

Conflicting Authorities. The Byzantine Symphony and the Idea of Christian Empire in Russian Orthodox Thought at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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The ideal of Byzantine symphony is still present in contemporary debate on church-state relations. A worldly notion of power interferes with a theological assessment of authority in the Church: hence the identification of the Christian empire with the kingdom of God, in a kind of a realized eschatology. This paper undertakes the deconstruction of the notion of “byzantine symphony” through its interpretations by some Russian religious thinkers at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the whole of Russian society faced dramatic changes. The idea of Christian empire, represented by Constantine the Great, emerges as the foundation of the new orthodox Russian Empire (Tjutčev), contrasted to European civilization (Danilevskij, Leont’ev); but Constantine is also an apocalyptic figure (Bukharev), a political leader (Bolotov), a tyrant (Solov’ev) and the symbol of an entire epoch in Christian history that definitely came to an end (Bulgakov, Berdyaev).

Keywords: Church-State relations, Byzantine symphony, authority, coercion, theocracy, unity of the Church, Christian freedom.

Introduction

The document on the “Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church”,¹ promulgated by the episcopal council of the Russian Orthodox Church in the year 2000, provides an overview on how in Christian history, and particularly in Russian history, attempts were made to work out an explicit ideal of church-state relations. Since church-state relations imply two partners, this ideal could have been realized historically “only in a state

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¹ *Concilium Moscoviense 2000*, ed. Hilarion Alfeev, in: *Conciliorum oecumenicorum generaliumque decretal* (COGD) IV/2. *The Great Councils of the Orthodox Churches. Decisions and Synodica. From Moscow 1551 to Moscow 2000*, Alberto Melloni, Davide Dainese (eds.), Turnhout, Brepols 2016, p. 941-1058.

that recognises the Orthodox Church as the greatest people's shrine, in other words, only in an Orthodox state".²

The first example is Byzantium, "where the principles of church-state relations were [...] described as symphony between church and state". This symphony is characterized by "co-operation, mutual support and mutual responsibility without one's side intruding into the exclusive domain of the other". The document quotes at length the Sixth Novella of Justinian I (527-565)³, where the principles of church-state symphony are formulated as follows:

The greatest blessings granted to human beings by God's ultimate grace are priesthood and kingdom, the former (priesthood, church authority) taking care of divine affairs, while the latter (kingdom, government) guiding and taking care of human affairs, and both, come from the same source, embellishing human life. Therefore, nothing lies so heavy on the hearts of kings as the honour of priests, who on their part serve them, praying continuously for them to God. And if the priesthood is well ordered in everything and is pleasing to God, then there will be full harmony between them in everything that serves the good and benefit of the human race. Therefore, we exert the greatest possible effort to guard the true dogmas of God and the honour of the priesthood, hoping to receive through it great blessings from God and to hold fast to the ones which we have.⁴

As it is well known, from this norm originated a legislation distinct but unique ("nomocanonic") of the laws of the Church and the laws of the State. The *Epanagoge* (second half of the ninth century) states the classical Byzantine formula of relationships between state and church power: "The temporal power and the priesthood relate to each other as body and soul [...] It is in their linkage and harmony that the well-being of a state lies"⁵. To be sure, the document of the Russian Church allows that this symphony never existed in Byzantium in a pure form, as it was often violated and distorted, and "the Church was repeatedly subjected to caesarean-papist claims from the state authorities, which were essentially the demands that the head of the state, the emperor, should have the decisive say in ordering church affairs". Further, the text claims that "relationship between the church and the state authorities was more harmonious in Russian antiquity", although there existed "deviations from the canonical norms", such as "under Ivan the Terrible and in

² *Concilium Moscoviense 2000*, Chapter III, "Church and State", par. 4, p. 960. I quote from the English version published on the website of the Patriarchate: <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts>, viewed on 28th March 2018.

³ See: Georg Ostrogorsky, *Storia dell'impero bizantino*, Torino, Einaudi 1963, p. 60-70.

⁴ *Concilium Moscoviense 2000*, p. 961, lines 30-44.

⁵ *Ibidem*, lines 48-51.

the confrontation between Tsar Alexis Mikhailovich and Patriarch Nikon". Finally, the Synodal period in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church (1721-1917) represents an "evident distortion of the symphonic norm", caused by the "impact of the Protestant doctrine of territory and established church ... on the Russian perception of law and order and political life".⁶

The reiterated crises between the autocratic power and the Orthodox Churches might actually cause one to depict their relationship as "conflicting authorities" rather than a "symphony". Nevertheless, the Byzantine model still seems to inspire, to a certain degree, the ideal of church-state relations for the Russian Church today, although not in shaping the fundamental laws of the state, but on the level of collaboration in cultural, ethical and social issues⁷.

A crucial notion in the church-state relations is that of "coercion". The document on the social doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church warns that in "the Kingdom of God [...] there is no room for coercion", and consequently that the "Church should not assume the prerogatives of the state [...] which presuppose coercion or restriction"; reciprocally, the state should not "interfere in the life of the Church or her government, doctrine, liturgical life, counselling, etc.", but should "respect her canonical norms and other internal statutes".⁸

In fact, the document presupposes the perspective of a secular society, where churches (and religions) are separate from political structures, and everybody can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God. By contrast, the political organization of all pre-modern societies – included the Byzantine Empire in the East and the feudal society in the West – "was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality"⁹. The model of state-church relations expressed in the Byzantine symphony, as well as in the theory of the "two swords" in the West¹⁰, was actually challenged by the secularization of

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 962.

⁷ After the election of patriarch Kirill, the head of the Department for External Church Relations, bishop (now metropolitan) Hilarion declared that "His Holiness Patriarch Kirill has been very often employing the Byzantine term «symphony». In Byzantium this symphony had only one conductor, the emperor. Equal partnership between the Church and the state could never be fully achieved. Today, there are all the prerequisites for this ideal to be realized in practice". Press Conference, 13.04.2009: www.pravmir.ru/article_4029.html, viewed on 28th March 2018.

⁸ *Concilium Moscoviense 2000*, Ch. III, par. 3, p. 959-960, lines 15-48.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA – London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007, p. 1.

¹⁰ See: François Rouleau, "L'aigle bicéphale et les deux glaives", in: *Communio* 17 (6/1992), p. 37-50.

the modern age (although in different ways in the East and in the West). At the same time, a new (negative) image of the Church was wrought from the eighteenth century onwards:

Since the Enlightenment, it has become a widely spread conviction that Christianity as a monotheistic religion with universal claims was normally intolerant and coercive to other religions. This conviction, however, is an anachronistic extrapolation to the early Christian era of the attitudes that the church demonstrated on the eve of the Enlightenment. [...] Coercion emerged in the Christian church in the fourth century. Before that, the church's attitude to coercion is hardly identifiable, and this is for a simple reason of enmity between the church and the state¹¹.

In this article, we will focus on the transformations of the byzantine ideal in Russian political theology, from the eve of modernity to the beginning of the Soviet Era. On the one hand, the lively discussions and the new ideas arisen around this problem show that the Orthodox Church was not a mere cultic phenomenon, but an active agent in shaping Russian history. On the other hand, the deconstruction of an idealized picture of church-state relations will contribute to developing a free theological reflection on ecclesiology and ecumenical issues, as it was recently suggested by a group of Orthodox theologians in a programmatic statement:

Today we need to question the fascination with the Byzantine Empire and the tendency to confine the Orthodox Church within the limits of the Byzantine heritage. We need to move forward beyond the empire. We have to care more about horizontal methods of communication than about following the trodden path of a self-imprisoned church. It is important to remember that the deconstruction of the imperial idea will open a way for unity with the pre-Chalcedonian churches. This unity has not been restored, even though theological dialogue has successfully resolved most Christological issues that have divided Byzantine and Oriental orthodoxies. The deconstruction of the imperial mentality will enable the Church to communicate more successfully with the surrounding contexts, to find new ways of unity, and to embrace the future instead of the past.¹²

¹¹ Cyril Hovorun, "Le relazioni stato-chiesa. Dilemmi della libertà umana e della coercizione", in: L. d'Ayala Valva, L. Cremaschi, A. Mainardi (eds.), *Beati i pacifici. Atti del XXII Convegno ecumenico internazionale di Spiritualità ortodossa, Bose, 3-6 settembre 2014*, Magnano, Qiqajon 2015, p. 299-310, here p. 299-300.

¹² Vision Statement of the Ecclesiology Group for the Conference of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA), Iași, 9-12 January 2019: <https://iota-web.org/ecclesiology-group/>, viewed on 28th March 2018.

The Shaping of the Ideal of Byzantine Symphony in Russian Political Thought

The well known Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky, in the aftermath of the death of patriarch Serge (Stragorodsky) of Moscow, wrote an article portraying the fall of the Romanovs' monarchy in 1917 and the subsequent ascent of the Soviet power in Russia as the end of an uninterrupted socio-political and cultural system ('the world of Byzantine tradition'), which ruled Church-State relations and whose roots went back to the fourth century:

The old world, the world of Russian Empire, the world of Byzantine tradition, which went back to Constantine the Great, the world which seemed to many people specific to Christianity, suddenly collapsed to the ground, and at its place appeared a new world, external to Christianity.¹³

This alleged continuity was in fact an ideological construction rather than an unquestionable historical fact. This ideology had a long prehistory. We will consider some of its transformations in the second half of the nineteenth century, from the reforms of Alexander II in the 1860s until the Revolution of 1917, when Russian social and political thinkers, as well as religious philosophers, were faced with dramatic changes in society and foreign policy.

Our starting point is the publication in 1861, in the popular journal *The Orthodox Interlocutor*, of the famed *Letter on inauspicious days and hours*, written around 1523 by *starec* Filofej of Pskov, where the formula 'Moscow – third Rome' is to be found for the very first time.¹⁴ This also gives us the opportunity to take a look at the history of Russian Orthodox imperial ideology.

The letter is addressed to the great prince's *d'jak* (in fact, a plenipotentiary) in Pskov, Mikhail Grigorevič Misjur'-Munekhin, who had asked Filofej about the prophecies contained in the astrological 'New Almanac' of Ja. Schtefler and I. Pflaum, translated into Russian by Nikolaus Bülow, a

¹³ Vladimir Lossky, "Личность и мысль святейшего патриарха Сергия" [The personality and the thought of patriarch Sergij], in: *Патриарх Сергий и его духовное наследство* [Patriarch Sergij and his spiritual legacy], Moscow 1947, p. 263 f.

¹⁴ "Послание о неблагоприятных днях и часах" [Letter on inauspicious days and hours], in: *Pravoslavnyj sobesednik* 5 (1861), p. 78-96. Further editions: Vasilij N. Malinin, *Старец Елеазарова монастыря Филофей и его послания* [The monk Filofej of the monastery of St Eleazar and his letters], Kiev 1901; *L'idea di Roma a Mosca. Secoli XV-XVI. Fonti per la storia del pensiero sociale russo. Идея Рима в Москве. Источники по истории русской общественной мысли*, Roma: Herder 1989, p. 135-161; Nina V. Sinicyna, *Третий Рим. Источники и эволюция средневековой концепции (XV-XVI вв.)* [The Third Rome. Sources and evolution of the medieval conception (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries)], Moscow, Indrik 1998, p. 336-357.

German physician at the court of Basil III (the same book provoked the reaction of Maksim the Greek). Filofej's main argument is that the stars, as material bodies, cannot have any influence on human destiny, which depends instead on God's will. The fall of reigns is caused by deflection from the true faith. Thus, Constantinople fell after the denial of Orthodoxy at the council of Florence in 1453, and although old Rome's walls still stand, "their souls are taken prisoners by the devil, as they make use of unleavened bread [in the Eucharistic liturgy]"¹⁵. Filofej's perspective is much more religious-apologetic than political and is based on Biblical historiosophy, whose roots lie in the patristic and medieval allegorical interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan. 2.20-45), rather than on a refined political-historical vision¹⁶. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century his modern Russian interpreters readily found in his letter a politico-philosophical theory.

Interestingly enough, the frequently quoted passage on the succession of the "three" Romes in the edition of 1861, and again in that of 1901, is reported in a corrupted text, with the reading "росское царство" ("Russian reign"), instead of the original "Ромейское царство" ("*Roman* reign"):

All of Christian kingdoms came to an end and were reduced to the one kingdom of our sovereign, according to the prophetic books, that is, the Kingdom of Rome [Ромейское царство]. Two Romes are fallen, and the third stands, and the fourth will never be. Many times also the Apostle Paul remembers Rome in his epistles, in his interpretation he says: Rome is the whole world.¹⁷

Before turning to Filofej's reception in the nineteenth century, let us consider closer his conception. The "Roman reign" foreseen by prophets (Dan. 2.44) acquires here an eschatological flavour, confirmed by two biblical quotations, which immediately follow in the text: Ps. 132.14 ("This is my resting place forever") and Rev. 12.1-4,14,15. The vision of the "woman clothed with the sun" and the "great red dragon" pouring "water like a river" after her, is interpreted by Filofej as indicating that disbelief had already drowned all Christian reigns but Russia.¹⁸ The "third Rome" has to be identified with

¹⁵ N. V. Sinicyna, *Третий Рим*, p. 343.

¹⁶ See discussion on patristic and medieval sources of Filofej's conception in: N. V. Sinicyna, *Третий Рим*, p. 133-173.

¹⁷ "Вся христианская царства приидоша в конец и снидошася во едино царство нашего государя, по пророчским книгам, то есть Ромейское царство. Два убо Рима падоша, а третий стоит, а четвертому не быти. Многожды и апостол Павел поминает Рима в посланиих, в толковании глаголет: Рим весь мир": N. V. Sinicyna, *Третий Рим*, p. 345. The variant "росское" was probably introduced within the circle of Metropolitan Makarij in the 1540s.

¹⁸ N. V. Sinicyna, *Третий Рим*, p. 345.

the entire “Russian state” and Orthodoxy itself, which are the authentic “Roman state”, the last reign in history.¹⁹

In Filofej’s epistle to Misjur’-Munekhin there is no reference to Emperor Constantine, whose name appears in a letter to the great prince Ivan III Vasil’evič, written probably between 1523 and 1526 and attributed in some manuscripts to Filofej himself²⁰. The formula of the “three Romes” is here integrated in a long encomiastic address to the great prince, without any argumentation. The purpose of the letter is to give some wise advice to the sovereign (“tsar”) and to ask for a new bishop for the vacant see of Novgorod. The tsar should not neglect the precepts of his “ancestors”, “the great Constantine, and the blessed Vladimir, and the great Jaroslav chosen by God and the other blessed saints, whose kindred descends” to the present monarch.²¹ Here we find traces of two other main paradigms in the making of Russian political ideology at the turn of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries: the typology of the “new Constantine of the new Constantinople-Moscow” and the genealogical derivation of Rjurik’s dynasty from the Roman emperor Augustus himself.

The first idea is outlined by Metropolitan Zosima of Moscow in his preface to the *Paskhalija* for the eighth millennium (i.e. 1492). The great prince of Moscow is addressed as “sovereign and autocrat of all Rus’, the new tsar Constantine of the new Constantinople, Moscow, and of all the Russian land”.²² This scheme differs from Filofej’s sequence, since it does not imply any *translatio imperii*, nor does it include any eschatological perspective, but relies only upon a religious-historical analogy. There are four great historical periods in Christianity: the first one is the age of diffusion of the Gospel; the second one is the epoch of “the first Orthodox emperor (цар) Constantine”, who received the orthodox faith and defended it; the third one is the baptism of Rus’ under the blessed prince Vladimir, called a “second Constantine”; in the last period, the pious great prince of Moscow, defending Orthodoxy against heresy, is actually imitating Constantine the Great, who represents, so to speak, his hagiographical “type”. While Filofej’s doctrine can be considered a theological foundation of state power, Zosima’s vision is a theology of history centred on the Church, whereas state power is legitimated, inasmuch as it protects and defends orthodox doctrine and the Church’s properties.

¹⁹ Cf. Nina V. Sinicyna, “Commenti ai testi”, in: Pierangelo Catalano et al. (eds.), *L’idea di Roma a Mosca, secoli XV-XVI: fonti per la storia del pensiero sociale russo*, Roma, Herder 1989, p. LXIV-LXV.

²⁰ N. V. Sinicyna, *Третьей Рим*, p. 358-364.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 359.

²² P. Catalano et al. (eds.), *L’idea di Roma a Mosca, secoli XV-XVI*, p. 124.

The dynastic ideology that underlines the kinship of Russian rulers with Byzantine emperors and traces back Rjurik's origin to the legendary Prus, "son" of Augustus, is to be found in diplomatic exchanges, genealogical legends, chronicles, and, at its final stage, in the letters of Ivan IV.²³ Here the legitimating of Moscow's kingdom is purely historical and dynastic, established directly by God's providence; no other earthly religious power plays any role and Constantine the Great is not mentioned at all.

There is no need here to enter into a detailed analysis of these ideas, which stem from different presuppositions and have different centres of gravity (church law in Zosima, political eschatology in Filofej, autocracy in Ivan IV), although very often in literature they are confused and put together under the general heading of "Moscow – third Rome", as a generic *cliché* to explain the Byzantine inheritance in the Muscovite State.

We may observe that the figure of Constantine the Great as a "type" of the pious Orthodox tsar is neither a consequence nor a starting point for the identification of Moscow with the "third Rome". The parallel between the Russian tsar and Emperor Constantine represents instead an alternative paradigm. So, in the seventeenth century, Simeon Polockij, in the preface to the Acts of the Moscow Council of 1666, compares the tsar Aleksej Mikhailovič to "Constantine the Great and the other pious emperors", because he too summoned "in a council [...] all the bishops of his pious reign, in the reigning and glorious city of Moscow, saved by God"²⁴. The tsar acts as the Roman emperor (the Council calls him "new Constantine"²⁵), but his power does not take legitimization from him, nor – this point was essential after patriarch Nikon's deposition – from the Church.

Under Peter the Great, this model shifted once again. The "Ecclesiastical Statute" (Духовный регламент, 1721) does not quote Constantine the Great at all: the model for Church-State relations is neither theocracy nor Byzantine *symphonia*, but Western *Polizeistaat*. From the last third of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, the application to the country of the regulatory model of the central European *Polizeistaat*, then French-style administrative rationalization, and finally the romantic project of rooting contemporary authority in "ancient laws, customs, and traditions", gave to Russian rulers the advantage to organize not only the Orthodox Church, but also the other non-Orthodox "faiths" of the Empire, legislating on their behalf²⁶.

²³ See the related texts in: *Ibidem*, p. 3-64, nr. 1-16.

²⁴ Деяния Московских Соборов 1666 и 1667 годов [The Acts of the Councils of Moscow of 1666 and 1667], Moscow 1893², f. 6v.

²⁵ *Concilium Moscoviense 1666-1667*, ed. Elena V. Beljakova, in: *COGD IV/2*, p. 698, line 38.

²⁶ Paul W. Werth, *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths. Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, p. 71.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the reactionary government of Nicholas I mixed Petrine tradition with revealed religion and a dash of the age's new sense of national uniqueness, proclaiming that Russia's eternal way was "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality". As a contemporary scholar rightly points out, it was "the pressure generated by Europe's advance, combined with the drag of native backwardness [...], not the hoary memory of the Sacred Palace of Byzantium or of the Mongols' Golden Horde, that constitutes the true anomaly of Russia's modern history"²⁷.

When the first generation of Slavophiles reacted against Petrine Russia in the first half of nineteenth century, they pleaded for the liberty of the Orthodox Church in Russia, subordinated to the uncanonical Holy Synod established by Peter the Great, but they did not look back to Byzantium (the formula "Moscow – third Rome" never appears in their writings, as it has been sometimes claimed²⁸): their "conservative Utopia" was directed *against* West-European civilization and *towards* the Old Russian rural world, not to Byzantine heritage²⁹. For them, Russian backwardness was in fact a point of strength, not of weakness.

Theocracy and the Unity of the Church

A new vision of "Byzantine symphony" emerges in Russian romantic thinkers. In his unfinished tract *Russia and the West*, Fedor Tjutčev (1803-1873) presents his version of the *translatio imperii*: "Russia is Orthodox insofar as she is the custodian of the Empire. What is then the «Empire»? Doctrine of Empire. The Empire does not die. *It is transmitted.* [...] *The lawful empire remains attached to Constantine's heritage*"³⁰. Here we have a typical romantic reactionary interpretation: Orthodoxy and state are inextricably linked in a sort of ideal organism, historically incarnated, that is the Christian empire.

After the publication of Filofej's works in 1861, the formula "Moscow — third Rome" overlapped with the public debate on the "Oriental question", originated by Russian Balkan policy in the 1870s. In his book *Europe and Russia*, first published in 1869 in the journal *Zarja* ("Dawn")³¹, Nikolaj Danilevskij, according to the theory of organic historic-political types he

²⁷ Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes. From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*, Cambridge MA, Belknap Press 1999, p. 146.

²⁸ For instance by Nikolay A. Berdyaev, *A.C. Хомяков* [A.S. Khomjakov], Moscow, Put' 1912.

²⁹ See: Andrzej Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii. Struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianowilstwa* [A Conservative Utopia. Structure and Transformations of Russian Slavophilism], Warszawa 1964.

³⁰ Quoted in N. V. Sinicyna, *Третий Рим*, p. 19 (italics are mine).

³¹ Nikolaj Ja. Danilevskij, *Россия и Европа* [Russia and Europe], Saint Petersburg 1889⁴; the following quotations are from chapter 12.

took from the German historian Heinrich Rückert³², portrays Constantine the Great, like Philip of Macedonia some six centuries earlier, as the founder of the “new Greek monarchy” (“Новогреческая монархия”). By moving the capital of the Empire from Rome to the banks of the Bosphorus, Constantine set the foundations of a new civilization, where Greek philosophy and Hellenic art molded cultural life and prepared for the development of Orthodox dogma and liturgy. Once Constantinople fell, it was the Ottoman Empire that assumed the historical role of preserving Orthodoxy from the corruption of Western Europe. But now, as an autonomous Slav power is growing, which was “since the beginning of time predisposed to be the lawful and conscious advocate of Orthodoxy”, Islam’s role is over. “The reign of Philip and Constantine rose again in the vast plains of Russia”, the Eastern Oriental Empire of Slav nationality is now restored, thanks to the efforts of “Ioann [IV], Peter and Catherine”, in order to counterbalance the Western Roman Empire of the German nation.

In the geopolitical historiography of the ideologue of “panslavism”, who freely and arbitrarily combines Slavophil themes with German idealism and elements of Old Russian imperial ideology, the role of the Church is completely subordinated to those of the absolute monarchy, incarnated in great historical figures: “Statesmen, deserving the title of great politicians (Caesar, Constantine, Charlemagne, Peter the Great, Frederick II, Catherine II) apparently conveyed new directions to an entire period in the history of their nations”.

Konstantin Leont’ev (1831-1891), whose major work *Byzantinism and Slavism* (1875) was much influenced by Danilevskij, reproached him for failing to distinguish between two fundamentally different types of civilization: the ancient Roman Empire and Byzantium. Only the second provides a “clear plan for an extensive and capacious building”, whereas nobody can say what “Slavism” really is.³³ The Slavs in the Balkans, affected by European democratic and egalitarian ideas, paradoxically could be protected in their cultural identity only by a prolonged Turkish and Austrian domination. To the optimistic perspectives opened by Danilevskij, Leont’ev opposed a sinister prophecy about the destruction of any reaction in Russia, if not supported by a “well-equipped despotism, skillfully and wisely repressing the personal liberty of citizens”. Only some kind of Russian tsar could “lead the

³² Heinrich Rückert, *Lehrbuch der Weltgeschichte in organischer Darstellung*, Leipzig, Weigel 1857. Vladimir Solov’ev, in his polemics with Danilevskij, unmasked the pretended originality of his ideas: Vladimir Solov’ev, *Национальный вопрос в России* [The National Question in Russia, 1888], Moscow, Ast 2007, p. 357-440.

³³ Konstantin N. Leont’ev, *Византизм и славянство* [Byzanthium and the Slavic world 1875], Moscow, Dar 2005, p. 4 and 66.

socialistic movement (as St Constantine led a religious movement: «In hoc signo vinces!») and *organize it* as Constantine promoted Christianity, entering *first the way of Ecumenical Councils*”³⁴.

The literary image of Constantine the Great in Danilevskij and Leont’ev is determined essentially by their political visions, with little attention to religious aspects. On the contrary, archimandrite Feodor Bukharev (1824-1871), in his posthumous *Studies on the Apocalypse*, sketches an unusual “apocalyptic portrait” of the Roman Emperor, centred on his divine mission. Commenting on chapter 10 of the Apocalypse, Bukharev interprets “the angel”, whom the Biblical seer contemplated “standing upon the sea and upon the earth” (Rev. 10.5), as Constantine himself. The great revolution he accomplished was disposed by heaven, as the supernatural signs that accompanied it (the apparition of the blazing Cross before the battle with Maxentius) testify. Constantine himself personally referred all this on oath to Eusebius.³⁵

The interest in Bukharev’s approach is less in historical accuracy or exegetical keenness, than in his visionary attempt to read the entire world’s history in the light of Christian Scripture, a light which comes from an eschatological, though near, future. For him, Constantine, equal to the Apostles, is surely a historical personage, but his figure is interpreted as a prophecy for the present. The whore of Babylon (cf. Rev. 17.1) is the mighty Ottoman Empire, and the radiant woman of Rev. 12 represents an “Orthodox people serving Christ”, that is Russia, engaged in the deliverance of Orthodox Slavs in the Balkans and in the liberation of Constantinople from the Ottoman yoke. The key concept in Bukharev’s Biblical-philosophical constructions, writes Paul Vallière, is “modernity as a *kairos*, an epochal moment or moment of spiritual challenge and decision”. Bukharev’s perspective differs from that of the early Slavophiles, despite his evident borrowings, because their “vision was inspired by the Russian past”, while “Feodor was a prophet [...] His vision was proleptic. He saw the modern world falling into God’s future, into the promised kingdom of the Lamb”.³⁶

This kind of a historiosophic image of Constantine the Great, though, was not the only one possible in nineteenth-century Russia. Whereas Bukharev took for granted the historicity of Eusebius’ narrative, Vasilij

³⁴ *Letter 45 to Anatolij Aleksandrov, from Optina Pustyn’, 3 May 1890* (italics by the author), in: Leont’ev K.N., “Письма к Анатолию Александрову”, *Богословский вестник* 1 (1914), p. 450-467.

³⁵ Feodor Bukharev, “Исследования Апокалипсиса” [Studies on Revelation], *Богословский вестник* 2 (7-8/1914), p. 305-336 (fourth pagination), p. 313.

³⁶ Paul Vallière, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Solov’ev, Bulgakov. Orthodox Theology in a New Key*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 2000, p. 85.

V. Bolotov, in his *Lessons on the History of the Ancient Church*, held in the 1890s at the Theological Academy of Saint-Petersburg, undertook a critique of sources in evaluating Constantine's personality and work³⁷. Bolotov does not conceal Constantine's crimes, but tries to justify them by reasons of state. In his evaluation of Constantine, the Russian historian conscientiously distinguishes historical processes and ecclesiological developments. Under Constantine the Great the change of State attitude towards Church from hostility "to normal, juridical relations" had such great consequences, that they necessarily reverberated in the Church's inner constitution. Without a Christian emperor, it would have taken centuries before an ecumenical council was summoned.³⁸

The problem of a Christian empire is for the first time organically associated with the question of the unity of the Church in the philosophy of Vladimir Solov'ev (1853-1900). The general attitude of Solov'ev towards Constantine the Great was critical. In an early, unpublished work, written in French, *La Sophia. Principes de la doctrine universelle* (1876), the philosopher exposes the antinomy between Christianity as an unearthly principle and the necessity, for the religion of the "Humanity of God", to penetrate all aspects of existence in the world with the Spirit of Christ. The conciliation imposed by Constantine was a complete failure:

L'empire de Constantin ne différait en rien d'essentiel [d'] avec l'empire de Dioclétien. L'Eglise, qui était assez puissante pour [en] imposer à l'Etat mais pas assez pour se l'assimiler, accepta le compromis; ainsi se fonda la société hermaphrodite qu'on nomme le Bas Empire.³⁹

In the middle of the 1880s Solov'ev was engaged in writing a work on *The History and the Future of Theocracy*. Of the three parts originally envisioned (theocracy in the Bible, in the history of the Church, and the present), only the first one was actually written and published in Zagreb in 1887. Very soon Solov'ev realized that there was little hope of publishing his work in Russia, and prepared a sort of abridged version of the entire project, the monograph *La Russie et l'Eglise universelle*, published in Paris in 1889. In his introduction, he explains the main lines of his theory of universal theocracy. His starting point is the dogmatic definitions of the fourth ecumenical council of Chalcedon, extended to the social and political domain: "L'union

³⁷ See: Vasilij V. Bolotov, *Лекции по истории древней Церкви III. История в период вселенских соборов* [Lessons on the history of the Ancient Church, vol. 3. History of the Ecumenical Councils], ed. A. Brilliantov, Saint Petersburg 1913, III, p. 7-35.

³⁸ See: V. Bolotov, *Лекции*, III, p. 5.

³⁹ V. Solov'ev, *La Sophia et les autres écrits français*, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme 1978, p. 73. In a footnote in the manuscript at this point Solov'ev notes: "à développer".

intime et complète du divin et de l'humain sans confusion et sans division" will lead to the "régénération de la vie sociale et politique par l'esprit de l'Évangile", to a true Christian society.⁴⁰

The Christianized state, as it were, is the prosecution in human history of the work of Christ, the Word become flesh: "Il s'agit de continuer par l'action humaine l'œuvre unificatrice de l'Homme-Dieu en disputant le monde au principe contraire de l'égoïsme et de la division".⁴¹ As Christ was Priest, King, and Prophet, so the perfect divine-human social body should result from the harmonious union of prophecy, priesthood, and monarchy. Constantine the Great failed to Christianize the Empire. "L'esclavage se perpétua comme institution légale ; et la vindicte des crimes (surtout des délits politiques) était exercée de droit avec une cruauté raffinée". The contradiction between "le christianisme professé et le cannibalisme pratiqué" is embodied by the founder of the Low Empire, "ce Constantin qui croyait sincèrement au Dieu chrétien, qui honorait les évêques et discutait avec eux sur la Trinité". History, however, has condemned the Low-Empire, which not only failed to accomplish its mission, the foundation of a Christian state, but "il s'est appliqué à faire avorter l'œuvre historique de Jésus Christ".⁴²

Since the great schism, the two main powers, priesthood (which in the Roman Catholic Church remained separated from the lawful Christian Empire) and regality (which in the Eastern Empire remained separated from the universal, "catholic" truth), are divided. The reestablishment of the unity of the Church is the necessary condition for implementing true social progress and justice in a new Christian state. The historical task to realize the "intimate alliance and organic union" of religious and political power, carrying out the unfinished work of Constantine and Charlemagne, belongs to Russia.⁴³ But Solov'ev's vision is diametrically opposed to that of Danilevskij. His "Russian idea" is a renunciation of nationalism, a truly universal vocation.

The Russian emperor, legitimate bearer of the royal power, should ally himself with the Roman pontiff, legitimate bearer of the priestly power, as suggested by the prophetic Spirit, who is speaking inside the Church (through Solov'ev himself). The Russian philosopher concludes his introduction with a passionate prayer to the Apostle Peter. After Constantine and Charlemagne, who gave to the Church a social body, still provisional and imperfect, a word is now awaited from the "people of the word", the Slavs (Solov'ev follows the romantic etymology of "Slav" from "*slovo*", "word"). This word will be the

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 141-142.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 132, 143.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

“third and definite incarnation” of the spiritual body of the Church in human history. “La théocratie libre et universelle, la vraie solidarité de toutes les nations et de toutes les classes, le christianisme pratiqué dans la vie publique, la politique christianisée”.⁴⁴ “For Solov’ev, universal theocracy is at the same time the «Russian national idea»”⁴⁵, but cleansed of any particularism.

However, “in Solovev’s theory, in contradistinction to Hegelianism, the highest manifestation of the institutionalized, objective ethic was not the state but the Church”⁴⁶. Whereas the unity of the Church was understood by Khomjakov in an anti-Roman-Catholic key, for Solov’ev its authentic realization could be only a reunification between the two separated halves of Eastern and Western Christianity. Until the end of the 1880s Solov’ev hoped that Russia could play a role in the reunification of the Churches. One condition, though, was required: religious liberty⁴⁷. However, granting religious liberty, which ironically was the celebrated historical deed of Constantine the Great, was too much for an empire that still sought, in the judgement of a contemporary observer, “l’unité de l’Etat dans l’unité de la religion”.⁴⁸

End of the Constantinian Era?

The disillusionment of the 1890s left room for an eschatological perspective, which found its expression in Solov’ev’s last work: the *Three Dialogues*, where the “emperor” appears as a figure of the Antichrist. The Russian Revolution of 1917-1918 and the subsequent building of the first “atheistic” state in history marked a dramatic end to what Sergius Bulgakov called the Constantinian era of historical Orthodoxy:

In fact, we have already crossed the border of historical Orthodoxy, and a new era has begun in the history of the church, well, at least as different from the previous one, as, for example, the pre-Constantinian era differs from its predecessor. The same, Constantinian era for Byzantium ended already in 1453, and for the entire Orthodox Church on March 2, 1917 [the day of the abdication of Nicholas II].⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 150-151.

⁴⁵ Evgenij N. Trubeckoj, *Мирозозерцание В. С. Соловьева* [The conception of V. S. Solov’ev, 1913], 2 vols., Moscow, Medium 1995, II, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Andrzej Walicki, *Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1987, p. 187.

⁴⁷ See: V. Solov’ev, *La Sophia*, p. 148 and 95. On the role of the concepts of toleration and religious liberty in shaping the relations between Russia’s predominant Orthodox faith and the other religious traditions of the Empire, see: P. W. Werth, *The Tsar’s Foreign Faiths*.

⁴⁸ Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, *L’empire des tsars et les russes* [1881-1882], Paris, Robert Lafont 1990, p. 1350.

⁴⁹ “... мы фактически уже перешли за грань исторического православия, и в истории церкви началась новая эпоха, ну, по меньшей мере, столь же отличная

It was not just the turn of a historical period, but the definitive destruction of the “inner, mystic link” between Orthodoxy and autocracy, which corresponded to the “primordial Orthodox conscience from St Constantine up to now”⁵⁰.

Paradoxically, it was the emperor’s abdication that allowed the Church to organize her own destiny and convoke the long-prepared Local Council of 1917-1918⁵¹. In the Decree “The Juridical Status of the Orthodox Church of Russia”, issued by the Local council, a last attempt was made to reverse the situation of the Orthodox Church after 1905, when it was deprived of the condition of “ruling and predominant faith” of the Russian empire⁵². The Decree reasserts the ideal of symphony in the new situation:

The Russian Orthodox Church, being part of the one Universal Church of Christ, shall have the pre-eminent public and legal status among other confessions in the Russian State, which befits her as the greatest shrine for the overwhelming majority of the population and a great historical force that built the Russian State... As soon as they are made public, decrees and statutes issued the Orthodox Church for herself in the order established by herself, as well as deeds of the church government and court shall be recognised by the State as legally valid and important unless they violate state laws... State laws concerning the Orthodox Church shall be issued only with the consent of the church authorities.⁵³

As Hyacinthe Destivelle comments, in this Decree the ideal of a “symphony of power”, formulated by Justinian, “clearly takes precedence over their separation”. But the claim to a privileged place—not only with respect to other confessions but as regards all other Russian institutions— “was an idealistic project, drawn up in abstract, and soon to be proven an illusion as the Soviets took over [...] and stripped the Church, as such, of its juridical personality”.⁵⁴

от предыдущей, как, например, доконстантиновская эпоха отличается от ей предшествовавшей. Эта же, константиновская для Византии закончилась уже в 1453 году, а для всей православной церкви 2 марта 1917 года”: Sergej N. Bulgakov, “На пиру богов” [The banquet with Gods], in *Из глубины. Сборник статей о русской революции* [De profundis. Collection of papers on Russian Revolution], Moscow 1918; reprinted in: Idem, *Сочинения в двух томах* [Works in 2 volumes], Moscow, Nauka 1993, p. 616.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ Hyacinthe Destivelle, *The Moscow Council (1917-1918). The Creation of Conciliar Institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church*, foreword by metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), trans. by J. Ryan, ed. M. Plekon and V. Permiakov, University of Notre Dame press 2015, p. 48 f.

⁵² The imperial ukase of April 17, 1905, legalized the passage from orthodoxy to other confessions (or religions).

⁵³ *Concilium Moscoviense 1917-1918*, ed. Hilarion Alfeev, in: *COGD IV/2*, p. 773-776; H. Destivelle, *The Moscow Council*, p. 223-225.

⁵⁴ H. Destivelle, *The Moscow Council*, p. 140-141.

The ideal of Byzantine symphony definitely faded away. Berdyaev, on the eve of World War II, could say that the attempt to give a sacral, theocratic character to the “reign of Caesar” was a “temptation”, which now came to end with the entire historical epoch bound to it⁵⁵. The reign of God could no longer be identified neither with a purely spiritual Church, but completely dependent on the state, nor with a visible Christian state; it was to be discerned in its eschatological reality, with spiritual eyes, as coming in every person who would accept it in his/her life. The reign of God would be present in the saints: those “who now *see* God, they are already dwell in this reign, *by themselves*”.⁵⁶ A new, tragic and paradoxical liberty, the liberty of faith, opened up before Russian new martyrs and confessors during the persecutions. In the words of St. Mother Maria (Skobtsova, 1891-1945):

What obligations follow from the gift of freedom which in our exile we have been granted? We are beyond the reach of persecutions [...] We have no enormous cathedrals, jewel-encrusted Gospel books, no monastery walls. We have lost our environment. Is this an accident? Is this some chance misfortune? ... In the context of spiritual life there is no chance, nor are there fortunate or unfortunate epochs. Rather there are signs which we must understand and paths which we must follow. Our calling is a great one, since we are called to freedom.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See: Nikolaj A. Berdyaev, *О назначении человека* [The Destination of Man, 1935], Moskva, Ast 2006, p. 318. See also: idem, *Царство духа и царство Кесаря* [The Reign of the Spirit and the Reign of Caesar], Paris, Ymca-Press 1949.

⁵⁶ S. N. Bulgakov, “О Царстве Божиим” [On the Kingdom of God], in: *Put’* 11 (1928), p. 3-30 (reprint in Sergej N. Bulgakov, *Путь Парижского богословия* [The Way of the Parisian Theology], Moscow 2007, p. 118-139, quote on p. 139).

⁵⁷ Mother Maria Skobtsova, *Essential Writings*, with an introduction by Jim Forest, Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books 2003, p. 27-28.