held lesser (perhaps merely symbolic) liturgical rights: He could cense the altar in Hagia Sophia as well as the tombs in the Church of the Holy Apostles; he could preach on certain occasions; he could commune himself (at the very least, on the day of his consecration); and as affirmed in the well-known Canon 69 of the Council in Trullo (690–91), he was the only layman who was officially allowed in the bema of a church (*thysiasterion*).

Third, the boundaries between church and state were blurred. Although employing these two institutional identities (i.e., church and state) already prejudices the discussion, divisions between or harmony among the spiritual and the temporal, the *hierasyne* and *basileia*, and the kingdom of heaven and the political *oikoumene*, continuously informed the history of Byzantium. It is wrong to assume that Byzantine society did not recognize differences between church and state; the two often came into conflict. Yet to set up the two in opposition to each other already introduces into the discussion preconceived ideas of the “theory of the two powers” that was
prevalent in the West from Pope Gelasius onwards but failed to make solid inroads in the East.6

This is not the place to address the question of Byzantine caesaropapism. How one views Byzantium and the role of its emperor in the life of the Church is often related to the observer’s own political and ecclesial views. Whether Byzantium was or was not caesaropapist is of no import for the present discussion. Whether we view Byzantine society as the best possible combination of the two powers—the *symphonia* or harmony of the priestly and imperial powers in the language of Justinian’s sixth novella—or as the Church surrendering to worldly authority, there can be no doubt that civic and religious life in Byzantium were intertwined.

The Byzantine Church absorbed the legacy of Constantine in a variety of ways. Throughout its millennial existence within the political orbit of the Roman Empire, the Church dealt often in a realpolitik approach to the challenges that imperial authority posed. At times, concessions or affiliations granted to the *imperium* raised the ire of many a Church leader and observer. At other times, the Church of Constantinople was more than willing to pursue a policy of accommodation toward imperial authority as long as it furthered the goals of the Church. In one area, however—that of political orthodoxy—imperial and ecclesial authorities joined forces in both policy and rhetoric. Defining the message and the language appropriate for the expression of the Christian gospel was as old as the evangelical message itself. What was new from Constantine onwards was the involvement of the state in this process. Constantine set the precedent and it continued down to the end of the empire. Within this relationship between the state and the Church that transpired over centuries and as Byzantine ecclesial identity and doctrinal content were being defined, there emerged not only the definition of orthodoxy but the utilization of this construct for political purposes. Political orthodoxy describes the adoption and defense of orthodox dogma as well as the cultural and political identity that helped to define it. As a construct, political orthodoxy differs from “political theology” or “political Christianity”—the former referring in general to the adoption of Christianity for political purposes (á la Constantine) and the latter constructing a theological view to support political authority (á la Eusebius).7 Political orthodoxy moves beyond these, though informed by both. Adhering to orthodox doctrine and practice, political orthodoxy expresses these in terms of cultural and institutional identity. It places orthodoxy in the service of defining oneself against someone else.
Certainly the categories of heresy and orthodoxy had been doing this kind of work for centuries. Political orthodoxy encompasses the definition of religious orthodoxy and places it in the service of the larger emerging ethno-political identities of the Eastern Roman Empire. To defend orthodoxy is thus to defend these identities as well.

Defender of Orthodoxy

In the first half of the fifteenth century, Symeon, archbishop of Thessaloniki (1416–29), noted that the emperor held an ecclesiastical rank equivalent to that of depotatos (deputatus) as well as the title of defender (defensor) of the Church.¹⁸ Both titles and the several privileges given to the emperor were, according to Symeon, derived from the fact that the emperor at his coronation was anointed by the patriarch with chrism—that is, the same myron used in baptism. Physical anointing of the Byzantine emperor was a late innovation, and can be attested with certainty only with the coronation of John III Vatatzes in 1221, who was crowned Byzantine emperor at Nicaea.¹⁹ The Western influence of such anointing cannot be doubted. Yet the political reality of the loss of the city of Constantinople a few years earlier to the Fourth Crusade, along with the breakup of the empire into three competing centers of authority (Trebizond, Epirus, and Nicaea), led to the diminishing of the political legitimacy of the imperial office. The use of chrism reflects the increased authority of the Church, as does the addition, during the Palaiologan period, of a profession of faith and proclamation by the emperor to defend the Church.¹⁰

As protector and defender of the Church, the function of the emperor was well defined and had a long history. Justinian placed the following edict at the beginning of his codification of law:

It is our will that all peoples who are ruled by the administration of Our Clemency shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the apostle transmitted to the Romans. . . . We command that those persons who follow this law shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom we judge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy attached to heretical dogmas.¹¹

This imperial responsibility is repeated again and again in our sources, perhaps most famously by Photios in the second title of the Epanagoge, a law book published in 886 that served as an introduction to the late ninth-century
comprehensive collection of laws known as the Basilika. Photios writes, “The emperor is presumed to enforce and maintain, first and foremost, all that is set out in the divine scriptures; then the doctrines laid down by the seven holy Councils.” The role of defender of the faith is reflected more dramatically by the actions of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–118). In the second year of his reign, in March 1082, Alexios timed the condemnation of John Italos, head of the school of philosophy in the imperial capital, to coincide with the Feast of Orthodoxy, which was celebrated each year on the first Sunday of Lent. The Feast of Orthodoxy celebrated the final victory of Orthodoxy over Iconoclasm that had occurred in 843. Each year on this feast day the Synodikon of Orthodoxy was read out. The Synodikon, a quasiliturgical/canonical text that affirmed the reinstatement and veneration of images, had remained substantially unaltered. Alexios changed all this, and added to the Synodikon anathemas against Italos for his apparent philosophical musings that did not sit well with ecclesiastical authorities. The condemnation of Italos and the reading of the anathemas against him on the Feast of Orthodoxy transformed the traditional role of the Synodikon. From Alexios’s time onwards, additions to the Synodikon would continue to be made. The Synodikon no longer remained identified with the victory over Iconoclasm but was now seen as “an authoritative statement of orthodoxy.” Alexios’s expanded role as defender of orthodoxy would be repeated throughout the remainder of the empire.

The imperial defense of doctrinal orthodoxy did not necessarily translate into recognition of a particular emperor’s sanctity. It is true that all the emperors of Constantinople who convened an ecumenical council are commemorated in the tenth-century Synaxarion of Constantinople. This does not mean, as Hippolytus Delehaye noted over a century ago, that inclusion in the Synaxarion, an official collection of brief notices of saints commemorated in the liturgical calendar in Constantinople, was equivalent to recognition of sanctity. Interestingly, the majority of the imperial recognitions made in the Synaxarion do not use the adjective hagios or hagia, but rather rely on formula that make reference to an individual’s piety (most often using the word eusebia [εὐσέβια]). Several augusta show up as well (Flacilla Eudokia; Pulcheria; Ariadne, the wife of Zeno (and later Anastasios); Theodora, the wife of Justinian). With the exception of the saintly Theophano, the first wife of Leo VI, and Constantine and his mother Helena, the Synaxarion of Constantinople is cautious in acknowledging the sanctity of imperial office holders. This may have more to do
with a broader view of what it means to “remember” the pious monastic, the steadfast martyr, the great theologian, or the effective emperor. The “memory” (mnēmē) is what is called upon; and remembrance does not necessarily equate with sanctity. Yet, it is significant that the Synaxarion remembers only those emperors who were defenders or supporters of orthodoxy; conspicuously, and not surprisingly, absent are the seventh-century emperors associated with monotheletism and those of the Iconoclastic period.

Political Orthodoxy

The task of defining and defending religious orthodoxy continued to occupy a variety of constituencies in Byzantine society. Yet it was in the wake of a series of political, ecclesiastical, and military crises that the understanding in Byzantium of the role of orthodoxy shifted. With the exception of the Palamite controversy of the mid-fourteenth century, the fundamental doctrinal content of orthodoxy had not changed since the conclusive rebuttal of Iconoclasm. Yet, we can point to three major catastrophes that required responses: schism with Rome in the eleventh century; the arrival and settlement of Turks in Asia Minor (the Seljuks at the end of the eleventh century, followed by the Ottomans at the beginning of the fourteenth); and the eastward extension of Western feudal power, culminating in the sack of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade. All of this provided the context for a reevaluation of the function of “orthodoxy.” Most dramatically the Fourth Crusade fragmented the empire into several competing centers of authority: The Empire of Nicaea, the Despotate of Epiros, and the Empire of Trebizond each tried to fill the political void created in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade. Although the Empire of Nicaea regained the imperial capital in 1261, the political fragmentation of Byzantium proved irreversible.

It was the period from 1261 until the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, known as the Palaiologan period, that witnessed a subtle but significant shift in the self-consciousness of the Byzantines. This final period of Byzantine history is characterized by an odd combination of territorial and political disintegration in parallel with a cultural revival in art and literature. The imperial office survived and continued its ideological claims to the Roman imperium. For many of the Palaiologan emperors, the only possible chance for survival was better diplomatic,
commercial, and ecclesiastical relations with Western powers, which were realized in three ways: increased economic advantages given to Italian commercial fleets; ecclesiastical reunion with the papacy (the reunion councils of Lyons in 1274 and Florence in 1438–39 are the most tangible expressions of this policy); and military assistance from Western armies. One of the results of this westward-looking policy was an intense debate among intellectuals, churchmen, and others about what constituted their own political, cultural, and religious identity. It is during this time that the notion of political orthodoxy emerges definitively in opposition to the West and the irreversible Ottoman expansion.

Coinciding with this new understanding of “orthodoxy,” and under its influence, was the flourishing of Hellenic paideia that occurred during the Palaiologan period. The flowering of cultural Hellenism at this time paralleled a new understanding of what it meant to be a Hellene. The term “Hellene” was now being used in varying frequency to refer to the eastern Roman population. The threat posed by the Latins and the Turks was not simply territorial but cultural. By this time, the Byzantines had sufficient experience living under both Turks and Latins, and although both might allow for the continuation of Byzantine culture, there was intense pressure (economic and personal) to adopt the culture of the overlords. It is in this context that the Byzantines reasserted their identity in terms of the ancient Greeks and an expanded understanding of orthodoxy. Although the concept of orthodoxy had been around since the earliest days of the empire, it was now being used as a cultural and national marker of identity.

At the twilight of the Byzantine Empire, political orthodoxy, once the sole purview of imperial leadership, had found a home among opponents of ecclesiastical reunion with the Latin Church. Both the pro- and anti-unionist camps had accepted it as well, though it does seem that the anti-unionists were more inclined to adopt it. The ardent fifteenth-century pro-unionist John Argyropoulos referred to his contemporary Constantine XI, who, unknown to Argyropoulos at the time, would be the last emperor of Byzantium, as the God-appointed “emperor of the Hellenes” and considered him the defender of “the freedom of the Hellenes.” Yet, unsurprisingly, the pro-unionist Argyropoulos never makes use of the adjective “orthodox” nor of its derivative noun “orthodoxy.” For pro-unionist Byzantines it was the ancient Hellenes and not Byzantium’s Orthodox Christian roots that provided for a new self-definition.
It was the opponents of reunion with the Roman Church who elevated the construct of orthodoxy to the level of a self-conscious marker of identity in contrast to the heretical West. One of the earliest examples of this comes from the pen of Germanos II, patriarch of Constantinople in exile at Nicaea (1223–40) and a strict anti-unionist. In several of his letters to Latin ecclesiastical leaders, Germanos identifies his Orthodox flock with those *Graikoi* (Γραικοί) living both within and outside of the Nicaean Empire.\(^9\) Joseph Byrennios, a monk and fervent anti-unionist, while addressing a synod in Constantinople in the year 1412, stated that Orthodoxy “is our riches, it is our past glory, it is our nation.”\(^20\) For Byrennios, the Byzantines were an “Orthodox race (τὸ ὀρθόδοξον γένος).”\(^21\) Orthodoxy had now become a marker of national or political identity.

Orthodoxy was not only defined in relation to the Latin West. Isidore Glabas, twice metropolitan of Thessaloniki during the last two decades of the fourteenth century, witnessed firsthand the challenges Orthodox Christians faced living under Ottoman rule. In 1387 he traveled to Asia Minor to negotiate a political treaty with the Turks on behalf of the empire. He encouraged the Christians he met with the following words: “Let us be sure above all, my brothers, that with all our energy and power we keep Orthodoxy unstained, even if it be necessary to this end that our worldly wealth be dissipated, our country enslaved, our limbs mutilated, our bodies tortured, our lives violently extinguished. Let us endure all this with joy if it means that our flawless religion be not betrayed.”\(^22\)

Doukas, who composed a history of the Empire covering the period from 1341 to 1462, reports how George Scholarios, the onetime pro-unionist turned staunch anti-unionist, responded to the Council of Florence. In his description of the reception of the Greek delegation upon its return to Constantinople from Florence, Doukas describes how the anti-unionists visited the cell of George Scholarios, who had now become the monk Gennadios. The group asked Gennadios how they should react to the union proclaimed at Florence. Gennadios penned his response and placed it on the door of his cell. According to Doukas, the note read: “Wretched Romans, how you have gone astray! You have rejected the hope of God and trusted in the strength of the Franks; you have lost your piety, along with your city which is about to be destroyed.” Doukas continues his narrative: “Then all the nuns, who believed themselves to be pure and dedicated servants of God in Orthodoxy, in accordance with their own sentiments and
that of their teacher Gennadios, cried out the anathema, and along with them the abbots and confessors and the remaining priests and laymen."

An odd shift has taken place. It is generally agreed by historians of Byzantium that the authority and prestige of the patriarch of Constantinople reached its zenith during the Palaiologan period—that is, from the recapture of Constantinople from the Latins in 1261 to the fall of the city in 1453. As the political stature of the Byzantine Empire and its emperor diminished, the importance and authority of the patriarch expanded. Demographically, more Orthodox Christians were under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Constantinople than were under the political control of the Byzantine emperor. It was no longer enough for the emperor simply to be a defender of orthodox doctrine; his prestige needed a boost, so he was now to be seen as the defender of political orthodoxy. The Roman imperium, by all measures except rhetoric, was dead. It was in need of a redefinition. The imperium was the protector of Orthodoxy: a concept that signified not only a theological body of doctrine, but a cultural expression of Christianity that was neither Latin nor barbaric. It was neither Western nor Middle Eastern. It was not Roman Catholic, nor was it Islamic. It was Orthodoxy. Political orthodoxy was born within the cultural revival and theological flowering that occurred within the context of the Palaiologan dynasty and amid the political upheaval that would signify the end of the empire.

Conclusion

For Byzantine society prior to 1204, “orthodoxy” primarily referred to adherence to a set of dogmatic beliefs and religious practices. During the period between the end of Iconoclasm and the Fourth Crusade, this “religious orthodoxy” began to expand as a concept to include cultural identity in addition. The Komnenian dynasty, especially under Alexios I, helped direct this development as it continued its employment of “orthodoxy” in aid of the state. The shift from “religious orthodoxy” to “political orthodoxy” is most dramatic during the final two centuries of Byzantium. Yet the move was never fully complete. For some, “orthodoxy” remained a referent to the pristine expression of the person of Christ, his message of salvation, and the manner in which one should worship him. For others, “orthodoxy” was a political orientation as well. Patriarch Anthony’s claim that one cannot have a Church without an emperor has less to do with traditional religious orthodoxy than it does with a new self-definition of
Christian Byzantine (Roman) identity. The fall of Byzantium was one of many moments in the complicated history of Byzantine “orthodoxy” which served as a catalyst for the further development of political orthodoxy. In fact, the transition from pristine Christian orthodoxy to political orthodoxy continued after 1453, and found a permanent home among the Orthodox faithful under Ottoman rule.

Political orthodoxy, therefore, was a marker of identity that developed at a time when the very political and cultural foundations of Byzantium were threatened by forces that were not Orthodox. Orthodoxy, as a construct vis-à-vis heterodoxy, was as old as Christianity itself; and Byzantine Christianity was never able to divorce itself from this reality. For the Byzantines and their identity, political orthodoxy comes into focus in the decades following the end of Iconoclasm, not as some scholars have argued in response to the internal Orthodox debate over Iconoclasm, but in response to the Latin West. It gained fuel in the eleventh-century distancing of the two churches; it was defended by the faithful Komnenian emperors; it became more prominent following the catastrophe of the Fourth Crusade; and it became entrenched in the anti-unionist responses to the pro-Latin ecclesiastical policies of the Palaiologans. It was the political failure of the Byzantines to reassert their once-great imperial authority and prestige among their neighbors that caused a reassessment of their own identity. Orthodoxy provided the Byzantines with an identity that, although extending beyond the shrinking political boundaries of Romania, was in need of the cultural and political legacy that Byzantium had imparted to the Church. Political orthodoxy is the culmination of a long process of self-identity set in motion by the actions of and reactions to the first Christian emperor.

Notes


3. Recent work on the post–Fourth Crusade Byzantine political context have used the adjective “political” to articulate the close connection between the church and the state; see, for example, Kristina Stoeckl, “Political Hesychasm? Vladimir Petrunin’s Neo-Byzantine Interpretation of the Social Doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 62 (2010) 125–33; and Dimiter Angelov’s use of “political ecclesiology” in *Imperial Ideology*, 351ff.


5. The most detailed rationale for allowing the emperor access to the altar area is given by the Byzantine canonist Theodore Balsamon (c. 1130–c. 1195) in his commentary on Canon 69; see Georgios Rhalles and Michael Potles, *Syntagma ton theion kai hieron kanon*, vol. 2 (Athens, 1852) 466–7.


7. For a discussion of “political Christianity” and “political theology” see Dagron, *Emperor and Priest*, 286ff.


10. For a translation of the oath, see P. Charanis, “Coronation and its Constitutional Significance in the Later Roman Empire,” *Byzantion* 15 (1941), 57–58.


13. For a fuller discussion, see Michael Angold, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni, 1081–1261* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 50ff.


15. The memory of the “praised and blessed” Emperor Andronikos III (1328–41), even with his questionable moral behavior, is noted in the Synodikon along with “all those who struggled in defense of Orthodoxy” (Guillard, “Synodikon,” 91, l. 714–16).


17. For a differing view on the importance of Hellenism in late Byzantium, see Cyril Mango, “Byzantinism and Romantic Hellenism,” *Journal of the*


