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“Byzantine Symphony” from Emperor Justinian to Basil I the Macedonian

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Abstract

The Byzantine conception was that the Empire and the Church were united in the leadership of a single universal Christian oikoumene. The first takes care of “human things”, and the Church “of divine things”. This conception is based on the dogma of the Incarnation of the Son of God, who united in His Person the two natures: the divine and the human so that Christ is the only source and the unity of the two hierarchies: political and ecclesiastical. Between the “divine” ones that represent the communion between man and God and “human affairs” – these two realities must coexist in perfect harmony, in a “symphony”.

Keywords

Byzantine, Empire, symphony, Justinian, Church, Photios

“There are two very great gifts that God, in His love for man, has given him from above: the priesthood and the imperial dignity. The first serves the divine, and the second leads and administers human affairs. But both stem from the same origin and adorn the life of mankind. Hence, nothing should concern the emperors more than the dignity of the priests, because the priests pray unceasingly to God for the (imperial) welfare. For if

the priesthood is in every way beyond reproach and has access to God, and if the emperors fairly and judiciously administer the State entrusted to their care, then general harmony will result, and whatever is useful will flow over the human race”¹.

Justinian’s words in Novella VI perhaps best show and express at the same time the official version of the Byzantine political and social ideal. The Byzantine conception was that the Empire and the Church were united in the leadership of a single universal Christian *oikoumene*. The first takes care of “human things”, and the Church “of divine things”. This conception is based on the dogma of the Incarnation of the Son of God, who united in His Person the two natures: the divine and the human so that Christ is the only source and the unity of the two hierarchies: political and ecclesiastical².

According to Meyendorff, Byzantine theocratic thought was based on a form of “already accomplished” eschatology, as if the Kingdom of God had already appeared and the Empire was the manifestation of this express power in the world and history³. However, this Byzantine political conception was not “heretical” because it recognized the reality of both personal and social evil but considered that this evil could be controlled by subjecting the whole world, i.e., everyone, to a single Christian and Roman Emperor and the authority of a single priesthood given by Christ. Necessarily, it follows that the Emperor of this universal Christian Empire had the duty to be the guarantor of true faith and to be a witness of God’s mercy towards man – he ensures the political and social order. The Byzantine political concept does not allow the dichotomy between sacred and profane, individual and social, or doctrinal and moral, but only recognized a certain polarity. Between the “divine” ones that represent

¹ *Novella VI, Corpus juris civilis*, in Rudolfus SCHOELL, Berlin, 1928, vol. III, p. 35-36 apud John MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină. Tendențe istorice și teme doctrinare*, transl. pr. conf. dr. Alexandru Stan, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 284.

² Pr. Dr. Cristian ȘTEFAN, *Misiunea creștină în Apus și Răsărit (secolele V-X)*, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 191.

³ John MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină*, p. 284.

the communion between man and God and “human affairs” – these two realities must coexist in perfect harmony, in a “symphony”⁴.

The political conception of the “symphony” of the two “gifts-powers” that God left in the world is based on the Christian teaching about the deification of man. Deification in the Byzantine Christian conception is not only a personal matter, it is not only individual but also communal. It has relevance in Christian society and must be embodied in the only Christian Empire founded by God, which constitutes the New Israel. The Empire and the Church are and must be inseparable allies in the management of this unique Christian kingdom.

One of the main features of Eastern Christianity, from a moral and social point of view, consists precisely in that “already accomplished” eschatology, based on experiential eschatological concepts, considering the deification of man possible here, as well as the communion of those who live in the same faith, which is the Christian Empire. In the West, Christianity has traditionally understood the current state of humanity in a pessimistic way, based on relative realism. In Western thought, although man is corrected and redeemed, he remains a sinner, in this way, the primary function of the Church is to ensure the criteria of thinking, discipline, and behavior necessary to overcome his sinful state and urge him to do good deeds. So, the Church is an institution located in the world, serving the world, at the disposal of the world, and using all the means of law, authority, and administrative power⁵.

These different conceptions between East and West regarding the purpose, role, and place of the Church in Christian society and the world help us to understand the different historical destinies of the two Churches. While in the West the Church developed as a powerful institution that used and benefited from all the means and offers that the world gives to impose itself, in the East it was seen, first of all, as a spiritual, sacramental organism, responding to “divine ones” and endowed only with limited institutional structures. These structures – patriarchates, metropolitans, and other divisions – were fixed by the Empire and by the imperial administrative structure itself. They were not considered by Eastern

⁴ Pr. Dr. C. ȘTEFAN, *Misiunea creștină...*, p. 192.

⁵ J. MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină*, p. 286.

Christianity as belonging to the essence of the Church, but only ways of expressing and organizing it. But the same thing was not considered regarding the three steps of the sacramental hierarchy, i.e., the episcopate, the priesthood, and the diaconate. This partial surrender of the Church to the Empire in matters of organization and administration contributed to maintaining a sacramental and eschatological perspective on the Church, but it also created serious deviations at times and put the Church in great danger⁶.

Regarding the relationship between the State and the Church, the Emperor and the Patriarch in Byzantium after the triumph of Orthodoxy in 843, it experienced a profound transformation compared to Justinian's formula – "symphony". The empire was and remains sacred, but the basis of this conception is no longer the idea of an absolute state, but the consciousness that he was the servant of Christ. Apart from the place occupied in the bosom of the Church, defined by the canons, the Patriarch also had a special place in the state structure. He was the representative of the Church in the state, the guarantor of the "Orthodoxy" of the Empire. Only loyalty to Orthodoxy was required from the emperor⁷.

The Church and the State are not linked by a legal form, which allows the legal delimitation of their spheres of influence, but by Orthodoxy, faith, and the teaching of the Church. Imperial power was not the only reflection in the world of divine power, but it obeyed the truth held by the Church. In the 9th century, the rite of anointing becomes the capital moment of the coronation. This did not mean the assimilation of the Church by the state, but the ecclesialization of the Empire. This is not about Caesaropapism or pope-cracy, even if sometimes there were tendencies and distortions towards this in the relationship between the two powers in Byzantium. If the Empire received the faith of the Church, remaining spiritually independent, the Church enters the Empire which protects and supports it⁸.

⁶ J. MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină*, p. 287.

⁷ See Michael MCCORNIK, "Împăratul", in: Guglielmo CAVALLO (coord.) *Omni Bizantin*, transl. Ion Mircea, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2000, pp. 271-273.

⁸ Emanoil BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul-istorie și spirituitate*, Editura Sofia, București, 2003, pp. 204-206.

The resumption of the old claims of universal hegemony by the Byzantine Empire in the 9th century, which allowed the Macedonian emperors to legitimize their expanded policy in the following two centuries, forced them to realize that the international context no longer allowed the Eastern Christian Empire to achieve its great projects with easiness⁹. The European political landscape, which had changed considerably as a result of the formation in the West of the kingdoms of German origin and then of the Carolingian Empire and the Roman-German Empire after it, and in the East of the Slavic states, led Byzantium to express its claims to universal supremacy in terms other than those used by Constantine the Great and Justinian¹⁰.

The empire was forced to develop a new political ideology. It is a new stage in the history of the political thought of Byzantium, which will suffer a pretense that will allow it to justify its new offensive strategy throughout the century¹¹. In the crystallization of the new Byzantine political ideology, a decisive role was played by the papacy and its temporal counterpart – the new Carolingian Empire, which arrogated to itself the title of the heir of the Roman Empire and the sole defender of Christianity¹².

The new imperial ideology was deeply original and is masterfully explained and exposed in a concentrated manner by Photios the Patriarch, a great ecclesiastical and political personality of his age and beyond, in the collection of laws *Epanagoge* (883-886) attributed to him. The first “Title” of the *Epanagoge* is dedicated to the Emperor who is very significantly called “the legitimate authority and the common good of all citizens”. His purpose is to be a “benefactor”. “When he no longer gives evidence of this quality, the ancients considered that his very quality of Emperor was destroyed”¹³. According to the same “Title”, “the goal of the emperor is to preserve and ensure the salvation of the present goods through his virtues;

⁹ Hélène AHRWEILER, *Ideologia politică a Imperiului bizantin*, transl. Cristina Jinga, Editura Corint, București, 2002, p. 38

¹⁰ Stelian BREZEANU, *O istorie a Bizanțului*, Editura Meronia, București, 2004, p. 134.

¹¹ Alexandru MADGEARU, *Originea medievală a focarelor de conflict în Peninsula Balcanică*, Editura Corint, București, 2001, p. 84.

¹² H. AHRWEILER, *Ideologia politică...*, p. 38.

¹³ Alain DUCELLIER, *Bizantinii, istorie și cultură*, transl. Simona Nicolae, Editura Teora, București, 1997, p. 79.

to recover the lost goods through his vigilant action; to acquire the goods that are missing through zeal, effort, and his honest victories”¹⁴. We derive from this a basic idea of the new Byzantine policy, which will henceforth justify the expansionist actions of the Empire, which are explicitly part of the duties and which the Emperor must follow. For his part, the Patriarch of Constantinople had the mission of bringing the pagans and heretics to the right faith in the Empire and outside. Thus, the military expansion and the Church’s missionary work were intertwined in a single doctrine of universal domination to which the Empire was called. We observe that the Emperor, through his status and his duty to be a “benefactor” appears as the instrument through which God, who is Goodness itself, reveals His goodwill to people. In this sense, the Emperor must be an *evergetos* – benefactor, beneficence thus becomes the dominant feature of the imperial function¹⁵.

This new imperial doctrine, which leaves far behind that of the iconoclastic emperors expounded in the *Ecloga*, whose modest aim was to save and defend the existing¹⁶ with the help of God, modifies the very conception of war because the Emperor now must regain “lost things” and recover “missing goods” through “honorable victories”. The notion of noble war, which used to mean wars that did not cause the death of Christians, therefore not between Christians, is replaced here by “just war”, a war that allows the Byzantines to expand their Empire, according to them the only guarantor of the universal good¹⁷.

On this foundation, the Byzantine state will ensure its hegemony in the next two centuries in the Christian world, and Constantinople the place of “queen” of the cities. This is how it is possible that the commonwealth that Byzantium managed to build, on account of the “doctrine of the family of kings”, according to which Christian principles form a spiritual family headed by the Constantinopolitan sovereign, whose authority “is above

¹⁴ H. AHRWEILER, *Ideologia politică...*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁵ Allain DUCÉLLIER, *Bizantinii, istorie și cultură*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Introduction to the *Ecloga*, presented as a preamble to the *Epanagoga* (a later work by more than a century), in: *PG* 113, 453 sq.

¹⁷ The notion of “just war” is the one that justifies the means used by the Byzantines in practicing an expansionist policy, which D. Obolensky qualifies as “defensive imperialism” in his work *Un commonwealth medieval*, Editura Corint, 2002, p. 164.

all earthly power and the only one instituted by the heavenly Master on earth”¹⁸, according to the Patriarch Nicholas the Mystic. The other princes are to him little “brothers” – like Charlemagne, “sons” – like Boris of Bulgaria, or subjects – like Armenian princes and the Venetian doges. In the name of this highly hierarchical “family”, the basileus bestows the signs of power that only he can give or only with his consent, such as crowns, titles, or dignities, which constitutes the very recognition of his highest privileged position in the Christian *oikoumene*. In this sense, any imperial victory and conquest were received as an act of “legitimate recovery” of usurped goods or territories¹⁹.

From the second “Title” of the *Epanagoge* we learn the duties and rights of the patriarch.

“Above all, he has the task to watch over a pure and pious life of those whom God has entrusted to him; then, as far as possible, he must bring the heretics to Orthodoxy and the union with the Church, according to the laws and canons, those who have strayed from the right path by leaving the universal Church, and also to bring those unfaithful to the faith, through the admirable and brilliant example of his actions”²⁰.

Here are laid the seeds of the great missions through which the Church will spread the “right faith” in this period and which has an unprecedented development. Knowing the new Byzantine policy that renews universalist claims, we will be able to easily understand the evolution of relations between Byzantium and its neighbors, starting with the second half of the 9th century, the 10th century, and almost the entire 11th century. The struggle for new territorial conquests and diplomatic activity, as well as the missions carried out by the Empire in all directions, draw their sap from this conception. Wars were no longer fought against pagans and barbarians, but even against those of the same faith. This explains the first civil war in the Orthodox world, as Allain Ducellier calls the war waged by

¹⁸ S. BREZEANU, *O istorie a Bizanțului*, p. 134.

¹⁹ S. BREZEANU, *O istorie a Bizanțului*, pp. 134-135.

²⁰ PG 113, 453.

the Byzantines against Tsar Simeon²¹. The expansionist effort of the state was always supported by the Church through missionary work, carried out among the peoples of the Balkans, the Black Sea, and Central Europe. In particular, this missionary work was supported by two exceptional patriarchs but also first-rank political personalities: Photios (858-867, 877-886) and Nicholas the Mystic (901-907, 912-925). Photios will confess this pride for the missionary work in his encyclical to the Eastern patriarchs. The Christianization of the Bulgarians, the Serbs, and later the Russians, and not only that, are the undeniable fruits of this policy, which allowed the Byzantine world to extend its spiritual and partly political influence over the Slavic world, far exceeding the borders of the Empire²².

After the victory over iconoclasm, the Church strengthened, patriarchs like Photios were also statesmen, who were not limited only to the ecclesiastical domain but also participated in making major political decisions, but it is also worth noting the arbitrary intervention of the Emperors who, intervening in the dispute between Photios and Ignatius, removed both of them from the patriarchal seat by a single order²³. Alexandre Schmemmann shows that the drama of the Church consists precisely in the fact that it was too “psychologically” linked to the Empire. The empire becomes for her a supreme and absolute, intangible, indisputable, and obvious value. It cannot leave the Byzantine hierarchy, the categories of the sacred Empire. This theoretical maximalism supported and guaranteed practical minimalism in the face of the mistakes and abuses of the Empire²⁴.

²¹ Allain DUCÉLLIER, *Bizanțul și lumea ortodoxă*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1986, p. 136.

²² H. AHRWEILER, *Ideologia politică...*, pp. 42-43.

²³ F. DVORNIK, *Le Schisme de Photius. Histoire et Légende*, Ed. du Cerf, Paris, 150, p. 145.

²⁴ Al. SCHMEMMANN, *Le chemin historique de l'Orthodoxie*, YMCA, Paris, 1995, p. 245.