

Byzantium's Heritage in Russia's Political, Ecclesiastical, Monastic and Cultural Life between 10th and 15th Century*

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I. Preface

In the year of the Lord 862, Prince Rastislav of Moravia sent envoys to Constantinople and asked Emperor Michael III to send him teachers capable of preaching in the Slavonic language. The emperor complied with this request and sent the young philologist and diplomat Constantine the Philosopher, better known under his later monastic name of Cyril (827/28–869) and his elder brother, hegumenos Methodius (?–885) to Moravia. The two brothers were natives of Thessaloniki.¹

The great missionary work of the apostles of the Slavs and of their companions is very well known and there is no need that its importance for the whole Slavonic world should be particularly mentioned here. But it is with great emotion and sacred pride that I present myself here, under the magnificent domes of the Saint Church of Russia in order to speak, as a humble compatriot of the two Greek saints, about some elements of the vital contribution of the Holy Mother Church of Constantinople to the Russian history and art.

II. The Byzantine political ideology of medieval Russia

It was not only the great surprise and admiration of the Russian delegates of the second half of the 10th century concerning the contemporary glory of Constantinople, which exceeded that of Rome², that convinced the grand prince of Kievan Russia to accept the new religion from the New Rome. There were also political reasons.

The fact that in 972 the byzantine princess who married the young German emperor Othon II in St. Peter's was not the *porfirogenita* Anna, the desired one, but Theophanu, niece of John Tsimiskes³, was of great importance for the European history. But there is more to it. The Holy Mother Church of Constantinople became Mother Church of the

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¹ J. Lindstedt, Byzantium and the Slavs in the Early Middle Ages, in: Byzantium and the North, (Acta Byzantina Fennica, vol. VI), Helsinki 1992, p. 40.

² Narratio de Russorum conversione, in: W. Regel, Analecta Byzantina – Russica, Petropoli 1891, p. 49.

³ M. Sotiriadis, Theophanu. Die Prinzessin aus Ost-Rom, in: Theophanu. Regierende Kaiserin des Heiligen Römischen Reiches Deutscher Nation, Köln 1991, pp. 8–32.

vast Russia through the baptism and marriage (988) of the grand prince Volodimer to princess Anna, sister of the Byzantine Emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII.⁴

Through these acts Byzantium brought to Russia, as it is generally accepted, five gifts: its religion, its law, its view of the world, its art and writing⁵.

Although some independence from Byzantine political ideas was manifested in Kievan Russia, such as in political philosophy and government, Russia – along with the Byzantine version of Christianity – accepted also the main principle of Byzantine political theory as well, based on the Hellenistic notion of the divinized King and adapted to Christian principles.⁶

According to this theory, 1) the Emperor of Constantinople was appointed by God as His representative on earth (*vicarius Dei*), and was therefore supreme legislator, even in ecclesiastical matters, for all Christians. This kind of subordination to the Emperor of Constantinople–New Rome successor of St. Constantine the Great, in which Russia was held during the first four centuries of its Christian existence, was perfectly compatible with the political independence of the Grand Prince of Kiev and other princes and 2) the emperor (*basileus* and *autocrator*), being instituted by God, was an autocrat wielding absolute power. This main principle of the Byzantine political theory was not yet to be accepted in the Kievan period. However, after the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 and the famous marriage of Grand Prince Ivan III with princess Zoe–Sophia, niece of the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI Paleologos, the Metropolitan Zosimus, in 1492, called the grand prince, in Byzantine fashion, »*the sovereign and autocrat of all Russia, new Tsar Constantine of the new city of Constantinople – Moscow*«⁷. After that, it is not without good reason to affirm the truth of the great influence of the Byzantine concept through the exercise of the imperial power on the political thought of the Tsars of Moscow.

III. Imperium and Sacerdotium: The Byzantine pattern of the relations between Russian State and Church

A leading principle of Byzantine political philosophy was the preservation of a harmonious relationship between Imperium and Sacerdotium. In the same way, the Kievan Russia adopted the Byzantine principle expressed by Emperor Justinian in his *Novel VI* on the relations between State and Church, by affirming the divine origin of both, the necessity of intimate relations between these two main factors in human society, the sovereign's role in establishing harmony between the temporal and spiritual powers, and his

⁴ See the testimony of the contemporary Arab writer *Yahya of Antiochia*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 23 (1932) 423–424 and *N. de Baumgarten*, *Saint Vladimir et la conversion de la Russie*, (*Orientalia Cristiana* XXVII,1), Roma 1932.

⁵ *B. H. Sumner*, *Survey of Russian History*, London ²1947, p. 178.

⁶ *F. Dvornik*, *Byzantine missions among the Slavs*, New Jersey 1970, pp. 280–281.

⁷ *F. Dvornik*, *The Slavs in European History and Civilisation*, New Jersey 1962, p. 372.

right, or rather his duty, to watch over the Church. The Kievan clergy willingly transferred these prerogatives to the Grand Prince of Kiev⁸.

Later on, the princes of Moscow were indebted for the growth of their power and the development of their autocratic monarchy to the support of the Russian Church. Although it sounds strange, it must be admitted that the ideological basis for the growth of Russian monarchy was prepared by the ecclesiastical writers of the Kievan period. It must not be forgotten that Russian churchmen were instructed by Byzantine missionaries and by Byzantine literary works translated into Old Slavonic.

The rulers and the people of the Kievan state had also good opportunities of becoming acquainted with the main principles of Byzantine political philosophy and of being influenced by it⁹. They accepted as their own the way of thinking of the Emperor Basil I, who's *Epanagoge* declares: »As the Commonwealth consists of parts and members, by analogy with an individual man, the greatest and most necessary parts are the Emperor and the Patriarch. Wherefore agreement in all things and harmony (*symphonia*) between the Imperium and the Sacerdotium bring peace and prosperity to the souls and the bodies of the subjects«¹⁰.

In accordance with this main Byzantine theory, in medieval Russia State and Church remained bound by the same twofold relationship clearly expressed in the Byzantine *Epanagoge*: parallelism and virtual equality on the one hand, indissoluble unity of purpose on the other hand. Sometimes, as in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when the secular power was weak and decentralized, the Church assumed a preponderance in public affairs; sometimes, as in the sixteenth century, the state in the person of the all-powerful monarch, would impinge upon the sphere of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. But generally speaking, after each of these oscillations the pendulum would swing back and in the end the balance would be restored in accordance with the byzantine theory.

Only in 1547, when Ivan IV accepted the imperial crown and officially assumed the title of Tsar, Moscow exceeded the Constantinopolitan pattern of political theory. The court of Moscow was organized on the Byzantine model but, at the same time, the Tsar defined his absolute powers in words, which not even a Byzantine emperor would have dared to use. Finally in 1589, the Moscow Patriarchate was founded. The time of the famous theory of the Third Rome has come¹¹.

IV. The Byzantine soul of the Russian churchmen

Russia along with the Russian Church can beyond any doubt be considered as the natural heir of the Byzantine spiritual and cultural tradition. It is widely recognized that when

⁸ F. Dvornik, *Byzantine missions among the Slavs*, New Jersey 1970, p. 281.

⁹ F. Dvornik, *The Slavs in European History and Civilization*, New Jersey 1962, p. 369.

¹⁰ *Epanagoge*, tit. III, cap. 8; Ed. *Zachariae von Lingenthal*, *Collectio librorum juris graeco-romani ineditorum*, Leipzig 1852, p. 68.

¹¹ F. Dvornik, *Byzantine missions among the Slavs*, New Jersey 1970, p. 282. On the theory of the Third Rome see: H. Schaefer, *Moskau – das dritte Rom*, Hamburg 1929 and also D. Stremoukhoff, *Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of the Doctrine*, *Speculum* 28 (1953) 84–101.

we speak of Russian Church, Russian literature, Russian art, Russian spirituality and generally of Russian culture we mean Russian Orthodox monasticism: monasteries, monks, monastic spirituality and prayer of Jesus, as well as monastic cultural and artistic production. In a few words, we refer to a genuine part of the East-Christian monastic world, which under the spiritual guidance of the Mother Church of Constantinople offered to the whole Christian Oecumene such model-figures of saints and such works of great artistic and cultural *finesse* that can be still considered – even today – of uncomparable, eternal value and as common precious Patrimony of all Christianity and of the entire civilized World.

To begin with the high dignitaries of the Russian Church, the metropolitans of Kiev and, later, of Moscow¹², we must note that till the first half of the fifteenth century they were almost all of them monks of greek origin and culture. The Church of Russia was from the beginning a metropolitan see of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which had the right to elect the metropolitans and envoy them to Russia. The metropolitan of Russia had, till the beginning of the second half of the fifteenth century, the title »*metropolitan of Kiev and all Russia*« and was always ordained in Constantinople. The Greek metropolitans of Russia were always and without exception the most learned men of that country. Their positive contribution to the civilization of the country, to the consolidation of the orthodox faith, to the development of literature, is beyond any doubt and has been panegyrically recognized by the ensemble of the Russian historians¹³. Indeed, the long chain of the metropolitans »*of Kiev and all Russia*« from Michael I (988–991) to Isidore (1436–1441)¹⁴ consists of a great number of learned men and of such personalities, who through their universal Byzantine culture and their work helped a great deal the Russian Church and people create their own civilization and play a protagonistic role in the European and world history.

Under the illuminated spiritual leadership of the Byzantine hierarchs of Russia many important greek books were translated and the Russian members of the Russian State and Church became familiar with them.

From the eleventh century on, the Russian clergy, the monks, the rulers and their boyars possessed Slavonic translations of Byzantine collections of canon law – the *Synagoge* of John Scholasticus and the *Nomocanon of Fourteen Titles*, together with the translation of two Byzantine law handbooks, the *Ecloga* and the *Procheiron*. These important writings contained many *Novels* of the Emperor Justinian, conciliar canons, imperial addresses to the conciliar fathers, and other documents giving expression to Byzantine ideas on rulership. These writings were supplemented by translations of the Greek Fathers, of Byzantine chronicles, and of collections of sayings attributed to Greek philosophers and Fathers, some of them impregnated with the spirit of Greek, Hellenistic and

¹² On the changing of the official title of the metropolitan of Russia see: V. Feidas, 'Εκκλησιαστική ιστορία της Ρωσίας (988–1988), Athens ³1988, p. 160.

¹³ A.-E. Tachiaos, 'Η Ἐκκλησία της Ρωσίας, in: 'Ο κόσμος της Ὁρθοδοξίας, Thessaloniki 1968, p. 71 and E. Golubinskij, Istorija Ruskoj Cerkvi, Bd. I 1, Moskva 1901, p. 323.

¹⁴ V. Feidas, 'Εκκλησιαστική ιστορία της Ρωσίας (988–1988), Athens ³1988, pp. 93–112 and 142–160; A.-E. Tachiaos, op. cit., pp. 71–76 and M. Sotiriadis, Metropolita Isidoro di Kiev (c. 1380/85–1463), Roma 1987 (un-edited master in church history).

Byzantine political thought. The most important of these collections was the Greek *Melissa* («Bee»), translated into Slavonic in Kiev in the twelfth century and containing a long chapter on power and kingship¹⁵.

As now concerns the Russian monachism it is widely known that it followed the pattern of the Eastern monachism in the same way as the Russian Church followed the pattern of the Byzantine one.

The founders of the organized monastic life in Russia in the second half of the eleventh century were St. Antonius and St. Theodosius of Petersk (Kiev). The first one after having become monk in Mount Athos was sent back to Kiev by the hegumenos of his monastery and founded the Lavra of Petersk, while St. Theodosius became the legislator of the same famous monastery by adopting the *Typikon* of the famous Constantinopolitan monastery of Studios, written by the learned hegumenos of the Byzantine monastic world St. Theodore Studite. To the Byzantine monastic ideals the Russian monachism remained loyal for many centuries. During the fourteenth century a great master of the Orthodox spirituality, St. Sergius of Radonez founded the famous Lavra of the Holy Trinity near Moskow (today: Zagorsk) and adopted the monastic *Typikon* of St. Theodore of Studios as once did Theodosius at the Peterskaya Lavra of Kiev.

In the fifteenth century, at the time of the Fall of Constantinople to the Turks, the ideals and the spiritual radiation of Byzantium still influenced the great Russian monastic figures and through their work the whole Russian monachism. The great reformer of the Russian monastic life, Joseph of Volokolamsk insists on applying the writings of the Greek Fathers, while at the same time his excellent antagonist, St. Nil Sorsky, knows the Greek language and on Mount Athos he reads authors like Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory of Sinai, whose *doctrine of hesychasm* (from the greek «*hesychia*» – silence) he exposes in his monastic Rule¹⁶.

It is interesting to notice that St. Joseph of Volokolamsk, one of the most prominent churchmen of his time, is very familiar with the Byzantine political ideas and speaks in Byzantine fashion of the heavenly monarchy reflected on earth by the imperial monarchy¹⁷.

At this point I feel the challenge to speak of St. Maximus the Greek, the learned monk, the philologist, historian, theologian, philosopher, poet, spiritual leader, reformer and defender of Orthodoxy, who has been called, and very justifiably so, «*the first illuminator of the Russians*». However, I think it would be unfair for such a universal personality to be put under the restriction of half a written page¹⁸.

¹⁵ F. Dvornik, *The Slavs in European History and Civilization*, New Jersey 1962, pp. 369–370. For a more complete list of translations of greek books into Slavonic and later into Russian see: V. Feidas, op. cit., pp. 119–129 and 172–174 and also: A.-E. Tachiaos, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁶ T. Spidlik, *I grandi mistici russi*, Roma ²1982, pp. 29–35, 88–91, 101–110, 117–127 and 247–248; V. Feidas, op. cit., pp. 116–119, 162–174; L. Bouyer, *Spiritualità Bizantina e Ortodossa*, Aubier 1965, pp. 80–86, 93–96, 101–116. On the spiritual movement of hesychasm see: L. Bouyer, op. cit., pp. 52–68 and V. Pseftongas, *Movimento Studita e tendenze esicaste*, in: C. Valenziano, *Spiritualità cristiana orientale*, Milano 1986, pp. 89–100.

¹⁷ F. Dvornik, *The Slavs in European History and Civilization*, New Jersey 1962, pp. 372–373.

¹⁸ V. Feidas, *Ἐκκλησιαστική ἱστορία τῆς Ρωσίας* (988–1988), Athens ³1988, pp. 198–229; A.-E. Tachiaos, *Ἡ Ἐκκλησία τῆς Ρωσίας*, pp. 77–79 and G. Papamichail, *Μάξιμος ὁ Γραικός. Ὁ πρῶτος Φωτιστὴς τῶν Ρώσων*, Athens 1950.

V. Theology of beauty: the Byzantine artistic miracle as guiding star of the Russian faith, spirituality and sensitivity

It would be a huge, enormous work, if we tried at the end of such a report to recapitulate the whole history of the theology of beauty according to the Russian sensitive soul. But this is not our task here. However, what we can mention here is a couple of artistic elements which belong to the Russian monastic spirituality and constitute a precious part of the world artistic patrimony.

After the baptism of St. Vladimir the first church dedicated to the Mother of God was built in Kiev by Greek craftsmen and plenty of works of christian art were brought from Byzantium to Russia, mostly for church needs: icons, textiles, illustrated manuscripts, enamel and silver objects, ivories etc. Many icons of special importance to the worship were continuously imported in Russia and Byzantine painters were often present in Russia in order to work for the monumental wall-paintings of the new churches of byzantine architectural style¹⁹. It can be stated that St. Vladimir's churches were entirely in the hands of the Greeks, both clergy and laymen artists²⁰. But it was not only him. The *Russian Primary Chronicle* informs us that: »In the year 6545 (=1037) Iaroslav (the Wise) built the great citadel (at Kiev). He also built the metropolitan Church of Sancta Sophia, the Church of the Annunciation over the Golden Gate, and also the Monastery of Saint George and (the convent) of Saint Irene. Iaroslav was a lover of books, and having written (or transcribed) many he deposited them in the Church of Sancta Sophia which he himself had founded. He adorned it with gold and silver (...)«²¹.

In fact, St. Sophia at Kiev, an artistic symbol of the russian people, is still one of the most important and beautiful churches of the Russian Church. It was the cathedral church of the greek metropolitan of Russia and was entirely covered with monumental Byzantine paintings and decorated with fine mosaics by excellent greek artists.

There were also mosaics in the apsis of the church of Archangel Michael at Kiev (1108) and we can still attest the existence of frescoes in the Kievan St. Cyril's church. Byzantine frescoes of high quality were created in the areas of Novgorod (Pskov – 1156, Staraya Ladoga – 1167, Spas Nereditsy – 1198) and Vladimir-Suzdal (12th century). Novgorod was also the place where the important greek painter Petrovits, creator of precious icons of the medieval Russian art (12th century), worked.

Finally, after the end of the Mongols' invasions, in the fourteenth century one can witness a renewal of the close contacts between Russia and Byzantium. This derives from the presence in Novgorod of a philosopher painter, Theophanes the Greek, who left frescoes of the highest Byzantine quality and exercised an indelible influence on his famous pupil, St. Andrej Rublev. He was the first Russian painter who gave birth to an original Russian painting style in the frame of the Byzantine tradition. His icon of the Holy Tri-

¹⁹ M. Chatzidakis, Σχέσεις Ρωσικής καὶ Ἑλληνικῆς τέχνης, in: *Hellas – Russia, one thousand years of bonds*, Athens 1994, p. 19.

²⁰ G. Podskalsky, *Christentum und theologische Literatur in der Kiever Rus' (988–1237)*, München 1982.

²¹ *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by S. H. Cross, Cambridge/Mass. 1930.

nity (ca. 1411) is considered to be the most lyrical expression of the entire Orthodox theology, as well as the most beautiful artistic invitation to meditation and prayer²².

However, the most sacred, the most beautiful, the most precious Russian object of theological beauty is the unique Byzantine icon of Our Lady of Vladimir. This icon – a real presence of the Holy Theotokos – was painted in Constantinople around 1125 and was subsequently transported to Russia, where it exercised a remarkable influence on the future development of Russian painting. Moreover, this icon still remains the symbol of the liberty of a great people with a 1000 year glorious monastic tradition, that still resists the power of time.²³

VI. Conclusion

St. Symeon, the New Theologian, writes somewhere about someone who was he himself: *»I met once a man who loved people and prayed to God and said: O my God, I want you to save my brothers. I want you to save **all** my brothers. But if you do not save all my brothers, then I do not want to be saved too, because I cannot understand what Paradise can mean without all my brothers inside it«.*²⁴

In the Orthodox Church, Paradise is the mystery of love, the state of communion in freedom expressed in the icon of the Holy Trinity of Rublev. These spiritual treasures, along with the eternal gifts of art, language, spirituality, theology, political philosophy and holy liturgy, were once tenderly offered to the daughter-Church of Russia and its people by Byzantium and the Mother Church of Constantinople. It is now a duty for the Russian Church and people to offer all these gifts and treasures, through the renewal of its rich monastic culture, to the world of the Third Millennium, a world that seeks for Truth, Peace and Beauty in a Paradise that has still good reasons of existence.

²² M. Chatzidakis, Σχέσεις Ρωσικής και Έλληνικής τέχνης, in: *Hellas – Russia, one thousand years of bonds*, Athens 1994, pp. 22–28; V. Feidas, *Εκκλησιαστική ιστορία της Ρωσίας* (1988–1988), Athens ³1988, pp. 129–132 and 177–183. See also: J. Albani, *Οι σχέσεις του Βυζαντίου με τους βαλκανικούς λαούς και τους Ρώσους*, in: *Byzantium between East and West*. Ed. by the Ministry of Culture, Athens 1993, pp. 58–65.

²³ D. Talbot-Rice, *Art of the Byzantine Era*, London 1963 (reprinted 1986), pp. 126–127; *Geistliche Akademie Sagorsk/Moskau – Ostkirchliches Institut Regensburg* (edd.), *Tausend Jahre Marienverehrung in Rußland und Bayern*, München–Zürich 1988, pp. 80–81 and D. Douglas Duncan, *Great Treasures of the Kremlin*, New York 1979, pp. 34–35.

²⁴ For an interesting synthesis on the common ecumenical missions of Greeks and Russians see: *Archimandrite Basil of Stavronikita Monastery* (today abbot of the Iviron monastery), *Οι αδελφικοί δεσμοί και η οικουμενική αποστολή Έλλήνων και Ρώσων διά της Όρθοδόξου Εκκλησίας*, in: *Hellas – Russia, one thousand years of bonds*, Athens 1994, pp. 93–105.