On March 3, 2023, His Beatitude Theophilos III, Patriarch of Jerusalem, and His Grace Hosam Naoum, Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem, consecrate oil from the Mount of Olives for the anointing of King Charles III. Photo: Patriarchate of Jerusalem/ Buckingham Palace.

"God's Special Care": Monarchy and the Orthodox Church

Martin Dudley

A constitutional monarch of the United Kingdom, who must by law be a faithful Protestant, carries the titles "Defender of the Faith" and "Supreme Governor of the Church of England." The oil used for the sacramental anointing of King Charles III was consecrated at the Anastasis, the Church of the Resurrection, by the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Anglican Archbishop. This ritual act placed the king within a subtle and complex set of historical and sacral relationships that link the British monarchy to the Orthodox monarchies of Russia and Greece and, through them, back to Byzantium and to Rome. He reigns only through and with the advice of his ministers in the elected government but, as his late mother Queen Elizabeth II demonstrated, the monarch represents, to a very significant number of people, the principle of stability—the earthly order that mirrors the heavenly hierarchy, what the Byzantines called *taxis.* There is no one-size-fits-all theology of king and kingdom. My intention

here is to identify some of the history that shapes the Orthodox attitude to monarchy. Central to this are the sentiments expressed by the deacon praying in the Liturgy "for the safety of our most religious Emperor *N.*, who is God's special care, and for all men and women."

Biblical Kingship

From a biblical point of view, kings may have always existed, for the Scriptures offer no explanation of them when they appear in Genesis.[1] They are a sort of given, a basic feature of human society, predating Abraham's journey from his father's house. First there is Pharaoh (Gen. 12:15), then the nine kings that do battle in the valley of Siddim (Gen. 14:1–12), the mysterious priest-king Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18), and then Pharaoh again (Gen. 41–50). These kings are only significant because of the part they play in the story of Israel. Though the word "king" appears some three thousand times in the Bible, it refers generally to a specific monarch, the king of some named city or kingdom. "Kingdom" appears only four hundred times, mainly in New Testament references to the "kingdom of heaven." There is no king over Israel until the elders demand that Samuel give them one to rule over them (1 Sam. 8:4–22). He gives, as God instructs, a solemn warning to the people about the arbitrary ways of kings, listing all that a king will demand, from soldiers for his army to the best of the cattle. It will be too late, warns Samuel, when the people discover the truth of his words, for in the day when they cry out concerning their king whom they have chosen for themselves, the Lord will not answer them. They still want a king like all other nations, to govern them and to fight their battles, and so begins the story of Saul, David, Solomon, and their successors. The relationship between the king and the people of Israel is complicated. It is conditioned by the relationship between God and the king, with divine intervention mediated by the prophets. This arrangement—God, king, prophet, people—foreshadows the later one in which the prophetic role falls to the Church. It will be the role of the prophet, and later of the Church, to remind the king of his obligation to God. This is a perilous endeavor, for some kings will repent and others will not, shrugging off the consequences of imprisoning or killing the prophet.

The Old Testament rather schematically labels kings as either good or bad. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, is the archetypal "bad king," the oppressor of Israel, though the story of Joseph shows that even Pharaoh is not inherently bad. Exodus makes it clear that a change of monarch, perhaps even of dynasty, brought about the oppression of the children of Israel (Ex. 1:8). For Israel, a "good king" was one who followed the commandments of God, governed wisely, and was successful in battle. There were remarkably few good kings in the biblical history of Israel and Judah. In Daniel 2:20, we read of the God of heaven as the one who sets up and removes kings and kingdoms, and whose sphere of activity is in no way limited to Israel. Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar—another archetypal king—that it is the God of heaven who has given him "the kingdom, the power, and the might and the glory." Some foreign kings were indeed "good" precisely because they were agents of the God of Israel, not least in chastising his people (Dan. 4:34).

Kings came to be recognised as the wise *par excellence*, the possessors of divine wisdom, as Elisa Uusimäki

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[1] Kingship as a political institution seems to have originated in Egypt and Mesopotamia in the early fourth millennium BC, with the centralization of power and the ruler's adoption of ceremonial and religious functions. For example, it was in the thirteenth century BC, in New Kingdom Egypt,that the title "pharaoh" came to refer to the ruler.

King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. Tower of Babel stele, early 6th c. BC, carved black stone. Schøyen Collection.

observes.[2] This recognition may go back into the third millennium BC; it is certainly clear by the time of Hammurabi (1792–50 BC). It was not just that the kings were wise but that they also relied upon experts who displayed wisdom. Pharaoh, after the dream prophesying years of plenty and of famine, "called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men," but none of them could interpret it (Gen 41:8). Joseph, who was able to interpret the dream, was drafted into service by Pharaoh, who told him, "there is none so discreet and wise as you are" (Gen. 41:39). In Exodus, too, Pharaoh is able to summon his wise men and sorcerers, the magicians of Egypt, who are initially able to match the wonders performed by Moses and Aaron. Finally, when the gnats come, the magicians fail to perform a corresponding miracle by their secret arts, and tell Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 7:1, 8:19).

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, invests in those who will be his future advisers, having his chief eunuch recruit "youths without blemish, handsome and skillful in knowledge, understanding, learning, and competent to serve in the king's palace" (Dan. 1). Provided with food and lodging for three years, they are taught the letters and language of the Chaldeans. As they began their service, Nebuchadnezzar finds Daniel and his companions ten times better in wisdom and understanding than all the magicians in his kingdom.

1 Kings celebrates the wisdom of Solomon and declares that he "excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind" (1 Kings 10:23–24, 2 Chron. 9:22–23). Huram or Hiram, the king of Tyre, leads a kingdom characterized by practical skill and knowledge of building and of ships. Solomon asks him for craftsmen in gold, silver, bronze, and iron, in purple, crimson and blue fabrics, and in engraving (2 Chron. 2:7). Huram, writing to Solomon, says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who made heaven and earth, who has given King David a wise son, endued with discretion and understanding" (12). There is no mention in Chronicles of Solomon's apostasy, whereas 1 Kings 11 tells how Solomon loved many foreign women and clung to them in love, how they turned away his heart to other gods; "and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father" (1 Kings 11:1–10). We hear neither justification nor repentance from the aged Solomon when God tells him that he will tear the kingdom from him and his descendants. Little is made of

[2] Elisa Uusimäki, *Lived Wisdom in Jewish Antiquity: Studies in Exercise and Exemplarity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 20.

the failings of Solomon, and much is made of his wisdom. Nehemiah refers to Solomon's sin: "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such [foreign] women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless foreign women made even him to sin." (Neh. 13:26). Likewise, Sirach condemns Solomon as one who "overflowed like a river with understanding" but who, because of women, put a stain on his honor, defiled his posterity, and brought down wrath upon his children, so that the kingdom was divided (Sir. 47:14–20). All the kings other than David, Hezekiah and Josiah "sinned greatly and forsook the law of the Most High" (49:4).

The Rise of Christian Monarchy

The scriptural legacy is only part of the mix that contributes to a theology of king and kingdom. Christianity began in territories within the newly-established Roman Empire, which carried the marks of previous kingdoms and conflicts. There was Caesar in Rome, there was a governor in Judea, and there were tetrarchs and puppet-kings set up or thrown down by the will of the imperial government. Rome itself was a city that was notionally a republic with an empire. The title of the Roman ruler was not "king," for Romans had no love for kings, nor "emperor"; it was a title derived from the author of the Roman revolution, Caesar. Against this model of earthly rule, the Gospels present a quite different type of kingdom and kingship. This is evident when the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, out of political convenience, labels Jesus as King of the Jews, and when others mock him as King of Israel. The kingdom of heaven is not an earthly kingdom, nor is Jesus an earthly king (John 18:33–37).

The apostle Paul is forced to deal with earthly kingdoms, justifying himself before governors and kings and appealing, as a Roman citizen, to Caesar (Acts 25:12). Paul respects human institutions precisely because they do not belong to the permanent order and will disappear "at the proper time," the time of "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). Likewise, the apostle Peter's teaching is also driven by a sense of eschatological expectation; for the present, Christians must be subject to "every institution ordained for men," including the imperial authority, and this "for the Lord's sake" (1 Pet. 2:13–17).

After centuries of sporadic persecution, there arose an Emperor who did not persecute Christianity but encouraged it, a sort of mirror-image Pharaoh. Constantine the Great appears in the "imperial theology" of Eusebius of Caesarea as the quintessential "good king," an ideal rarely achieved thereafter in the Orthodox lands. After the end of the Western Empire in 476, various kingdoms came into existence—pagan, then Arian, and finally Orthodox Christian—and bishops and leading laymen necessarily adopted a pragmatic approach, for the kingdom of God would always be greater than earthly kingdoms. Remnants of Eastern imperial rule persisted in parts of the West into the sixth century, but the Bishop of Rome became the de facto principle of continuity amid the flux of barbarian kingdoms.

Christians often made do with whatever rulers they found. The sixth-century court of Shah Khusro I was marked by a new class of

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professional administrators, many of them Christians from Mesopotamia. Khusro was, as Peter Brown says, the just king *par excellence*, a king who "realized the formidable Near Eastern ideal of the long-armed king." He summed up the role of the king very simply: "The monarchy depends on the army, the army on money; money comes from the land-tax; the land-tax comes from agriculture. Agriculture depends on justice, justice on the integrity of officials, and integrity and reliability on the ever-watchfulness of the King." His justice extended equally, and equally harshly, to Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians.[3]

In Constantinople, ancient pre-Christian Roman traditions persisted at the succession of a new emperor. It was only at the coronation of Leo II in 473 that the patriarch first recited prayers and placed the diadem—precursor of the crown—on the emperor's head. Coronations still took place at the hippodrome, not in change to "not in" a church, but as the account of the inauguration of Emperor Anastasios in 491 shows, there was a strong religious element. The emperor's declaration of commitment to the Holy Trinity brought cries from the crowd of "Kyrie eleison! Son of God, do thou have mercy on him! . . . God will keep a pious emperor! . . . He in Whom thou believest, He will save thee! . . . God will preserve a Christian emperor! . . . God has given thee, God will keep thee."[4] In 641, Constans II was crowned in Hagia Sophia, and this became the normal practice. In the detailed accounts of the coronation ceremonies, there is a notable ritual absence: the Byzantine emperors were not anointed until the late twelfth century at the earliest. This practice seems to have come from the Latin West and the first instance seems to have been the coronation of the Latin emperor Baldwin I in Hagia Sophia on May 16, 1204, during the Fourth Crusade.

The coronation rite took on its final form in the middle of the fourteenth century.[5] It included an oral and written profession of Christian faith and of adherence to the apostolic and divine traditions of the Church. The emperor promised "to abide and perpetually be found a faithful and true servant and son of holy Church." Before the Trisagion, the patriarch prayed over the emperor, anointed him on the head only, in the form of a cross, and imposed the crown. During communion, the principal deacons escorted the crowned emperor into the sanctuary and gave him the censer. He then censed the holy table and the patriarch, and the patriarch, taking the censer, censed the emperor.

After communicating himself, the patriarch delivered a particle into the hands of the emperor—who had removed his crown—and then held the chalice for the emperor to drink from it in the manner of priests and deacons. The emperor then resumed his crown and withdrew from the sanctuary. In this way, the emperor's relationship to God in the Church was expressed without being defined. He had become a sacral person in a special position vis-à-vis the Church, "somewhere astride the . . . not altogether clear border between the clerical and lay orders."[6]

In the Church's prayer for divine blessing on "our most devout and faithful emperor," three principles are once again invoked: obedience to God, wise governance, and either continued peace and stability or at least success in war. Failure in the first of these would negate the others:

[3] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 166.

[4] F.E. Brightman, "Byzantine Imperial Coronations," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 2.7 (July 1901): 372.

[5] Ibid., 387ff.

[6] Robert Taft, S.J., *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, vol. 6: *The Communion, Thanksgiving, and Concluding Rites* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2008), 8.

[7] Michael McCormick, "Taxis," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 2018.

disregard for God led to tyranny and military defeat.

Wise governance was essential to the fundamental Byzantine concept of *taxis*. This word refers to "the harmonious hierarchy of institutions that constitute the state" and applies to every sort of order, from military rank and formations to precedence and etiquette and departments of government.[7] Properly ordered, human society mirrored the cosmos and the divine hierarchy. The pursuit of *taxis* was basic to imperial government, though its demands could be exercised by *oikonomia*, allowing compromise according to the circumstances. The opposite of *taxis* is *ataxia* or disorder, which is characteristic both of the barbarians who threatened the empire from without and the *demokratia* that threatened it from within. Change necessarily meant divergence from the established order. Byzantium depicted itself as unchanging, so needful change had to be represented as a return to an original, ancient *taxis*. The orderly succession of emperors and the declaration that they were *Roman* emperors was a necessary part of this. For the Church, then as now, it meant adherence to apostolic tradition and rejection of innovation.

Church and Emperor in Russia

The Byzantine Empire was far less ordered than might be expected, however, and it was constantly weakened, especially after 1261, by civil wars, heresies, and the Ottoman invaders. Imperial power was also weakened by failed attempts to force a union of the churches acknowledging the primacy of the Roman Pope, though the Patriarchate of Constantinople grew in prestige in countries that were not under Byzantine rule, including Russia. While never claiming succession to the Byzantine emperors, the Grand Prince of Moscow became tsar of all Russia, and his court adopted various Byzantine features. As John Meyendorff observes, Russia's ostensible inheritance from Byzantium may have amounted to "nothing but dreams," but "dreams, when they are rooted in powerful spiritual forces, possess the peculiar property of providing the life of nations . . . with patterns of judgment, norms of behaviour and historical meaning."[8] Granted its own patriarchate in 1598, the Russian church developed a relationship to the tsar that resembled the Byzantine church's relationship to the emperor. Though Peter I later abolished the patriarchate and moved the capital from Moscow to St Petersburg, tsars were still crowned in the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin.

It is strange that a convert to Orthodoxy should have expressed most clearly the Byzantine concept of *taxis*. Catherine II's coronation in September 1762 was modelled on the Byzantine rite. High-ranking officials and church dignitaries escorted her to the cathedral. She wore the coronation robe of Catherine I from 1724, covered in golden double-headed eagles. The crown, commissioned for the occasion, was based on an ancient Byzantine design. According to Russian tradition, she placed the crown on her own head. She held the orb and scepter, was anointed by the Archbishop of Novgorod, received communion, and venerated the icons in the two smaller Kremlin cathedrals of the Archangel Michael and the Annunciation. As historian Virginia Rounding observes:

> The guiding principle for Catherine was order, and the Orthodox Church, with its orders of bishops, archimandrites, priests and

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[8] John Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia: A Study of Byzantino-Russian Relations in the Fourteenth Century* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1989), 278.

[9] Virginia Rounding, *Catherine the Great: Love, Sex, and Power* (London: Hutchinson, 2006), 160.

deacons, and the people as obedient worshippers, contributed to the rightful ordering of a peaceful, well-regulated State, where everyone knew his place and contributed appropriately to the whole.[9]

An essential aspect of this "rightful ordering" was the relation between the monarch and the Church. Centuries earlier, in 1393, Patriarch Anthony of Constantinople sent a famous letter to Grand Prince Basil of Moscow. He explained the importance of past emperors in convening councils and regulating the Church, and continued:

> For Christians, it is not possible to have a Church, and not to have an emperor, for the empire and the church have a great unity and commonality, and it is impossible to separate them. Christians reject only the heretical emperors, who were raging against the Church and introducing doctrines which were corrupt and foreign to the teachings of the apostles and the fathers.[10]

By the same token, there often came a point at which the Church, in the person of some patriarch, metropolitan or bishop, had to challenge a heretical emperor. History shows that many lost their freedom, their tongues and noses, and even their lives, when opposing heterodoxy, immorality, and tyranny. If the emperor did not maintain his coronation oath and follow the canons in his public and private life, he would be rejected by the Church and, if he did not repent, he would be punished by God.

The yardstick against which kings will be judged is indicated in the Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete, which contrasts the two outstanding biblical kings, David and Solomon, and presented them as a warning. David "sinned doubly, pierced with the arrow of adultery and the spear of murder" and yet repented when challenged by the prophet Nathan, whereas Solomon, "the lover of wisdom who became a lover of harlots and a stranger to God," did not repent.[11] Moreover, Symeon the New

[10] Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia*, 254–55.

[11] *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), 205, 225.

Tsar Nicholas II receives communion at the altar following his coronation. Klavdiy Vasilievich Lebedev, *The Coronation Ceremony of Nicholas II: The Eucharist*, 1899, chromolithograph.

Theologian put forward, in his discourse on penitence, an interesting extension of the judgement that is found in Matthew 25: "Each patriarch, each metropolitan, each bishop, God will judge by the apostles and the holy Fathers who were illustrious before them in each metropolitan see and diocese." On that day of judgment "every sinful man will see one who is like him [positioned] opposite to him in eternal life, in that unutterable light, and will be judged by him." So sinful kings, on the left, will see holy kings, on the right, and as the rich man who saw Lazarus in Abraham's bosom they will be put to shame and left without excuse.[12]

Some final remarks must be made on the continuity and discontinuity of the Russian Church vis-à-vis ancient and medieval tradition. To the very end of tsarist rule, the Divine Liturgy included petitions for "Our most God-fearing Sovereign *N.* Emperor of all the Russias and all the reigning house" and a prayer "for our most pious and divinely preserved Emperor."[13] The Liturgy of Saint Basil continued the Byzantine use, referring to the subjection of barbarous nations who delight in war, and asking, "grant unto him a profound and lasting peace; incline his heart toward Thy Church and toward Thy people that in his peace we may lead an untroubled life in all godliness and honesty."[14] The tsar, like the Byzantine emperor, was a sacral person, and pictures of the coronation of Nicholas II show him being anointed before the holy doors and receiving communion standing at the holy table. We could go further in exploring how the last tsar achieved sainthood as a royal passion-bearer, not because he was a good king but because of the fortitude with which he bore his sufferings at the hands of the Bolsheviks. The Russian Orthodox Church was not openly committed to the triad of Orthodoxy-Autocracy-Nationhood, which Nicholas II received from his father, Alexander III, but they were three principles that shaped its life even after 1905, when Nicholas became a constitutional monarch who could not easily shed the habits of autocratic government. The Moscow Council of 1917 sought to secure the Church's position "in view of the changes that occurred in the political system." It affirmed its position on the basis of three facts: it is part of the Universal Church of Christ, the majority of the Russian people are Orthodox, and it served as "the great historic force that created the State of Russia."[15] The council expected that the head of state would be Orthodox, but Russia was changing too fast. The Provisional Government was overwhelmed by the revolution, and we shall never know how or if the Russian Orthodox Church would have adapted to a democratic society that lacked a monarch. ❃

[12] Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, trans. C. J. de Cantazaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 107.

[13] P. Kuvochinsky, *The Divine Liturgy of the Holy Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Graeco-Russian Church* (London: Cope & Fenwick, 1909), 39, 51.

[14] Ibid., 112.

[15] 'Concerning the Legal Status of the Orthodox Church in Russia' in Hyacinthe Destivelle, *The Moscow Council (1917-1918)*, 223.

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