Review Essay

Byzantines, Ottomans, and Latins: Reconsidering the Politics

Nevra Necipoğlu, *Byzantium between the Ottomans and the Latins: Politics and Society in the Late Empire* (Cambridge, 2009), xiv + 372 pp.

Dimiter G. Angelov, ed., *Church and Society in Late Byzantium* (Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), 242 pp.

The history of the Byzantine Empire after the Latin conquest beginning in 1204 has been one defined by the influence and power of Byzantium's rivals and enemies and the shifting, adaptive responses of Byzantines to the increasing influence of western European Catholic powers and the emergence of the Ottoman Turks in Anatolia. The increasingly straitened political and economic conditions of Byzantium from the thirteenth to the early fifteenth centuries coincided with a period of significant religious and intellectual activity. Even here, however, Byzantine dependence on western powers for political and military aid repeatedly generated internal divisions over the issue of church union that reinforced existing economic and political grievances. In response, Byzantine church and society identified themselves increasingly in terms of opposition to Latin Christians at the same time that many of their political and ecclesiastical elites were convinced of the necessity of allying with Latin Christians.

Byzantium's later status as a tributary to the sultan imposed strict limits on Byzantine rulers from the time of John V and dictated the nature of dynastic political competition until the final decades of the empire. For much of the last century of Byzantine rule, the "internal" conflicts between Palaiologan rulers and their rebel challengers often involved Ottoman support and intervention, so much so that seeking Ottoman assistance became a customary part of any attempt to gain the throne. Sultan Bayezid's defeat at Ankara in 1402 at the hands

of Timur temporarily reversed the dynamic, but this respite simply underscored Byzantium's extreme weakness in its last decades. On the other hand, the unsuccessful Nicopolis and Varna crusades of 1396 and 1444 revealed the limits of any promised western military aid. Given the empire's predicament, most Byzantines moved into one of two alignments, either pro-Latin or pro-Ottoman, and there were very few Byzantines who could practically maintain an anti-Latin and anti-Ottoman position.

Even in a greatly reduced, more homogenous Greek-speaking empire, these responses were not uniform but varied according to location, socioeconomic status, and political and religious views. In *Byzantium between the Ottomans and the Latins*, her careful study of competing political orientations in late Palaiologan Byzantine Thessalonike, Constantinople, and Morea, Nevra Necipoğlu has presented a detailed picture of the internal conflicts created within Byzantine society during a period of frequent warfare and territorial losses. She has also augmented the economic history of late Byzantium by explaining the economic and political incentives different groups of Byzantines had for cooperating with Latins and against Ottomans, with Ottomans and against Latins, or sometimes opportunistically with both.

Necipoğlu has assembled an impressive body of evidence for her arguments, drawing on a wide array of Latin, Greek, Italian, and Turkish sources from chronicles and monastic records to council acts and the accounting books of Venetian merchants, and she has presented her material and citations effectively. The bibliography and index are very extensive and useful, and there are several appendices summarizing some basic, but nonetheless valuable prosopographical information on Thessalonian *archontes*, Constantinopolitan merchants, and Greek refugees in Italy. It is her use of this thorough prosopographical research that enriches Necipoğlu's account and fills in the picture of Byzantine society during its last few decades.

The most consistent division Necipoğlu describes is that between aristocrats in and around Thessalonike and Constantinople and the lower-class inhabitants of both cities. While

traditionally landed aristocrats were turning to commerce and finance to increase their wealth, and they were often unwilling to break with their Italian trading partners and submit to Ottoman authority, the devastation experienced by lower-class Byzantines on account of persistent warfare inclined them towards concessions to the Ottomans and hostility to Latins. For these lower-class Byzantines, the Latins represented economic competition, religious heterodoxy, and the support of the *archontes* who enjoyed relative economic prosperity amid the general deprivation of the broader population. Most of the time aristocratic economic interests and connections in Italy combined with support for church union. As important as retaining Orthodoxy and the privileges of the Orthodox Church were to anti-unionists, who derived the bulk of their support from lower-class Byzantines, Necipoğlu makes a reasonable case that economic interests and grievances were also significant inspirations for pro-Ottoman, anti-Latin, and anti-union sentiments.

The close attention to economic interests throughout Necipoğlu's treatment of political and religious views deepens our understanding of the motives and allegiances of Palaiologan-era Byzantines. In most narrative treatments of late Byzantium, resistance to church union has usually been understood almost entirely in terms of a popular religious backlash inspired by monastic leaders and fuelled by an excessive attachment to Orthodox doctrine and anti-Latin prejudice. Religious attachments and cultural antipathies undoubtedly were significant factors of anti-unionism, but what we find in Necipoğlu's account is a more complicated explanation of what sustained anti-unionist and pro-Ottoman attitudes among lower-class Byzantines. There was an expectation of prosperity, or at least of peace that would reduce the internal conflicts within Byzantine society. Lower-class Byzantines saw no tangible advantage in perpetuating conflict with the Ottomans and saw many immediate disadvantages in welcoming Latin assistance and influence: submitting to Catholic ecclesiastical authority was only one of these. Economic incentives reinforced the strong appeal of Orthodox traditionalism.

There were a few Byzantine ecclesiastics who initially held a combined anti-Latin/anti-Ottoman position, such as Thessalonike's Metropolitans Isidore Glabas and Symeon, whose homilies Necipoğlu relies on extensively in analyzing the political orientations in Thessalonike. Like the broader population that embraced an anti-Latin, anti-union position, Isidore's early anti-Ottoman orientation was transformed into pragmatic acquiescence to Ottoman authority during periods of occupation so long as the Ottomans guaranteed the autonomy of the church and the judicial powers the archbishops had acquired earlier. Given the later alternative of Venetian military protection in the 1420s, Symeon's anti-Latin position yielded to practical acceptance of assistance from Venice. The political and military situation in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was such that none could afford the luxury of resisting both Latin influence and Ottoman power at the same time for very long. As much as Ottoman conquests were forced upon Byzantium, there was a degree of grudging acceptance of the coming of Ottoman rule among most Byzantines that was prompted by their reactions to the growing influence of the Latins and the dealings Byzantine *archontes* had with them.

Necipoğlu also discusses the most famous apocryphal statement expressing a preference for the turban over the miter attributed to Loukas Notaras, and proves fairly conclusively that Notaras held no such view. As she does with a number of other aristocratic families, she has investigated the economic practices of Notaras' family and found that the Notarades were like many other members of their class in having long-established trading connections to Italy. Despite the well-known quote attributed to Notaras by the chronicler Doukas, anti-unionist sources do not identify Notaras as an ally, and Scholarios himself specifically claims that Notaras was a unionist who favoured submitting to Rome out of political and military expedience alone. The case of Notaras, which at first appears to undermine her thesis of a close connection between economic interests and political-religious orientations, ultimately confirms the observation of a pattern of pro-Latin accom-

modation among Byzantine aristocrats with economic interests in Italy.

Reconstructing social history and recovering the views of social classes that have left behind no records of their own are always difficult tasks, and it is appropriate to use religious literature, including homilies, to find evidence describing social and economic conditions. It is still questionable how much one can expect that "preachings of the clergy" will be "more representative of the attitudes that prevailed among people of lower social rank."[1] Earlier in the fourteenth century, Gregory Palamas in his role as archbishop of Thessalonike railed against both exploitative landowners and rebellious Zealots in certain homilies, but it is potentially very misleading to assume from this that the statements of a learned, elite monastic engaged in a rhetorical performance for a high ecclesiastical office were representative of lower-class attitudes. This applies equally to Thessalonike's later archbishops.

As Necipoğlu discussed in her second chapter on Thessalonike, two of Isidore's homilies restated a hierarchical understanding of the importance of obedience to established secular authorities and emphasized the virtues and qualifications of the city's *archontes*. These homilies certainly bear witness to deep social tensions in Thessalonike, but Isidore's preaching itself is unlikely to be very representative of the attitudes of lower-class Thessalonians, whom Isidore was counselling against disobedience and unrest. To the extent that these two homilies reflect lower-class attitudes, they do so indirectly by alerting us to the discontent that Isidore was attempting to reduce.

Anti-Latin opposition in this period could take the straightforward form of rejection of papal authority and church union. As Dimiter Angelov shows in *Church and Society in Late Byzantium* in his article, "The Donation of Constantine," it could also be found in more complicated arguments that sought either to use the forged Donation of Constantine to undermine papal claims or to debunk the Donation entirely as a fraud. Despite the obvious pro-papal message of the Donation, Angelov details how Byzantine authors circulated and used the

[1] Necipoğlu, *Byzantium Between the Ottomans and the Latins*, 13–14.

text in different ways to bolster the authority and status of the patriarch of Constantinople or dismiss the Petrine argument for papal authority.

For some Palaiologan anti-Latin polemicists, such as Barlaam of Calabria, the Donation provided valuable ammunition by locating the source of papal authority in the grant bestowed on Pope Sylvester I by Constantine rather than in the succession from Saint Peter. This made the status of the bishop of Rome something of human origin, which could then be used to support the equality of the other patriarchates. Others saw it as evidence supporting the elevated status for bishops and the requirement of secular rulers, including the emperor, to show special deference and respect to them, and this was then applied to patriarchs in Constantinople. After 1204, patriarchs and their supporters cited the relationship between Constantine and Pope Sylvester as a model for contemporary emperors to follow, and Metropolitan Symeon of Thessalonike was one of the last Byzantine churchmen to cite the Donation to protest imperial interference in internal church affairs.

Most important of the examples Angelov investigates was that of Makarios, metropolitan of Ankara residing in Constantinople at the turn of the fifteenth century, who systematically and carefully critiqued the authenticity of the Donation on historical grounds. Angelov's treatment of the criticism represents the first extensive discussion of Makarios's argument. While he emphasizes the significance of Makarios's work, he remains doubtful that Makarios's argument inspired subsequent Renaissance critics of the same text. This conclusion seems reasonable, as there is no evidence of circulation of Makarios's writings in Italy, and it is improbable that an anti-Latin text would find much of a receptive audience in the west. Generally, the Palaiologan intellectuals that generated the greatest interest in the west were either overtly supportive of church union and some aspects of scholastic thought, such as Demetrios Kydones, or they were at least not actively hostile to union. Most accounts of late Byzantine culture have tended to divide sharply between "humanists" and hesychasts, pitting intellectuals open to western thought against monastics adamantly opposed both to Catholic doctrine and new methods of

reasoning. The case of Makarios of Ankara offers evidence that the nature of this divide can be easily exaggerated. Makarios was an anti-Latin hierarch who could engage in rigorous historical criticism similar to that used later by Italian humanists in the service of his polemical purpose, and he produced a polemic inspired by the prospect of church union and submission to papal authority that anticipated Italian humanist criticism of the Donation. Makarios "shared with his renowned Renaissance contemporaries a common historical approach to textual critique, a central feature of the new age of humanism."[2]

While rising Latin influence provoked Byzantine reactions centered on religious differences, wars with the Ottoman Turks generated a different, liturgical response in the form of the composition of new prayers and services in preparation for conflict with Muslims. In "From Constantinople to Moscow," Philip Slavin has introduced the reader to twenty-two new prayers composed between 1336 and 1360, sixteen of which concerned war with the Ottomans, and has classified and analyzed them in his study of the Byzantine liturgy of war. Most of the sixteen are prayers for aid against invasion, and some are more general supplications for intercession on behalf of Christians against their enemies. Overwhelmingly, the prayers Slavin has discussed are concerned with defence and requests for divine forgiveness that will remove the moral and spiritual causes of the invasions. Nonetheless, Slavin argued that he located "elements of an ideology of holy warfare" in these prayers that challenge the view that Byzantines had no notion of holy war.[3]

Whether or not Byzantines had their own concept of holy war has been a contested point, and part of the reason for the disagreement is the differing standards by which scholars have judged Byzantine war rhetoric and ideology. Warfare against non-Christian powers inevitably involved some official rhetoric that portrayed conflicts in strongly religious, triumphalist language. Sasanian-Byzantine wars in the fifth and again in the seventh century provided examples of this before the coming

[2] Angelov, "The Donation of Constantine," 124.
[3] Slavin, "From Constantinople to Moscow," 212.

of Islam, and George of Pisidia's panegyrics dedicated to Heraclius are well-known contributions to this literature. George of Pisidia's *Contra Severum* celebrated Heraclius's victory over the Sasanians in close connection with his supposed theological triumph over non-Chalcedonians at a 631 synod in Hierapolis, which presented a picture of Heraclius as the empire's military and spiritual champion, but even this was a combination of traditional praise for the emperor and normal theological polemic. As infused with religious enthusiasm and imagery as George's poems were, they remained panegyrics working within the traditions of Roman imperial ideology. As much as the seventh-century war against the Sasanians might lend itself to comparisons with later wars to retake Jerusalem, the Byzantines at the time regarded it as a Roman defensive war. That war had a religious dimension, because of Sasanian Zoroastrianism, the occupation of Jerusalem, and capture of the relics of the True Cross, but holy war was something else. The same argument applies to later Byzantine periods as well.

To the extent that the Byzantines regarded themselves as the New Israel and Constantinople as their Jerusalem, there were bound to be prayers and religiously-charged rhetoric that invoked the protection of God and the Theotokos. Biblical imagery and comparisons of Byzantine emperors with prophets and kings of the Old Testament were evidence of the extent to which the empire had been Christianized, but they do not in themselves prove that Byzantines conceived of war as sacred or holy. Crucially, even after their exposure to Crusading ideas on warfare and penance, the Byzantines never understood war as a holy undertaking through which someone might expiate his sins, much less that he could achieve salvation as a martyr on the battlefield. Famously, Nikephoros II Phokas (963–69) failed to persuade Patriarch Polyeuktos that his fallen soldiers should be recognized as martyrs in their wars against Muslims in Syria and Cyprus, and there is no record that any later emperors revisited the question.

Slavin is correct that Byzantines did employ religious rhetoric justifying defensive warfare and offered prayers appealing for divine aid, and Byzantines could liken their conflicts to apocalyptic struggles. However, even when wars were

being fought against non-Christian foes they did not acquire the distinction of being holy wars. If we accept that Byzantines possessed a Roman national identity, as Anthony Kaldellis has argued in *Hellenism in Byzantium*, we might understand these prayers better as invocations for help in wars of national defence and survival. Particularly by the fourteenth century, as Byzantium was beginning to weaken to a point where it would become an Ottoman tributary state, Byzantines were facing the possibility of the collapse of their polity and the captivity of their nation. When they likened their predicament to that of Israel, Byzantine authors of these prayers were drawing on the scriptural sources that addressed the plight of the people of God confronted by their enemies. The "mere desire for victory at home" that the Byzantines had was the product of their tradition of just war, and the fourteenth-century prayers were aimed to secure the empire of the Romans that the Orthodox Church likened to Israel.

Necipoğlu's final section concerns Byzantine political orientations in the Morea, whose aristocracy had more diverse and changeable responses to Latin influence and Ottoman success. The Morea was less directly threatened by Ottoman military advances after Bayezid's defeat at Ankara, and as a result Moreote landowners were more concerned to protect their holdings and privileges against increased central authority from Manuel II in Constantinople. Many Moreote landlords were willing to make accommodations with either Ottomans or Latins depending on circumstances and guarantees of their position and property. Most high-ranking Moreote families changed their orientations and allegiances as necessary to secure their positions, and even preferred disorder and conflict so long as it ensured their independence from Constantinople. One interesting case that Necipoğlu examines at length concerns the Eudaimonoioannes family, which took a sustained pro-Latin political stance in keeping with its history of submission to Frankish rule and its business dealings in Italy.

The Eudaimonoioannes family cultivated strong relations with Venice, and one of its leading members, Nicholas, was deeply involved in diplomatic exchanges with the Republic

and arranged marriages for leading members of the Palaiologan dynasty as well as attending the Council of Constance to propose church union. Nicholas Eudaimonoioannes provides an example of a Moreote landowner whose family's economic interests aligned with the diplomatic projects of the emperor. His case suggests that sufficiently strong economic ties to Italy tended to bind even independent-minded Moreote landowners to the imperial center when it concerned Constantinople's diplomatic relations in the west.

Urban monastic foundations in Thessalonike and Constantinople were among the institutions most negatively affected by Ottoman territorial gains in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Fiscal losses through alienation of property were the main cause of church decline in the late Byzantine period as a whole. Necipoğlu has described this process for non-Athonite monasteries in the major cities, which lost many of their rural properties to Ottoman control, and monasteries' abbots had to negotiate with Ottoman authorities for economic concessions despite their initial anti-Ottoman/anti-Latin stance. Tom Papademetriou provides additional examination of this process of impoverishment in "The Turkish Conquests and the Decline of the Church." Papademetriou examined the *Patriarchal Acta*, the record of the patriarchal synod in Constantinople, and found that the responses of Anatolian bishops to Turkish control might sometimes be the same kind of resistance to central, patriarchal authority and accommodation with local Turkish rulers that Necipoğlu identified in the Morea among Byzantine landowners.

In order to secure property rights, competing Anatolian bishops often sought the mediation and support of Turkish authorities. This was a practical solution for those bishops that remained in their dioceses, but this necessarily put them at odds with the patriarchate, which condemned the involvement of Turkish rulers in any ecclesiastical matters. As the examples of the Moreote landowners suggest, however, these accommodations with non-Byzantine authorities and resistance to Constantinople's control reflected both the needs of local secular and ecclesiastical leadership and the significant limits

of the power of both Byzantine church and state in the Palaiologan era.

Late Byzantine society was sharply divided by glaring social and economic inequalities that shaped and reinforced internal political and religious antagonisms. The economic and political interests of Byzantium's *archontes* were sufficiently at odds with the broad majority of the inhabitants of the empire's two major cities, and the interests of Moreote landowners were at odds with the emperors' attempts to re-establish control in their region, and this dictated their respective responses to church union and Ottoman power. The promise of religious autonomy under the Ottomans in which pro-Ottoman Byzantines trusted was partly undermined by many monasteries' losses of productive territories and the ongoing impoverishment of the church under Ottoman rule.

Severe deprivation caused by persistent warfare with the Ottomans naturally inclined the majority of the population towards a position of accommodation with the Ottomans. This complemented their strong attachment to an Orthodox identity coloured by resentments against Latins and the Byzantine elites who cooperated with them. Perhaps because they were similar in religion while still being significantly different in their customs and beliefs, the Latins represented more of an intangible threat to the Byzantines than the tangible losses to the Ottomans. The hoped-for post-conquest elimination of intra-Byzantine conflicts that had motivated lower-class support for accommodation with the Ottomans ultimately came at the price of the loss of empire, but this was a smaller price than the feared loss of identity that would come with church union.

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