

What Were the Consequences for the Church of making Christianity a State Religion?

In February 380 Theodosius I passed an edict declaring that privileges bestowing the cultivation of religion were henceforth only to be given to the followers of the Christian faith. In June 381 Arians, Eunomians and Aetians were declared heterodox, were forbidden to assemble, and their churches were ordered to be handed over to the Orthodox Church. In July 383, a further edict was published prohibiting all heretical worship. Thus, from its beginning as a persecuted minority, the Christian Church became the Church identifiable with the State. This new relationship had significant consequences not only for the secular Byzantine Empire and world history, but also for the theology and cosmology of the Orthodox Church.

This essay will discuss aspects of the development of this complex and dynamic relationship to the end of the Fourth Ecumenical Council in an effort to demonstrate the consequences to the Church that resulted from Christianity being made the State religion.

Some Initial Comments

Although there exists today an extant body of literary and theological material from the Byzantine Empire there is, unfortunately, "a dearth of documentary and archival records"¹. This lack of interest in chronicling daily life has left some historians such as Mango to focus on the Byzantine mentality to derive a value for the underlying realities of historical events.

Of course, such an approach brings into play a complex dynamic of the historian interpreting elements, making assumptions and applying suppositions and prejudices

to form his 'objective' picture. Given, however, the complexity of events themselves having multiple causes, society itself being fragmented and having a myriad of diversity, and the need for giving meaning to change, some caution should be exercised in adopting what may be no more than a particular historian's interpretation. This is especially so, given that the historian must formulate a view from a paucity of primary sources which in itself is incomplete and therefore misleading.

Temptation may thus exist to make assumptions on the basis of themes common to culture and society through time. Care should accordingly be exercised to avoid anachronous interpretation and thereby misinterpret the history of the Byzantine Empire.

The Relationship Between Early Christian Church and State

The nascent Church found itself confronted by the Roman Empire which demanded, as a political act, worship of the imperial person or image. Thereafter, all citizens were free to worship as they pleased. To both Jews and Christians this was idolatrous and they refused. To Romans this was seen as a challenge to authority, and persecutions and martyrdoms were common. Indeed, as Dix has pointed out in relation to the Christian Church:

for two hundred and fifty years from Nero to Constantine to be a Christian was in itself a capital crime, always liable to the severest penalty, even when the law was not enforced²

The Roman Empire

In 293 Diocletian reorganised the Roman Empire by introducing a tetrarchical system of leadership to overcome what he saw as the inability of the State to fully meet the

needs of a diverse and militarily challenged Empire. He appointed himself as Augustus in the east, with his son-in-law Galerius as his Caesar, and a trusted friend, Maximian, as Augustus in the West with Constantinus Chloros, the father of Constantine I, as his Caesar.

In 303 the great persecution of the Christians began under Diocletian. Four edicts were declared; the first ordering the closure of Churches, the handing over of scripture, and the deprivation of civil rights of Christians. The second imprisoned the clergy, the third decreed torture and death to the clergy, and the fourth required sacrifice to the pagan Gods. Although these edicts were more enforced in the East, the Church of the Christians was under significant attack from the State.

On the 1st May 305 the two Augusti retired and Galarius and Constantinus were appointed in their stead. Galarius appointed Maximinus Daia and Severus as new Caesars. However, on the 25th of July 306, Constantinus died and Constantine I was proclaimed Augustus in his place.

The Roman Empire by this time was in a state of turbulence whereby at the end of 306 the Empire had six claimants to the leadership. However, on the 28th of October 312, Constantine I changed the course of Western civilization by defeating Maximinus, the son-in-law of Galarius, at the battle of Milvian bridge. This battle was won under a Christian sign. This Labarum, whether received by Constantine I as vision or not, is unimportant. What is relevant is that for the first time the Emperor, as State, saw the Christian faith as a religion capable of service for the promotion of that state.

The State, in the form of Constantine I and Licinus, met in 313 near Milan and resolved to grant to Christians and all others the right to follow whatever worship they wanted including paganism. Moreover, it was agreed that confiscated Christian property was

to be restored without the necessity of going to Court and that any current owners effected would be compensated by the State.

The Value of the New Relationship

Although it may be argued that from 312 onwards, Constantine saw himself as having a special relationship with Christ who granted him success, the Edict of Milan should not be viewed as providing proof of preference for Christianity. In restoring confiscated property to the Christians, the State was doing no more than right a wrong. In any event the Church itself is not mentioned in the Edict, although the State and well-being thereof is. The question now arises as to what advantage the association between the two would have for themselves and for the other.

The State

After Constantine I had defeated Lucinius and was the absolute master of the Byzantine empire in 324, he must have been only too aware that his empire had a diversity of peoples, languages and regions. To overcome these divergent and potentially fragmentary problems, he needed as many unifying agents as possible. It is true that the State did impose its laws, coinage and system of Government, however, what really would bind the peoples and elevate the status of emperor and hence State was religion. What could have more authority, than being declared God's representative, for:

as the Word of God expressed God's will in the Creation of the world, so the Emperor, expresses the will of God in the government of the civilized world and fulfills his role by his imitation of the Word or Logos by his Logomimesis³

To Eusebius, Constantine was "pre-eminent in every virtue that true religion can confer"⁴, and was seen as having half way to heaven and the elect of God. Hence, to a State centred in Constantinople there was every value of promoting a special relationship for "One God, one Empire, one religion".⁵ This ensured that "the Emperor was now raised above the Church which gave him a number of prerogatives"⁶ that recognised his special position.

The Value to the Church

What was the value of this relationship to the Church? By being incorporated into the State, it clearly gained special protection and at the same time a potential for conflicting with that very protector.

To a body previously living on the margin of society and under persecution, finding itself in the centre of temporal power would no doubt have instilled gratitude and compliance in the main to their secular redeemer. It also changed the role of the Church forever by allowing it to develop as the Church Militant and to better prepare the flock for the Church triumphant which the Church saw as its Spiritual commitment. Thus, the Church was released to take on not only a social role, but also a secular role in local administration. At the same time, it also developed theologically, liturgically, ecclesiologically and monastically within the fabric of the State and under the protection of the Emperor.

This freedom paradoxically impacted upon the Church's own view of itself. Points of abstruse controversy were vital to be resolved correctly as salvation was only seen to be through the path of perfect Orthodoxy. As Runciman points out:

the main attention of the Byzantine was very reasonably on those little details that would open or close to him the gates of heaven⁷

The Church from the first was racked with differences. However, now it could (apart from the reign of Julian the apostate from 361-363) call on the State to protect its Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis. Orthodoxy brooked no toleration and heresies and disputes abounded with four Ecumenical Councils to 451 being convened to better ascribe and defend the faith. Thus, the Church developed with this discord as an ongoing dynamic whilst refining and expanding its theology in the background of competing patriarchies and expanding hierarchies.

The Church as Good Samaritan

After the Edict of Milan, the Church found itself being the recipient of significant concessions from the State. It generally found itself to be exempt from taxation as well as receiving patronage and financial assistance from the State. The Church began to increase in wealth, and with it, found the ability to be Good Samaritan to its flock. For instance, according to Mango:

The Church of Antioch at the end of the 4th century provided for three thousand widows and virgins, in addition to invalids, strangers, prisoners and beggars. What is more, it did so without expending its capital. The emoluments of the clergy and the upkeep of buildings were further charges on the ecclesiastical budget⁸

This was no isolated case, the Church having significant resources. In Alexandria:

The Church was able to act as the banker to the business community. At the same time the Patriarch of Alexandria was said to have 7500 beggars in his care⁹

Accordingly, the Church provided a social welfare function that the State, the *annona civica* of Constantinople aside, did not provide.

The Church as Employer

To operate and care for the needs of the poor, the faithful and the churches themselves required a vast bureaucracy. The Church began to accumulate property which required administrators, secretaries, legal advisers and staff to keep it functioning, as well as actively engaging in a building programme for the glory of God.

The Patriarchates were significantly resourced with staff. The Church developed its hierarchy especially as the local bishops took on more and more of the role of secular bodies. Bishops dispensed local justice, oversaw works, regulated the markets and otherwise administered to the secular needs of their area. The Bishop thus became a person who was in need of managerial experience as much as religious. As Wybrew points out:

With the public recognition of the Church in the 4th century all the bishops found themselves enjoying the status of senior imperial officials.¹⁰

After Constantinople became the capital in 330 what had been a suffragan of the see of Heraklea became extremely important. The liturgical rite began to be developed under Constantine I, through Chrysostom, and continued to grow and be developed until the 8th century. Also, what significantly developed during the period under consideration was the setting of the liturgy. The building fabric began to be larger, and based on the basilica form with narthex, nave and apse. Churches were built as befitting a king, as indeed was not Christ the King of Kings? This demanded an impressively rich interior and the best materials to be used to manifest the Kingship of Christ which reflected glory on the earthly Kingship of the Emperor.

This idea of Kingship flowed into iconography. Icons began to depict Court dress and the trappings of high birth. Further, the style utilised to depict saints was not the portraiture of the natural image of the West but rather to emphasize the status of the saint. Thus, the red boots of the Emperor who embodied the State as well as other trappings of Royal personage became incorporated into iconography, re-enforcing to the faithful the connection between the State and Church.

Ultimately however the Church was to prepare the faithful for the life to come. Hence whilst at one level the Church acted as perhaps an instrumentality of the State, the faithful saw the Church as the right way to salvation with the Emperor, as having an almost apostolic role. Thus, the Emperor was also seen as being coterminous with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The Tensions between Church and State

Almost from the beginning there was an ambivalent relationship and tension dynamic between the various personae personifying the Church and State. The question is who was to be the more assertive in the relationship? This depended upon the personality of the individual involved, and the issues at large.

To Eusebius, his view was that Christians should give honour first to God, then to the Emperor, and then his sons beloved of God. In 325, Constantine celebrated his 20th anniversary amongst the Bishops and saw himself as having a special relationship with the Church. Indeed, he was seen as God's Vicar on earth and his Palace as a reflection of the heavenly Kingdom. However, the interaction between the two hierarchies was not as harmonious generally. In 355, Constantinus II, the middle son of Constantine I and Fausta, took the view that the Church was under his control and

what he wanted should be regarded as Canon Law. Constantinus not only took an active role in the affairs of the Church, he did so as a proponent for the Arians. St Athanasius, an opponent of Arianism, was of the view that ecclesiastical authority was independent of the Emperor. Indeed, St Ambrose of Milan made it clear to Theodosius I, who had elevated the Christian Church to the status it enjoyed, that the King was in the Church and not over it. St John Chrysostom took the matter further by referring to the head of the Basilian as having been subordinated by Holy Laws to the hands of the priest thus placing the State under the Church. This interplay and clash of personalities continued through the life of the Empire.

Caesaropapism?

For all the above could it be said that the State was the head of the Church in ecclesiastical matters?

The Emperor did have a right of supervision of the priesthood as well as electing the Patriarch from names submitted or his own. This did not, however, make him the nominal head of the Church. That he was influential and could participate indirectly in the affairs of the Church is beyond dispute, for:

Out of the 122 Patriarchs elected between 379 and 1451, fifty-three were deposed or forced to resign and of these at least thirty-six did so at the instigation of the Emperor.¹¹

However, the Emperor did not possess priestly powers and his only liturgical prerogative was to receive communion according to the prescription of priests. Further, the Patriarch together with the Synod could and did make decisions relating to the issues of faith, feast days, liturgy and the applications of Canon Law, which took precedence over and was reinforced by the State. Accordingly, the Emperor as the

embodiment of the State could influence the outcomes of the Church indirectly by his appointees or by forcing others to resign but could not directly impose his will. For all this, Meyendorff posits that:

The people of God taken as a whole, were thought of as united under the septré of a single monarch: Church and state were no longer two separate entities, concerned about defining their mutual relations, but one single society governed by two hierarchies: the ecclesiastical and the political, the later headed by the Emperor.¹²

Hence although it was an uneasy alliance it was an alliance never the less and not one of liege and vassal.

Monasticism

This interdependence between the imperium and the sacerdotium did not appeal to all of the Church. After the Church ceased being persecuted, some Christians became disaffected by the Church which they saw as identifying increasingly with the earthly kingdom to the detriment of the Church triumphant. Hence, Monasticism, a lay movement, emerged in Egypt, Syria and later throughout the Kingdom. This movement saw "the ministry of the Church, its liturgy and its predication"¹³ as almost irrelevant thus posing a threat to the early Church.

The Church was quick to defend itself. In 341 a local council was convened at Gangra which addressed the practices of Eustathius of Armenia who held both marriage and the Church in contempt. Canon 6 declared that the holding of private assemblies outside the Church and the performance of ecclesiastical acts without permission of the Bishop would be a basis for anathematization. Further, Theodosius I ordered monks to inhabit desert places and move away from towns. Whatever the difficulties, by the mid fifth century, monasticism, through the fathers, had been reconciled to the

Church. Thus, monasticism saw itself as the high road to heaven, whilst the Church offered to the laity the same destination but by a less taxing route.

Of Councils and Dissentions

The Church, once into the mainstream, found itself confronted with divisions and dissentions. As it had been persecuted so it was at pains to defend the right doctrine. Any deviation was considered heretical. The Church protected itself from interferences both from without and within.

For instance, the Church opposed paganism which did not disappear with the sixth century. This opposition was violent as evidenced by the sacking of the Serapum Temple in Alexandria and the lynching of Hypatia in 415. Similar intolerance was extended to the Jews who were seen as obdurate and second-class citizens for resisting Christianity.

The real challenge to the Church, however, came from within. Epiphaneus of Salamis, a monastic, in his work in the "Panarium" (circa 380) describes some eighty heresies and deviations against true orthodoxy. The Theodosian Code contained sixty-six laws relating to heretics. The Church and Emperor met these challenges through the convening of Ecumenical councils. The decisions of these councils convened by the Emperor became laws. Councils were important to define dogma, correct belief and determine the Canonical norms of the Church. Between 325 to 451 there are four councils that are recognised as Ecumenical. The first Council of Nicea (325) condemned Arius and defined the incarnated Son of God as consubstantial with the Father. The first Council of Constantinople (381) finally resolved the Arian controversy and finalised the Creed. The Council of Ephesus (431) condemned Nestorianism and

declared that the divinity and humanity of Christ were hypostatically united in Christ. The Council of Chalcedon (451) condemned Monophysites. This last Council resulted in the first schism of the Church when the Church in the non-Greek elements of the Empire such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Armenia and Syria left the Orthodox Church and broke away from the Greek speaking portion of the Church.

Conclusion

In adopting Christianity, and increasingly employing that as a basis for policy, the State acted to assure the unity of the Empire. The Church, however, had difficulty with wrestling with abstruse metaphysical doctrine which led to dissention and dispute. To the State it was important that there be a definition of faith that allowed for clear laws which made for a well-ordered society. However, the Church was reluctant to defend the faith other than through negation and saw the State's role as defending and not defining the faith. Further, it saw itself as concerned ultimately with bearing witness to the true teaching whilst preparing for the second coming. Hence it was not really interested in the workings of the State save as it affected its operations.

At an individual level Emperors and Patriarchs were impacted upon by events and reacted differently to them. Hence, the relationship between Church and State was dynamic, changing, and dependent on the personalities involved. This led to disputes from time to time. However, their relationship was developing towards the ideal announced by Justinian in 535 whereby the priesthood was declared to serve divine things and the imperial dignity directed human affairs.

For the Church, the most disappointing aspect was the schism initiated by the Council of Chalcedon. Instead of one God, one Church and one Empire, the very institution

relied upon by the State to hold the disparate secular elements of the Empire by appealing to temporal unity had been ruptured. Although Emperor Marcian convened the Council of 451 to cure the deepening split occasioned by the monophysite heresy and to settle the turmoil within the Church, the effect was in the long term quite the opposite. The non-Greek speaking Churches rejected the Chalcedonian decree and over time became independent of the mainstream Orthodoxy. Further, the Council, in questioning the Pope's supremacy, sowed the seed of discord which led to the schism between East and West. Thus, in a period of 138 years since the Edict of Tolerance the Church had developed from a persecuted institution into one identified with the State who saw the Church as the bulwark of secular power exercised by it.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Mango, C. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London 1998) P6.
- ² Dix, Dom Gregory. *The Shape of the Liturgy*. (A & C Black, London 1960) P145.
- ³ Eusebius. *The History of the Church*. Translated G.A. Williamson. (Penguin Books, London 1989) PXII.
- ⁴ Eusebius. *The History of the Church*. Translated G.A. Williamson. (Penguin Books, London 1989) P332.
- ⁵ Mango, C. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London 1998) P88.
- ⁶ Hussly, J. *The Cambridge Medieval History Vol JV*. (Cambridge 1978) P105.
- ⁷ Runciman, S. *Byzantine Civilization*. (G Arnold and Co, London 1933) P108.
- ⁸ Mango, C. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London 1998) P37.
- ⁹ Mango, C. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London 1998) P38.
- ¹⁰ Wybrew. *The Orthodox Liturgy: The development of the Eucharist liturgy in the Byzantine Rite*. (SPCK London 1989) P32.
- ¹¹ Hussey, J. *The Cambridge Medieval History Vol JV*. (Cambridge 1978) P6.
- ¹² Meyendorff, John. *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press 1996) P17.
- ¹³ Mango, C. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. (Phoenix Ltd, London 1998) P108.

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