

Byzantine Orthodoxy Under Ottomans

(1453 - 1821 A.D.)

(1) The Christian Ghetto

According to Muslim belief, Christians as well as Jews were considered *people of the Book*, i.e. their religion was seen as not entirely false but incomplete. Accordingly, provided that Christians submitted to the dominion of the caliphate, the Muslim political administration, and paid appropriate taxes, they deserved consideration and freedom of worship. Any Christian mission or proselytism among the Muslims, however, was considered a capital crime. In fact, Christians were formally reduced to a ghetto existence: They were the Roman nation conquered by Islam but enjoying a certain internal autonomy.

In January 1454 A.D., the Sultan allowed the election of a new patriarch, who was to become the head of the entire Christian nation or in Greek the *Ethnarch* (ethnic ruler) with the right to administer, to tax and to exercise justice over all the Christians of the Ottoman empire. Thus, under the new system the patriarch of Constantinople saw his formal rights and jurisdiction substantially extended geographically. On one hand, through the privileges granted to him by the Sultan, he could practically ignore his colleagues, the other Orthodox patriarchs; and on the other hand, his power ceased to be purely canonical and spiritual as it became political as well. To the enslaved Greeks, he appeared not only as the successor of the Byzantine patriarchs but also as the heir of the emperors. For the Ottomans, he was the official and strictly controlled administrator of the Christians. In order to symbolize these new powers, the patriarch adopted an external attire reminiscent of the emperors: the Mitra in form of a crown, long hair, eagles as insignia of authority, among other imperial accoutrements.

The new system had many significant consequences. Most importantly, it permitted the church to survive as an institution. Indeed, the prestige of the church has actually increased, because for Christians the Church was now the only source of education. It alone offered possibilities of social promotion. Moreover, through the legal restrictions placed on the Church's mission the new arrangement created the practical identification of church membership with ethnic origin. Finally, since the entire Christian population was ruled by the patriarch of Constantinople and his hierarchy, it guaranteed the *Phanariots* (the Greek aristocracy of the Phanar, the area of Istanbul where the patriarchate lives) a monopoly in episcopal elections. Thus, Greek bishops progressively came to occupy all the hierarchical positions. The ancient

patriarchates of the Middle East were practically governed by the Phanar. The Serbian and Bulgarian entities came to the same fate: The last remnants of their autonomy were formally suppressed in 1766 and 1767 A.D., respectively, by the Patriarch Samuel Hantcherli. This Greek control, exercised through the support by the hated Turks, was resented more and more by the Balkan Slavs and Romanians, as the Turkish regime became more despotic, taxes grew heavier and modern nationalism began to develop.

It is necessary, however, to credit the Phanariots with a quite genuine devotion to the cause of learning and education, which they alone were able to provide inside the oppressed Christian ghetto. The advantages they obtained from the *Porte* (the Turkish government) for building schools and for developing Greek letters in the Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Walachia that were entrusted to their rule came to play a substantial role in the rebirth of Greece.

(2) Relations with the West

The Union of Florence became fully inoperative as soon as the Turks occupied Constantinople (1453 A.D.). In 1484 a council of bishops condemned it officially. Neither the Sultan nor the majority of the Orthodox Greeks were favorable to the continuation of political ties with western Christendom. The Byzantine cultural revival of the *Palaeologan* period was the first to experience adverse effects from the occupation. Intellectual dialogue with the West became impossible. Through liturgical worship and the traditional spirituality of the monasteries, the Orthodox faith was preserved in the former Byzantine world. Some self-educated men developed a remarkable ability to develop the Orthodox tradition through writings and publications, but they were isolated exceptions. Probably the most remarkable among them was St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, the *Hagiorite* (1748-1809), who edited the famous *Philokalia*, an anthology of spiritual writings, as well as translated and adapted Western spiritual writings (e.g. those of the Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola) into modern Greek.

The only way for Orthodox Greeks, Slavs or Romanians to acquire an education higher than the elementary level was to go to the West. Several of them were able to do so, but in the process became detached from their own theological and spiritual tradition.

The west, despite much ignorance and prejudice had a constant interest in the *Eastern Church*. At times, there was a genuine and respectful curiosity; in other instances, political and proselytistic concerns prevailed. Thus, in 1573-81 A.D., a lengthy correspondence was initiated by the Lutheran scholars from Tübingen (in Germany). However interesting as a historical event, this correspondence, which includes the *Answers of Patriarch Jeremias II*

(patriarch from 1572 to 1595 A.D.), shows how little mutual understanding was possible at that time between the Reformers and traditional Eastern Christianity.

Relations with the West, especially after the 17th century, were often impaired in the East by the incredible corruption of the Turkish government, which constantly fostered diplomatic intrigues. An outstanding example of such manipulation was the *Kharaj*, an important tax required at each patriarchal election. Western diplomats were often ready to provide the amount needed in order to secure the election of candidates favorable to their causes. The French and Austrian ambassadors, for example, supported candidates who would favor the establishment of Roman Catholic influence in the Christian ghetto, while the British and Dutch envoys supported patriarchs who were open to Protestant ideas. Thus, the gifted and Western-educated *Patriarch Cyril Lucaris* was elected and deposed five times between 1620 and 1638. His stormy reign was marked by the publication in Geneva of a *Confession of Faith* (1629 A.D.), which was, to the great amazement of all contemporaries, purely Calvinistic (i.e. it contained Reformed Protestant views). The episode ended in tragedy. Cyril was strangled by Turkish soldiers at the instigation of the pro-French and pro-Austrian party. Six successive Orthodox councils condemned the Confession: Constantinople in 1638 A.D.; Kiev in 1640 A.D.; Jassy in 1642 A.D.; Constantinople in 1672 A.D.; Jerusalem in 1672 A.D.; and Constantinople in 1691 A.D. - In order to refute its positions, the metropolitan of Kiev, *Peter Mogila*, published his own Orthodox Confession of Faith (1640 A.D.), which was followed in 1672 A.D. by the *Confession of the patriarch of Jerusalem, Dosìtheos Notaras*. Both, especially Peter Mogila, were under strong Latin influence.

In the 18th century, these episodes were followed by a strong anti-Western reaction. In 1755 A.D., the Synod of Constantinople decreed that all Westerners - Latin or Protestant - had invalid sacraments and were only to be admitted into the Orthodox Church through Baptism. This practice of the Greek Church did not fall into disuse until in the 20th century.