

A Reflection on the Church in the Political Arena

I.

Democracy and the separation of church and state are relatively new for the Orthodox Church. From both derive the many challenges the Church in America encounters as it stands unfettered in the political arena.

Since the time of the Apostles, the Church has always kept a keen eye on the political landscape. Prior to the formation of the Christian empire writers such as Saint Paul and Origen of Alexandria (+253 AD) not only deferred to the authority of the emperor and empire but also understood them as institutions of divine providence which prepared the way for spreading of the Gospel. Paraphrasing the British historian and theologian G.L. Prestige the concept, let alone the reality, of a political atheist was unknown. Until the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, God, politics and the Church were inseparable.

History shows that as Christianity expanded throughout the empire the Church was faced with two options: to either remain in the *world/empire* and contribute to the development and improvement of the body politic or to retreat into the *desert*. By the time of Constantine's conversion to Christianity the Church found itself at a crossroads. It had to grapple with Christ's kingdom not being of this world (Jn.18: 36) and the reality of an emerging Christian empire with a Christian emperor at its head.

Facing the crossroads of *empire and desert* two concurrent foundations were laid. The first was a Christian political philosophy upon which would be built a Christian state and culture. The other was its antithesis, manifested primarily in the monastic movement, which would serve as a continuous reminder to the Church that its true home and sovereign were elsewhere.

II.

Within the configurations of the Byzantine and Russian empires, Christian political philosophy developed to the extent that as Church and State maintained their respective spheres of influence they would nevertheless form a "symphonic" relationship of interdependence. Ideally "rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Mt. 22: 20-21/Mc. 12:17) entailed the Church providing the dogmatic and moral foundations of society while the government, in the person of the emperor, ensured that *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy* universally prevailed.

Within this ideal relationship the role of the emperor was crucial especially during the formative years of the Christian empire and its corresponding political philosophy. Personifying true piety i.e. orthodoxy which involved caring for the social welfare of his subjects and the proper functioning of every aspect of the

political establishment, the emperor was also seen in these early years as both king and priest. As the empire was transitioning from pagan to Christian the emperor had more than a quasi-sacerdotal function. This is attested to in the multi-authored fourth century *Life of Constantine* attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea. Based on this and other texts one detects a nascent political philosophy based on pagan antecedents in which the emperor was *de facto* if not *de jure* the head of the Church, “bishop of bishops,” the convener of ecclesiastical councils who was chosen by God to rule over the entire world. Byzantine political philosophy provided a theocratic ethos built upon the precepts of the Gospel. The Christian empire was pre-destined to be the copy of God’s kingdom extending into all the earth and whereby Church and state were responsible for proclaiming and implementing these precepts.

Yet, as this political philosophy became refined, as the relationship between Church and state continued to be interdependent, the *symphonic* ideal was not always in tune. Often the Church was overpowered by the state. This out of tune symphony reaches its crescendo after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the rise of Russia. By abolishing the patriarchate of Moscow (1721), Tsar Peter the Great reduced the Church to a department of the state with the monarch as its head.

III.

Antithetical to the concept of Christian empire is the retreat into the desert. Preparing for the “kingdom not of this world” called for a withdrawal from the world i.e. the empire. Whether the retreat was geographic, as in the case of early monasticism, or was lived out in the world it was accompanied by a psychological/spiritual myopia that gave rise to sectarianism.

As the concept of Christian Empire promoted theocracy and the establishment of the kingdom of God, Christian sectarianism looked to the coming apocalypse. This psychological/spiritual posture continues today among Orthodox Christians throughout the world. Espousing a “retreat” from the world these Christians attempt to either remove themselves from as much responsibility as possible to a given state or they embrace a political agenda understood as accelerating the anticipated apocalypse. Both postures discourage dialog and/engagement with a given culture. In spite of the romantic allure of sectarianism the Church has never officially embraced it.

IV.

As Father Georges Florovsky pointed out, the Christian Empire was an experiment that ultimately failed. Yet, even with the disappearance of the Christian Empire the autocephalous churches emerging after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire remained state churches. Allied with and influenced by their respective governments these churches became engines for promoting political ideologies. This is especially the case in Eastern Europe. Other autocephalous churches were and remain restricted to carrying out basic liturgical and pastoral needs of the faithful

due to the prevailing politics of the states in which they exist. Consequently, these churches in parts of the Middle East, Africa and Turkey often have to carefully forge a *modus vivendi* just to survive.

The exception to the above is the autocephalous Orthodox Church In America. It is not allied with the government nor is it a church in captivity. It is a local church that possesses the freedom to teach and preach the Gospel without diluting it with political propaganda. Within the American context the OCA is free to engage in the many and difficult challenges it faces in a secular and pluralistic culture without substituting its rich, living and transfiguring theology with the ideology of the state.

Yet, ironically, those Americans, preferring a Church of the empire that imposes a theocratic polity in place of a constitutional democracy undermine this gift of freedom and the ability of the Church to bring the Gospel into the political arena. More importantly, entertaining the thought of the American Church becoming allied with the American government ultimately relinquishes the Church from its responsibility to implant the Gospel in the minds and hearts of those freely seeking Christ and his kingdom.

Among the challenges facing the Church in America are the challenges the Church has had to face throughout history: to remain a vibrant contributor to society without “peddling” an ideology in the guise of the Gospel (2 Cor. 2:17); to laud and defend “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable” (Phil. 4:8); to be an advocate for the freedom, well being, protection and dignity of the person created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26); to care for the hungry and thirsty, to embrace the stranger, to cloth the naked, to visit and care for the sick, to care for the imprisoned (Mat. 25:32ff); to assist and protect the orphans and widows (Jm. 1:27) and to nurture, venerate and properly utilize the creation which awaits its envelopment and transfiguration in the glory of Christ’s second coming (Rom. 8:18-23).

Maintaining freedom from the government while remaining faithful to the Gospel, the Orthodox Church in America can humbly provide the criteria from which its faithful may actively and responsibly engage in the political arena not as lobbyists but as members of the living body of Christ.

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