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Language, Ethnicity and National Identity In Eastern and Oriental Christianity

The origins of Eastern Christianity are not directly recorded in the New Testament. The Pentecost event as recorded in Acts (2:7ff) notes pilgrims from places both within and outside the Roman Empire with the inference that they became believers. The work *Against the Jews* previously thought to be by Tertullian pictures Christianity spread to areas beyond the Empire¹. The Church in Ethiopia has its legendary origin in the eunuch in Acts (8:26-30). Eusebius in (Ecclesiastical History 6:46, 2 & IX, 8:2) writes of Early Armenian Christianity and early Arab Christianity (6: 20 & 37). Keralese Christians proclaim strongly that their Church was founded by Thomas the Apostle. It certainly was an early foundation². These are just a few of the stories of early Christianity beyond the Empires borders.

Eastern Christianity is however often seen as dominated by the political entity of Byzantium or Constantinople for more than 1000 years, from the founding of the city by Constantine the Great on Monday 11 May 330 to its conquest by Mehmet II, the Ottoman Sultan on Tuesday 29 May 1453.

Eusebius of Caesarea tells a story of a heavenly vision preceding the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 which made Constantine master of the Roman World. This story is suspect and Lactantius' story of a dream is to be preferred³. Constantine seemingly had lost interest in the Roman gods and some years before had reported a vision and replaced the old Roman Gods on the coinage with *Sol Invictus*. He was tending towards monotheism⁴. With his conversion Constantine regarded himself as the guardian of the Christian Church. The old Roman religion had been an arm of the Empire. Constantine saw the Christian Church in the same role and he funded it appropriately both in Rome and in his new capital. Constantine seemed to hedge his bets for the consecration date for his new city was

¹ Cf. Ludlow. Morwenna, 2009, *The Early Church*, I.B.Taurus, London. p23.

² Cf. Thapar. Romila, 2003, *The Penguin History of Early India*, Penguin, London. p 278-9

³ Cf. Norwich. John Julius, 1988, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*. Viking/Penguin, London. p40.

⁴ Ibid. p42.

determined by consulting augurs and astrologers and the High Priest Praetextus played a part⁵. Just as acceptance of the Roman Civic Religion had been enforced as a sign of loyalty, so was unity within the new religion enforced⁶.

Though paganism might be tolerated, there must be no heresy. If the Church were to stand henceforth as the spiritual arm of an indivisible Empire, how could it be divided?⁷

Peace must reign. The first Christian Church in the new capital was dedicated to St Eirene: The Holy Peace of God.

The Council of Nicea is commonly spoken of as called by Constantine to quell divisions. Indeed he the Emperor opened the Council with these words

For my own part, I hold any sedition within the Church of God as formidable as any war or battle, and more difficult to bring to an end. I am consequently more opposed to it than to anything else.⁸

A more accurate version is that he took the opportunity of many bishops being present for his *vicennialia* to try to settle the questions of the Donatists, the Meletians and the Arians. It is plain from Constantine letter to the disputants that he was not interested in the doctrinal points but rather of establishing his supremacy over the Church binding it to the state which was to survive for more than a thousand years in the east.⁹ But the supremacy of the state over the church was not to go unchallenged. Basil of Caesarea resisted Valens when he tried to impose Arianism.¹⁰ Machiavelli was to reason that religion was useful and a ruler should encourage it since it fostered unity. An idea that Constantine usage seemed to prefigure.

A view perhaps biased by a Gibbon's or Weberian Protestant approach is that

The adoption by Constantine of monotheistic Christianity and its fusion with a universal empire is literally epoch making. It seems to have produced an exceptionally powerful and long-lasting model of authority, which can be taken to explain 'the continuity of "autocracy, absolutism, centralism, divine sanction"...through successive phases of history.'¹¹

The Emperor Theodosius continued this policy of church as part of the state¹². Theodosius was also responsible for the geographic division between Eastern and Western Christianity.

The establishment in the fourth century CE of the north-south 'Theodosian Line' demarking the eastern and western segments of the Roman Empire. Organization of the Christian Church was subsequently based on this division. Missionaries from Rome converted Slavic tribes in the West to Roman

⁵ Ibid. p 64.

⁶ Roman authorities allowed the practice of other religions as long as the official Religion was included. It was the religious exclusivism of the Christians that was the problem. Cf. Ludlow p 99.

⁷ Ibid. p52

⁸ Quote in Norwich p51

⁹ Cf. Norwich pp51ff.

¹⁰ Cf. Payne. Robert, 1989. *The Fathers of the Eastern Church*. Dorset Press, New York. P 127ff.

¹¹ McMylor. Peter, and Vorozhishcheva. Maria, "Sociology and Eastern Orthodoxy" in Parry. Ken Ed. 2007, *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Blackwell, Oxford. p468

¹² Theodosius in 380 decreed the acceptance for the Empire of the Nicene Creed. Cf. Ludlow p 134.

Catholicism (these tribes became the progenitors of the Slovenes and Croatians), while missionaries from Constantinople converted ancestors of the Serbs and Montenegrins to Eastern Orthodoxy¹³.

In 381 a Council in St Eirene condemned the Arians and further more decreed that Constantinople would replace the Apostolic Church of Ephesus as leader in the area and second only to Rome in precedence. Again this links the church and state. The policy of controlling the Church became entrenched. The Emperors appointed and deposed Hierarchs and church officials as long as the Empire lasted. Constantius II exiled Dionysius of Milan and replaced him with Auxentius in 355¹⁴. John Chrysostom was exiled under the Emperor Arcadius most probably because of John's condemnation of the Empress Eudoxia.¹⁵ It was common usage in most polities east and west, but perhaps more noticed in the Eastern Empire because of its geographic spread and its' long history.

The human and the divine elements in Christ were a continuing debate

At the Fourth Oecumenical Council called at Chalcedon by Emperor Marcian and his wife Pulcheria in 451 to settle the matter... the Monophysite refusal to accept it made Chalcedon a permanent symbol of division and led to the growth of separate churches...¹⁶

The Armenian church never accepted the definition of Chalcedon: it was not part of the process which produced it....A high proportion of the Christians of Egypt and Syria, provinces of the empire which believed themselves exploited and neglected by the imperial centre, and had vigorous vernacular cultures of their own rejected Chalcedon¹⁷

We see with this rejection the distinction we now know as Oriental rather than Eastern Orthodox Christianity but both represent a symbiosis of race and religion. The liturgical language used is often a distinguishing feature of Eastern and Oriental Christianity. Language is a cultural label not to be confused with race which claims a biological descent.

Alexander conquered much of the east and with his successors the Ptolemies in Egypt, the Selucids in Antioch and the Attalids in Pergamon Greek became the language of administration and education through out the east¹⁸. Christianity spread to Rome and the west from these Greek speaking areas. "Greek was Christianity's *lingua franca* in Rome as in most places elsewhere"¹⁹ By the end of the fourth Century CE Greek was no longer fulfilling this role and Rufinus and others were translating theological works from Greek to

¹³ Cf. Norwich pp51ff.

¹³ Radic. Radmilla, "Serbian Christianity" in Parry. Kenneth, Ed. 2007, *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, Blackwell, Oxford. p232.

¹⁴ Cf. Ludlow p 167.

¹⁵ Something similar is to be found in Philip the Fair vs. Boniface VIII and Clement V.

¹⁶ Herrin. Judith, 2007, *Byzantium*. Allen Lane, London. p 39.

¹⁷ Walls. Andrew, "Christianity" in Hinnells. John R., 1998. *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, Penguin, London. p 67.

¹⁸ Cf. Ludlow. p. 73ff.

¹⁹ Ludlow. p47.

Latin²⁰. From this time on the Greek East and the Latin West were drifting apart religiously because the one did not understand the theological language of the other, even if the political break was not yet. The Empire began its terminal decay with the death of Justinian in 565²¹ or perhaps ten years earlier with the death of Theodosia. Justinian has re-conquered previously lost parts of the west, but in doing so he had emptied the coffers in Constantinople. He had manipulated the Council of 553 condemned Pope Virgilius who he did not allow to return to Rome but exiled him to an island in the Mamara.

He cared only for religion, for the state of the Church --his Church -- and for the endless theological disputations in which true Byzantine that he was, he found stimulus and relaxation²²....his last item of legislation, the end of a long series of enactments on ecclesiastical affairs -- they included fixing the official dates of Christmas and the Epiphany²³

The decrees of Chalcedon were enforced within the Empire. They were not accepted, nor could that be expected, beyond the already fluctuating borders of the Empire. For Persian or Armenian Christians to accept and follow decrees from a Council called, presided over and promulgated by the Emperor of a rival polity was not to be expected²⁴. Questions must be asked. Were these non accepting groups guilty of the implied heresy? I am not prepared to debate that question here. Persian Christians following the Byzantine Emperor might well find themselves in difficulties and further fragmentation and suspicion ensued.

The extent to which the emperor controlled the extended Church is disputed.

Caesaropapism is normally understood as a system of rule in which the head of state is also the head of the Church and the supreme judge in religious matters; Byzantium and Russia are generally cited as examples (quite why is not clear when England from the Henrican Reformation to the present day seems a rather splendid example). Although the patriarch of the imperial capital owed his position to the political power of the emperor, Byzantine Orthodoxy knew no instance of ultimate doctrinal authority except the church councils; we can add that nor does any form of Eastern Orthodox Christianity²⁵

While the ruler may not have directly controlled the teachings of the local church, controlling appointments and often the salaries gave a powerful influence over all aspects of religion in the locale including teaching.

The rise of Islam in the Middle East areas that had been Christian heartlands saw conversions to Islam. By the middle of the tenth Century CE if the report of Liuprand to Otto of Saxony is to be believed the Constantinople of Nicephorus Phocas had fallen far from the

²⁰ Cf. Davis. Davis. J.G., 1995 *The Early Christian Church*, Barnes & Noble, New York. p235.

²¹ Another version is that the Empire was delivered its death blow with the serious of plagues in the reign of Justinian Cf. Rosen. William, 2006, *Justinian's Flea*, Pimlico, London.

²² Norwich p 259

²³ Ibid. p261

²⁴ Although one Lebanese based Church now aligned with Rome still calls itself Melkite -- King's men.

²⁵ McMylor. and Vorozhishcheva. p469.

glory days.²⁶ Penury was to be commonplace in Constantinople, by the mid thirteenth century and so interdependent was the Church State relationship even “the Crown of Thorns” so highly prized in the city was pawned to Venice and bought by Louis of France²⁷. It would have several revivals but the resentment that Byzantium provoked and the cultural differences with the rest of Christendom hastened both the political and religious breakup in the east²⁸. With the fragmentation of the Empire and the rise of nations based on ethnicity, local church allegiance was to the new entity and only indirectly to the Constantinopolitan Patriarch

The remnant Christian populations in the regions overrun by Islamic armies became and remain an hereditary minority. Since the post 1918 borders established new nations the remnant Christians both Eastern and Oriental hark to a distant past that is ethnic and religious rather than national. National and ethnic tensions can arise within such churches. The Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem is elected by the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre who supply the higher clergy and whose member are Greek while the laity and some lesser clergy are Arabs. Improper use of assets has been a continuing source of friction. Recently property has been sold to the Israeli State and Jewish interests to the anger of the ordinary church members²⁹.

Constantinople was originally dominant in the Slavic areas as the Empire lost control and local polities emerged often with a local language so the urge for the religious authority to achieve independence from the Constantinopolitan Patriarch dominated church politics. The Church in the independent Bulgaria achieved ecclesiastical independence from Constantinople.

In 919 a Council of the Church and the People officially proclaimed the autocephaly of the Bulgarian Church and the Bulgarian Archbishop received the title of Patriarch. According to the theory prevailing at the time, the status of the Church had to be equal to that of the state³⁰.

The Russian Church commonly looks to the baptism of Vladimir in 988 as the start of their Christianity. The south Slavs also look to Clement of Rome exiled by Trajan to Cherson on the Black Sea. “The Grand Prince of Moscow Basil II refused to accept Metropolitan

²⁶ Cf. Wright. Jonathan, 2006, *The Ambassadors*, Harcourt, Orlando. P. 97ff.

²⁷ Cf. Norwich. John Julius, 1996, *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall*. Penguin, London. p201.

²⁸ Cf. Wright. *ibid*.

²⁹ Cf. Cohen. Raymond, 2008, *Saving the Holy Sepulchre*, OUP, New York. P 18-19 et al. A similar dispute over Macedonian church property is chronicled in the SMH 21/02/2009 p 3.

³⁰ Dimitrov. Ivan Zhelev, “Bulgarian Christianity” in Parry. Ken Ed. 2007, *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Blackwell, Oxford. p 51

Isidor, appointed by the patriarch of Constantinople in 1441”³¹. With the founding of the Russian autonomous Church and the Russian monarchy, Moscow became the “Third Rome”. Similar stories can be told of the other Orthodox Churches. These two examples illustrate the fragmentation of Eastern Christianity. The link between Church and nation is no better illustrated than by the history of the Orthodox Churches of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. These previous Provinces of Imperial Russia became independent after the Russian revolution, then came under Nazi Germany, then under the USSR and are now independent again. The history of these Churches over this period displays the link with the state³².

The history of the Georgian Church is more complex, the Georgian state and Church ceased to exist under Russian rule and Russian Orthodoxy was enforced. The Georgian monastery and Church of the Cross in Jerusalem became Russian. “After regaining its independence in 1991 Georgia is once more seeing the Georgian Orthodox church play an important role in society”³³

Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* perhaps from the media reports in the popular consciousness deals with a clash between Western and Islamic world views. He does however note key contemporary world civilizations.

The seventh contemporary world civilization is Orthodox, now centred on Russia and seen as separate from western Christendom as a consequence. In Huntington’s words, it is “of Byzantine parentage [a] distinct religion’ (here a question mark suddenly jumps before us as it surely doubtful the Eastern Orthodoxy is a more distinct form of Christianity than say Protestantism is from Catholicism), and has ‘200 years of Tartar rule, bureaucratic despotism, limited exposure to the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and other central Western experiences’.³⁴

Huntington sees that Greece and Russia have a common enemy in Turkey and have the shared religious culture of Eastern Orthodoxy. He argues that both links will propel Greece towards Russia as its natural civilizational home. Right or wrong such a view highlights the Church State relationship and the relationships between states of similar Eastern Orthodox background³⁵. Despite this pan-orthodoxy the national cultures and languages that have developed ensure separate identities.

³¹ Loure. Basil, “Russian Christianity” in Parry. Ken Ed. 2007, *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Blackwell, Oxford. p 209. McMyler. and Vorozhishcheva. p469.

³¹ Cf. Cohen. Raymond, 2008, *Saving the Holy Sepulchre*, OUP, New York. P 18-19 et al.

³² Cf. Brady. D., “Latvian Orthodox Church” p293, “Lithuanian Orthodox Church. p295 & “Estonian Orthodox Church” p 183. In Parry. Ken, Ed. 1999, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Churches*, Blackwell, Oxford.

³³ Kiladze. Nana, “Georgia, Christian thought in” in Parry. Ken Ed. 1999, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Churches*, Blackwell, Oxford. p 217.

³⁴ McMyler and Vorozhishcheva p 471.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.* p 472.

The Oriental Churches basically those that did not accept Chalcedon separated from the Orthodox in the fifth century.

The differences in the articulation of Christology were compounded by linguistic, cultural and political factors. With the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the divide between the two families became entrenched³⁶.

Following the spread of Islam these Oriental Christian communities separated from the bulk of Christianity and forming a decreasing minority relied on their religion together with a liturgical language and family for identity. Ethnically they were little different from their neighbours whose language they increasingly used liturgically. Upon migration to other lands they continued to form a minority. A new language came into use but their religion and family together with remnant knowledge of their liturgical language continued to give identity. But often history is interpreted in terms of religious identity. The Armenian “massacres” in Turkey after World War I would be an example³⁷.

Many Orthodox Christians also migrated from places where they may have represented a minority but a sizable one and had a regional religious identity. Others came from regions where their religion represented the local majority and had an added national identity. In their new locations they too formed a minority, but without the past experience of minority status of the Orientals. Without the hierarchical and financial support that was their prior experience the laity began building and organising in locales that encouraged or at least tolerated but did not support religious activity financially. This has led to laity versus clergy confrontations especially in matters of finance and religion has achieved a primacy as the input of identity. Such communal history can be seen as homogeneous and a functional unit of history. Without further waves of migration this can be expected to decline. The USA experience is indicative. Orthodoxy in North America originated with the Russian mission in Alaska. Originally in the late C19 and early C20 with migration from Eastern Europe pan-Orthodox parishes flourished. With further migration especially of Greeks church activity focused on particular ethnic groups. Attempts at a united Orthodox church in the United States sank under new waves of migration and the establishment of ethnic groupings of Orthodoxy³⁸. Each new wave of migrants seems to have entrenched the ethnic element, with the added problem that “the old country” its religion and customs became idealised and crystallized in forms that no longer existed “at home”.

³⁶ Fitzgerald. Thomas, “Eastern Christianity in the United States” in Parry. Ken Ed. 2007, The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity. Blackwell, Oxford. p. 277.

³⁷ The Greek exodus from Turkey would occupy a similar place.

³⁸ Fitzgerald. p 272f.

Depending on migration patterns something similar could be anticipated in Australia. Australia has migrant populations adhering to most if not all of the Eastern and Oriental Churches. Because of the scarcity until recently of their own Churches and clergy the earlier migrants of Churches in communion with Rome have become functional Latins, accepting in practice their own and a Latin identity while retaining elements of their culture but a lesser ecclesiastical identity³⁹. The case is different for those without Roman links. The 2006 ABS figures are 2.8% under the general label of Orthodox. Language, music and food help to establish identity. As these identifiers become minimised or absorbed by the surrounding culture, Church becomes a more important link for these communicants to their culture. The need to import clergy is a problem⁴⁰ although the non-English liturgical languages are also becoming problematical to the locally born⁴¹.

In any immigrant community tensions can arise between national and ethnic identity, between a sharp focus on the religious dimensions of church life and a broader sense of the church's role in the cultural and educational life of a community between a DIASPORA identity and a local identity. These problems have manifested themselves in various ways among the Eastern Christian communities of Australia and New Zealand.⁴²

As in the United States fragmentation can occur in Australia. The recent Macedonian dispute⁴³ and the split in The Church of the East over the calendar could be symptoms. How the local and overseas church leaders handle these disputes will be interesting, but is unlikely to impact on the wider Australian community.

³⁹ Since Vatican II some including the Melkites have dropped the *filioque* from the Creed. Cf. Galzada. Peter. "Eastern Catholic Christianity" in Parry. Ken Ed. 2007, The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity. Blackwell, Oxford.

⁴⁰ The Greeks and Copts are attempting to provide locally born and educated clergy and are also experimenting with Liturgies in English. The initial problems between local and imported clergy can be expected to initially increase as the clergy of local origin increases and then subside and over time ethnic language and culture will hopefully meld with the local.

⁴¹ The Church of the East establishing an English parish is indicative of this.

⁴² Melling. David J., "Australia and New Zealand" in Parry. Ken, et al.1999, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*. Blackwell, Oxford. p72.

⁴³ Cf. "Church Legal Battle divides Macedonian congregants". SMH Feb.21, 2009 p3.

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