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Donald M. Nicol

Excerpt

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I

The background: the theocratic Empire

Opinions may vary about when the Byzantine, as distinct from the Roman or Late Roman Empire began. But about its end there can be no doubt whatever. The Byzantine Empire as a social and political institution ended on 29 May 1453. It was a Tuesday. The fall of Constantinople on that day completed the process of transition from a Christian Roman Empire to a Muslim Ottoman Empire. It had been a long process. It may be said to have begun almost exactly a hundred years before, in 1354. On 2 March of that year Gallipoli was destroyed by earthquake. The Osmanlis (or Ottomans) at once sailed over the Hellespont from Asia Minor to settle in the ruins. At Gallipoli they established their first permanent bridgehead on the soil of Europe. Forty years later almost the whole of the Balkans, Northern Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria were under Turkish rule. The ancient Greco-Roman cities in Asia Minor – Nicaea, Nikomedia, Ephesos and others – had succumbed even before 1354. But now the way into Europe was open to the infidel, the way that had been kept closed to the Arabs and the Seljuqs. The hope of reaching an entente between Christians and Muslims as European and Asiatic powers, which had been in the mind of at least one Byzantine emperor, was doomed. There were really only two cities left in the Empire – Thessalonica and Constantinople. The former was to have its first taste of Turkish conquest in 1387. The latter was to become the capital of an Ottoman Empire already in other respects well established on that fateful Tuesday in 1453.

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The fall of Constantinople marked the end of the century-long process which had begun with the Turkish occupation of Gallipoli in 1354. Nearly a hundred years before that event the Byzantines had made a brave show of inaugurating a new era for their ancient Empire. They had weathered the storm of the Fourth Crusade and in 1261 recovered their capital city from the westerners who had stolen it. It has become fashionable to imply that the Byzantines by their ineptitude and isolationism brought the Fourth Crusade upon themselves. There may be some truth in this. But neither they nor the crusaders can have foreseen the consequences of that dreadful deed: a ruined, burnt and pillaged city, a diaspora of refugees to east and west, the setting-up of three rival Byzantine states in exile, and the French or Italian occupation of most of Greece and the Greek islands. (One forgets, for example, that Athens, conquered by Burgundian adventurers in 1204, was not again a Greek city until 1833.) The Latin régime in Constantinople ended in 1261 when the Emperor in exile at Nicaea, Michael VIII Palaiologos, entered the city in triumph as the 'new Constantine', the second founder of the Christian Roman Empire. It was from him that all the emperors of the last centuries of that Empire, with one notable exception, were descended. The year 1261 was therefore the beginning, the year 1354 the middle, and the year 1453 the end of these last centuries of Byzantium, the end of the world.¹

In that world, the Byzantine world, the distinction between things spiritual and things temporal was often blurred and seldom defined. Church and Empire were seen as the two elements of one society, the soul and the body. In the fourth century Eusebius of Caesarea had declared

¹ General historical surveys of the period in English may be found in the following works: A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324–1453* (Madison, 1952), pp. 580–722; G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 444–572; *Cambridge Medieval History*, iv: *The Byzantine Empire, Part 1: Byzantium and its Neighbours* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 331–87 (G. Ostrogorsky); D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261–1453* (London, 1972).

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that the Christian Roman Empire was the earthly reflexion of the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as there was only one God in heaven so there could only be one ruler on earth, and that was the Emperor of the Romans. The emperor was God's regent on earth, the visible head of church and state, because the two were interdependent.² This theory sometimes left room for doubt as to where *imperium* ended and *sacerdotium* began. The ideal, as expressed by the Patriarch Photios in the ninth century, was that the emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople worked in harmony, the one having care of the bodies, the other the souls of the people.³ This happy state of psychosomatic co-operation was liable to be upset by extremists; for some emperors and some patriarchs too overstepped the limits of their jurisdiction. But in general it was agreed that there was something very special, something holy, about the office of emperor; and its holder, who was after all sometimes described as 'the thirteenth apostle', was very near to being a priest. A Byzantine canonist of the thirteenth century ruled that: 'The emperor has all the prerogatives of a priest except the right of administering the sacraments.'⁴ Rightly so, for the emperor was the God-crowned ruler and protector of the Christian world.

It is significant that there is no Greek word for 'Christ-

2 On this fundamental tenet of Byzantine political thought, see especially N. H. Baynes, 'The Byzantine state', and 'Eusebius and the Christian Empire', in Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1955), pp. 47–50, 168–72; F. Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, ix: Washington, D.C., 1966), II, pp. 611 ff.; and S. Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy* (Cambridge, 1977), chs. 1 and 2, esp. pp. 22–5.

3 The views of Photios are expressed in the *Epanagoge*, composed about 880: J. and P. Zepos, *Jus Graecoromanum*, II (Athens, 1931), pp. 236–368, Tituli II and III, pp. 240–3; English trans. in E. Barker, *Social and Political Thought in Byzantium from Justinina I to the last Palaeologus* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 89–93. Cf. Runciman, *Byzantine Theocracy*, pp. 94–5. See also the texts collected in O. Mazal, *Die Prooimien der byzantinischen Patriarchenurkunden* (Byzantina Vindobonensia, VII: Vienna, 1974), pp. 145–57.

4 Demetrios Chomatianos, *Letter to Constantine Kabasilas*, ed. J. B. Pitra, *Analecta Sacra et Classica Spicilegio Solesmensi Parata*, VI (Rome, 1891), cols. 631–2.

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endom', no Byzantine equivalent for the Latin term *christianitas*. The word that would have sprung to a Byzantine mind is *oikoumene*, or *basileia* – the Empire. The 'Christ-named people' (χριστώνυμος λαός) who formed the great Christian society were the privileged inhabitants of the oecumenical Empire, whose visible head was the *basileus*, the God-protected ruler, defender of the faith and order (ἐπιστημονάρχης) of the Church.⁵ This idea persisted to the very last days of Byzantium. In 1393 the Grand Duke of Moscow, Basil I, suggested that things had reached such a sorry pass in Constantinople that, although the Church was seen to be surviving, there was no longer any very evident emperor to lead society: 'We have a Church but no emperor.' The Byzantine reply to this rude outburst by a Russian prince was composed by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Antonios IV. It is a justly celebrated document. In summary terms, the Patriarch pointed out, first, that, even though the Turks were hammering at the gates of the city, there was still an emperor on the throne, and second, that to talk of a Church without an emperor was an absurdity. The oecumenical Church, of which Russia was a part, postulated an oecumenical emperor. The one could not exist

5 For the term *epistemonarches*, signifying 'defender of the faith and regulator of order in the Church', see George Pachymeres, *De Michaelae Palaeologo*, ed. I. Bekker (CSHB, 1835), p. 261 line 3; Demetrios Chomatianos, *Letter to Constantine Kabasilas*, col. 631. For other examples of the use of the term see DuCange, *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae graecitatis* (Lyons, 1688), col. 427. Cf. A. Michel, *Die Kaisermacht in der Ostkirche (843–1204)* (Darmstadt, 1959), pp. 47, 77. The Patriarch Athanasios I (on whom see below) applied the title to his emperor. Alice-Mary M. Talbot (ed.), *The Correspondence of Athanasius I Patriarch of Constantinople. Letters to the Emperor Andronicus II, Members of the Imperial Family, and Officials* (Dumbarton Oaks Texts, III [= CFHB, VII]: Washington, D.C., 1975), no. 61 line 48; no. 95 line 21. Athanasios's views on *imperium* and *sacerdotium* are clearly expressed in letter no. 104, addressed to the emperor about 1309 (ed. Talbot, p. 264 lines 25–8): 'For priesthood was not granted to Christian people for the sake of empire, but empire for the sake of priesthood, so that if the empire in a manner pleasing to God supported the Church with the secular arm and honored and protected Her, the empire in turn would be supported and protected and increased by God.' Cf. letter no. 61, p. 139.

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without the other.⁶ The same view was expressed by the monks of Constantinople in the thirteenth century when they were being persecuted by the Emperor Michael VIII. The historian of the time tells us that the monks counted the days till they should be rid not of their emperor but of their miseries; for they could no more live without an emperor than a body can live without a head.⁷

Some Orthodox theologians of today have deplored this Byzantine identification of Church and society. Alexander Schmemmann writes: 'The tragedy of the Byzantine Church consisted precisely in the fact that it became merely the *Byzantine Church*, that it merged itself with the Empire not so much administratively as, above all, psychologically, in its own self-awareness. The Empire became for it the absolute and supreme value, unquestioned, inviolable, and self-evident.'⁸ Perhaps this was a tragedy. But at least until 1453 it was a fact of Byzantine life.

The Church on earth, which implied the Empire on earth, was a reflexion of the Church in heaven. The Byzantines therefore lived in constant communication with the other world, in constant expectation of miracle or supernatural intervention in their material affairs. The interplay of time and eternity was always real to them. The Church on earth provided the links, the channels of grace between this world and the other. The sacraments or 'mysteries' were the regular means of communication. But there were other channels: tangible ones like icons or relics; living ones like monks or holy men. Society within the Empire was under the special protection of God. But

6 The text of the Patriarch's letter is in *MM*, II, pp. 188–92. Partial English trans. in E. Barker, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 194–6. For discussion of its significance see S. Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity. A Study of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek War of Independence* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 71–6; Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, pp. 553–4; D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe, 500–1453* (London, 1971), pp. 264–6.

7 Pachymeres, *De Michaelae Palaeologo*, p. 490.

8 A. Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* (London, 1963), pp. 222–3.

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God would remove his protection if his people drifted into sin or lapsed into heresy. The Byzantines studied and wrote treatises about the 'art of war'. They knew that God helps those who help themselves. But they truly believed that ultimately the safety of their city depended as much on the strength and purity of their faith as on armed defence. Time and again Constantinople was saved from its enemies by the intervention of the Virgin. Time and again Thessalonica was saved from Arabs, Slavs or Bulgars by the intervention of its Saint Demetrios.⁹ Such matters were beyond reason and above politics. Theology too, in its proper sense of the knowledge of God, was held to be beyond reason. Byzantine theologians distrusted the subtleties of syllogism and dialectic as aids towards the understanding of God. Only a mystic or a saint could come to the fullness of that understanding. Yet, because Byzantine society was so permeated by religious feeling, theology in some sense was seldom far from men's minds. If the ancient Greek was, as Aristotle said, 'a political animal', the Byzantine was a theological animal. In the absolute monarchy under which he lived religion was almost the only form of politics available to him. Rival emperors or pretenders might fight for possession of the throne, but their motives were seldom political in the modern sense. They were personal, they were dynastic; but the warring factions were not intent on changing the existing order of society or the institutions of government. The order of society was in any case divinely ordained; and the orthodoxy of an emperor's theology was held to be more significant for the maintenance of that order than his 'politics'. There was indeed one political upheaval in the fourteenth century which had nothing to do with theology or the Church. But it is unique. When Byzantine society was divided the division was usually on ecclesiastical or theological grounds. The christological debates of the fourth to sixth centuries, the iconoclastic controversy

⁹ See N. H. Baynes, 'The Supernatural Defenders of Constantinople', in Baynes, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays*, pp. 248–60.

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of the eighth and ninth centuries, the passionate arguments about the rights and wrongs of union with the Roman Church in the last centuries – all these were matters of life and death. The issues were basically theological. But they divided families, divided society, divided the Empire.

In the last centuries of Byzantium there were three great debates of this nature: the Arsenite schism, the hesychast controversy and the question of union with the Roman Church. Each one of them demonstrates the extent to which religion was the politics of the Byzantine people. The so-called Arsenite schism, which divided church and society in the thirteenth century, began with the crime of an emperor and with a conflict of loyalties among his subjects.¹⁰ The Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, who had chased the Latins out of Constantinople in 1261 and restored the city to its proper owners, had imprudently inaugurated the new era by blinding the boy Emperor John IV, whom many believed to be the lawful heir to the throne. Like the United Kingdom the Byzantine Empire had no written constitution. Its monarchy was, in principle if seldom in practice, elective and not hereditary. Emperors had blinded or even murdered their rivals before Michael VIII. But many people felt that the victim in 1261 had a prescriptive right at least to share the *imperium* which his fathers had saved from extinction after the Fourth Crusade. For the young John IV was the last of the line of the dynasty of Laskaris, which had ruled the Empire in exile at Nicaea for over fifty years. Michael VIII's treatment of him was criminal, a crime against humanity and against the Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople, Arsenios, very properly excommunicated him. As soon as he could find a pretext, the Emperor deposed his patriarch.

¹⁰ On the Arsenite schism, see especially L. Petit, 'Arsène Autorianus et les Arsénites', *DTC*, I, ii, cols. 1991–4; I. Sykoutris, *Περὶ τὸ σχίσμα τῶν Ἀρσενιατῶν*, *Hellenika*, II (1929), pp. 267–332; III (1930), pp. 15–44; V. Laurent, 'Les grandes crises religieuses à Byzance. La fin du schisme arsénite', *Académie Roumaine. Bulletin de la section historique*, xxvi (Bucharest, 1945), pp. 225–313. Cf. Nicol, *Last Centuries*, pp. 50, 67, 102–5, 110–11, 131–3.

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But such was the feeling in the Church that it was another two years before Michael could persuade a substitute patriarch to absolve him and receive him back into the fold.

The deposed Patriarch Arsenios promptly became a martyr. A faction of bishops, priests, monks and laymen broke away from the rest of the Church. They called themselves the Arsenites and refused to recognise the authority of any subsequent patriarchs. They remained loyal to the memory of Arsenios who had had the courage to condemn the Emperor as a criminal. Not all of them perhaps were motivated by such lofty principles. As so often in Byzantium, the trouble was partly about the extent to which the emperor had the right to interfere in the affairs of the Church. This, as has already been suggested, was a perennial problem and one to which no Byzantine canonist had ever provided a definitive answer, merely a series of interpretations and recommendations. Here again, the Empire could perhaps have done with a written constitution; the Church could have done with an army of canon lawyers. But in either eventuality the Empire, and the Church, would have ceased to have that specific quality which we call 'Byzantine'. There were plenty of precedents for an emperor to disembarass himself of a troublesome patriarch. But that did not mean that such action was right or acceptable to the Church. 'Caesaropapism' is now rightly a somewhat discredited word.¹¹ But it should be remembered that Byzantine emperors who overstepped the invisible line between the preserves of the *imperium* and the preserves of the *sacerdotium* were frequently given hell by their bishops in this world, whatever happened to them in the next.

The Arsenites were also encouraged by the emotional hostility towards Michael VIII of the large number of

¹¹ See D. J. Geanakoplos, 'Church and State in the Byzantine Empire: A reconsideration of the problem of Caesaropapism', in Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 55–83.

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supporters of the disprised and blinded Emperor John Laskaris. They were most numerous and most loyal in Asia Minor, where the Laskarid dynasty had earned its fame and its following. The Arsenite schism therefore represents very well the amalgam of ideals, of politics and of religion which constituted an opposition party in Byzantium. It was always difficult to tell where religion ended and politics began. The schism was not officially resolved until 1310, long after Michael VIII and Arsenios were dead and gone, when circumstances had changed, memories had faded and passions cooled.¹²

The second great debate that divided Church and society in the last centuries of Byzantium concerned the precepts and practices of certain monks who came to be known as the hesychasts; or rather it was about the theological implications of the mystical experience which the accomplished hesychast claimed to enjoy. This was on a much higher and more rarefied plane than the conflict waged by the Arsenites. The most eloquent champion of the hesychasts and indeed a major formulator of their theology was Gregory Palamas, a monk with a great following on Mount Athos. Councils of bishops were convened and reconvened to determine the truth or the falsehood of Palamite theology. The Church was rent by controversy. Society was divided into Palamites and anti-Palamites, hesychasts and anti-hesychasts.¹³

Put in its simplest form the argument was about the nature of the divine light of the Transfiguration. Nothing

¹² Nicol, *Last Centuries*, pp. 110–11.

¹³ On Hesychasm, see esp. J. Meyendorff, *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas* (Paris, 1959) (English trans., *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, by G. Lawrence (London, 1964)); J. M. Hussey and T. A. Hart, in *Cambridge Medieval History*, iv, 2 (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 198–205; Runciman, *Great Church*, pp. 128–58; J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm: historical, theological and social problems. Collected Studies* (Variorum: London, 1974); Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York, 1974), pp. 76–8, 107–9; Meyendorff 'Spiritual trends in Byzantium in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries', in P. A. Underwood (ed.), *The Kariye Djami*, iv (New York, 1975), pp. 93–106. See also Ch. 2.

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could seem further above the sordid world of politics. But the controversy coincided with the outbreak of a civil war, or rather a dynastic war, following the death of the Emperor Andronikos III in 1341. Andronikos left an infant son, John V, as his successor. The bone of contention was the regency and guardianship of this heir to the throne in Constantinople. The Grand Domestic John Cantacuzene had been the late emperor's chief minister and friend and had every right to expect the regency as his reward. But his claim was disputed by the Patriarch of Constantinople, John Kalekas, and by the Grand Duke Alexios Apokaukos. Both men owed their positions to Cantacuzene. But both posed as champions of the legitimate heir, John V, and of his mother, the Empress Anne of Savoy; and she was persuaded that it was the Patriarch who should act as regent. Cantacuzene and his supporters went to war to right this wrong.¹⁴ These were the circumstances in which the hesychast dispute arose. The Patriarch, who was in fact no great theologian, convinced himself that Gregory Palamas and his hesychast monks had gone too far and were guilty of heresy. He had them condemned by his synod. Palamas was imprisoned and then excommunicated. Those who believed, as did the pretender John Cantacuzene, that hesychast doctrine was perfectly orthodox therefore tended to take the other side in the war over the regency. Cantacuzene was thus able to count on the overwhelming and invaluable support of the monks, especially on Mount Athos. This was not mere political opportunism on his part. His own memoirs and theological writings, which he composed later in his life, show that

14 The circumstances of the civil war of 1341–7 are outlined by Nicol, *Last Centuries*, pp. 191ff., and Nicol, *The Byzantine Family of Kantakouzenos (Cantacuzenus) ca. 1100–1460. A genealogical and prosopographical study* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, xi: Washington, D.C., 1968), pp. 44–63. Cf. P. Charanis, 'Internal strife in Byzantium during the fourteenth century', *B*, xv (1940–1), pp. 208–30; G. Weiss, *Joannes Kantakouzenos – Aristokrat, Staatsmann, Kaiser und Mönch – in der Gesellschaftsentwicklung von Byzanz im 14. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden, 1969); K. P. Matschke, *Fortschritt und Reaktion in Byzanz im 14. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1971).