

Between Pacifism and Just War: *Oikonomia* and Eastern Orthodox Political Theology

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Abstract

Scholars have often focused on the doctrinal and canonical reasons for the lack of a just war tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The consensus seems to be that the Eastern Orthodox Church, for historical as well as theological reasons, has never developed a doctrine for the justification or the containment of war but was rather orientated to the question of peace (albeit without being pacifist) and the theological imperative of deification. There is, however, another reason why just war concerns never found fertile ground in Eastern Orthodoxy. Byzantine political theology carried an anarchistic theocratic dynamic that remained in tension with any effort to sanctify the Empire or its martyrs. Such a perspective has more in common (without being identical) with conceptualisations of just peace or just war as a tradition of ethical restraint on war rather than as a doctrine for the moral justification or legitimisation of war.

Keywords

Eastern Orthodoxy, *oikonomia*, just war, Trinitarianism, Byzantine political theology, theocracy

Introduction

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, discussions on just war theory have gained a renewed prominence in the West. When proponents of just war theory claim that the Russian invasion is unjust, the arguments employed to support this claim are usually derived from the long and venerable just war tradition as developed in the West from Augustine, through Aquinas and the sixteenth-century Scholastics, up to modern just

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war theory.¹ What, however, seldomly features in these debates is a serious discussion of the Eastern Orthodox theological and moral responses to the dilemmas of war and peace. While both Russia and Ukraine (barring the minority presence of the Uniate Church) belong to the Eastern Orthodox world, the tendency to read their confrontation through a Western just war lens may reflect the wider Western unfamiliarity with, or perhaps downright ignorance of, not only the traditions, practices, and sensibilities that form the Eastern Orthodox attitudes to war and peace, but also the broader contours of Eastern Orthodox political theology.

My purpose here is not to provide a romanticised defence of a tradition that is usually presented as in opposition to dominant Western attitudes to war (pacifism, just war, holy war). Indeed, this temptation is often present in accounts that depict Eastern Orthodoxy as untainted by the sins of holy war or by the tendency in just war thinking to morally justify, rather than tolerate or limit, armed violence.² That said, it remains overwhelmingly the case that Eastern Orthodox attitudes to war are perceived as transcending the conventional occidental distinctions between pacifism, just war, and crusadism.³ What is, however, not often persuasively addressed in those accounts is the broader political theological framework within which Eastern Orthodox attitudes to war and peace make sense and which, in turn, may better explain their distinctive character.

In this brief article, I will review the principal Eastern Orthodox approaches to war and peace while also debunking the dominant Western stereotypes about the nature of Eastern Orthodox political theology. The reigning prejudice on this issue is that the absence of a Western type of political theology in Eastern Christianity can explain the lack of a just

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1. See a summary of recent discussions in Lee Trepanier, 'Russia's Invasion Violates Personhood, Not Just War Theory', 25 May 2022, <https://providencemag.com/2022/05/russia-invasion-violates-personhood-not-just-war-theory-orthodox-church-political-theology/>. For a good overview of the just war tradition, see Daniel R. Brunstetter and Cian O'Driscoll (eds.), *Just War Thinkers: From Cicero to the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2018).
 2. For the latter tendency in modern just war theory, see Nicholas Rengger, 'On the Just War Tradition in the Twenty-First Century', *International Affairs* 78.2 (2002), pp. 353–63. Rengger argues that the knack of modern just war theory for analytical or formulaic definitions of what constitutes morally justifiable use of armed force has tilted the emphasis from viewing the just war tradition as an instrument for restraining war to treating it as a vehicle for making war 'moral'.
 3. According to Perry Hamalis, prominent Orthodox theologians, such as Stanley Harakas, Alexander Webster, John McGuckin, and Philip LeMasters, 'proclaim in unison that Orthodoxy's teachings differ *in some fundamental way* from the main stances articulated in Western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) churches'. P. Hamalis, 'Just Peacemaking and Christian Realism: Possibilities for Moving beyond the Impasse in Orthodox Christian War Ethics', in P. Hamalis and Valerie Karras (eds.), *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), pp. 335–59 (338); original emphasis. Indeed, the consensus among Orthodox scholars is that the experience and teachings of Eastern Orthodox Christianity on issues of war and peace do not fit neatly within the familiar categories of pacifism, just war theory, and holy war. See Philip LeMasters, 'Orthodox Perspectives on Peace, War and Violence', *The Ecumenical Review* 63 (2011), pp. 54–61.

war tradition in Orthodox thought. Whereas in the West church and state are perceived to be distinct and separate entities that sometimes work together, and other times are at odds with each other, Eastern Christendom, the same argument goes, has historically followed the model of *symphonia* or *synallēlia* where the state focuses on worldly affairs and the church on divine ones. Ultimately, this model would evolve into the harmony between *imperium* and *sacerdotium* where allegedly the state and church would be inextricably bound together and complement one another.⁴ Presumably, the result of this arrangement was that the church never felt the need to address social and political issues independently of the state or claim political power for itself. Orthodox political theology, as it were, did not exist, or certainly did not challenge imperial power. Orthodox political theology was to legitimise the existing political order, which, in turn, supported the church and protected the Christian faith.⁵

This neat but seriously flawed narrative will be duly challenged. Instead, it will be argued that it is Western political theology that depended on a model of consecration of power, of which modern sovereignty is a direct offshoot. In contrast, Byzantine political theology arguably rested on an understanding of the relationship between faith and political power that kept the temptation of the sacralisation of power, or sanctification of violence, at bay. This paradoxically, anti-monarchical political theology, grounded in Eastern Orthodox Trinitarianism, may then explain, what I call in this article, the *oikonomic* attitude to war that Eastern Christianity has developed in its tense relationship with the powers of this world. Such a perspective better illuminates the distance that separates the abuse of religion for political purposes from Eastern Orthodox theological sensibilities. It also refutes those who, on the face of the Russian Church's capitulation to Russian nationalism, believe that the Eastern Orthodox Church is somehow congenitally destined to obey the state or sanctify

4. The formal expression of this model is recorded in Emperor Justinian's 6th *Novella*: 'There are two greatest gifts which God, in his love for man, has granted from On-high: the priesthood and the imperial dignity. The first serves (ὑπηρετοῦμένη) divine things, while the latter directs and administers human affairs; both, however, proceed from the same origin and adorn the life of mankind. Hence, nothing should be such a source of care to the emperors as the dignity of the priests, since it is for their (imperial) welfare that they constantly implore God. For if the priesthood is in every way free from blame and possesses access to God, and if the emperors administer equitably and judiciously the state entrusted to their care, general harmony (συμφωνία τις ἀγαθή) will result and whatever is beneficial will be bestowed upon the human race'. Cf. John Meyendorff, 'Justinian, the Empire and the Church', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22 (1968), pp. 43–60 (48).

5. See here Pope Francis's admonition, widely recorded in the press, to Patriarch Kyrill in the context of the Russian Church's support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine not to become 'Putin's altar boy'. For a compelling argument regarding the modern abuse of the model of *symphonia* by the Russian Orthodox Church, see Mikhail Antonov, 'Church-State Symphonia: Its Historical Development and its Application by the Russian Orthodox Church', *Journal of Law and Religion* 35.3 (2020), pp. 474–93. For the contradictions of the concept that both supported and undermined state power, see Tamara Prosic, 'Between Support for the State and its Betrayal: The Contradictions of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Concept of Symphonia', *Political Theology* 15.2 (2014), pp. 175–87.

national myths. While those temptations have always been present in its long history, Eastern Orthodoxy may still embody a model of political theology that is not only critical to secular power but also well-attuned to the tragic inevitabilities of a fallen world.

Eastern Orthodox Attitudes to War and Peace

As Yuri Stoyanov informs us, the origins of the dominant responses to the questions of war and peace for both Western and Eastern Christianity can be easily traced back to the New Testament and some of its well-known passages, such as Matthew 5–7, 26:52, Lk. 2:14, 3:14, 6:29, foregrounding the pronounced pacifistic outlook of Christ's moral teaching. Concurrently, Eastern Orthodoxy was also heir to those non-pacifist traditions of exegesis of New Testament passages containing military allusions that in Western Christianity were sometimes used to justify the use of force (Stoyanov cites 1 Thess. 5:8, Eph. 6:10, 1 Cor. 9:7, 2 Tim. 2:3–4, Jesus' 'sword' allusions in Matt. 10:34, Lk. 22:35–38 and the heavenly war imagery in Revelation 20).⁶ Eastern Orthodoxy, then, inherited evident tensions between the imperative of peace and the exigency of war, found respectively in both the Old and New Testaments, which in some cases led to divisions and schisms, fuelling apocalyptic and heretical movements within Christianity.

Indeed, early Christian pacifistic attitudes were often reinforced by eschatological expectations of an apocalyptic end of the world and a concomitant, often purist, condemnation of Christian participation in Roman military service. While such anti-militarist and pacifist preoccupations were shared in varying degrees and hues by several early Church Fathers, such as St Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165), Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215), St Hippolytus (c.170–c.236), Tertullian (c.160–c.225), and Origen (c.185–c.254), early Christian pacifism was interpreted in the context of the providential role accorded to the Empire by figures such as Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260/5–339), St Cyril of Alexandria (376–444), and St John Chrysostom (345–407). The tense relationship between a religion of peace and a newly evolving imperial ideology that identified the earthly Roman empire with the 'empire of Christ' was reflected in the domain of military service. Cults of worship of military saints who were serving in the imperial army, even in the pre-Constantinian era, began to spread coupled with efforts to sanctify those soldiers who died in defence of a Christian Empire that perceived itself as the Christian ecumene, the centre of a Christianised world.⁷

Tensions between the pacifistic theological and social ethos bequeathed from early to Byzantine Christianity, on the one hand, and the political and military necessities of an

6. See Yuri Stoyanov, 'Norms of War in Eastern Orthodox Christianity', in G. Reichberg, V. Popovski and N. Turner (eds.), *World Religions and Norms of War* (Tokyo: UNU Press, 2009), pp. 84–128 (167). See also John C. Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War: A Contribution to The History of Christian Ethics* (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008 [1919]) and Ronald H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960).

7. See Stoyanov, 'Norms of War', pp. 168–69. On the Christianisation of the empire, see Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

imperial state that remained Roman in military structure, mobilisation, and ethos, on the other, could be frequent and acute. The most characteristic expression of this uneasy relationship can be found in the famous 13th Canon of St Basil the Great (c.330–379) from his first Canonical Epistle to Amphilochous, Bishop of Iconium. For St Basil, the act of killing during war needed to be distinguished from voluntary murder, although this distinction should be interpreted within the context of the overall pastoral concerns of the Eastern Orthodox Church for the salvation of the soul of those engaged in warfare. The Canon prescribes a three-year refusal of the Holy Communion for those who killed in battle as a means of purification from sin. Warfare, then, is acknowledged, yet never condoned as ineradicable, but only as a tragic necessity that damages the soul, even if it cannot be avoided.⁸ Although the historical record shows that the Byzantines were hardly immune to just war practices or holy war ‘deviations’,⁹ canonical regulations prohibited Christian clergy and monks from entering military service or working for the secular state administration and government, a phenomenon that has been aptly defined as ‘stratification of pacifism’ since pacific standards were stipulated for both clergy and monks while any military activity was strictly reserved for the laity.¹⁰

Truth be told, St Basil’s 13th Canon was often perceived as too onerous or intolerable since its strict implementation would preclude Christian soldiers involved in warfare from participation in the holy mysteries. And yet, the Eastern Church not only refused to bend St Basil’s Canon but also systematically denied requests by emperors to establish canonical regulations through which Byzantine soldiers fallen in battle in defence of the state would begin to be honoured as holy martyrs and celebrated with hymns and feast days. While in the West, Popes such as Leo IV (847–855) and John VIII (872–882) were preparing the ground for the eventual formalisation of the Crusade idea and the sanctification of holy war by the Catholic Church by granting absolution to those who fought for Christendom, Patriarch Polyuktos (956–970) and the Byzantine ecclesiastical hierarchy were invoking the authority of St Basil’s Canon to refuse treating fallen Christian soldiers

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8. Stanley S. Harakas, *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics, vol. 1: Patristic Ethics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), pp. 155–56. See also Slawomir Nowosad, ‘War—Just or Justifiable? A Christian Orthodox Perspective’, *Studia Oecumenica* 16 (2016), pp. 113–22 (116).
 9. The oft-invoked example of a possible justification of warfare comes from St. Cyril (†869) which he expressed in his conversation with Caliph Mutawakkil in 851 offering ‘a surprisingly strong and unambiguous theological affirmation of the wars being fought to repel the armies of the caliph’; see David Goodin, ‘Just-War Theory and Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Theological Perspective on the Doctrinal Legacy of Chrysostom and Constantine-Cyril’, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 48.3-4 (2004), pp. 254–61 (252). Byzantine wars were often perceived as ‘holy’, and their goal was to ‘defend the integrity of God’s empire on earth’, and so, ‘by extension they were fought for God and Orthodoxy’. See Stoyanov, ‘Norms of War’, p. 180; Nowosad, ‘War—Just or Justifiable?’, pp. 115–16.
 10. Stanley S. Harakas, ‘The Morality of War’, in J.J. Allen (ed.), *Orthodox Synthesis: The Unity of Theological Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary, 1981), pp. 67–95 (85–87).

as martyrs often against the wishes of popular emperors, such as the monkish warrior-emperor Nicephorus II Phocas (963–969) who pushed for their canonisation.¹¹ Even though the pressure by the political and military authorities and the imperial ideology of the Byzantine state, which saw itself as the centre of the Christian ecumene, to bestow a certain quality of ‘holiness’ to its military expeditions was considerable, the Eastern Church tenaciously opposed the notion of sanctified military martyrdom for fallen soldiers.

War, Peace, and Eastern Orthodox Theology

Eastern Orthodox canonical law and practice reflected specific theological commitments common to the Christian faith. Echoing the patristic ethos of early Christianity, Eastern Orthodox theology was not concerned fundamentally with morality as an end-in-itself but only as part of the eschatological vocation of humanity which is destined for deification (*theōsis*), participation in the eternal life of the Holy Trinity. Human beings are called to become by grace all that God is by nature.¹² Granted, some instances of killing may be tragically necessary, such as the actions of a soldier in defending his or her nation from invasion by a conquering power. Killing in such circumstances may be understood in light of the Orthodox category of ‘involuntary sin’, which includes actions that damage the soul despite the fact that they are done without malice and out of necessity. The Church knows that killing does not have to be murder for it to be spiritually damaging. As a result of its emphasis on deification and spiritual healing, Orthodox moral theology does not find the theoretical justification of war a worthy endeavour, let alone pronouncements that war can be ‘holy’ or ‘just’.¹³ Although Orthodoxy does not necessarily regard nonviolence or pacifism as absolute characteristics of the Christian life, neither does it sacralise or justify war. Instead, Orthodox theology merely tolerates war as a sometimes tragically necessary or unavoidable endeavour for which a period of penitence is required (confession, refraining from the Eucharist, etc.).

Correspondingly, the soldier is not condemned as a murderer but is treated as someone in need of pastoral guidance in the process of healing from the spiritually ruinous effects of taking life. Repentance, then, is understood therapeutically in Orthodoxy. The focus is not on paying a legal penalty for one’s sins but, instead, on finding healing by reorienting one’s life towards God.¹⁴ The soldier who has killed in war needs repentance, not because

11. See Stoyanov, ‘Norms of War’, p. 170; LeMasters, ‘Orthodox Perspectives’, p. 59.

12. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

13. The abhorrence and criticism by Byzantine churchmen, and indeed historians, of the phenomenon of Latin warrior-bishops and priests taking part in the Crusades are well attested. For an excellent theological discussion of the providential dimension of Orthodox eschatology that prevents it from recognising any ‘justness’ in war, see Peter Bouteneff, ‘War and Peace: Providence and the Interim’, in Hamalis and Karras (eds.), *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War*, pp. 251–75.

14. According to John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), p. 196: ‘Byzantine theologians

of breaking the law, but because taking life presents a profound challenge to spiritual health. It is obviously difficult to grow in holiness while killing people, regardless of the circumstances.¹⁵ This explains why Orthodoxy has not canonised saints simply on account of military prowess or treated soldiers as martyrs, even if they died in defence of the faith or of an Orthodox nation. St Basil's 13th Canon and Patriarch Polyeuktos's tenth-century rejection of the canonisation of Byzantine soldiers who died serving the empire illustrate this attitude that reflects Orthodoxy's reluctance to link holiness to the defence of earthly political purposes or invest political causes with the aura of sanctity.

Ultimately, spiritual resources within Orthodoxy enabled a more dynamic and flexible praxis of peace in response to the challenges of war than an abstract, systematic formula for assessing the moral legitimacy of violence. The Byzantine synthesis between a pacific attitude, grounded on the priority of ontological peace of a creation, viewed eschatologically, and the pastoral care for a creation 'groaning in labour pains', as expressed in the practical embracement of the late Roman just war tradition and some innovations in the theory and practice of warfare, created an ambivalent and flexible system of nuanced attitudes to war in which various compromises were achieved to accommodate the inherent frictions between the various elements. This may explain the consensus among Orthodox theologians that the Eastern Orthodox attitude to war cannot be captured by the conventional categories of pacifism, political realism, just war, and holy war.

Conscious of this complexity, esteemed Orthodox theologian Perry Hamalis has proposed that Orthodox thinking on war should be classified as falling between the traditions of 'just peace-making', as an active and transformative practice of preventing war, and that of Christian realist tragic pragmatism, which kept its distance equally from pacifism and the just war tradition.¹⁶ Such a sensibility may share affinities with recent

never succumbed to the temptation of reducing sin to the notion of a legal crime, which is to be sentenced, punished, or forgiven; yet they were aware that the sinner is primarily a prisoner of Satan and, as such, mortally sick. For this reason, confession and penance, at least ideally, preserved the character of liberation and healing rather than that of judgment'.

15. That said, pastoral and theological responsibility may require the oikonomic practice of *diakrisis* (=making distinctions) here: 'While there are examples of military saints, pacifist saints who sacrificed their own lives to save others, and saints who died willingly to perpetuate peace... [there is no example] of a saint who stood by and watched while others were killed. In the saints venerated in the church, omission is also an important means of expression. In this, perhaps, is a recognition that defense of others is an appropriate means of caring for others'. See G. Woloschak, 'War, Technology, and the Canon Law of *Economia*', in Hamalis and Karras (eds.), *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War*, pp. 315–33 (325).
16. Hamalis, 'Just Peacemaking and Christian Realism'. On Christian realism, it is characteristic that the father of the doctrine, Reinhold Niebuhr, was a critic of the just war tradition, envisaged as formulaic application of natural law-based moral standards for the justification of war, but was not unfriendly to conscience-based just war arguments, such as Paul Ramsey's *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961). Niebuhr's reluctance to endorse the overconfidence of the just war tradition in making secure judgements about the 'justness' of war is closer to the spirit Hamalis is alluding to. See Vassilios Paipais, 'Reinhold

developments in contemporary Catholic thinking on war. Advocates of a ‘just peace’ perspective remind us that the objective of peace had always been the horizon within which just war thinking took place and argue that this emphasis on peace-making needs to be revived and cultivated.¹⁷ Like Orthodox thinking on this matter, just peace thinkers feel uncomfortable both with pacifism’s inability to appreciate the tragic realities of international politics and with just war’s emphasis on morally justifying the use of armed force. But whereas the just peace project is either still internal to the ways the just war tradition can be interpreted or seeks to replace it, Orthodox attitudes on war and peace have been less systematic and more driven by pastoral considerations that may explain their casuistic, flexible character.

***Oikonomia* and Eastern Orthodox Political Theology**

A central role in this flexible approach was played by the pastoral concept of *oikonomia*. The concept of *oikonomia* is based on the idea that there are rules that govern the church, yet to appropriately manage the ‘household’ (*oikos*) of the church, sometimes those rules must be reconsidered in context. The necessity for this reconsideration derives from the tension within church life between the transformative potential of inaugurated eschatology (Christ has *already* announced the new creation) and the reality of a fallen world in anticipation of salvation (the Kingdom of God has *not yet* been consummated). *Oikonomia* negotiates the gap between the two. In some respects, it may be said that the explicit church rules are meant to provide grounds for careful consideration of actions and to emphasise the need for discernment (*diakrisis*), rather than to invoke blind obedience. Discernment and knowledge of circumstances are prerequisites of *oikonomia*, and decisions to employ it are made only after deep consideration and empathetic understanding. While the teaching of the church on the concept of *oikonomia* is not precisely defined, Georges Florovsky has articulated much of the thinking that sustains its practice:

In the broadest sense ‘economy’ embraces and signifies the whole work of salvation ... οἰκονομία is opposed to ἀκριβία as a kind of relaxation of church discipline, an exemption or exception from the ‘strict rule’ (ius strictum) or from the general rule. The governing motive of ‘economy’ is precisely ‘philanthropy’, pastoral discretion, a pedagogical calculation—the deduction is always from working utility. ‘Economy’ is a pedagogical rather than a canonical principle; it is the pastoral corrective of the canonical consciousness ... ‘economy’ is pastorship and pastorship is ‘economy’.¹⁸

Niebuhr and the Christian Realist Pendulum’, *Journal of International Political Theory* 17.2 (2021), pp. 185–202.

17. See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019) and C.N. Braun, ‘Quo Vadis? On the Role of Just Peace within Just War’, *International Theory* 15.1 (2023), pp. 106–28.
18. Georges Florovsky, ‘The Boundaries of the Church’, in Richard S. Haugh (ed.), *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, vol. 13. Ecumenism I: A Doctrinal Approach* (Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1989), pp. 36–45 (38).

It would be a mistake, however, to view the concept of *oikonomia* in isolation from the overall Byzantine political theology and its resistance to sacralising authority. This is important as the idea of *oikonomia*, or economic political theology, has been lately extensively treated in the work of Giorgio Agamben and other Italian thinkers of biopolitics, such as Roberto Esposito, who build on Foucault's idea that Christian pastoral practices formed the basis of modern governmentality.¹⁹ In his *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben argues that the entire edifice and function of modern sovereign power rests on the medieval formula, 'the king reigns but does not govern'. Government or administration has been assigned the 'economic' maintenance of society while the machine of sovereignty is running on empty (authority is 'glorified' by standing in for divine absence). Essentially, for Agamben, economic theology is what happened to political theology in the West once the machine of separation between sovereignty (authority) and 'economy' (governance) legitimised the perpetual management of social and political order. The latter is premised exactly on the idea of the empty throne of sovereignty, of the always lurking and legitimising sovereign exception that retains its effect (the possibility of suspending the law) by remaining hidden or auratic.

Contrary to this perspective that reduces it to the hellish reproduction of administrative apparatuses, impersonal regulatory frameworks, and control mechanisms, *oikonomia* for the Byzantines involved the meditative and compassionate resolution of ecclesiastical and moral questions in accordance with the spirit of God's love of humankind, wisdom, and will for the salvation of the person (a Christianised version of the Aristotelian *epieikeia*, the measured, contextual, and prudential application of the law in the service of life).²⁰ Consequently, *oikonomia*, as a sanctified path for navigating problems and contradictions in an imperfect world, was not a mechanism for granting exceptions to dogmatic maxims, or legitimacy to arbitrary rule, but the practice of justice as the aim and fulfilment of those rules themselves. *Oikonomia* was, then, perceived as a way of putting rule-following to the service of life, akin to Agamben's idea of a form-of-life in which form (the law) is not experienced as oppressive, foreign, or imposing but as a way of life.²¹

In fact, a closer look at the legal and political history of Byzantium reveals that the Christianisation of imperial power—specifically, the merging of God's anarchic ('no rule') sovereignty with the Roman legal concepts of *aequitas* and the Aristotelian *epieikeia*, which gave the Empire its characteristic law-governed character and Byzantine

19. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Michel Foucault, *Security Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78* (ed. M. Senellart and A.I. Davidson; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

20. See Marinos Diamantides and Anton Schütz, *Political Theology: Demystifying the Universal* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

21. Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

politics its trademark preoccupation with social welfarist policies²²—occurred not, as Catholic Agamben implies it did, in the name of universal salvation as part of an economic management/governance machine, but in that of the emperor *qua* patron and *imitator Christi* in his merciful benevolence as expressed in the emperor's love of the poor.²³ The emperor's exercise of *oikonomic* power was not a legal running of the household but a practice of philanthropy as the true content of the law (justice) owed by the emperor *qua* humble servant of God to His people and exercised by way of welfare policies and dispensations that merged God's anarchic praxis with the rigour and austerity of the law, mirroring on earth God as the 'Living Law' (*nomos empsychos*).²⁴

But, to gain a deeper understanding of the kind of political theology this image and function of *oikonomia* rested on, one must revisit the thorny and widely misunderstood issue of the relationship between Christian faith and secular power in the Eastern Roman Empire (what has been misleadingly—and now conventionally—called 'Byzantine Empire'). Instead of retroactively attributing to Byzantium the caesaro-papist outlook of the Russian Czars, the Eastern Roman Empire should rather be re-imagined as a sort of populist 'Byzantine republic', an *ennomos politeia* (law-governed republic)²⁵ where the holder of the imperial office was always suspected as potentially illegitimate—a fake messiah, or an illegitimate high priest-king—that was 'tolerated only insofar as his administration was conducive to the *salus populi*, not of everyone in the people to be precise, but of enough supporters and friends to keep him in office—the *filoi*',²⁶ the informal system of patronage that was pivotal in effectively keeping him in power.

As Diamantides and Schütz aptly put it,

against the customary Western mythological assumptions about Eastern history, based as they are on the hopelessly inappropriate term of 'caesaropapism', the Byzantine Christian empire, while trying by all means to impress the populace and foreign powers, was characterised by a weak—doubtlessly to the Western reader a dangerously, uncannily weak—quasi-sovereignty, with each Basileus enjoying full recognition as dominus while facing a perennial legitimacy deficit ...²⁷

Being merely blessed by the church—not anointed, as his Western counterpart was—the Byzantine *basileus* could not count on the authority given him by God to diffuse insurrections, seditions, or challenges to his power. Sovereign rule thus remained 'personal rather than invested in an immortal, naturally or irreducibly, glorious office,

22. See Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1968).

23. Diamantides and Schütz, *Political Theology*, p. 150.

24. See Miguel Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology After Carl Schmitt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

25. See Anthony Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

26. Diamantides and Schütz, *Political Theology*, p. 131.

27. Diamantides and Schütz, *Political Theology*, p. 132.

advantageously articulated with a smoothly functioning managerial-decisionist administration'.²⁸ Contrary to the occidental misreading of the situation, the Christianisation of the empire was, from the vantage point of the imperial office, not a power-enhancing move but, on the contrary, a constraining development. It was the origin of an evolution that was mired in a legitimacy deficit.

Theologically speaking, the key difference between the Latin/Catholic West and the Greek/Orthodox East rested on different interpretations of the Trinity. In Eastern Trinitarianism, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, proceeds from God the Father, without the possibility of any grafting on Christ's authority or His earthly representatives (Pope or Emperor). In the corresponding political theology, the Eastern Roman Empire, like its church, did not need to be 'instituted' or sanctioned as a righteous, God-serving entity (unlike the 'Holy Roman Empire'). It was simply taken for granted that the institutional survival of the Roman Empire after its Christianisation was a result of God's providence. Yet, unlike the elected Pope or anointed monarch, there was no assumption that the Byzantine *basileus* was indeed God's representative. It was impossible for God, being *anarchos*, to be represented by consecrated authorities.

As a result of the lack of an official doctrine of divine representation, the imperial legitimacy crisis was not understood as a necessary 'exception' to a rule but both as the sign of a mysterious divine providence and as the condition of possibility for the next emperor's rise to power, which explains why the Eastern Roman Empire never developed a tradition of dynastic succession. The obfuscation of anomic *oikonomia* behind the fiction of a divinely sanctioned 'exception' to rules and principles happened only later, and only in the West, in the context of what György Geréby calls Nestorian crypto-monarchic tendencies in Latin Christendom.²⁹ As opposed to the model of sacralised monarchical power and the divinisation of sovereignty that prevailed in late medieval Western Europe,³⁰ Byzantine political theology was based upon a generalised suspicion of power and the conviction that, being under divine dispensation, imperial power was weak in legitimacy but potentially more effective if attuned to the right duties, tending to the poor and the common good. What, therefore, in Eastern Orthodoxy came to be recognised as *symphonia* was nothing other than this praxis of 'economic' government that endorses divine anomia as a mystery (both sustaining and undermining power by keeping it under the divine *regimen*)—namely, as a practice of fidelity to the idea that the law exists in the service of life and justice and not as the fig leaf of a glorified sovereign power to be suspended at its will.

28. Diamantides and Schütz, *Political Theology*, p. 148.


29. G. Geréby, 'Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt', *New German Critique* 35.3 (2008), pp. 7–33 (30) and Erik Peterson, 'Monotheism as a Political Problem', in Michael Hollerich (ed.), *Theological Tractates* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 68–105.

30. See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Conclusion

What all this means is that in the Eastern Roman Empire, as opposed to the Latin West, *oikonomia* was not yet obscured by claims to ‘exception’ from the law or ‘governance’ as opposed to ‘rule’. Since divine rule could not be represented and since imperial rule was under divine dispensation, suffering from a permanent legitimacy deficit, violence or un-Christian behaviour was not excused but portrayed as necessary in a fallen world. On the question, then, of the justification of war and state violence, the two traditions could not have been more different and that may explain the occidental awkwardness in classifying the Eastern Orthodox perspective, but also the tendency of the latter to transcend the occidental categories of pacifism, just war, and holy war. War, for the Orthodox, is a tragedy and perhaps a necessary evil when the innocent need to be defended or justice vindicated, but it is never recognised as something good, or moral, or holy, or even a lesser good. *Oikonomia* and *diakrisis* (=discernment) are the two pastoral weapons that allowed the Orthodox to square the tragic inevitabilities of a fallen world with the eschatological nature of Christian spiritual life that looks to growth in holiness and, ultimately, deification. The specific nature of the Eastern Orthodox *oikonomia* and dynamic praxis of peace, however, cannot be understood outside of the general anomic context of Byzantine political theology that regulated the tensive relationship between faith, secular power, and authority.

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