

Empire and Autocephaly: A Brief Historical Sketch

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Many churchgoing Orthodox Christians are oblivious to the canonical disarray and infighting between churches that are, in many ways, a direct result of the historical interplay between Church and empire. The faithful are, understandably, happy to get to a functioning parish with a good priest on the weekend. However, for those who have serious interest in church life and history, that is to say, an interest in the Church as both a historical and spiritual institution, an objective assessment of Orthodox Christianity today is a challenge and an exercise in patient resolve. Keeping up with current events lead to moments of incredulity and frustration, and even at times to despair.

Perhaps this is nothing new. At the end of his book *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, Father Alexander Schmemmann writes that “many people regard the history of the Church as a temptation and avoid it for fear of ‘disillusionment.’” Although in the history of Orthodoxy there was “no lack of defect and human sins,” Father Alexander confidently states that “the whole strength of Orthodoxy lies in the truth; moreover, ‘discerning the spirits’ of the past is a condition for any real action with the Church in the present.”¹ This article seeks to provide a basic sketch or framework to better assess the interplay between the political history of the empires in which the Orthodox Church took shape and

evolved and the disarray in which it finds itself in today’s post-empire situation.

The spiritual, historical, and social order invoked by the incarnation, the order that shaped the spirit of the early Church, can only be understood through the lens of *parousia*. The novelty of Christianity was the very life and death of a truly exceptional person, as introduced at the first Pentecost: “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him” (Acts 2:22). This new religion was radically different in that it was not of an *ethnos* or nation but of the *oikoumene*. “You are chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

This “exclusion of exclusivity” was not to the liking of all, but the New Testament record leaves no doubt that Christianity was for everyone. In the central act of the crucifixion, Jesus announces, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). Saint Paul faced controversy but prevailed in his assertion that neither Jew nor Gentile had special standing, “but a new creation . . . the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:15–16). Nor was this religion to be attached to a party, like that of Paul, Apollos, or

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, trans. Lydia W. Kesich (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 341.

Cephas (1 Cor. 1:12). It is no wonder that many embraced Christianity, hearing lofty language proclaiming the “church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth,” where followers “become partakers of the divine nature” (1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Pet. 1:4).

After Emperor Constantine’s victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312, Christianity became the established religion of the Byzantine Empire and great changes ensued. Exponential growth necessitated order and regulation. The Church became an institution: hierarchical, structured, and organized, with dogmatic formulas, liturgical rubrics, moral codes, administrative regulations, and protocols of conduct. The Apostolic Church had already recognized the necessity of civil order. To Christ’s command, “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Matt. 22:21), Saint Paul added, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. . . . Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” (Rom. 13:1–2) Saint Peter likewise declared, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors. . . . Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Pet. 2:13–17)

The Constantinian era ushered in a new relationship between the Church and the governing authorities. What had been a passive acceptance in the early church became a mutually dependent bond. In addition to tremendous resources and protection, Constantine and the

succeeding emperors offered oversight and direction—as well as meddling and interference. Relationship with empire became foundational to the Byzantine church, and by extension was embedded in the structures of other Orthodox churches. All the ecumenical councils were called by emperors, who themselves presided over the formulation of creedal statements and canons. Imperial influence was definitive, if indirect. Father John Meyendorff states: “No text ever gave the emperor the power to define or formulate these principles; but it was universally accepted that he had a responsibility for relating them to the empirical realities of history, and thus to manage, where necessary, the practical affairs of the visible Church. This is the meaning of the famous words attributed to Constantine—‘I have been established by God as the supervisor of the external affairs of the Church.’”²

Under Justinian, emperor for some forty decisive years in the sixth

² John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 82.

Fragments of a colossal marble statue of Constantine the Great, early 4th c. Capitoline Museums, Rome. Photo: Neil Howard / CC BY-NC 2.0.



century, Church and empire became officially united in “symphonia.” His Sixth Novel declared, “There are two great blessings, gifts of the mercy of the Almighty to men, the priesthood and the empire.”³ He ordered the construction of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, a visible monument to the prestige and magnificence of symphonia. But this symphony was not always harmonious. Imperial authority was used to squash dissent in the Church and to persecute both theological opponents and those who opposed the imperial excesses. A hundred years before Justinian, the Archbishop of Constantinople, Saint John Chrysostom, was banished for his rebuke of imperial authorities, and many other patriarchs, bishops, and monks were tortured, exiled, or killed. Over the centuries, there was perennial friction between church and empire, but never were there movements for “separation of church and state.” Quite the opposite. Four hundred years after Constantine, the Byzantine Church was established to such a degree that it exerted influence on the empire. The two-headed eagle became the symbol of this coterminous relationship, the liturgical year was the calendar of the empire, and church canons acquired the weight of civil laws, affecting the processes of civil governance. These developments are evident in the *Epanagoge*, the preface to a ninth-century collection of laws. Byzantine scholars have noted that Patriarch Saint Photius directly participated in its writing. The *Epanagoge* explicitly outlined the tasks and goals of the Emperor and Patriarch. The Emperor is “to safeguard and secure the strength of the nation by good governance.” The goal of the Patriarch “is the salvation of the souls entrusted to him; he must live by Christ and strive wholeheartedly for peace.” Notably,

the *Epanagoge* gave the Patriarch responsibility to speak truth to power. He is “to speak of the truthfulness and safeguarding of dogmas before the face of the Emperor without confusion. . . . The Patriarch alone must interpret the maxims of the ancients, the definitions of the Holy Fathers, and the statutes of the Holy Councils.”⁴

As a template for the relations between Church and political authority, the *Epanagoge* posits an idyllic paradigm. Indeed, there are good examples of how Orthodox churches and civil authorities worked together to provide people with spiritual and ethical enlightenment, social order, and stabilizing political organization. Scholarly studies about Byzantine philanthropy reveal how the Byzantine Church and society worked together on humanitarian projects.⁵ Nonetheless, Orthodox churches were often subdued and oppressed by emperors, tsars, and political authorities, from imprisonment and exile of bishops and monks to the suppression of ecclesiastical institutions.

As this historical sketch demonstrates, the institutions and structures of Orthodox Christianity are the direct result of the “symphonic” setup of the Byzantine Empire. The sophisticated theological formulas, the majestic and sensuous liturgy, the refined creativity in visual, poetic, and musical arts, and the insightful ascetical traditions are the remarkable legacy of Byzantium, and all the Orthodox churches profited from it. The centuries saw changes and adaptations in matters of liturgy, iconography, and music, but the Byzantine “flavor” remained. The canons, by which autocephaly is attributed to churches or patriarchates, also came from Byzantium, and with

³ Justinian I, Sixth Novel, quoted in Schmemmann, *Historical Road*, 151.

⁴ *Epanagoge* in Schmemmann, *Historical Road*, 214–15.

⁵ See Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1968) and Timothy S. Miller, *The Orphans of Byzantium: Child Welfare in the Christian Empire*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003). In Russia, the Orthodox Church was vital to fostering political stability, as for example during the “Time of Troubles” in the early 17th century.

them came the co-dependent relation of the Church to the state. Over time, canonical structures and political affiliations varied, but this established relationship of a Church subservient to the state persisted.

The Russian Church, established as part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 988 under Grand Prince Vladimir of Kyiv, assumed the same concept of *symphonia* as the Byzantine Empire. The story of Vladimir sending envoys to find a religion for his state and their experience in Constantinople is well known. While it is clear from the chronicles that the Grand Prince developed a real spirituality, there was also political expediency in his thinking. His mandate of Orthodox Christianity for his people set a pattern of political control over and inside the Church.

The two-headed eagle, which the Russian rulers eventually adopted for themselves, was not only a symbol of Byzantium's virtues but also of its political aberrations. Thus, in addition to theology, spirituality and artistic achievements, the Russian church inherited the Byzantine ecclesio-political ideology. The Constantinopolitan bond between *ecclesia* and *civitas* became deeply embedded in Russia's collective consciousness. This consciousness reached full form in the century before the Byzantine Empire collapsed. In 1393, Patriarch Anthony of Constantinople wrote to Grand Prince Basil Dmitrivich: "For Christians it is not possible to have a Church, and not to have an emperor, for the church and the empire have a great unity and commonality, and it is impossible to separate them."⁶ In Russia, this Byzantine concept of binding Church and state would come to validate the Tsar's oppressive control of the Church.

As the Byzantine Empire weakened over the next few centuries under the pressure from its Muslim neighbors, the Russian state and the Russian Church accumulated greater and greater power. With the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the remains of Byzantium and other Eastern Patriarchates came under domination of Muslim authorities for some five hundred years. Religious life was drastically affected. Ivan III, Grand Prince of Moscow, claimed succession as the Church's royal patron, and declared Moscow to be the "Third Rome." Even though actual autocephaly was not granted to the Russian Church by the (weakened) Patriarch of Constantinople until 1589, Russia assumed the dominant position in the Orthodox *oikouméne*. With the granting of autocephaly, Moscow became the fifth Orthodox Patriarchate, after Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria. As Russia became a flourishing Orthodox empire, the Russian Church assumed a position of prominence over the other—now crippled—Orthodox churches, offering them considerable financial and other assistance. Such assistance was perhaps not without sincere Christian compassion, but political advantages were sought and received.

Russian tsars, like the Byzantine emperors, were anointed with holy chrism at their coronation. In the eyes of the faithful, the tsars were "God-appointed." As Byzantine emperors had done, Ivan the Terrible called a church council. He took part in the deliberations at the 1551 Stoglav Council. A religious fanatic, Ivan behaved at times like a monastic, but when Metropolitan Philip II of Moscow rebuked him for murderous, un-Christian activity, the tsar had the bishop imprisoned and then killed. Likewise, in the seventeenth century,

⁶ Quoted in John Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia: A Study of Byzantino-Russian Relations in the Fourteenth Century* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1989), 255.

Tsar Alexis became embroiled in a conflict with Patriarch Nikon that resulted in the patriarch's exile and imprisonment.

As the Russian Empire grew, so too did the power of the tsars, and with it their authority over the Church. Inevitably, the Byzantines' ideal "symphonic balance" tipped in the favor of the state. The pivotal event in this subjugation of the Russian Church was Tsar Peter the Great's abolition of the patriarchate. After Patriarch Adrian died in 1700, Peter appointed a temporary bishop to oversee church administration. This temporary situation lasted twenty years. Peter's desire to "westernize" Russia was sporadically successful, but it dramatically altered the structure of the Church. Having

organ in the Russian Church. Many in the Church disapproved, but as critics were transferred and removed, the opposition was overcome.

As an official branch of government, the Russian Church had access to considerable financial resources. The Church invested in evangelization and missions, translating Scripture and prayers into foreign languages. In time, Russian Orthodox missions were established in eastern Siberia, China, Japan, as well as in Alaska and the lower United States. In North America and Europe, where Russians and other ethnic Orthodox Christians resided, churches were built and supported by the Russian government, becoming an effective vehicle of Russian expansion and colonization.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was widespread denunciation of the synodal system. Thus, unsurprisingly, the first item at the much-anticipated 1917 All-Russian Church Council was the election of a Patriarch. The lot fell to the saintly Patriarch Tikhon, previously a ruling bishop in North America. Tikhon's tenure was tragically short and difficult, coinciding with the beginning of seventy years of gruesome suffering under the militantly atheistic communists.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was a crucial event for Russia and Orthodox Christianity. All hopes for renewed canonical order perished in a matter of months. Although particularly devastating for Russia, the entire Orthodox world was affected by the revolution, and many of the canonical issues and controversies that Orthodox churches face today are largely consequences of the revolution. The pre-revolutionary Russian Church was deeply dysfunctional, but the tsars were believing



Members of the Holy Synod pose under a portrait of Empress Catherine the Great in the Alexander Nevsky Lavra, 1911.

seen conciliar forms of governance in Protestant countries, he was convinced that a collegial group of bishops would be easier to govern than a single, all-powerful patriarch. In 1721, the Holy Governing Synod, a group of ruling bishops approved by the tsar, became the highest administrative

Orthodox Christians and there was a real, if unbalanced, *symphonia*, in which state and Church functioned without fearing that one would destroy the other. That was not the case with the communists. Within Russia, persecutions of clergy and laity, suppression of churches and church institutions, acts of terror, and assassinations became routine.

Furthermore, in the absence of a defined “symphonic” structure, canonical chaos spread outside of Russia. Parts of the missionary dioceses in North America and Europe were cut off from supply clergy and finances. In 1920, Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow issued an emergency resolution which allowed Russian bishops isolated outside of Russia to create temporary autonomous administrations. An autonomous Russian Orthodox and Greek-Catholic Church in North America came into existence. In Serbia, a group of exiled Russian bishops established the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). Russian bishops in Western Europe allied with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. To further complicate things, the so-called “Living Church” of liberal, reform-minded Russian clergy was recognized by the communist government. While Russian Orthodox clergy were being imprisoned and executed, Living Church clergy travelled freely outside of Russia, sowing canonical chaos wherever they went. Initially, the Patriarchate of Constantinople also recognized the Living Church, giving the uncanonical schismatics a veneer of canonical legitimacy.

Organized persecutions and the destruction of churches reduced the Russian Church to almost total annihilation. In 1927 Metropolitan Sergius, who functioned as temporary ruling

bishop of the Russian Church, issued a declaration of loyalty to the Soviet government. Eventually, a forced truce between the Russian Church and the Soviet state was reached in 1943, placing the “resurrected” Moscow Patriarchate under de facto governance by the authorities. The Church’s uncritical acceptance of its deplorable state was passively tolerated; the few who voiced criticism were variously punished or imprisoned.

In the brief period after the Russian Revolution, several Ukrainian Orthodox councils took place in Kyiv with the intention to create an autocephalous Church. Not having enough legitimate bishops to perform ordinations, one group became the “self-consecrated” Ukrainian Church, justifying an episcopal consecration by the laying on of hands placed upon a dead bishop’s relics. The communist government realized the political advantages gained by forcing all Ukrainian Orthodox and Greek Catholics to be under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. For the Russian Church, the return of Greek Catholics to Orthodoxy was publicized as a happy homecoming. When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, that enforced amalgamation instantly broke apart.

The relationship between Church and state in post-Communist Russia for a time appeared harmonious. The post-Communist government actively subsidized the recovery of the Russian Church. Ruined churches and monasteries were rebuilt, new ones erected, prayer books and religious literature published. Russian churchmen began to proclaim that the Russian Church was going through a fantastic spiritual revival. Some bishops said that the Church was thriving in total freedom, independent from any exterior

authority, a situation of unlimited potential unlike anything in its past. However, the relationship of the Church to the state was increasingly marked by striking paradoxes. The Church appeared to be both independent *and* dependent, both apolitical *and* demonstratively political, both peace-loving *and* actively warmongering. Though not constrained by any governmental policies, the Church voluntarily became an assertive partner of the state, endorsing political agendas and the military establishment. It is apparent that, yet again, financial support systems are rewarding the Russian Church for its loyalty to the government. Moreover, just as in the Byzantine Empire, the government brutally persecuted non-Orthodox “heretics.”⁷

The fall of the communist regimes did little to normalize Orthodox ecclesial order. For example, Ukrainian Orthodox clergy petitioned the Moscow Patriarchate to establish an autocephalous church in the 1990s. Moscow did grant its Ukrainian church autonomy but continued to exert decisive influence. When Ukraine broke away from the Russian Federation, a schismatic Kyivan Patriarchate was established in 1992. During the presidency of Petro Poroshenko, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople negotiated to establish an autocephalous church. There were hopes that this would resolve the discord and bring Ukrainian Orthodoxy together. On December 20, 2018, Bartholomew granted the tomos of autocephaly creating the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. There was limited success in bringing factions together, with strong opposition from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which remained canonically connected to Moscow. Patriarch Bartholomew’s act was condemned as uncanonical

by Moscow’s Patriarch Kirill who, in reaction, broke canonical relations with Constantinople. Churches loyal to Moscow were instructed not to celebrate services or participate in sacraments with churches loyal to the Ecumenical Patriarch.

The conflict between the two patriarchs had an immediate impact on other Orthodox Churches, particularly those of the diaspora in Western Europe. These communities founded by the Russian diaspora, where churches under Constantinople and Moscow formerly coexisted with little political or ecclesial tension and readily communed in one another’s parishes, have now been forced to take sides. Priests can no longer concelebrate and, while there is much variance in actual observance, their parishioners can no longer commune in each other’s churches. Disruptions at the parish level are considerable, and many people have left one parish for another as an act of conscience.

Looking back at the 2020s, future scholars may regard Orthodox churches as being at a “quantum moment”—that is, a time of radical alteration of understanding in principles and directions. The principles of Newtonian science did not cease with Einstein and quantum mechanics, but the understanding of physics changed dramatically. Likewise, Orthodox dogma and liturgical content will always possess eternal validity, but ecclesiastical structures and canonical formulae are in need of critical evaluation. Church canons that effectively ensured external and internal stability for centuries have become so relativistic that they are now useless. Precedents such as subservience to governing authorities and policies, together with a pervasive adherence to “chthonic

⁷ For example, in 2017, Russia banned the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses as “extremist.” Currently over 740 people are in prison for being part of the group.

Orthodoxy,” which holds the love of nationality and customs as supreme, have burdened the Church and led to dysfunctional incapacity.

There have been some attempts to engage with modernity, such as the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America in 1970 and the Ligonier meeting of North American bishops in 1994. These have produced very limited results. During the celebration of Russia’s Millennium of Orthodox Christianity in 1988, small gestures suggested the Russian Church was preparing to face the future. Sadly, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russian Church became engrossed in recreating pre-revolutionary religious glory, with golden cupolas, the biggest bells possible, and extravagant liturgical display. Among the Orthodox patriarchates today, their estrangement from each other, together with their individual inherent problems, vitiates movement for any kind of conciliar gathering. The twenty-first century finds Orthodox Christianity at a crossroads, a “quantum moment” of reassessment and realignment. How this will take place, and in which direction it will go, remains to be revealed!

Noticeably absent in discussions about Orthodox Church institutions are references to the foundational Christian qualities of peace, love, and joy. These were made manifest by Jesus Christ and imparted to the

Church through the Apostles, beginning at Pentecost. As the Apostles’ lives were transformed, their capacity to live in peace, love, and joy was augmented by the fact that Jesus suffered to make these qualities accessible. They understood that they too would have to suffer. “The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers. Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. . . . If one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God. For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God.” (1 Pet. 4:7–8, 16–17) Two thousand years of church history have only reinforced those Apostolic insights. The great twentieth-century Orthodox visionary Father Alexander Schmemmann knew firsthand about suffering and the challenges facing Orthodoxy. Yet, while his journals are filled with lamentation, he often refers to “spiritual joy,” about which he expresses his abiding convictions. “God will forgive everything except lack of joy; when we forget that God created the world and saved it. Joy is not one of the ‘components’ of Christianity, it’s the tonality of Christianity that penetrates *everything*—faith and vision.”⁸ Father Alexander’s sense of that joy never left him, strengthening him throughout life. It is a comforting example for us, as is his love for the Orthodox Church, whose sorrows and tribulations he knew so well. ✽

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⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 1973–1983*, trans. Juliana Schmemmann (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2000), 137.



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