

CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

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At present institutional Christianity has no power in America. Yes, “separation of church and state” is both ahistorical and stupid, but even a separation recognizes the dual nature of any society, typically governed in concert by both the secular and the spiritual. But nature abhors a vacuum, so as the power of Christianity has faded, the state has filled the empty space. This imbalance is one of the major reasons for our present discontents. Yet individual Christians are still here, and still must navigate political waters. Moreover, we can hope that in a future dispensation, Christianity may yet again wield power. Thus, the intersection of Christianity and political philosophy, the topic of this short book, is very much worth considering.

The Eastern Orthodox have, since Constantine, needed to manage formal ties between church and state—sometimes with greater success, sometimes with less. This book, by Pavlos Kyprianou, does not claim to be a complete treatise on the relationship between Orthodoxy and politics. Nor is it offered as advice to America; Kyprianou says nothing specifically about America. He appears to be a Cypriot by origin; he doesn’t live here or have any obvious connection to America. He is a lawyer by training; he went to school in London and practiced as a barrister from 2000 until 2013. But in 2018 he became a monk in Limassol, the second-largest city in Cyprus, and his book, published in 2023, is explicitly informed by the thinking of the Metropolitan of Limassol, Bishop Athanasios. (The Metropolitan was made famous by a book written by another Cypriot, *The Mountain of Silence* by Kyriacos Markides, in which the Metropolitan, then a simple monk, is the main interlocutor of the author.)

The double-headed eagle, a carving of which graces the cover of the book, is a late Byzantine imperial symbol, sometimes thought to symbolize the Emperor’s role in both church and state. It is an apt symbol, both in the abstract and for this book. But its use also highlights a problem of this book, for an American, which is that parts of it revolve around matters and conflicts that are obscure. Kyprianou says explicitly that part

of the reason he wrote this book was to combat “right-wing nationalist ideology” among Cypriot clergy (as we will see, his objection is more to “nationalist” than “right-wing”). The example he gives is a controversy over the placement, in the Theological Seminary in Nicosia (the capital of Cyprus) of a statue of one Archbishop Makarios. Wikipedia will tell you that Makarios was both President of Cyprus after its independence, in 1960, and also its Archbishop. Kyprianou assumes that not only the reader knows who Makarios was, but what his politics and actions were. This opacity is not a fatal problem, and Wikipedia helps, but it seems pretty clear that an American reader will miss certain references and, more relevantly, not fully understand the frame of certain arguments.

In any case, Kyprianou begins with nationalism and Christianity. This is a crucial and fraught topic, often discussed recently among some groups of Protestants (though we will not address that today), and one of particular resonance for the Orthodox. The goal of the Church is to maximize the salvation of mankind, using all means necessary, except sinful means. This necessarily implies the entanglement of the Church with secular matters. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure the Church does not become just another among many secular institutions, but rather a spiritual institution which sanctifies secular institutions, and makes disciples of all the nations, seeking communion with Christ. The Church aims to restore the pre-Fall world, which implies “no exclusivity or exclusion” from admission to the Church. We live, however, in the post-Fall world. What does this mean for how national identity interacts with the Church?

Kyprianou is not opposed to nations. In fact, he sees the story of the Tower of Babel as God’s endorsement of a multipolar world instead of a one-world government (although he hedges his bets on whether a one-world government with “a political philosophy inspired by” Orthodoxy would be acceptable). What Kyprianou objects to is “the elevation of the nation or race to a supreme idea, faith, or ideology,” which he rejects as “ethnophyletism or nationalism.” Phyletism is an Orthodox heresy, which boils down to limiting the Church, in ecclesial organization or membership, on national or racial/ethnic grounds. More technically, it is the heresy that within a given geographic territory, there can exist several Church jurisdictions, each of which directs its efforts only to members of specific national or ethnic groups, to the deliberate exclusion

of others. Thus, Kyprianou implicitly defines nationalism not as love of country, or placing the interests of one's nation and compatriots above those of foreigners, but as ecclesiastical exclusion.

Phyletism is a very modern heresy. It did not exist before the late nineteenth century, when the term was coined, as part of a now-obscure controversy regarding the Bulgarian Exarchate's relationship to the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch, wherein the Ottoman suzerainty over the Bulgarian lands was also relevant (and in which can be detected echoes of current controversies between the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Russian Patriarchate with respect to Ukraine). Various manifestations of what may be called phyletism are a problem in many parts of the world for modern Orthodox, as a result of the spread of Orthodox through emigration. In most cases no national church has been formed in countries where Orthodox are newcomers, rather each ethnic group has set up churches tied to its "original" national church. This, combined with the modern existence of nationalism as an important force for most ethnic groupings, has not infrequently led to exclusionary actions. In the Orthodox context, where one national church in each nation is the norm, having multiple overlapping Orthodox jurisdictions is anomalous and not preferred, but nobody has come up with a good way to fix it. In practice, the best that can be done is for each outpost of a national Orthodox church in another nation to welcome all; the opposite is phyletism.

Kyprianou distinguishes phyletism from patriotism, in that the former "refers to an unwholesome love for the homeland," while the latter "means love both for the homeland and for the entire world." He does not say what he means by "unwholesome," but it appears he means an exclusionary love, whereas he believes "Christian love does not distinguish between nations." A Christian may not love his homeland in a way "that betokens hostility or indifference to the world." Then he backs off this definition, suggesting that the Christian may "love the homeland as a specific place of communion," but not as "an impersonal idea and ideology." (This implies a preferential love, but Kyprianou does not pursue the matter.) Phyletism therefore can be described as "the division and partition of humanity not as an objective and inevitable description of a fact . . . but as a biased prescription."

In theory, phyletism could relate to attempts to limit Orthodoxy on racial grounds, and I am informed that some have tried to do exactly that. While as I have discussed elsewhere so-called white nationalism is fake, a tendentious boogeyman spun up by the Left in order to shut down discussion and justify the violent destruction of all who oppose them, it would be phyletism to try to limit an Orthodox church, or any Orthodox grouping or organization, on racial grounds. It doesn't seem very likely to be me to be a major problem, but then again, I am always saying that "Orthodoxy is the coming thing," so if the racial divide continues to be exacerbated in the United States by anti-white hatred whipped up by the Regime, it is certainly something that bears the Orthodox being on guard against.

Kyprianou then continues the theme of nations, turning to sanctification of the nation, counterpoised to idolatry of the nation, which "may provide the impetus and inspiration for the transcendence of the nation to meet other nations in communion on the basis of Orthodox civilization." We should "support and unite the nation but not identify with it, nor become subservient to it." However, unification of nations, even Orthodox nations, is by no means required; such combinations are a matter of "discernment." And while there is no geographic limitation to the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor, the primary mechanism for doing so is in a "personal and communal" manner, which "usually presupposes a common place and time." That is, "love your neighbor and through your neighbor love all humanity and God Himself." Even Christ loved his own nation, after all, not "against the world, but for the benefit of the world," though he was not, obviously, interested in "liberation struggles."

So far, so good. But how is this to be put into practice? Here, we turn to conflict, and we begin to sense some special pleading. Christ may not have been interested in evicting the Romans, but today "in order to protect the land and its people, the Church can give its blessing for armed resistance to invaders and, with especial discernment, to liberation struggles, on the basis of the principle 'choose the lesser of two evils.'" It is apparent what Kyprianou has in mind is Greek and Cypriot struggles against the Turk. But it less apparent that "choose the lesser of two evils" is a Christian doctrine, and it does not rescue this apparent contradiction that Kyprianou counsels love for the enemy in the midst of

conflict, which he interprets as engaging in violence, but without hatred. He mostly, but not completely, limits this to defensive wars, again (it appears) to leave an opening for throwing off the yoke of the Turk. I'm all for throwing off the yoke of the Turk, but this exceedingly precise phrasing is suspect. It is just not clear from this what the position of the average Orthodox Christian citizen should be about nationalistic violence, either in the abstract or with respect to his nation, nor is it at all clear that purely defensive wars are the only acceptable ones.

I think it would have been helpful if Kyprianou adopted Carl Schmitt's position, taken from the distinction in the Vulgate between *hostis* and *inimicus*, between the private enemy and the public enemy. "A public enemy [*hostis*] is one with whom we are at war publicly. . . . In this respect he differs from a private enemy [*inimicus*]. He is a person with whom we have private quarrels. They may be distinguished as follows: a private enemy is a person who hates us, whereas a public enemy is a person who fights against us." The Turks are the public enemy; we are not commanded to love the public enemy, but if anything, to struggle against him. In fact, the Turks, or rather Islam more generally, is Schmitt's exact example of the public enemy. "Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens or Turks. . . . [Christ's command] certainly does not mean that one should love and support the enemies of one's own people."

Because he has no such frame (and also because, in a somewhat Protestant way, tends to rely on Scriptural references while largely ignoring the Church Fathers), Kyprianou flounders. "Revolutionary violence, however, is not in line with the Gospel, save, perhaps, for exceptional situations after all avenues of compromise have been exhausted due to the intransigence of the oppressing side." This vagueness is a far cry from the rigorous approach of Saint Thomas Aquinas to rebellion. Then he asks, "Can a true and healthy society be born from the antisocial seed of violence and revolution, that is, of civil war?" Leaving aside that revolutions are not necessarily civil wars, the answer is clearly yes—look only at the American War of Independence. In fact, civil wars are very often the precursor to civilizational rebirth, as the contradictions that have encrusted a dying polity are resolved by being burned off. War is, in its implementation and practice, extremely antisocial. Its downstream

consequences, however, are clarifying and often beneficial for the survivors. That doesn't mean war is good, but it does mean that Kyprianou is offering an overly-simplistic analysis for considering these questions.

Aside from war, Kyprianou completely ignores knotty questions that are currently actual political questions for Orthodox, and for Christians more generally. So, for example, what of allowing migrants from alien cultures to settle in a nation? Hundreds of millions of people are desperate to move to America, and to Europe. Very few of them are fleeing persecution (and, in fact, the American government works very hard to deny any entrance to Christians who face persecution abroad). Almost all of them just want either freebies or a better economic life. They hugely modify the life and culture of the target nation, mostly very negatively. In any case, it is not obvious that a nation, or a Christian, owes any general duty to open its borders to those persecuted abroad, especially those who are not themselves Christian. Yet our government has admitted, mostly illegally and completely against the wishes of the vast majority of Americans, tens of millions of invaders (most of whom can and should be deemed public enemies), as have European governments (except a few wise ones such as Hungary). This is a live and contested political question in our nation. What does Kyprianou think about this? The reader does not know.

We then turn to the broader question of the structures governing the relationship between church and state. Kyprianou calls for the Church having maximum possible influence on the state while also remaining maximally independent and having no official temporal power, which is a bit like calling for a square circle. Nonetheless, this is the traditional Orthodox ideal of symphony, which can work well, though usually doesn't, due to failings in state, Church, or both. It may, however, still be better than the alternatives.

But then Kyprianou tries to put meat on these bones, and the attempt falls flat. He notes that the Church does not call for any particular form of government, but also that the Church would necessarily prefer a form of government that offers the rule of law. (He does not say exactly why, but the obvious answer is that the rule of law, a concept found nowhere outside Christendom, is the clearest and fastest way for a sovereign to maximize justice.) Then we go off into the weeds. Democracy is described as "power to the people" and conflated with the rule of law,

both utter falsehoods as a historical and philosophical matter. Then Kyprianou calls for, simultaneously, a monarchy, to offer a personal element to the rule of law. The reader experiences whiplash, made worse in the next paragraphs when the author explains he means an elected monarch—who must retire at seventy-five, and be an Orthodox Christian. I mean, maybe, but there is no historical example of such a system, ever, anywhere, which suggests it is a bad system. The reader begins to realize that what we are getting are Kyprianou's utopian musings, uninformed by either history or by analysis of other thinkers, secular or religious. Never let lawyers loose, that's what I say.

Then we return to exhortations to individuals, and to more profitable themes, including how the Church should relate to "ideologies and parties." While Kyprianou does not precisely define ideology, he seems to be reaching for a definition similar to that of James Burnham: "a more or less systematic and self-contained set of ideas supposedly dealing with the nature of reality . . . and calling for a commitment independent of specific experience or events." He says that someone who "identifies with or subordinates himself to an ideology . . . reduces his own status as a person because he ceases to think freely." Moreover, an ideology offers a "claim to comprehensiveness [which] is not conducive to communion," leading even to attempted "self-deification" (a frequent target of the author). This is quite good. But then Kyprianou ruins his good run, by rejecting the idea of left- and right-wing political action, as an "artificial division of society," which "contradicts the spirit of the Gospel" by creating a "dichotomy of 'us versus you,'" with "potentially anti-communal or antisocial consequences." One should not even call oneself "right" or "left," because by doing so "one has already manifested an unwholesome attraction to the impersonal, an addiction to the ideological veil, and a potential desire to reject Christian Orthodox person-centeredness." Such labels "polarize, fanaticize, and entrench their followers."

This is incorrect. Dichotomy is not always bad, for there is both good and evil abroad in the world, and sometimes a dichotomy is merely recognizing this essential truth. The Left is a real thing, the essence of an ideology, and it is the enemy of mankind and a tool of Satan. The Right is not an ideology at all, and its only real definition is that it is not Left. To be sure, within the Right there have been a few Right ideologies,

though none have any current power or significant following. But in practice, today, being Right simply means rejecting the poison of the Left and being grounded in reality. One of these things is not like the other; they are not simply two polar opposites, equally distasteful, with some fictional middle ground that a Christian should occupy. It is no doubt true that one can be on the Right and engage in behavior which conflicts with Christian dictates. It is much, much easier and more likely that someone on the Left will not only find his politics requires such behavior, but that his politics require overt attacks on Christianity and Christians—on real Christianity, that is, not leftism wearing a cloak of Christian colors.

This aspirational, ungrounded approach to politics continues. We get clarion calls for both Church and state to recognize and work for “human rights,” without once attempting to define the same, or acknowledging that in current practice the term is almost always code for “whatever the Left demands today.” It’s not like Kyprianou is some leftist apologist. Almost certainly, objectively viewed, he fits on the Right; it would be hard to be an Orthodox monk and be a man of the Left. He castigates abortion, euthanasia, trannies, and homosexual “marriage” (all core “human rights” in the eyes of the powerful today). His economic views are what one would expect, a combination of reasonable limitations on the market with unexamined goals that sound good. Thus, he calls for a “human-centered” economic system, combining freedom with equality. Very Foundationalist. But then he repeatedly says we must always pay for unlimited higher education (one of the disasters that has ruined the West), and says we need “maximum possible incentives to produce wealth and at the same time maximum possible redistribution of wealth for the benefit of all the people.” Such forced redistribution might work in the right society, but in practice has typically worked very, very badly, and never, ever, works in a democracy. The reader is left uncertain if Kyprianou is simply a detached academic, or someone unwilling to see the actual threads of politics in a vain attempt to not pick a side.

Finally, we get a grab bag of odd ideas. Kyprianou suggests that Christian charity dictates that, if possible, each of us pay more in taxes than assessed, though payors should be incentivized by thereby purchasing “advisory positions” in the government. Given the spending of

modern Western governments on manifold evils, and that even elected politicians have very little influence over government action, this is the opposite of good advice. (A clue is given to his frame, however, by his noting that this will “reduce the inclination . . . to masonic membership.” The reader notes again that this is book is not about America.) Government employees should not be subject to being dismissed upon a change in power, but they should be militarized and their pay cut to make them better behaved. I am pretty sure that is not going to work. The workplace should be “democratized.” Kyprianou does not seem to realize that democracy in an actual business is desired by neither workers nor owners. And, last in this section, we get a disquisition on law, with the (correct) conclusion that the common law is better than Roman/code law, but the topic seems out of place.

The rest of the book is highly technical discussion of the organization of Orthodoxy, in large part advocating a type of subsidiarity as a partial solution to conflicts between nationally-based Orthodox churches, combined with advocating possible federations of Orthodox states, with a “supranational” Orthodox identity. Kyprianou also raises, gently, the problems arising over the ecclesial status of Orthodoxy in Ukraine. My read, although much of this is above my pay grade, is that what he really wants is an Orthodox union where the Russians, as by far the most powerful Orthodox state, cooperate with the Ecumenical Patriarch and others, rather than engage in fisticuffs. I’m all for that, but just not well informed enough to comment on it—and you will not be better informed reading this book, because as I say Kyprianou assumes the reader has a great deal of background knowledge.

I will say, I actually enjoyed this book. It may not answer all, or even many, questions related to how Orthodox Christians should relate to political philosophy. But it raises many, and that is a place to start. Maybe, as the Orthodox presence in the West grows, and become less ethnically-based, we will get more books on this topic, helping to flesh out the Orthodox perspective. I certainly hope so.