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## The Orthodox Churches on Church-State Relations and Religious Liberty

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Apart from the pre-Constantinian era of church history, the areas conquered by Islam, and the modern situation under the rule of militant atheism, the Orthodox churches show a very strong preference for church-state unity and have even been somewhat over-accused of submission to the state, especially by those who try to apply Latin problematics in dealing with this question.

Within the Roman Empire, the Latin churches were involved in the very same church-state relations as the Greek churches, until the barbarian invasions gave occasion to the papacy to revolt against the Roman Empire by accepting the status of a vassal feudal kingdom of the Frankish Empire. The actual result of this arrangement was the enslavement of the church to powerful secular interests, since the election of pope and king of the Papal States became one identical event, and since the election of bishops was generally put into the hands of the kings of Europe. In order to liberate the papacy and the churches of the West from secular interests, strict clericalism and papo-caesaristic theories were evolved, which, however, proved in the long run much more successful on paper and in the imagination of pious Catholics and some Protestants than in practice. There are still alive many members of the last generation to witness the centuries-old veto power exercised over papal elections by the Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire and Austria.

Aside from the so-called radical reformers, the Reformation churches also showed strong tendencies to unite church and state. In America, pluralism and secular humanism made it necessary to follow the lead of the free churches in developing church and state separation in order to guarantee religious liberty and to make possible civic cooperation for the common good. Besides this American concern for religious liberty, there is the missionary concern for the freedom of proselytizing activi-

ties within those countries and societies which treat such enterprises as a form of foreign aggression. Then there is the weaker

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concern for the religious liberty of the "other" religious minorities in general.

An historical description of Orthodox church-state relations and religious liberty is beyond the scope of this article. Rather an attempt will be made to give a general outline of those Orthodox theological, and especially ecclesiological, principles which may indicate why certain directions in Orthodox church-state relations prevailed in history, and what an ideal and consistent Orthodox position could be if it were ever really possible for principle to become the norm in such relations.

### I

Within Greek patristic thought there is no room for theories concerning *natural law* in terms of physical, social, and moral laws being copies of eternal and immutable forms in the mind of God. The existence of transcendental immutable universals according to which everything is and ought to be patterned is flatly rejected by the Orthodox Patristic tradition, which is neither Platonic nor mystic. There is, according to Orthodox belief, no similarity whatsoever between the uncreated and the created. Creation is neither a copy of immutable forms, nor is it grounded in the divine nature, which transcends the very category of Being. Creation is grounded rather in the divine will, which is not a form, idea, or universal. It is not to be equated with ontology, nor is it a static immutability in any predestinarian sense. God is both actuality and potentiality, and at the same time He is radically beyond both. Creation is therefore not a copy of something beyond itself, but rather it is unique in itself and not necessarily identical with itself at different stages of its history and development. It is impossible, therefore, to ground

physical, social, and moral forms in supposedly eternal and immutable forms and laws, since forms belong only to the created realm of existence, whose very nature is determined by motion and change, not because of any fall from immutability, but because created so by God.

It is clear from such presuppositions that it is impossible to take analytical observations concerning nature and man as they are and project them into an imagined transcendental realm of changeless norms and thereby claim that the physical, moral, and social forms as they now exist, or once existed, or will exist, are the will of God because patterned according to immutable divine

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ideas. The will of God they might certainly be in a given situation, but not because copies of immutable realities. Also the will of God is not a static pattern, but encompasses history, evolution, and change.

The basis for the Orthodox approach is the revelation of God's glory to the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and other saints of the church. It is through this revelatory experience that it becomes known that between God and creation there is and can be no similarity, that God is neither form, nor shape, nor chaotic being, that God can neither be conceived nor imagined by the human intellect and imagination. It is this revelation to the saints of both Old and New Testaments which breaks the back of the mythological and philosophical understandings of the gods of ancient and modern paganism and philosophies which approach the divine always in terms of man's needs and curiosities. Since this revelation to the saints of both the Old and New Testaments is transconceptual and supra-intellectual and supra-sentient, it is expressed by its recipients in symbols which are infallibly valid for those who have not seen God, and yet have in faith accepted the witness of those who have. But these symbols cannot be used as tools by those who have not received revelation for the attainment of a conceptual knowledge of God. God is radically beyond human categories and can be known undistortedly only by those to whom He reveals Himself. Yet in this very act of revelation God remains a hidden mystery to be witnessed to in human categories, but never defined.

The abyss between this understanding of revealed religion and natural religions generally is apparent. It becomes even more apparent when one takes seriously into consideration the fact that the relationship established between God and the prophets, apostles, and other saints is completely non-utilitarian, and therefore one of true friendship whereby one does not seek his own. Because of this relationship the saints have boldness towards God and can even argue and contend with

God about the salvation of others (Gen. 18:22-32; Exod. 5:22-23; 8:8; 32:11-14; 32:30-32; 33:7-10; Rom. 9:3). God and the saints are involved in a relationship which transcends the categories of utilitarian, happiness-seeking love. This love which does not seek its own is known by revelatory experience and not by definition or analysis of the normal human situation. It is a mystery of union with the glory of God which transcends normal human

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relations based on sense, reason, and rational self-interested calculation. It is because of this revelation, made exceedingly clear in the Incarnation, that the Orthodox Fathers understood human destiny not in terms of the exhaustion or fulfillment of human potentiality by the attainment of actuality in a Platonic or Latin type of beatific vision, whereby immutability and changelessness and motionlessness and satisfaction of all intellectual desires are presented as perfection, but rather in terms of an historical process of perfection which will never end and in which motion and change toward ever higher reaches of glorification will become the norm.

Thus from the Orthodox doctrines of God and creation it is clear that natural religion, natural theology, and natural law are not completed by revelation or some supernatural theology, but rather are radically transformed. If St. Paul says that the Law of Moses had only a pedagogical significance, how much more must one say as much for what some call natural moral law.

Within the Orthodox tradition, however, one does not find any opposition between law and grace, or Old and New Testaments, or between an old period of enmity toward God and a new period of reconciliation. Grace, glorification, and reconciliation exist already in the Old Testament and were shared by the friends of God, the patriarchs and prophets (the glorification of Moses is the prime example). Now as then, not all baptized in the sea and in the cloud (I Cor. 10: Iff) are friends of God and partakers of the grace of glory. The friends of God in the Old Testament as well as those of the New Testament period by grace transcend the need of law. But now as then there are those who need the law by which to live because they are not friends of God. There are the *slaves* who do the will of God because of *fear* of eternal damnation and there are the workers or *hirelings* who do the will of God because of the profit of the *reward* of salvation. Their motivation is not that of a *friend*, because it is utilitarian.

In contrast to the legalism of the Latin tradition, the Orthodox never developed theories concerning merits, satisfaction, purgatory, and supererogatory works. The slave and the hireling work hard for their salvation, but

their works are accepted by God, not because He deems them meritorious, but only because God is compassionate and wants the salvation of all. Actually, even the friend of God has neither merit nor extra merit, because he is only performing his duty as a human being when by grace

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he transcends the realm of utilitarian relations. Also in Orthodox theology there was never any question of works becoming meritorious because of any baptismal grace which makes man agreeable and acceptable to God. God already loves even the devil and all who are going to be eternally damned. Augustine's doctrines of original sin in terms of inherited guilt and of predestination in terms of God loving and dying for only those whom He has predestined for salvation were never known in the East. Salvation is not a satisfaction of a divine justice, but liberation from death, sin, and the devil.

Also the reward-and-punishment structures of Latin theology were unknown in the East. Salvation could not become a matter of God's moving the will to good works whose unmerited merit earns the beatific vision. Nor was damnation understood as a divine decision not to give irresistible grace so that man justly receives his real merit due to the inherited guilt of Adam. In the Greek Patristic tradition both damned and glorified will be saved. In other words both will have the vision of God in His uncreated glory, with the difference that for the unjust this same uncreated glory of God will be the eternal fires of hell. God is light for those who learn to love Him and a consuming fire for those who will not. The reason for this is not that God has any positive intent in punishing, but that for those who are not prepared properly, to see God is a cleansing experience, but one which does not lead to the eternal process of perfection. Being a Christian, therefore, is not to attain to the reward, which in a real sense will be common to all, but of being prepared so that the reward will not in fact lead to the perfect stagnation of an immutable bliss. In a certain sense the Platonic and Latin beatific vision is similar to the Orthodox understanding of hell.

It follows from all that has been said thus far that Orthodox Christians have been aware of God's love for those within and without the church. No one can claim to have a monopoly on God's love because of membership in any religious group or because of any special piety. The saints who are friends of God know this better than anyone else. Yet on the other hand no one can afford to be indifferent to the question of salvation because of confidence in the divine love.

This universal love of God together with the fact that true Christian faith is a free response to God's grace makes it imperative that Orthodox Christians not only tolerate other religious

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groups, but also recognize and guarantee their human rights to religious and civil liberties. It is a fact that *not one Father or saint of the Greek Patristic tradition ever proposed the death penalty for heretics*, as happened with the Roman Catholic and some Protestant traditions. Social and political disabilities, however, have been applied at various times in history by Orthodox governments against religious groups considered politically or socially dangerous.

The idea that religious liberty is necessary for the expression of the inner Christian freedom of faith is from an Orthodox point of view absolutely wrong. Religious liberty is no doubt a human right and a wonderful thing to have, if this be the will of God in any given situation, but martyrdom is after all one of the best and in many cases the highest expression of one's inner Christian freedom. To remain faithful in one's love of God in the face of persecution or any kind of suffering and to be willing to forego one's own salvation and well-being for that of others is an expression of non-utilitarian love or inner Christian freedom.

It remains to relate the general presuppositions thus far described to Orthodox presuppositions concerning the doctrine of the church in order to examine the church's relations and attitudes toward extra-church social and political realities. The leading idea in Orthodox ecclesiology is that the church is the New Israel, the New Jerusalem, and the New Zion, the people and nation of God. The patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and other saints are members of an identical group of elite witnesses to the glory of God, and the living leaders of the faithful. The very foundation of Orthodox ecclesiology is the fact that, in Christ, God has extended His kingdom or reign (*basileia*) to the dead so that the church is now composed of the saints of all ages. They are in a permanent way already sharing in the victory of Christ over death, or in what is called the first resurrection, and are awaiting the final consummation. That aspect of the church comprised of the saints of all ages has been established by the victory of Christ over the devil, death, and sin in such wise that "the gates of Hades (death) shall not prevail against it." The baptized this side of death are also sharing in this first resurrection, but not in any final and guaranteed manner, since they can still be defeated by sin and the devil through inattention that may quench the Spirit. The

saints before and after the incarnation are in the lives of the Orthodox living guides and actual members

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of Orthodox society. The church, therefore, is the body of Christ, the Israelitic nation of God, composed of the saints of all ages and Christians of all places. Local congregations are not part of the church universal, but identical with the church universal. In Christ, the entire catholic church of saints of all ages and all places is present in and identical with each local congregation nourished by the life of love centered in Eucharistic worship. Therefore each worshipping congregation is related to other congregations not by a common participation in some superstructural organization higher than itself, but by an identity of existence in Christ. By baptism and faith an individual is born into the body of Christ which is at once the local congregation and the church universal, but he remains alive and increases in this body of Christ by participation in the community life of love centered in eucharistic worship and communion. A person is born into the family of God and stays in it because he is fed by the corporate life of this same family of God, the body of Christ.

Thus a person does not become a member of the body of Christ, the church, once for all, just as a child does not continue to live simply because it is once born. There is no life in Christ apart from the corporate love within the local congregation, manifested in and formed by Eucharistic worship and communion. It is for this reason that the canons of the Church call for the excommunication of those who do not participate in Eucharistic worship and communion. Thus according to the canons of the period of the early Councils, baptism and the corporate Eucharistic worship and communion were, although certainly not guarantees, at least visible signs or indications of continuous participation in the body of Christ.

Therefore for Orthodox Christians every gathering of the local congregation for Eucharistic worship and communion is an anticipation of the final eschatological event. By their love for each other, they gather together and continue to participate in the victory of Christ over sin, death, and the devil, or by their lack of love and unworthy communion (St. Paul) put themselves under judgment.

It is obvious, so it seems, from the points thus far made that this primitive Christian universalism which still survives as the very essence of Orthodox ecclesiology has nothing in common with such understandings of unity as are based on local or universal centralization. Since the fullness of the body of Christ,

the church of all ages and all places, is manifested in and one with the local congregation gathered in the same place, and since the local congregations are related to each other by an identity of existence in Christ, the church cannot be identified with the boundaries of nations, denominations, or the papacy. Even at the local level, the church is not simply the local society nominally connected by cultural background to the church. The gathered community *is* the church in process of becoming the church and those who gather unworthily and those who do not gather are not members of the church. In Orthodoxy neither baptism nor predestination can be guarantees of continuous participation in the body of Christ. Only Christ and the struggle to fulfill His commandment to love by the power of grace as expressed in corporate communion are such guarantees.

## II

On the basis of the theological principles enumerated above, the following remarks which bear on the topic of church and state may be made.

The Orthodox Church is theologically not committed to any special form of political institution, culture, or society. Actually she is more oriented toward the desert (Abraham, Moses, Elijah, St. John the Baptist, Christ, St. Paul [Gal. 1:17-24; 2:1], the desert Fathers), but at the same time committed to do everything possible to sanctify, as much as possible, society, culture, political institutions, and nature.

At the same time Orthodox Christians are committed to a Eucharist-centered self-definition which is central to the doctrine that the church as the body of Christ is a *universal nation* which exists within many nations without being identified with anyone or group of them. The church has a right to be legally recognized as such, and not merely as one private association among many.

The inner life of the church is not or is not supposed to be governed by the norms of society at large. What is natural (e.g. utilitarian love) outside the church may be accepted as a legitimate principle for human life in general, but is transformed by grace within the lives of those who truly believe in Christ into a love which does not seek its own. The happiness-seeking-love of so-called natural man is not satisfied but rather transformed by the grace of God.

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The fact that Christian spirituality manifests itself in the lives of Christians at different levels, means that the immature spiritually are in need of the law. The Orthodox,

therefore, accept the rule of law as something positively good both within the church and outside the church. It is not a necessary evil but a positive pedagogical means of fulfilling the will of God for society and the church at certain spiritual levels. The higher or lower degree of the law's approximation to perfection depends not on its conformity to immutable archetypes, but rather on its proximity to selfless love and the will of God for man in any given situation.

The Orthodox understanding of divine love means that one cannot believe that he has a special claim on God's love because of membership in any special church or society. There is a real equality between God's love for the saved and the damned, for the rich and the poor, for the healthy and the sick, and for the powerful nation and the weak nation. This means that one cannot pride himself over others because he is a member of any special church, class, society, race, or nation. One must, therefore, treat those outside his own group in realization of this.

In seeking to do the will of God rather than the will of men, an Orthodox Christian is not exchanging mutability and motion for an immutable and motionless happiness in a transcendental world of immutable truths. In other words, Christian love is not a love for the changeless in contrast to a love for the transient. Rather it is in its first stages a self-seeking love which by grace is being transformed into a love which does not seek its own and which in the end loves God, man, and nature equally.

This means that history is, in Orthodox thought, part of the eternal plan of God, and not just a stage for the accumulation of such divine favors as will lead beyond history into a timeless eternity. When this significance of history and eternal motion toward ever-higher reaches of perfection is coupled with the realization of God's equal love and concern for extra-ecclesiastical society, one can understand the attitudes of Orthodox Christians toward the world.

The Augustinian way of thinking in terms of the world and the church as two conflicting cities is an impossibility in Orthodox theology. An Orthodox Christian could go along to some degree in agreeing about the work of the devil in and out of the church, but to transport this into the realm of God's love for one and

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hatred for the other, or to inject the Augustinian dualistic contrast between mutability and immutability, and to allow this to influence the church's attitude toward the secular state, is out of the question. Even the worst barbarian state is loved no less than the church by God. This does not mean, however, that the church must passively

condone an unjust state and simply tell its people to grin and bear it. The fact that God loves a murderer as much as He loves a saint does not mean that the murderer should be left alone and not be punished. Although the church is not committed dogmatically to any form of government, she is committed to order, justice, and the general welfare of society. In most cases, the church can be expected to do no more than accept society as it is and to do everything possible to influence it for the better. The characteristic attitude of the Orthodox toward the state is willingness to cooperate without compromising dogma and inner spiritual freedom for the general good of society. In exceptional circumstances Orthodox leaders have supported revolutionary movements against injustice and have and are serving as political leaders when called upon to do so by the people.

According to the theological presuppositions enumerated above, religious freedom must be recognized as an inalienable factor of human existence and is so declared by the church. This is guaranteed not only by the fact that faith must be a free response to God's revelation, but even more so by the fact that those with faith have no special claim on the love of God. Church-state separation from an Orthodox viewpoint is theologically guaranteed by the above mentioned definition of the church as the gathered community.

However, the overwhelming majority of citizens of a state may at times become at least nominal members of the church even as a gathered community, and in such cases the temptation exists to be not so faithful to one's church's dogmatic principles, and to contribute to the privation of the full religious liberty of minority groups.

In this respect, Orthodox history has been greatly determined by the union of Christian sacramental universalism with the universalism of the Roman Empire. The church as the new Israelitic nation of God became identical with the citizens of Rome. In this situation, political ideologists became very much concerned

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with making Roman universalism and Christian sacramental universalism coterminous.

However, the Greek churches of the Roman Empire never confused Imperial universalism with church universalism. The elements of Roman administration were built into canon law, but never elevated to the status of dogma. In contrast to this, the Latin churches lent themselves to the expansionist designs of the Franco-Germanic Empire, and bishops became in practice feudal vassals of the kings and only in theory vassals of the Pope. The Pope theoretically claimed for himself the relation the emperor already had with his vassal bishops. The papal centraliza-

tion which evolved out of this was justified on a convenient exegesis of scripture and elevated to dogma.

The Greek churches could never evolve a centralized church administration not only for dogmatic reasons, but also because the feudal political theories of medieval Latin Christianity never existed in the Eastern Roman Empire where Roman law and administrative forms prevailed till the final collapse of the Empire in the fifteenth century. Besides this, the basic structure of church administration was already established long before Constantine. The self-determination of bishops and congregations grouped into provincial synods was an established fact, and in one form or another has remained so throughout the history of the Orthodox churches.

It is impossible to try to apply the church-state categories arising out of the conflict between caesaropapism and papocaesarism within medieval Latin Christendom to the Greek churches of the Roman Empire. Those who do so usually fail to take into consideration the administrative structure of the Orthodox churches and interpret an East Roman emperor's interest in the election of the bishop of the capital city as a general interference in the election of bishops. There is no doubt that the emperors showed an interest in the election of bishops of the capital cities, but the provincial bishops were elected without state interference. Exactly the opposite was true in the Latin West.

Basically there are two types of episcopal groupings within the Orthodox Church, autocephalous ones and

autonomous ones. An autocephalous grouping is one in which the presiding bishop and the bishops of the province or diocese are elected by the clergy (and laity) and ordained by the bishops of the same province or diocese. An autonomous grouping is one which elects

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and ordains its own provincial bishops and elects its presiding bishop, but does not ordain its presiding bishop whose ordination is supervised by the presiding bishop of the autocephalous church under whose surveillance the autonomous grouping exists. As a rule presiding bishops are bishops of the capital cities of provinces or nations, and as such have a primacy of honor and are the presidents of the local provincial or national synods. It is very important to note that the many autocephalous and autonomous provincial and diocesan synods of the Roman Empire existed within one political administrative complex, and when one takes seriously the fact that the emperors concerned themselves with the election of only bishops of capital cities (usually Rome and New Rome or Constantinople), the suggestion that there was a general caesaropapism becomes groundless.

The observations in this brief article have been offered as an outline guide to the theological foundations of Orthodox attitudes to church-state relations and religious liberty and are not intended to be taken as a systematic and definitive statement on the subject.

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