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Notes on Autocephaly and Phyletism*

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What is Autocephaly?

'Local Churches' as Members of the 'Universal Church'

Autocephaly – independence and self-government – is an attribute of the major Orthodox Churches. Theoretically it offers no scope for isolationism or exclusivism. John Meyendorff traces its origin to the arrangements whereby local communities of believers in the early church came into association with each other. The initiative was with the local church. Pluralism was maintained; it was necessary, however, for all local churches to remain part of the Universal Church. This contact and communion was facilitated by the bishops who were in this sense the servants of the local church rather than representatives of some central authority.

'The full integrity and catholicity of each local church required its communion with all the churches,' explains Meyendorff. 'The initial form of this communion was normally realized with neighboring churches in the framework of existing political structures. These canonical groupings were meant to serve unity, not create divisions.'¹ It was the local church community that was of fundamental importance; the bishops of local churches were equal in status and they met regularly in provincial synods under the authority of the bishop of the local provincial capital, or 'metropolitan'.² 'There were no canonical obstacles to the existence of this patriarchal pluralism. On the contrary, the ancient canons of Nicaea and subsequent councils ... sanctioned ecclesiastical regionalism in the framework of a universal unity of faith, secured by councils.'³

These fundamental principles of autocephaly remain valid today. 'The eucharistic assembly, presided by the bishop, is the fullest manifestation of the Church catholic, although it is always a local event. It gathers all the Orthodox Christians living in a given place.' One of the factors which determines its authenticity is 'unity with all the other Orthodox communities of the present.' 'If there is no concern for "horizontal" unity in truth with the entire Church universal, there is only congregationalism.'⁴

Autocephaly, then, affirms the integrity of each 'local' church community while asserting that each such community achieves its validation only within the Universal Church. Such continues to be the teaching of those with the profoundest insight into Orthodox ecclesiology. The Russian Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Men' was once

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asked whether he was afraid his spiritual pupils would cool towards Orthodoxy if they took part in ecumenical meetings. On the contrary, he answered, 'they will become better Orthodox if they are enriched with the knowledge of unity'.⁵ Fr Vladimir Fedorov, professor at the St Petersburg Theological Academy, criticises a popular misunderstanding, that 'Orthodoxy is the basis of Russian culture, Russian civilisation and the Russian mentality'. 'One can agree fully with the statement that "Christianity is the basis of Russian culture and civilisation", but Orthodoxy and Christianity must not be seen as opposites. Orthodoxy is not a religion. Rus' was baptised into an undivided Church.'⁶

The 'Local Church', Autocephaly and the Nation

There will clearly be some latitude in defining what constitutes the 'local' church as the unit endowed with 'autocephaly'. From the fourth century independent churches arose beyond the eastern borders of the Roman Empire. 'Very early, the identity of these churches was defined primarily along cultural or ethnic lines.'⁷ Among these churches the Armenian Apostolic Church was the first to identify itself with a state and make the latter officially Christian (p. 301). Since then it has always been defined as the church of the Armenian people. Throughout its history it has been the symbol and preserver of Armenian national identity, a vital function for a nation which has suffered centuries of war over its original homeland, culminating in genocide, and which today has a diaspora at least as large as the population of its home republic. 'The Armenian Church indeed grew to be so national that neither the Greeks nor the Aramaeans settled in the very midst of the Armenian population felt themselves at home in Armenian churches and had Greek and Syriac churches built for their own use.'⁸

From the earliest days, then, autocephaly showed that it was capable of undermining the spirit of universalism. In the original understanding autocephaly was to give autonomy to Christians in a particular locality; in Meyendorff's words, quoted above, 'it gathers all the Orthodox Christians living in a given place'. However, it is clear that in many circumstances the Christian community feeling itself to be 'local' will be identified with a cultural, linguistic and probably therefore also ethnic community. 'The problem of nationality and universality in the Church is as old as Christendom and the whole evolution of Christianity down to our own days is characterised by repeated attempts, more or less successful, at discovering the right balance between the national and the universal elements present in the Church ...'⁹

The Orthodox Churches virtually all lie beyond a 'fault-line' which divides Europe into East and West, and are to be found in that part of Europe with a distinctive pattern of political, economic and cultural development. How far these have shaped religion and how far the reverse is true is a complex question. They have also spent much of their history under authoritarian or totalitarian control. From the mid-thirteenth century Russia was under Mongol political domination for several hundred years; from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries the Balkans were under Ottoman domination; and in the twentieth century all the European Orthodox Churches except that of Greece have been under communist control. These experiences have had their effect on the nature of Orthodox autocephaly: churches have emerged which are identified for better or worse with particular nation-states.

Orthodoxy under the Ottomans

The Millet System

Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire were recognised by the Muslim authorities as fellow ‘people of the Book’, and were therefore not to be forcibly converted or persecuted for their faith. Each religious community or *millet* was placed under the supervision of its own leaders – at local level for the Christians these would typically be the bishops – who were responsible for civil justice, education, collecting taxes and maintaining order amongst their people. At the top level all Orthodox Christians were all placed under the authority of the ecumenical patriarch in Constantinople. They were not divided according to nationality: all the Orthodox, whether Greeks, Bulgars, Serbs, Arabs or Albanians, were grouped together as the *millet-i-Rum*. The administrative power of the Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities under Ottoman rule was in fact greater than in the Byzantine Empire.

The Christians were allowed to exist in peace, then; but limitations were placed on their activities. Church building and monasticism were restricted. Theology lost originality and vigour, charitable and educational work was reduced to a minimum, many parish clergy were illiterate, and missionary activities ceased altogether. The practice of selling ecclesiastical offices spread down from the highest to the lowest levels as each office-holder recovered his expenses from those he appointed below him, and it was the ordinary peasant who bore the final financial burden.

At the same time, however, the Patriarchate became part of the institutionalised corruption of the Ottoman system. The office of patriarch was soon obtainable only by means of a massive bribe to the grand vizier and although patriarchs theoretically enjoyed tenure for life the sultan replaced them at whim. In the seventeenth century the office changed hands some 60 times.

Hellenisation: Early Greek Nationalism

One phenomenon increasingly resented by all the Slav peoples in the Ottoman Empire was indeed a consequence not of Ottoman oppression but of the fact that it was the Greeks who had ultimate authority over the Orthodox *millet*. This was the increasing hellenisation of the Slav churches and cultures. The struggle between Greek and native Slav influences within the Byzantine Church goes back to the time of Cyril and Methodius and it continued into the nineteenth century in both the Serbian and Bulgarian Churches. The Phanariots, so-called after the Greek Phanar quarter in Constantinople where they originated, engaged in trade and were relatively rich. They were therefore able to buy all the lucrative ecclesiastical and civil appointments open to Christians in the Ottoman Empire, using ‘their ostensible ecumenism as a cover for promoting ecclesiastical Hellenism’.¹⁰

Orthodox theologians have subjected the concept of Hellenism to examination. Alexander Schmemmann says that the Greek Orthodox Church confuses ‘hellenism’, which is a nationalist concept, with ‘Christian hellenism’, which refers to Orthodox theology, worship and spirituality. Georges Florovsky similarly maintains that hellenism, as expressed in the Church Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils, is of the essence of the church, but that modern national hellenism leads the church astray.¹¹ Schmemmann traces Greek Orthodox nationalism back to the late Byzantine and Ottoman periods and vehemently denounces it as just as harmful for the church as the influence of western nationalism on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Balkan states.¹²

Orthodoxy and the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century

The Case of Bulgaria

The question whether a national question existed in the Habsburg lands before the late eighteenth century is extremely complex. Certainly the concept of ethnic nationalism was not consciously formulated at that time; hence, political demands based on it did not exist. Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism, the Southern Slav problem and Italian Irredentism were of course ideas alien to the Baroque period.¹³

If this is true of the Habsburg lands, it is even more true of the areas under Ottoman control. The *millet* system meant that no local church in the Ottoman Empire kept its autonomy. Nevertheless, the Christian subjects of the empire were allowed to maintain their churches and monasteries, and their religious leaders had a defined role to play. It was the local churches which did most to preserve the cultural heritage and separate identities of the various Balkan peoples.

Geographically closest to Constantinople, Bulgaria experienced more systematic intervention than other Balkan regions from Turkish officials, Phanariots and cosmopolitan administrators from all over the empire; and the Bulgarians were to be the last of the Balkan Orthodox nations to gain independence. Many churches, especially in towns, and all monasteries were closed, at least in the earlier Ottoman period. Monks, novices, scribes and scholars left the country, depriving Bulgaria of its educated classes. It was in the villages, where Greek influence over the church was less strong than in the towns, that Bulgarian traditions were best preserved.

The achievement of Greek independence in the 1820s did not mean an end to the hellenisation of the Balkan Orthodox churches: the Greek patriarch was after all still located in Constantinople, and he was still responsible for all Orthodox in the eyes of the Ottoman authorities. The tradition in Bulgaria was to appoint not only Greek-speaking bishops but even Greek-speaking priests to purely Bulgarian parishes; 'to have to say confession through an interpreter could excite forceful emotions'.¹⁴ If in the 1820s protests in Bulgarian communities focused on the venality of the episcopacy, some complaining that they paid more in church dues than in taxes to the state, by the 1840s a growing demand was that they be given bishops who could at least understand their language. Such priorities reflected the steady development of Bulgarian culture throughout the nineteenth century. Most of the early enlighteners in Bulgaria were faithful to the Greek Patriarchate and tended to regard, for example, education in Bulgarian as an addition to rather than an alternative to Greek schooling. By the middle of the century, however, schools had been founded which taught the Bulgarian language and propagated the idea of liberation. As the Bulgarians grew more conscious of their cultural identity they clashed first not with the Ottoman state but with the Greek church.

The Patriarchate was used to paying little heed to Bulgarian complaints, and because of this the Bulgarian communities began to demand the right to administer their own churches and appoint their own clergy. In 1848 they achieved their first major success when the Ottoman authorities agreed to the foundation of a Bulgarian church in the Phanar district of Constantinople. This set a precedent which other communities in the Ottoman Empire were anxious to follow.

In 1860 a leading bishop declared the Bulgarian Church independent, and during the following decade many dioceses in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Thrace declared for

it. The Patriarchate put up fierce resistance, and the Ottoman authorities were content to sit back and watch the quarrel, until growing unrest in Bulgaria and international pressure prompted them to respond. In 1870 the sultan recognised the Bulgarian Church as a separate religious community headed by an exarch.

The Heresy of 'Phyletism'

The patriarch's response to the so-called 'Bulgarian Schism' was to excommunicate the new church in 1872 for the heresy of 'phyletism', or maintaining that ecclesiastical jurisdiction is determined ethnically rather than territorially. The condemnation describes phyletism as 'the establishment of particular churches, accepting members of the same nationality and refusing the members of other nationalities, being administered by pastors of the same nationality' and as 'a coexistence of nationally defined churches of the same faith, but independent from each other, in the same territory, city or village'.¹⁵ The Bulgarian exarch lived in Istanbul, as did the ecumenical patriarch. The participants in the Patriarchal Synod maintained that this was a violation of the old Orthodox principle that there could not be more than one bishop in one territory.¹⁶

National Orthodox Churches Consolidate Themselves

John Meyendorff comments that 'the character and meaning of regionalism underwent a radical change with the rise of modern nationalism'; 'the new nationalist ideology identified the nation – understood in both linguistic and racial terms – as the object of basic social and cultural loyalties'. 'Clearly, modern nationalism has effected a transformation of legitimate ecclesiastical regionalism into a cover for ethnic separatism.'¹⁷

The Bulgarian Exarchate became the focus for the continuing Bulgarian national revival; some argue that it was the ecclesiastical victory which encouraged the Bulgarians to claim political freedom. The Exarchate certainly served the purposes of the Bulgarian political leaders in Sofia as far as their territorial ambitions were concerned. Such was the extent to which the church was identified with the nation that it was the territories which comprised the Exarchate which became the ideal of Bulgarian nationalists for a Greater Bulgaria. Moreover, 'like many nationalities in the Balkans at that time, Bulgarians were widely distributed, often among Greeks, Serbs and other communities. From 1870 it could be claimed that anybody, wherever he lived, who belonged to the so-called "Bulgarian nation" was part of an independent Bulgarian exarchate.'¹⁸

The other Orthodox churches in the Ottoman Balkans expressed support for the newly independent Bulgarian Church. Meyendorff deplors 'the rather self-righteous character of the decrees [of the Council of 1872] which condemned the Bulgarians, as if they alone were guilty of ecclesiastical nationalism ...'.¹⁹ The churches were clearly caught between Scylla and Charybdis. In accepting the new nationalist principles they ran the risk of becoming mere tools in the hands of the secular politicians. However, resistance to nationalism was hardly an option for the churches: it would have amounted by implication to acquiescence in continuing Ottoman control, which by the late nineteenth century was increasingly capricious and repressive. Even the Ecumenical Patriarchate succumbed: 'To maintain its authority, it became fiercely defensive, capitulating only under duress and, in its struggle for survival, gradually and unconsciously identified its own fate with that of

the Greek nation.²⁰ Not the least harmful legacy of the rise of nationalism was ecclesiastical division: as the new nations turned into rivals, so the Orthodox of one nationality were set against those of another.²¹

The First World War brought about the collapse of four empires, the Russian, German, Austrian and Ottoman. The political changes led to changes in the circumstances of churches throughout the Orthodox world. Most of the larger Orthodox Churches increased substantially in size and a central issue became that of determining the relationship between the church and the nation-state. This is an issue which lay dormant in the communist period but which has reemerged with undiminished vigour in the postcommunist period. One of the many ways in which it manifests itself today is in jurisdictional disputes leading to schism.

In 1996 a major dispute blew up in Estonia. An autonomous Estonian Orthodox Church, set up after the First World War and in exile during in the Soviet period, had succeeded in registering itself with the Estonian government as the only legal Orthodox Church in Estonia. The Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, which had functioned during the Soviet period, was denied registration, and this meant that it was unable to claim back property it felt was its own. Soon the quarrel involved the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the latter supporting the claims of the autonomous church, and for a matter of months the two Patriarchates were out of communion with one another.²²

After 1989 the Orthodox Church in Ukraine experienced two major schisms, and soon three distinct Orthodox hierarchies were competing for the allegiance of parishes, clergy and faithful: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.²³ Paradoxically the result was that in the 1990s there was greater religious freedom in Ukraine than in many postcommunist Orthodox countries: no one church had the upper hand or recognition by the government as the 'national' church.

The Orthodox communion today consists of the following autocephalous churches: the four ancient Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem; five Patriarchates of more recent origin (Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia); and the Churches of Cyprus, Greece, Poland and Albania. It is symptomatic of the developments we have been following that while the first four are names of cities the rest are names of nation-states.

Since 1872 the Ecumenical Patriarchate has continued to condemn nationalism within Orthodoxy. In 1904 Patriarch Ioakeim III wrote a letter to the churches on the subject.²⁴ In September 1995 the Ecumenical Patriarch hosted a meeting of Orthodox primates. They took the opportunity to react to western criticism that the close link between church and people in the Balkan countries had contributed to the Balkan war, and contended that while the Orthodox ecclesiastical concept of 'nation' emphasised the particularity of each people and their right to cultivate the richness of their traditions it did not sanction aggression and conflict between peoples. They condemned any national fanaticism which might lead to hatred between peoples and to the extinction of the cultural and religious characteristics of other peoples.²⁵ On 29 March 1999, in the midst of the NATO assault on Serbia, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios 'sounded a stern warning against nationalism', which he pointed out 'was branded a heresy by Orthodoxy as far back as 1872': 'even when nationalism invokes Christianity as a means to justify its end, this does not make it any less a heresy'.²⁶

Notes and References

- ¹ John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1982), p. 222.
- ² *ibid.*, pp. 222, 225, 237.
- ³ *ibid.*, p. 225.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 237–38.
- ⁵ Sandr Riga, 'The Society of Ecumenical Christians before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union', *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1994, pp. 379–90, here p. 388.
- ⁶ Vladimir Fedorov, 'Barriers to ecumenism: an Orthodox view from Russia', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 26, no. 2, June 1998, p. 135.
- ⁷ Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 224.
- ⁸ F. Dvornik, *National Churches and the Church Universal* (Dacre Press, Westminster, 1944), pp. 14–15.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹⁰ Spas T. Raikin, 'The Bulgarian Orthodox Church', in Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1988), p. 161.
- ¹¹ A. Schmemmann, 'A meaningful storm: some reflections on autocephaly, tradition and ecclesiology', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, vol. 15, 1971, pp. 3–27; G. Florovsky, *Aspects of Church History (The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky)*, vol. IV (Belmont, MA, 1975), pp. 191–99. Both are quoted in Basilius J. Groen, 'Nationalism and reconciliation: Orthodoxy in the Balkans', *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 26, no. 2, June 1998, pp. 111–28, here p. 116.
- ¹² A. Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* (New York, 1963), pp. 276–81, 289–91. Quoted in Groen, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
- ¹³ Robert Kann, *A Study in Austrian Intellectual History* (London, 1960), p. 8.
- ¹⁴ R. J. Crampton, *A Short History of Modern Bulgaria* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987), p. 14.
- ¹⁵ Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 228, quoting Maximus, Metropolitan of Sardis, *To Oikoumenikon Patriarcheion en te Orthodoxo Ekklesia* (Thessaloniki, 1972), pp. 323–25. For further comments on phyletism see Olivier Gillet, *Religion et nationalisme: l'idéologie de l'église orthodoxe roumaine sous le régime communiste* (Université de Bruxelles, Brussels, 1997), especially pp. 97–102.
- ¹⁶ Basilius J. Groen, 'Nationalism and reconciliation: Orthodoxy in the Balkans', *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 26, no. 2, June 1998, pp. 111–28, here p. 115. He cites as references: J. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova at amplissima collectio*, vol. XLV (Paris, 1911; reprint Graz, 1961), pp. 417–546; Maxime, Métropolitte de Sardes, *Le Patriarcat Oecuménique dans l'Église orthodoxe: Étude historique et canonique* (Théologie historique 32, Paris, 1975), pp. 374–84; François Thual, *Géopolitique de l'Orthodoxie*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1994), pp. 79–84.
- ¹⁷ Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, pp. 225, 226.
- ¹⁸ Groen, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- ¹⁹ Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 228.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 252.
- ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 227. Groen (*op. cit.*, p. 116) looks at a range of modern Orthodox theologians who criticise excessive nationalism in the churches, and he quotes François Thual's argument that in modern Orthodox countries national and religious sentiments reinforce each other and determine the enemies of a given nation and of Orthodoxy. (Groen, *op. cit.*, pp. 116–17; Thual, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18, 69, 125–32).
- ²² Serge Keleher, 'Orthodox rivalry in the twentieth century: Moscow versus Constantinople', *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 25, no. 2, June 1997, pp. 125–37.
- ²³ Taras Kuzio, 'In search of unity and autocephaly: Ukraine's Orthodox Churches', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 25, no. 4, December 1997, pp. 393–415.
- ²⁴ Groen, *op. cit.*, p. 115; he cites J. Karmires, *Ta dogmatika kai symbolika mnemeia tes*

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²⁵ Groen, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–24; he cites: *Orthodoxia*, vol. 2, 1995, pp. 366–74. See also *Istina*, vol. 41, 1996, pp. 171–80; *Oekumenisches Forum*, vol. 19, 1996, pp. 289–96; *Het Christelijk Oosten*, vol. 48, 1996, pp. 109–16.

²⁶ ‘Ecumenical patriarch warns: nationalism a “heresy”’, *Orthodox World News Listserver*, <http://www.goarch.org/worldnews>.