

The Church of Imperial Byzantium

[Around 1000 A.D. to the Fall of Constantinople, 1453 A.D.]

Eastern Christianity about 1000 A.D.

At the beginning of the 2nd millennium of Christian history, the church of Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire, was at the peak of its world influence and power. Neither Rome, which had become a provincial town and its church an instrument in the hands of political interests, nor Europe under the Carolingian and Ottonian dynasties could really compete with Byzantium as centers of Christian civilization. The Byzantine emperors of the Macedonian dynasty had extended the frontiers of the empire from Mesopotamia to Naples (in Italy) and from the Danube River (in central Europe) to Palestine. The church of Constantinople not only enjoyed a parallel expansion but also extended its missionary penetration, much beyond the political frontiers of the empire, to Russia and the Caucasus.

Relations Between Church And State

The ideology that had prevailed since Constantine (4th century) and Justinian I (6th century) — according to which there were to be only one universal Christian society, the *Oikoumene*, led jointly by the empire and the church — was still the tenet of the Byzantine emperors. At the heart of the Christian polity of Byzantium was the emperor, who was not an ordinary ruler, but God's representative on earth. If Byzantium were an icon of the heavenly Jerusalem, then the earthly monarchy of the emperor is an image or icon of the monarchy of God in heaven. In church, people prostrated themselves before the Icon of Christ, and in the palace before God's living Icon - the emperor. The labyrinthine palace, the court with its elaborate ceremonial, the throne room where mechanical lions roared and musical birds sang: these things were designed to make the Emperor's status clear as vice-regent of God. *By such means*, wrote the Emperor Constantine VII (Porphyrogenitus), *we figure forth the harmonious movement of God the creator around this universe, while the imperial power is preserved in proportion and order*. The emperor had a special place in church worship: Though he could not celebrate the Eucharist, he received communion within the sanctuary *as priests do* - taking the consecrated bread in his hands and drinking from the chalice (instead of being given the sacrament via spoon), he also preached sermons and on certain occasions censed the altar.

The life of Byzantium formed a unified whole, and there was no rigid line of separation between the religious and the secular, between Church and State. The two were seen as parts of a single organism. Hence, it was inevitable that the emperor played an active part in the affairs of the Church. Yet at the same time, it is not just to

accuse Byzantium of *Caesaro-Papism*, of subordinating the Church to the State. Although Church and State formed a single organism, yet within this one organism there were two distinct elements, the priesthood (*sacerdotium*) and the imperial power (*imperium*). While working in close co-operation, each one of these elements had its own proper sphere, in which it was autonomous. Between the two there was a *symphony* or *harmony*, but neither element exercised absolute control over the other.

This is the doctrine expounded in the great code of Byzantine law, drawn up under Justinian (sixth Novel) and repeated in many of the Byzantine texts; as Emperor John Tzimisces says: *I recognize two authorities, priesthood and empire; the Creator of the world entrusted to the first the care of souls and to the second the control of men's bodies. Let neither authority be attacked, so that the world may enjoy prosperity.*

Thus it was the emperor's task to summon councils and to carry their decrees into effect, but it lay beyond his powers to dictate the content of those decrees: It was for the bishops gathered in council to decide what the true faith was. Bishops were appointed by God to teach the faith, whereas the emperor was the protector of Orthodoxy, but not its exponent. Such was the theory, and such in great part was the practice. Admittedly, there were many occasions when the emperor interfered unwarrantedly in ecclesiastical matters; but when a serious question of principle arose, the authorities of the Church quickly showed that they had a will of their own.

Iconoclasm, for example, was vigorously championed by a whole series of emperors, yet for all that the Church successfully rejected it. In Byzantine history, Church and State were closely interdependent, but neither was subordinate to the other. The authority of the patriarch of Constantinople was motivated in a formal fashion by the fact that he was the bishop of the *New Rome*, where the emperor and the senate also resided (Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon, 451 A.D.). He holds the title of *Ecumenical Patriarch* which points to his political role in the empire. Technically, he occupied the second rank — after the bishop of Rome — in a hierarchy of five major primates, which included also the patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. In practice, however, the latter three were deprived of all authority by the Arab conquest of the Middle East in the 7th century, and only the emerging Slavic churches attempted to challenge, at times, the position of Constantinople as the unique center of Eastern Christendom.

The Church of the Holy Wisdom or *Hagia Sophia*, built by Justinian in the 6th century, was the center of religious life in the Eastern Orthodox world. It was by far the largest and most splendid religious edifice in all of Christendom. According to *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, the envoys of the Kievan prince Vladimir, who visited it in 987 A.D., reported: *We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. Hagia Sophia*, or translated "holy wisdom", provided the pattern of the liturgical office, which was adopted throughout the Orthodox world. This adoption was generally spontaneous, and it

was based upon the moral and cultural prestige of the imperial capital: the Orthodox Church uses the 9th-century Byzantine Rite.

The Development of Monasticism

Monasticism played a decisive part in the religious life of Byzantium as in all Orthodox countries. It has been rightly said that the best way to penetrate Orthodox spirituality is to enter it through monasticism. There is a great richness of spiritual life in all forms to be found within the bounds of Orthodoxy, but monasticism remains the most classic of all.

The monastic life first emerged as a definite institution in Egypt and Syria during the fourth century, and from there it spread rapidly across Christendom. It is no coincidence that monasticism has developed immediately after Constantine's conversion, at the very time when the persecutions ceased and Christianity became fashionable. The monks with their austerities were martyrs in an age when martyrdom of blood no longer existed; they formed a counterbalance to the newly established Christian society. Secular society was in danger of forgetting that Byzantium was an image and symbol, not the reality: They ran the risk of identifying the kingdom of God with an earthly kingdom. The monks and nuns – by their withdrawal from society into the desert – fulfilled a prophetic and eschatological ministry in the life of the Church. They reminded Christians that the kingdom of God is not of this world.

Monasticism has taken three chief forms, all of which had appeared in Egypt by the year 350 A.D., and all of which are still to be found in the Orthodox Church today. First, there are hermits, i.e. ascetics leading a solitary life in huts or caves, even in tombs, among the branches of trees or on top of pillars. In Orthodoxy, a monk's primary task is a life of prayer, and it is through this that he or she serves others. It is not so much what a monk does that matters, but what he is.

The great centers of the semi-eremitic life in Egypt were Nitria and Scetis, which by the end of the fourth century had produced many outstanding monks: Ammon the founder of Nitria, Macarius of Egypt, Macarius of Alexandria, Evagrius of Pontus and Arsenius the Great. From its very beginnings, the monastic life was seen, in both east and west, as a vocation for women as well as men. Throughout the Byzantine world were numerous communities of nuns.

Since the tenth century, the chief center of Orthodox monasticism has been *Mount Athos*, a rocky peninsula in Northern Greece jutting out into the Aegean and culminating at its tip in a peak 6670 feet high. Known as the *Holy Mountain*, Athos contains twenty ruling monasteries and a large number of smaller houses, as well as hermits' cells; the whole peninsula is given up entirely to monastic settlements, and in the days of its greatest expansion it is said to have contained nearly forty thousand

monks.

There are no religious *Orders* in Eastern Orthodox monasticism. In the west, a monk belongs, for example, to the Carthusian, the Cistercian or some other Order; in the east, he or she is simply a member of the one great fellowship, which includes all monks and nuns, although of course he or she is attached to a particular monastic house (monastery or Skete).

Both in the capital and in other centers, the monastic movement continued to flourish as it was shaped during the early centuries of Christianity. Historically, the most significant event was the missionary expansion of Byzantine Christianity throughout eastern Europe. In the 9th century, Bulgaria had become an Orthodox nation and under Tsar Symeon (893-927 A.D.) had established its own autocephalous (administratively independent) Patriarchate in Preslav. In 988 A.D., the Kievan prince Vladimir embraced Byzantine Orthodoxy and married a sister of Emperor Basil. After that time, Russia became an ecclesiastical province of the church of Byzantium, headed by a Greek or, less frequently, a Russian metropolitan appointed from Constantinople. This statute of dependence was not challenged by the Russians until 1448 A.D. – During the entire period, Russia adopted and developed the spiritual, artistic and social heritage of Byzantine civilization which was received through intermediary Bulgarian translators.

Relations with the West

Relations with the *Latin West* were becoming more and more ambiguous. On one hand, the Byzantines considered the entire Western world as a part of the Roman *Oikoumene*, of which the Byzantine emperor was the head and in which the Roman bishop enjoyed honorary primacy. On the other hand, the Frankish and German emperors in Europe were challenging this nominal scheme. The internal decadence of the Roman papacy was such that the powerful patriarch of Byzantium seldom took the trouble of entertaining any relations with it. From the time of Patriarch Photius (Patriarch 858-867 A.D. and 877-886 A.D.) the Byzantines had formally condemned the *Filioque clause*, which stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father *and from the Son*, as an illegitimate and heretical addition to the Nicene Creed. However, in 879-880 A.D. Photius and Pope John VIII had apparently settled the matter to Photius' satisfaction. In 1014 A.D., the *Filioque* was introduced in Rome, and communion was broken again. The incident of 1054 A.D., incorrectly considered as the date of the *Schism* (which had actually been developing over a period of time), was in fact an unsuccessful attempt at restoring relations, disintegrating as they were because of political competition in Italy between the Byzantines and the Germans as well as because of disciplinary changes (enforced celibacy of the clergy in particular) imposed by the reform movement that had been initiated by the monks of Cluny, France. Conciliatory efforts of Emperor Constantine Monomachus (reigned from 1042-55 A.D.) were unsuccessful in overcoming either the aggressive

and uninformed attitudes of the Frankish clergy, who were now governing the Roman Church, or the intransigence of the Byzantine Patriarch Michael Cerularius (1043-58 A.D.). When papal legates came to Constantinople in 1054 A.D., they found no common language with the patriarch. Both sides exchanged recriminations on points of doctrine and ritual. Finally, they hurled Anathema of excommunication at each other, thus provoking what has been called *the Schism*.

The Crusades

After the Battle of Manzikert (1071 A.D.) in eastern Asia Minor, Byzantium lost most of Anatolia to the Turks and ceased to be a world power. Partly solicited by the Byzantines, the *Western Crusades* proved another disaster: they brought the establishment of Latin principalities on former imperial territories and the replacement of Eastern bishops by a Latin hierarchy. The culminating point was, of course, the sack of Constantinople itself in 1204 A.D., the enthronement of a Latin emperor on the Bosphorus and the installation of a Latin Patriarch in the Hagia Sophia. Meanwhile, the Balkan countries of Bulgaria and Serbia secured national emancipation with Western help, the Mongols sacked Kiev (1240 A.D.), and Russia became a part of the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan.

The Byzantine heritage survived this series of tragedies mainly because the Orthodox Church showed an astonishing internal strength and a remarkable administrative flexibility.

Until the Crusades (and in spite of such incidents as the exchanges of Anathema between Michael Cerularius and the papal legates in 1054), Byzantine Christians did not consider the break with the West as a final schism. The prevailing opinion was that the break of communion with the West was due to a temporary take-over of the venerable Roman See by misinformed and uneducated German “barbarians”, and that eventually the former unity of the Christian world under the one legitimate emperor — that of Constantinople — and the five Patriarchates would be restored. This utopian scheme came to an end when the Crusaders replaced the Greek Patriarchs of Antioch and Jerusalem with Latin prelates, after they had captured these ancient cities (1098-99 A.D.). Instead of reestablishing Christian unity in the common struggle against Islam, the Crusades demonstrated how far apart Latins and Greeks really were from each other. When finally, in 1204 A.D., after a shameless sacking of the city, the Venetian Thomas Morosini was installed as patriarch of Constantinople and confirmed as such by Pope Innocent III, the Greeks realized the full seriousness of papal claims over the universal church: theological polemics and national hatreds were combined to tear the two churches further apart.

After the capture of the city, the Orthodox Patriarch John Camaterus fled to Bulgaria and died there in 1206 A.D. – A successor, Michael Autorianus, was elected in Nicaea (1208 A.D.), where he enjoyed the support of a restored Greek empire. Although he lived in exile, this Patriarch was recognized as legitimate by the entire Orthodox

world. He continued to administer the immense Russian Metropolitanate. From him, and not from his Latin competitor, the Bulgarian Church received again its right to ecclesiastical independence with a restored Patriarchate in Trnovo (1235 A.D.).

The Mongol Invasion

The invasion of Russia by the Mongols had disastrous effects on the future of Russian civilization, but the church survived, both as the only unified social organization and as the main bearer of the Byzantine heritage. The *Metropolitan of Kiev and all Russia*, who was appointed from Nicaea or from Constantinople, was a major political power, respected by the Mongol Khans. Exempt from taxes paid by the local princes to the Mongols and reporting only to his superior (the Byzantine Patriarch), the head of the Russian Church — though he had to abandon his cathedral See of Kiev that had been devastated by the Mongols — acquired an unprecedented moral prestige. He retained ecclesiastical control over immense territories from the Carpathian Mountains to the Volga River, over the newly created episcopal *See of Sarai* (near the Caspian Sea), which was the capital of the Mongols, as well as over the Western principalities of the former Kievan Empire — even after they succeeded in winning independence (e.g., Galicia) or fell under the political control of Lithuania and Poland.

Attempts At Ecclesiastical Union

In 1261 A.D., the Nicaean emperor Michael Palaeologus recaptured Constantinople from the Latins, and an Orthodox patriarch again occupied the See in the Hagia Sophia. From 1261 to 1453 A.D., the Palaeologan dynasty presided over an empire that was embattled from every side, torn apart by civil wars and gradually shrinking to the very limits of the imperial city itself. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church kept much of its former prestige, exercising jurisdiction over a much greater territory, which included Russia as well as the distant Caucasus, parts of the Balkans and the vast regions occupied by the Turks.

Several patriarchs of this late period — e.g. Arsenius Autorianus (patriarch 1255-59 A.D. and 1261-65 A.D.), Athanasius I (patriarch 1289-93 A.D. and 1303-10 A.D.), John Calecas (patriarch 1334-47 A.D.) and Philotheus Coccinus (patriarch 1353-54 A.D. and 1364-76 A.D.) showed great independence from the imperial power, though remaining faithful to the ideal of the Byzantine Oikoumene.

Without the military backing of a strong empire, the Patriarchate of Constantinople was of course unable to assert its jurisdiction over the churches of Bulgaria and Serbia, which had gained independence during the days of the Latin occupation. In 1346 A.D. the Serbian Church even proclaimed itself a Patriarchate; a short-lived protest by Constantinople ended with recognition in 1375 A.D. — In Russia, Byzantine

ecclesial diplomacy was involved in a violent civil strife; a fierce competition arose between the grand princes of Moscow and Lithuania, who both aspired to become leaders of a Russian state liberated from the Mongol yoke. The “Metropolitan of Kiev and all Russia” was by now residing in Moscow, and often, as in the case of the Metropolitan Alexis (1354-78), played a directing role in the Muscovite government. The ecclesiastical support of Moscow by the church was decisive in the final victory of the Muscovites and had a pronounced impact on later Russian history. The dissatisfied western Russian principalities (which would later constitute the Ukraine) could only obtain — with the strong support of their Polish and Lithuanian overlords — the temporary appointment of separate Metropolitans in Galicia and Byelorussia. Eventually, late in the 14th century, the Metropolitan residing in Moscow again centralized ecclesiastical power in Russia.

Relations with the Western Church

One of the major reasons behind this power struggle in the northern area of the Byzantine world was the problem of relations with the Western Church. To most Byzantine churchmen, the young Muscovite principality appeared to be a safer bulwark of Orthodoxy than the western-oriented princes who had submitted to Catholic Poland and Lithuania. In addition, an important political party in Byzantium itself favored union with the West in the hope that a new *Western Crusade* would be made against the menacing Turks. In fact, the problem of ecclesiastical union was the most burning issue during the entire Palaeologan period.

Emperor Michael Palaeologus (1259-82 A.D.) had to face the aggressive ambition of the Sicilian Norman king Charles of Anjou, who dreamed of restoring the Latin empire in Constantinople. To gain the valuable support of the papacy against Charles, Michael sent a Latin-inspired confession of faith to Pope Gregory X, and his delegates accepted union with Rome at the Council of Lyons (1274 A.D.). This capitulation before the West, sponsored by the Emperor, won little support in the Orthodox Church. During his lifetime, Emperor Palaeologus succeeded in imposing an Eastern Catholic patriarch, John Beccus, upon the Church of Constantinople, but upon the emperor’s death, an Orthodox council condemned the union (1285 A.D.).

Throughout the 14th century, numerous other attempts at negotiating union were initiated by the emperors of Byzantium. Formal meetings were held in 1333, 1339, 1347 and 1355 A.D. – In 1369 A.D., Emperor John V (Palaeologus) was personally converted to the Roman faith in Rome. All these attempts were initiated by the government and not by the Church for the obvious political reason of hoping to obtain western help against the Turks. However, the attempts brought no results, neither on ecclesiastical nor on political levels. The majority of the Byzantine Orthodox hierarchy was not opposed to the idea of union but considered that it could only be achieved through a formal Ecumenical Council at which East and West would meet on equal footing, as they had done so in the early centuries of the church.

The project of a Council was promoted with particular consistency by John Cantacuzenus, who, after a brief reign as emperor (1347-54 A.D.), became a monk but continued to exercise great influence on all ecclesiastical and political events. The idea of an Ecumenical Council was initially rejected by the popes, but it was revived in the 15th century with the temporary triumph of conciliar ideas (which advocated more power to councils and less to popes) in the West at the Councils of Constance and Basel. Challenged with the possibility that the Greeks would unite with the conciliarists and not with Rome, Pope Eugenius IV called an Ecumenical Council of union in Ferrara, which later moved to Florence.

The Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-45 A.D.) allowed for long theological debates. Emperor John VIII Palaeologus, Patriarch Joseph, and numerous bishops and theologians represented the Eastern Church. They finally accepted most Roman positions—the *filioque* clause, purgatory and the Roman primacy. Political desperation and the fear of facing the Turks again, without Western support, was the decisive factor that caused them to place their signatures of approval on *the Decree of Union* (July 6, 1439 A.D.). The Metropolitan of Ephesus, Mark Eugenicus, alone refused to sign. Upon their return to Constantinople, most other delegates also renounced their acceptance of the council. Thus, no significant change occurred in the relations between the churches.

The official proclamation of the union in the Hagia Sophia was postponed until December 12, 1452, and May 29, 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks. Sultan Mehmed II transformed the Hagia Sophia into an Islamic mosque, and the few partisans of the union fled to Italy.

Theological And Monastic Renaissance

Paradoxically, the pitiful history of Byzantium under the Palaeologan emperors coincided with an astonishing intellectual, spiritual and artistic renaissance that influenced the entire Eastern Christian world. The renaissance was not without fierce controversy and polarization. In 1337 A.D., Barlaam the Calabrian, one of the representatives of Byzantine humanism, attacked the spiritual practices of the Hesychast (from the Greek word *hesukhia* for stillness) monks, who claimed that Christian asceticism and spirituality could lead to the vision of the *uncreated light* of God. Barlaam's position was upheld by several other theologians, including Akyndinus and Nicephorus Gregoras. After much debate, the church gave its support to the main spokesman of the monks, St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 A.D.), who showed himself as one of the foremost theologians of medieval Byzantium. The Councils of 1341, 1347 and 1351 adopted the theology of St. Gregory, and after 1347 A.D. the patriarchal throne was consistently occupied by his disciples. John VI Cantacuzenus, who as emperor presided over the Council of 1351 A.D., gave his full support to the Hesychasts. His close friend, Nicholas Cabasilas, in his spiritual writings on the Divine Liturgy and the sacraments, defined the universal Christian

significance of Palamite theology. The influence of the religious zealots, who triumphed in Constantinople, outlasted the empire itself and contributed to the perpetuation of Orthodox spirituality under the Turkish rule. It also spread to the Slavic countries, especially Bulgaria and Russia. The monastic revival in northern Russia during the last half of the 14th century, which was associated with the name of St. Sergius of Radonezh, as well as the contemporaneous revival of iconography (e.g. the work of the great painter Andrey Rublyov), would have been unthinkable without constant contacts with Mt. Athos, the center of Hesychasm, and with the spiritual and intellectual life of Byzantium.

Along with the Hesychast revival, a significant *opening to the West* was taking place among some Byzantine ecclesiastics. The brothers Prochorus and Demetrius Cydones, under the sponsorship of Cantacuzenus, for example, were systematically translating the works of Latin theologians into Greek. Thus, major writings of Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas were made accessible to the East for the first time. Most of the Latin-minded Greek theologians eventually supported the union policy of the emperors, but there were some — like Gennadios II Scholarios, the first patriarch under the Turkish occupation — who reconciled their love for Western thought with total faithfulness to the Orthodox Church.

This Syrian Orthodox Church enjoys the greatest prestige in the history of Christendom, since it is the first Church which was established in Jerusalem by the Apostles, Preachers and other converted Jews. It was grafted in Antioch by those who were converted from among the Arameans and other gentile elements. It can justifiably claim the wealthiest liturgical and musical heritage, besides a proud theological and missionary record. The Church administration as well as its faithful still use Syriac-Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus Christ. It suffered untold hardships and tragedies, including massacres and repeated transfer of the See of the Patriarchate from one locality to another, due to political and other developments until it settled in Damascus, Syria. Historians declare that the survival of this Church was nothing short of a miracle. The Church provides spiritual guidance to over four million faithful throughout the world.