

UNIT 1C: CHURCH HISTORY

25: Decline and Metamorphosis

A Redefined Papacy

Two boats tethered together in a swollen river may jostle and occasionally collide but if the violence of the waters strains and breaks the rope then both will break free of the other and pursue increasingly divergent courses downstream. The analogy is inexact for in the case of the Christian east and Christian west before the Schism the boats themselves are contributing to the turbulence. Nonetheless after the Schism we see Rome and Constantinople drifting further and further apart amidst mutual recrimination.

Developments in Old Rome however far outstripped those in New Rome. The pace of change and reconstruction, particularly in respect of the papacy, admitted of little if no brake. It all started with the Pope serving during the Great Schism itself, Leo IX. He arranged a political alliance with the Normans, whom he later blessed to invade Britain in 1066. He allowed, if not directly instigated, the breach with Constantinople. He set in motion administrative machinery and a centralised bureaucracy that would deliver on Rome's long nurtured aspiration to rule and arbitrate across the whole Church.

Now that the fractious German Christians had been tamed by a loyalist Frankish expansion, an idealised view of a triumphant Rome reborn strengthened. The history of the papacy was deftly rewritten by the propagandist use of the notoriously forged document: "The Donation of Constantine" which purported to show the first Christian Emperor granting full jurisdictional potency to the papacy via the then Pope Sylvester I in 315. However, even this forgery of 750, used by Pope Stephen II in a jurisdictional dispute with the Emperor in Constantinople, had by now outgrown its usefulness. Emperor Constantine is portrayed as the munificent benefactor of the papal privilege whereas in this later age it had to be Christ himself who conferred the honour and responsibility of the Chair of St. Peter to the Vicar of

the Prince of the Apostles. Consequently, from the 12th century, the pope came to be known simply as the Vicar of Christ, thereby having an exclusive and unmediated authority from God himself. The outdated Donation forgery proved temporarily useful and it was incorporated into western canon law but later quietly forgotten. We now see the west embarking on a course of confrontational politics with secular rulers in order to assert its own privileges over them, the zenith of which was the claim, grand in conception if not in execution, to influence and if necessary depose a Christian prince. The western patriarchate proved to be slightly more amenable to this papal control with the pope's spiritual authority often but not always stronger than his temporal authority. Thus, increasingly, the papacy eroded the historic rights of the local churches to elect their own leaders. It took to itself from the keys of St. Peter the authority to remit purgatorial suffering through both the reward and purchase of indulgences. It instituted an increasingly complex supplicatory and appeal system to maintain direct control over the canonisation of saints in the next world and the day to day affairs of men and women in this. Many of these developments took centuries to consolidate, extend and deepen but the course was now set for an absolute monarchical papacy and more especially when an ambitious and vigorously reforming monk named Hildebrand, ascended the papal throne as Gregory VII in 1073 to carry forward this agenda. With no Greeks to worry about and a western society that was growing economically and politically in tandem with Rome, the following bold new claims were made by Gregory and were followed through practically with only one final exception.

The pope can be judged by no one;

The Roman church has never erred and never will err until the end of time;

The Roman church was founded by Christ alone;

The pope alone can depose and restore bishops;

He alone can make new laws, set up new bishoprics and divide old ones;

He alone can translate (transfer) bishops;

He alone can call general councils and authorise canon law;

He alone can revise his own judgements;

*He alone can use the imperial insignia;
He can depose emperors;
He can absolve subjects from their allegiance;
All princes should kiss his feet;
His legates, even though in inferior orders, have precedence over all bishops;
An appeal to the papal court inhibits judgement by all inferior courts;
A duly ordained pope is undoubtedly made a saint by the merits of St. Peter.*

Only this last provision was not enacted. Even such a grandiose papacy could not justify the institutional sanctification of itself without bringing the office into disrepute. The other objectives took a little longer to achieve. In the 12th century the papacy could not push through its reforms without a conciliar movement to strengthen its position on the ground. From the beginning of the 12th to the beginning of the 14th centuries no fewer than seven western Councils were held to this end. The enforcement of clerical celibacy for priests derives from this period (Lateran I: 1123) together with the definition of certain increasingly western innovative theologies concerning purgatory, the merits of the saints and atonement theory. Much of the rest of this conciliar business was unexceptional and necessary, for example the banning of simony and the reform of church administration.

These centuries saw an enormous expansion in the power and prestige of the western church precisely at the moment when Orthodoxy in the east was being harried by invaders and losing many of its lands to Islam. Rome was not unmindful of the suffering of eastern Christians but its ultimately disastrous Crusades of liberation (1095 – 1291) antagonised yet further the Orthodox who were now being increasingly pressured to accept Roman jurisdiction, pre-empted often by the installation of Latin patriarchs in Orthodox lands. Increasingly against this onslaught from the west the Orthodox had recourse to their erstwhile vanquishers the Turks whose political protection they sought and indeed obtained. Before returning to the west, therefore, and Rome's alliance with the Franks, we must now consider how Byzantium fared after the Great Schism.

The Decline of Byzantium

The citizens of Byzantium thought of themselves as Romans and called their empire ‘the Oikoumene’ meaning the entire civilized world, or simply ‘Romania’. They rejoiced in their Greek heritage and aspired to an education in Greek letters but, intellectuals apart, did not consider themselves to be Greeks. When they spoke of ‘Greeks’ they were usually referring to ‘pagans’. They defined themselves by their loyalty to the Empire and adherence to the Orthodox Christian Churches. The Byzantine Empire remained multi-cultural at every level. It was only in the final years that this ‘package’ was re-examined and then only because the empire had been reduced to an association of Greek cities. To the bitter end, ‘Byzantine’ only referred to those people who were born or lived in the ‘Queen of Cities’, Constantinople, the New Rome.

The battle of Manzikert (1071) in which the Byzantine army was destroyed by the Seljuk Turks signalled the formation of ‘Turkey’ and is still celebrated in the modern Turkish Republic. Seljuks, Turkmen, Yoruks and related tribes from Central Asia arrived and seized lands across Anatolia. A second Byzantine defeat at the hands of the Turks (Myriokephalon, 1176) signalled the end of the Empire as a major power in the Mediterranean. It should be noted that relations between Turks and Byzantines were never unremittingly hostile. It would appear that some Turkish tribes were converted to Orthodox Christianity (the Karamanlis), groups of Turks served in the Byzantine military and certain families achieved prominence in the capital (Tarchan). At least one Orthodox saint of this period is titled the ‘Turk’.

The expected calamity arrived with the Fourth Crusade, due to the machinations of the Venetians, with the disastrous sack of Constantinople (1204) and the establishment of the ‘Latin Empire’.

Though the Crusaders could destroy the Empire, they could not hold more than a part of it, and outlying regions remained under Greek rule. The Despotates of Rhodes and Paphlagonia were insignificant. The Empire of Trebizond controlled the shores of the Black Sea, was nourished by trade with East Asia and closely allied to Georgia. Incidentally, with Orthodox Alan (Ossetian) support, Georgia had dominated the entire Caucasus since liberating Tbilisi (1121). It was in the Empire of Nicaea and the Despotate of Epirus that Greek hopes for the re-establishment of Byzantine rule in Constantinople were vested. Epirus was initially successful, liberating Thessalonica (1223) but Nicaea won the race to Constantinople (1261).

However, the writing was on the wall for the entire Orthodox Christian Commonwealth. The Mongol/Tartar hordes dominated Russia from 1238 and reduced the Alans, the Patzinaks and the Cumans in 1239. The Crusaders remained in control of large areas of southern Greece and many islands and enjoyed the military support of Italian and Western European states. The Bulgarians, as ever, waged war against the Greeks, the Albanians asserted their independence and the Serbs established an empire of their own. Under Tsar Stefan Dusan the Serbs all but swept the Byzantines out of the Balkans in the 1360s and aspired to take Constantinople. This was not to be as the Ottoman Turks had already moved into Europe in 1353, two years before the great Serbian Tsar died.

In the second half of the fourteenth century, the Ottoman Turkish advance gathered speed. Attempts by the Bulgars and the Serbs to dispute the Ottoman conquest of Thrace led to their defeat and Bulgaria being reduced to an Ottoman protectorate (1371). Sultan Bayezid, on the first day of his reign, destroyed the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo (1389). Serbia became an Ottoman protectorate, as did Bosnia and the Romanian states (1391). Resounding though these victories of Bayezid were, they were surpassed by his extensive campaigns in Asia Minor. He soundly thrashed the Crusade, launched from Hungary under Sigismund, at Nikopolis on the Danube (1396). Byzantium, now reduced to Constantinople, Thessalonica and Mystra, was only saved by the arrival of the Tartars under Timur (1402). While attacking the Ottoman Turks, Timur also campaigned vigorously against Georgia (reducing the country

to ruins in 1394, 1399, 1400 and 1403). The Mamlukes, mercenary converts to Islam based in Cairo, had also ravaged Cilicia and extinguished Armenian independence (1375).

The Ottomans

With the Ottoman conquest of Albania and Thessalonica (1430) the fate of Constantinople and Eastern Europe was sealed. The city fell to Sultan Mehmet Fatih in 1453. He was of mixed Greek/Turkish and Serb ancestry and sought to create a new synthesis, like a second Alexander in Persia, he hoped to unite East and West.

We read that “political extinction” overtook the Eastern Orthodox Church. As the Turks steadily whittled down the Byzantine Empire, the Byzantine Emperor saw a hope in survival in accepting the authority of Rome as the price of Western support. But the reunion of 1439 was insincere, never accepted by the people of Constantinople, and always denounced by their clergy. In any case, the days when the Papacy could direct the armaments of the West were long past, and the Emperor was soon brought to realize this. Byzantium fought and fell in the name of the Orthodox Church. Only the rising star of Muscovy and the dying glow of Georgia remained to the Orthodox as the long night of Ottoman supremacy began” (Colin McEvedy in ‘the Penguin Atlas of Medieval History’ - published in 1973, page 86).

In broad terms this statement is true but qualifications need to be made. Sources indicate that the early Ottoman Sultans often championed the Orthodox Christian cause, mainly against the Roman Catholic West. They regularly made donations to Orthodox churches and monasteries (notably Athos), a gesture usually masked by being declared in the name of their mothers or wives (mostly Christians). The respect and understanding between Sultan Mehmet Fatih and his first Patriarch, Gennadios Scholarios, was rarely matched but the concordat they established remained the ideal for many centuries to come. In the ‘Pax Ottomana’ the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople was an honoured courtier, as were the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople and the Jewish Chief Rabbi. It should be noted that

this status was not extended to the leaders of large Shia Muslim communities, nor to the Druze, neither to the Roman Catholics (quite numerous across the expanding Empire). The fact that honoured leaders were often persecuted or executed went with the territory, being the fate of Ottoman aristocrats and members of the Imperial family.

The Patriarch of Constantinople –from 1453 to 1921- presided over the ‘Rum millet’ or ‘Roman nation’ wherever Ottoman rule extended. To underline this new, temporal role, Patriarchs and Church authorities quickly assumed the titles, privileges, pomp/ceremony and robes of the Byzantine Court. The ‘Rum’ were called ‘Greeks’ by people from the West but were actually all Christians of the Eastern Orthodox tradition in lands ruled or owing allegiance to the Ottomans. In this sense the Ottomans re-united the Orthodox world and elevated the position of the Patriarch of Constantinople. In the last decades of Byzantium the authority of the Patriarch did not extend beyond the walls of the City. We know that the Ottoman Turks restored the churches and monasteries to the Orthodox and invariably chased out the feudal Frankish lords and their Latin clergy (notably in Rhodes and Crete). This patronage also strengthened the position of the Eastern Orthodox across West Asia, not least in Lebanon where they were favoured above the pro-Latin Maronites.

Nevertheless, the Orthodox and all non-Muslims were ‘dhimmi’ in Islamic law, making them a subjugated people, legally discriminated against, subject to the ‘blood-tax’ (donation of children to the elite Janissaries) and to a heavy poll-tax (harac). Inter-communal violence persisted in the Ottoman Empire and local rulers or Islamic Councils regularly victimised the Christians (notably in Syria). In Anatolia and amongst the Slavs whole communities were forcibly converted to Islam (albeit during military campaigns) and elsewhere, communities impoverished by war or natural calamities converted on a voluntary basis to avoid the poll-tax (and the Church tithe). Of course, individuals, including a never ending supply of renegades from Western Europe, embraced Islam to further careers in the Ottoman establishment, or as an expression of sincere belief.

Therefore, a paradox emerges in the early Ottoman centuries, which underlies the precarious position of the ‘dhimmi’. On the one hand the monastic republic of Paroria was so thoroughly devastated that the very location is subject to debate. On the other hand, the Kalloni Monastery complexes on the island of Lesbos were founded by St Ignatios Agallianos (1492-1566) but supported by Ottoman officials (Mount Menoikion is another example). These monasteries are impressive both for their size, the libraries, colleges and welfare foundations they supported and a location at the very heart of the Ottoman world. Likewise, generous support towards Orthodox Christian institutions like Mount Athos and (initially) the Serbian Patriarchate took place alongside attacks on suspected Crypto-Christians (Stavriotes) in all cities and provinces.

We might remember that the Ottoman Sultans were often heretical Baktashi Muslims themselves but supported a strict Sunni Muslim establishment that persecuted Bektashis and Alevis as apostates from Islam.

Byzance-apres-Byzance

For centuries, Byzantium-after-Byzantium endured. The Ecumenical Patriarchate worked in ‘synergy’ with the Ottoman Court and remained an international institution, many Patriarchs being of Slav, Albanian, Romanian or Karamanli extraction. This was reinforced by the Orthodox of the Ottoman Empire looking to Russia, the Romanian and Georgian principalities for support and finances. This arrangement was undermined by the emergence of a new merchant class from amongst the Orthodox, at first just beyond the reach of Ottoman rulers (in Austro-Hungary) and then in the great commercial centres of the Empire itself.

Above all, the emerging Greek merchant class of Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria (alongside Marseille, Trieste and Odessa) were defining themselves as Greeks first and foremost. Inspired by the ‘return to the Classics’ in Western Europe they were increasingly reluctant to consider themselves as primarily Orthodox or simply members of the ‘Rum millet’

alongside Christians from Baghdad and beyond, or Romanies. As most intellectuals from Christian communities in the Ottoman Empire had received some level of education in Italy, new ideas regarding language and nation spread swiftly. This new outlook not only divided the Eastern Christian jurisdiction but also divided nations (Orthodox/Catholic in the Cyclades and Orthodox/Muslims like Valades of Macedonia).

Franks, Heretics and the New Religious Order

Considering, therefore, this cross transfusion of western culture back into the Eastern Mediterranean particularly on the back of the Venetian Empire and the Renaissance, we need now to explore the route the west took from the ascendancy of the Franks to this position and thus we shall have completed the circle of our historical journey between east and west in the medieval period.

Under the Franks the west politically became an increasingly feudal society with a secular analogue of papal power extending hierarchical control from an aristocratic class right the way down to a dispossessed serfdom. This rigid and comprehensive subordination of all classes to their superiors both spiritual and temporal also profoundly affected the character of western Christian theology. Anselm, for example, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109, developed an apologetic for the Incarnation (*"Cur Deus Homo"*) and an atonement theology based on both the necessity of divine judgement and the appeasement of divine wrath through the sacrifice of the Son to the Father. Crudely put we might say that the serfs' relationship with their angered lord was served by the necessary sacrifice of the honest and blameless yeoman on their behalf. Clearly Orthodoxy and western Christianity had now embarked on radically different trajectories.

By the 13th century Rome's theological control was being challenged by the Cathar heresy in the south of France. By the middle of this century this dualist heretical sect had been brutally overthrown at the cost of over 200,000 lives although some historians claim that nearly a

million lives were eventually lost. Unsurprisingly perhaps in 1252 Pope Innocent IV authorised the use of torture in Inquisitions. By this time the newly fashioned Dominican Order of Preachers had been drawn into the battles against heresy with tragic long term consequences. The infamous 15th century Torquemada was a Dominican friar. More happily and productively for the west in the 13th century, so was St. Thomas Aquinas!

This period also saw the birth of the Franciscan movement through the life and work of the saintly St. Francis, proving once again that amidst all the bloodshed, conflict and power struggles of the medieval western church, genuine sanctity continued to flourish. The development of these and other new monastic orders, remoulding and breaking ancient and received Benedictine forms, presaged a new approach to Christian reform in the west – the willingness to experiment with new sometimes even competing communities that were designed by their founders to serve particular goals. The notion of the generic ascetical monk following a Rule rather than being formed by an Order had gone for good. The new Orders had to be endorsed by the Church in general and the papacy in particular so in that regard little had changed. The women Beguines who resisted all such institutionalisation in 13th century Germany did not last long for precisely this reason.

In the 14th century another convulsion affects the papacy, this time the exile of seven popes to Avignon for over 70 years (1305-1378) and the resurgence of the old problems of anti-popes and the captivity of the papacy within western geo-politics, this time at the behest of the French court. The deadlock was broken at the urging of St. Catherine of Sienna and the papacy returned to Rome. In this period the Black Death (1347 – 1351) mowed down between 30% and 60% of Europe's population and this also of course devastated the Church. Alongside this darkness however another light began to shine which would have mixed results for the western Church – the so-called Renaissance.

The Renaissance and the Rise of Dissent

The Renaissance was a movement that introduced the notion of secularity and the pursuit of truth aside from any received religious concerns. At this time the west rediscovered classical culture which it received anew from the eastern Mediterranean through both Greek and Islamic conduits. The new but old learning promoted the growth of the universities and a liberalisation of the arts and sciences. It enabled Thomas Aquinas to appropriate Aristotle for his systematic theology. It prompted even Christian art to evolve away from a formal theological canon into a more naturalistic expression.

The Renaissance also fostered indirectly a Christian humanism that encouraged both scholastics and reformers alike to seek a more rational, accessible, purified and responsive Christian witness in the west. Often this led to conflict with more conservative minds, as the likes of John Wyclif, Jan Hus and William of Ockham contended with Rome. As these dissenting voices grew in strength so did Rome's policy of persecution of heretics, for the good of their souls of course! The pressure for reform was growing but it would be some centuries yet before heretics could realistically seek the protection of a sympathetic Christian prince and stand together against the Church. The papacy and the Christian rulers of Europe might contend against each other for supremacy but before the 16th century both had too much to lose by sacrificing their ancient symbiosis for any truly radical reconstruction of the religious and political order. And so for the time being, the valve was closed on that pressure cooker which was the late medieval Catholic Church. Two years after the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 the printing press invented by William Caxton produced the first printed Gutenberg Bible. Soon afterwards the entire religious map of Western Europe would be redrawn. The Christian East, in so far as it understood what was truly going on in the Latin Church, stood by unaffected and somewhat bemused. Constantinople's own long incarceration in the Ottoman Empire would soon direct all attention away from its alienated wayward sister religiously speaking, but it nonetheless remained profoundly affected and influenced by western political expansionism and cultural and educational exchanges.