"St. Constantine-Cyril's Mission to the Abbasid Court and Eastern Orthodox Ideology of Warfare"

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The historical origins and evolution of the stances of Eastern Orthodox cultures and secular or ecclesiastical elites on the ethics and conduct of warfare betray both important analogies and dissimilarities to the respective Western Christian attitudes. They have been subjected to much less detailed and systematic treatment than their Western Christian counterparts, partially due to the fact that a considerable amount of the relevant late antique, medieval, and early modern sources (Greek, Old Church Slavonic, Georgian, etc.) has been neither edited and published nor translated into modern Western European languages. This current state of evidence and research in the field of Eastern Orthodox ideology and theology of warfare makes the further historical and theological investigation of these extant sources (as well as identifying other relevant sources) an urgent imperative.

Likewise with Catholic and Protestant Christianity, the New Testament sources of the quintessential inherited approaches to the ethics of war and normativity of peace in Eastern Orthodoxy can be traced to the Gospel passages referring to the recourse to armed force and violence as well as to Christ's moral precepts, with their underlying pacific perspectives (Mathew 5-7, 26:52, Luke 2:14, 3:14 6:29, etc.). Another authoritative corpus of texts which had been continuously drawn upon in Eastern Orthodox religious thought comprises the statements of the early Church Fathers[1] on war and violence as well as their admonitions regarding non-retaliation and non-violent martyrdom. They mirror the predominant anti-militarism and pacific beliefs of the early Church and its ideal of the normativity and affirmation of peace in all its dimensions, from the individual inner peace to the peace among humans. Embellished and theorized

[1] 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), Origen (c.185–c.254), St. Cyprian of Carthage (d.258), Arnobius (3rd–4th century) and Lactantius (c.250–c.325).

further during the patristic period, this ideal remained one of the paramount and recurrent leitmotiv as well as unifying idea in Eastern Orthodox theology, anthropology, ethics, hymnography and hagiography.

At the same time, similarly with Western Christianity the Old Testament dramatic narratives of righteous wars in the service of God in biblical books such as the Deuteronomy, Numbers, Joshua and the Maccabees furnished a suitable normative source material for justifying, legitimizing and conducting warfare. This was especially the case in the area of imperial Byzantine political theology and the related Eastern Orthodox versions of rulership ideology which repeatedly drew on the Old Testament kingship models of Saul, David and Solomon. Thus, as other Christian cultures and ideologies, Eastern Orthodoxy inherited and epitomized the dichotomies and tensions between the notions of war and peace respectively in the Old and New Testament which notwithstanding certain obvious continuities, also diverged in some vital areas. Such characteristic divergences can be detected, for instance, in the contrast between the Old Testament-related imperial and more New Testament-oriented clerical attitudes to warfare in medieval Eastern Christendom.[2]

In addition to the scriptural and patristic sources, early medieval Byzantine stances on warfare underwent the formative influence of earlier and selectively inherited Graeco-Roman ideas, moral norms and theories (among other venues, articulated military manuals) concerning just and unjust wars, the justification of and causes for resorting to military force, right conduct on the battlefield, etc. Some of these conceptions like self-defense and recovery of lost imperial territory and possessions

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[2] For an insightful analysis of the differentiation between the imperial and clerical strands of Byzantine Christianity in the sphere of legitimizing warfare and the status of the Christian soldier, see Paul Stephenson, 'Imperial Christianity and Sacred War in Byzantium', in James K. Wellman, Jr. (ed.), *Belief and Bloodshed: Religion and Violence across Time and Tradition* (Lanham; Boulder; New York; Toronto; Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 81-97. For influential arguments for the differentiation between the "Old Testament in tone" imperial Christianity and the "more New Testament-oriented Christianity of the clergy" in Byzantine culture, see Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest. The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, transl. by J. Birrell, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1, 103-104, *passim*.

were integrated into imperial secular law books and collections like the *Basilika* and *Epanagoge*.[3]

The institutionalization of the Christian church in the Roman Empire inaugurated during the reign of Constantine the Great (306-337) precipitated various models of rapprochement between the imperial state and the clerical leadership. The newly evolving consonance between the secular and ecclesiastical order in the empire also had a bearing on the procedures of justification and sanctioning of warfare. In a number of instances, however, this consonance developed along divergent avenues in the West and East Roman Empire, as prompted by the disimilar development of church-state relations in the Greek East and Latin West. The foundation of the medieval Catholic just war tradition were established by figures such as St. Ambrose (c.339-397) and St. Augustine (354-430) in the very specific political and religious conditions in the Christian Latin West. In the Greek East religious and ecclesiastical attitudes were shaped by a different corpus of patristic writings and the church instituted and secured different model of relationships with the East Roman/Byzantine centralized imperial state and its new political theology. Accordingly, the Eastern Orthodox Church preserved some essential elements from pre-Constantinian Christian pacific attitudes to the morality and sanctioning of war. Consequently, in East Roman Christian/Byzantine culture and society these clerical attitudes co-existed and inter-acted with the partially retained theories and practice of the pre-Christian just war tradition, maintained in accordance with the political and military needs of the imperial state.

Indebted to the largely secular late Roman just war tradition, the Christian East Roman/Byzantine ideology of warfare went through inevitable Christianization which started with the reign of Constantine. According to one of the central notions of this Christianized Roman ideology of warfare the Christian Romans (as the new ‘‘chosen people’’) were entrusted with the divinely-decreed mission to protect and defend Constantinople, regarded as both the ‘‘New Rome’’ and the ‘‘New Jerusalem’’, and its universal Christian oikumene, the ‘‘New Israel’’. The ‘‘New Israel’’ and “New Rome” needed to be safeguarded against the aggression and war designs of the new

[3] On this process, see Hélène Ahrweiler, *L'Idéologie politique de l'empire byzantine* (Paris: P. U. F., 1975), 42ff; Angeliki E. Laiou, “On Just War in Byzantium”, in J. Langdon, *et al* (eds.), *To Hellenikon: Vol. 1, Hellenic Antiquity and Byzantium. Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis Jr* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Aristide D. Caratzas 1993), 153-177, at 163-164.

‘‘barbarians’’: initially, pagans, then in later periods Muslims and, at times, West European Christian powers. As this ideology was underpinned by the notion of Byzantium representing the new ‘‘Chosen People’’, Byzantine chronicles and imperial propaganda could describe and explicate Byzantine wars as God-directed campaigns against the new ‘‘infidel’’ enemies. These contemporaneous enemies could customarily identified as new “incarnations” of the Old Testament adversaries of the Israelites. whereas successful and victorious warrior-emperors could be associated with the emblematic war heroes of the scriptural war narratives such as Moses, Joshua or David.

The principal notions and outline of early medieval Byzantine ideology of warfare can be reconstructed on the basis of Byzantine military manuals (with their distinct Christian just war statements acknowledging the “evil” or anti-normative nature of war and the permissibility of defensive warfare and focus on the conduct of extensive religious practices in the Byzantine army), imperial statements, military orations and religious services. The extant source material does not comprise conclusive evidence that the Byzantine church made any systematic attempt at formulating a just war theory. At the same time, the fundamentals and precepts of the mature Byzantine just war theory (and their provenance) developed by the imperial court and government can be readily traced and categorized in the existing sources, ranging from “self-defense”, and “recovery of lost territory” to “breach of agreement” and “averting a greater evil”. [4]

The involvement and obligations of the Eastern Orthodox church in the practical spheres of medieval warfare (as in Western Christendom) were manifested in military religious services, the early-defined role of military chaplains in the army, the celebration of Eucharistic liturgies in the field, the consistent use of Christian religious symbolism and relics for military purposes, pre-battle blessings of standards and

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[4] Laiou, “On Just War in Byzantium” (on the basis of an analysis focused especially on Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad*); cf. W. Treadgold, "Byzantium, the Reluctant Warrior", N. Christie and M. Yazigi (eds.), *Noble Ideals and Bloody Realities. Warfare in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 209-33, at 212-213; Angeliki E. Laiou, “The Just War of Eastern Christians and the Holy War of the Crusaders”, in Richard Sorabji and David Rodin (eds.), *The Ethics of War: Shared Problems in Different Traditions* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2006), 30-44, at pp. 33-34; George T. Dennis, “Defenders of the Christian People: Holy War in Byzantium”, in Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottaheden (eds.), *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 31-41, at 37-38; “Norms of War in Eastern Orthodox Christianity”, in Gregory Reichberg and Vesselin Popovski (eds.), *World Religions and Norms of War*, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 2009, 166-220, at 175-187.

weapons, services for fallen soldiers as well as thanksgiving ceremonies to salute and solemnize imperial victories.[5] Notwithstanding these responsibilities Eastern Orthodox canon law introduced a series of rulings which highlight the pacific nature of the vocation of clerics and monks and explicitly and emphatically proscribe them from bearing arms or taking part in any fighting or acts of violence.[6] These Eastern Orthodox canonic regulations made the non-participation of clergy and monks in warfare obligatory and unconditional, which represents one of the major differences from the respective Western Christian developments in this area of religious-military ideology in the medieval era. However, throughout the Byzantine Middle Ages a kind of ambiguity persisted, both in canon law and Byzantine political military ideology, regarding the actual status of the Christian soldiers and whether their involvement in fighting on behalf of the Byzantine empire could earn them spiritual recompense.

Within Byzantine canon law this ambiguity and consequent disputes largely draw on the perceived duality between the approaches of St. Basil the Great (c.330–379), and the influential Nicene theologian and anti-Arian polemicist, St. Athanasios of Alexandria (c.296–373). With its apparent endorsement of the praiseworthiness and lawfulness of killing in war in a statement in St. Athanasios of Alexandria's Epistle to Ammoun the Monk[7] (one of his three epistles which has been accorded status of canons) has predictably been of vital importance to medieval and modern Eastern Orthodox stances on the legality and justifiability of warfare in theological and canon law discussions. New reappraisals of St. Athanasios' pronouncement in the overall

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[5] On the military religious services in the Byzantine army, see J.-R. Vieillefond, "Les pratiques religieuses dans l'armée byzantine d'après les traités militaries", *Revue des études anciennes*, 37 (1935), 322-330; Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 238-251; George T Dennis, "Religious Services in the Byzantine Army", in E. Carr, et al. (eds.), *Eulogēma: studies in honor of Robert Taft, S.J.* (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1993), 107-118.

[6] A series of canons in the Apostolic Canons and those of the Ecumenical and Local Councils which entered Eastern Orthodox canon law (such as canon 7 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon of 451) clearly articulate the prohibitions on Christian clergy and monks becoming involved in military service or the secular state administration and government, see the text of Canon 7 in *The Pedalion (The Rudder) of the Orthodox Catholic Church: The Compilation of the Holy Canons by Saints Nicodemus and Agapius*, trans. by D. Cummings (Chicago: Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1957; repr. New York 1983), 251. For other texts of some of the relevant canons, see Louis J. Swift (ed. and transl.), *The Early Fathers on Law and Military Service* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983), 90-93.

[7] St. Athanasios of Alexandria, Epistle 48, *To Ammoun the Monk*, in Georgios A. Rhalles and Michael Potles, *Syntagma ton theion kai hieron kanonon* (Athens: G. Chartophylax, 1852), vol. 4, 69; English translation in *The Pedalion (The Rudder)*, trans. by Cummings, 758-760, at 759-760.

context of the rhetoric and imagery of the epistle, have prposed different interpretations, which cast doubt on its reading as a patristic justification of murder on the battlefield.[8] The well known 13th Canon of St. Basil the Great from his first Canonical Epistle to Amphilochus, Bishop of Iconium (378)[9], clearly acknowledges the permissibility and occasional necessity of "fighting in defense of sobriety and piety" and stipulates that the act of killing during war needs to be distinguished from voluntary murder. At the same time St Basil advises that those responsible for such acts of killing on the battlefield should abstain from communion for three years, since "their hands are not clean".

Given its uncompromising stance, St. Basil's canon has been frequently seen as forestalling the formulation and growth of just war theory in Greek Orthodox thought in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, comparable to that advanced (in its initial and formative phases by St. Augustine and St. Ambrose in the contemporaneous Latin Christian West.[10] St Basil condemned, moreover, the praise and rewards bestowed during wars on the combatants in accordance with "the magnitude of the slaughter",[11] but could also assert that the military profession could be still consonant with the Christian faith and "perfect love for God".[12]

The question of the practical applicability of St Basil's 13th canon remained an important topic in medieval Byzantine canon law deliberations and disputes regarding the legitimacy and consequences of Christian participation in warfare. These continuing

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[8] For this line of interpretation of St. Athanasius' assertion, see Stanley S. Harakas, 'The Teaching of Peace in the Fathers', in Stanley S. Harakas, *The Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics: Part One: Patristic Ethics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Orthodox Press), ch.6, 155-56; John A. McGuckin, "Non-Violence and Peace Traditions in Early and Eastern Christianity", in K. Kuriakose (ed.), *Religion, Terrorism and Globalisation: Non-Violence - A New Agenda* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2006), 189-202; John A. McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: an Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 403-404. Cf. Swift, *The Early Fathers*, 95.

[9] St. Basil the Great, *Epistle* 188.13, Rhalles and Potles, *Syntagma*, vol. 4, 131; English translation in the *Pedalion (The Rudder)*, transl. by Cummings, 801.

[10] See, for example, Harakas, 'The Teaching of Peace; McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 403-405.

[11] St Basil, *Homily 21 on Psalm 61*, 4, English translation from *Saint Basil Exegetic Homilies*, trans. by Sister Agnes C. Way (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 341-351, at 345-346.

[12] St. Basil, *Letter 106* :"I have become acquainted with a man who demonstrated that it is possible even in the military profession to maintain perfect love for God…", *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 32, col. 513; English translation in Swift, *The Early Fathers*, 94.

debates reveal a shift towards moderating the severity of St Basil's canon and generally tend to expound it as an advisory rather than a mandatory canonical requirement. They also manifest an enduring and salient concern with the spiritual dimension of the Christian soldier's fighting to defend his fellow Christians.

The early centrality of the status of the Christian soldier in Byzantine ideology of warfare is highlighted in the religiously charged orations delivered by Emperor Herakleios (610-641) to his troops during the last Sasanian Persian-Byzantine war (603-628).[13] The orations demonstrate Herakleios' efforts and intentions to intensify the religious dimension of the warfare, castigating the Sasanian adversaries as inexorable enemies of Christendom who have deliberately devastated and desecrated Christian sanctuaries. Apart from the appeals for self-sacrifice Herakleios' addresses to his troops go as far as to promise heavenly rewards (recompense from God) and even martyr's crowns to soldiers who fell in the battle for their Christian brethren's salvation, arguably the first instance of such promise for a military martyrdom in Byzantine sources.

Herakleios' efforts to introduce the notion of military martyrdom into Byzantine ideology of warfare, however, could not find mainstream currency and acceptance, as the ecclesiastical elites seem to have been continuously opposed to the theologizing and application of such notion. Consequently, the Eastern Orthodox Church was largely unaffected by the changing attitudes to the Christian involvement in warfare in Western Christendom during the pre-crusading ninth-tenth century period. During this period the first concepts of absolution and heavenly rewards for fallen Christian soldiers. defending the church and Christendom, were formulated by the Papacy, namely by Leo IV (847–855), Pope John VIII (872–882) and Pope Leo IX (1049–1054) and these concepts would crucially contribute to the development and eventual formalization of

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[13] Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia*, 303.12-304.13; 307.1-11; 310.25-311.2; *Theophanis Chronographia*, Carl de Boor (ed.). 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner 1883-1885); English translation in *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813.* Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (transl.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1997), 436, 439, 442-443. Generally, on the religious dimension of the war, see Yuri Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2011), ch. 3, 45-77.

Catholic religious military ideology in the period leading to and during the crusading era.

However, whereas the Eastern Orthodox Church by and large did not share these Western Christian developments, within the Eastern Orthodox tradition, comparable notions are recorded to have been articulated during the ambassadorial sojourn of the renowned and revered missionary to the Slavs, St. Constantine–Cyril the Philosopher (826/7–869), to the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (847–861) in 851. The ninth-century *Vita* of St. Constantine- Cyril narrates in some detail his debates with Muslim (Hagarene) theologians at the Abbasid court.[14] During these disputes the Muslim polemicists raise the question why Christians do not apply in practice the maxims in the well-known verses in Matthew 5:38–44 teaching nonviolence, non-resistance to evil/evildoers and love and prayer for one's enemies. In his reported reply St Constantine-Cyril asserts that while observing the commandment in Matthew 5:38-44, Christians also take into account the precepts in John 15:13 (''No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends''). St. Constantine-Cyril argues that as private people Christians can bear any offences, but when in company they defend each other and sacrifice their lives in battle for their neighbours.

St Constantine- Cyril thus in effect gives priority to John 15:13 and interprets through its prism the martial feats of the ''Christ-loving soldiers'' in defense of their lands, the Church and Christianity as constituting cardinal Christian duties for which they should ''fight to the last''. What is more, St Constantine- Cyril asserts that after fulfilling these ''precious pledges'', the Church would qualify these Christian soldiers as martyrs and intercessors before God. This represents a clear legitimization of Christian just war notions and the potential martyr status of the Christian warrior - the provenance of St. Constantine-Cyril 's statement can perhaps be best understood within the religio-political framework of his mission to the court of al-Mutawakkil.[15]

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[14] *Vita Constantini*, In: *Kliment Okhridskii. Sŭbrani sŭchineniia*, B. S. Angelov and K. Kodov, K. (eds.) (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bŭlgarskata Akademiia na Naukite, 1973), vol. 3, 89-109, at p. 93.

[15]See, for example, David K. Goodin, ''Just War Theory and Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Theological Perspective on the Doctrinal Legacy of Chrysostom and Constantine-Cyril'', *Theandros: An Online Journal of Orthodox Christian Theology and Philosophy*, 2(3), 2005; available at http://www.theandros.com/ justwar.html; cf. Marian Gh. Simion, "Seven Factors of Ambivalence in defining a Just War Theory in Eastern Christianity", in Marian Gh. Simion and Ilie Tălpășanu (eds.)

In marked contars with contemporary and later Catholicism, however, such notions appear only on a few occasions in medieval Eastern Orthodoxy and they were never developed in any systematic fashion or integrated into a consistent theory and the concept of military martyrdom failed to find acceptance in the mainstream of Byzantine Church thought and practice. Indeed despite becoming moderately and progressively more acquainted with crusading ideology in the era of the Crusades the Byzantine church elites retained a generally negative stance towards its principal notions regarding the status of the Christian warrior. This is also demonstrated by the fact that, in contrast to the high and late medieval Western Christendom, medieval Byzantine ecclesiastics took the formal step to respectively promise remission of sins and bestow martyrdom on Byzantine soldiers who died in battle only on two occasions which clearly represent exceptions to the predominant clerical attitudes.[16]

At the same time, the continuing influence and prestige of St. Constantine-Cyril's heritage in the Byzantine Commonwealth (and particularly in the Slavonic Orthodox world), made it possible for his pronouncements at the Abbasid court, as recounteds in his *Vita*, to be used as an authoritative basis for later Eastern Orthodox attempts to formulate and develop just war concepts (if not a systematic theory). The history of this reception is yet to be fully explored and written but it clearly represents a manifold and enduring tradition which extends to the modern period. This is well illustrated by the fact that in the twentieth and twenty-first century St. Constantine-Cyril's just war exposition at the ninth-century Abbasid court continues to provide the authorized framework for formal Eastern Orthodox documents as diverse as the St. Tikhon's, Patriarch of Moscow, "Letter to the Council of People's Commissars" of

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Proceedings: 32nd Annual Congress of the American Romanian Academy of Arts and Sciences(Polytechnic International Press: Montréal, 2008), pp. 537-543, on p. 539.

[16] On the religious and historical context of these occasions, see Stoyanov, "Norms of War", 171-172.

1918[17] and Jubilee Council of Russian Bishops statement of faith of 2000, *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Church*.[18]

[17] St. Tikhon, Patriarch of Moscow, "Poslanie patriarkha Tikohona Sovetu Narodnykh Komisarov (Letter to the Council of People's Commissars' [26 October 1918]), *Tserkovnye Vedomosti (Vysshee Russkoe Tserkovnoe Upravlenie za granitse)*, 9–10

[18] Jubilee Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, "War and Peace", *The Orthodox Church and Society: The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*. (Belleville, Michigan: St. Innocent, Firebird Publishers, 2000);