

**JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON THE ROMAN  
EMPIRE: A STUDY ON THE POLITICAL  
THOUGHT OF THE EARLY CHURCH**  
(CONSTANTINE BOZINIS)

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In late modernity a strange delusion has taken hold among many Christians. They have come to believe that democracy, broad popular participation in how a society is governed, is a morally superior political system, even one desired by God, rather than simply one among many, and perhaps one both morally and practically worse than any other. To every Christian thinker of the prior two thousand years, apotheosizing democracy in this way would have been bizarre at best, heretical at worst. We can be sure that such an idea never passed the mind of Saint John of Antioch, known as Chrysostom, who lived and died under the Empire of Rome.

This book is an interesting, but frustrating, analysis of what Chrysostom said about the Roman Empire. It's frustrating for two reasons. First, he said almost nothing about the Roman Empire, which means the author, Constantine Bozinis, essentially engages in apophatic analysis—telling us what he thinks Chrysostom thought about the Empire by analyzing what he did not say about the Empire. That's not worthless, and the author does a good job, but it gives a nebulous feel to the analysis. Second, Bozinis is Greek, and his book is translated from the Greek. But both in the body of the text and in the voluminous footnotes (which are half the entire book), he repeatedly fails to translate terms and quotations, both from the Greek and from other languages. Thus, the English-language reader cannot fully grasp some of what the author is saying. Probably none of it is essential, but it still makes the book incomplete.

Chrysostom was a voluminous writer, although most of his writings are actually transcribed homilies, rather than formal tomes. Most, or nearly all, of Chrysostom's writing is included in the English-language multi-volume compilation *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, which I really need to add to my library. I earlier discussed several of his sermons collected under the title *On Wealth and Poverty*, and those sermons, as apparently most of his sermons, generally revolve around practical

applications of Christian principles to the Christian life. A good deal of Chrysostom's sermonizing is directed critically at the lifestyle of the ruling classes of his time and place, but strictly in a social, not political, key. I have always been fascinated, for example, that on several occasions Chrysostom is very exercised by the multicolored shoelaces worn by the rich, which, among many other luxury expenditures by the wealthy, he regarded as stealing from the poor.

Bozinis states up-front that Chrysostom said little about the Roman Empire. Instead, he typically talks about groups of individuals identified by either their religion or their home city. He never addresses any group as "Romans," not once in the fifteen volumes of his collected writings in Greek. "Chrysostom often gives us the impression that he is still living in an autonomous Greek city that is engrossed in the internal problems of its own civic life." The *polis* is his focus, not the far-distant emperor, whose only notable impact on most cities was the collection of taxes and the occasional enforcing of order.

In fact, only three of Chrysostom's homilies mention the emperor at all. None of them are the type of panegyric often directed in those times to the Emperor, by churchmen as well as secular figures. Only one touches directly on political topics—a sermon aimed at the Emperor Theodosius after, in A.D. 387, the people of Antioch engaged in a riotous revolt where statues of the Emperor were destroyed, and Chrysostom was (mostly successfully) attempting to mitigate the Emperor's anger and bring the people to repentance. Lacking direct comment by Chrysostom, Bozinis therefore relies on contrasting what thoughts Chrysostom did express with those of others, most of all Eusebius of Caesarea, bishop of that city in the late third and early fourth centuries and famed historian of the Church. Eusebius frequently praised the Emperor while omitting any theology at all, occasionally also directing respectful theological sermons at the Emperor and his court, something Chrysostom never did, even when (involuntarily) appointed Archbishop of Constantinople in 397. In part, this was no doubt due to his conflict with the Emperor Arcadius, or more precisely with his wife Eudoxia, whom Chrysostom publicly castigated, a conflict which was the main cause of Chrysostom dying in exile in 407, although he also fought with other powerful churchmen over matters of both organization and doctrine.

The only area in which Chrysostom discusses the Emperor substantively has very little connection with the Emperors who lived during his lifetime, who were all Christians. Instead, he wrote several times about the “synchronic parallel,” a frequent focus of early Christians—the belief that the ascent of Caesar Augustus, and the beginning of the Pax Romana, coinciding with Christ’s earthly ministry, was ordained by God in order to permit the spread of the Christian faith. This line of thought, of which Origen was a proponent, tied the Scriptural injunction to obey the civil authorities to the need for peace in order that the Gospel message might be more easily spread. Eusebius brought this theory to full flower, using it to wholeheartedly endorse the imperial system, in essence praising Caesaropapism as ordained by God, downplaying past persecution of Christians. He saw the rise of Augustus as a second theophany and the end of polyarchy as leading to the end of polytheism. Eusebius therefore tended toward Arianism, to the extent of viewing the co-equal Persons of the Trinity as a form of undesirable polyarchy.

In these analyses, persecutions of Christians were usually presented as occasional deviations by bad Emperors from the desirable imperial structure. Chrysostom, by contrast, was lukewarm on synchronic parallelism, and had no use whatsoever for Arianism or any other claim (and there were several) which undermined the fullness of the Trinity. Certainly, he taught that peace is desirable, both for its own sake and that the people may be unburdened by existential secular concerns and therefore free to seek Christ. But his focus is on the preeminence and importance of the Church, not of Caesar, a reverse of the approach of Eusebius. The humble Apostles, fishermen and tent makers, and their successors are the ones whose authority matters, not the Emperor’s. And necessarily, therefore, it is the dominance of the Church, not of the Empire, which Chrysostom teaches will lead to universal peace. Thus, Chrysostom goes so far as to criticize Augustus as an impious pagan, who might have incidentally benefitted the Church. He also frequently implies that pre-Constantinian Emperors were tyrants—not because they did not have popular support, which is irrelevant to Chrysostom, but because they acted unjustly and worked in opposition to Christianity. Viewing his writings on the topic as a whole, Chrysostom in effect undermines the traditional approach to how the Empire was viewed.

All this is quite interesting. But we learn more about Eusebius and his fellow travelers than we learn about Chrysostom.

Bozinis next turns to a topic that has long interested me, the *katechon*, the force which, in Second Thessalonians, Saint Paul tells us holds back the Antichrist, agent of Satan, for now. This was a topic that, unsurprisingly, also interested many early Church Fathers. It also intrigued more modern thinkers—René Girard, for example, noted that the *katechon* only holds back Satan in part. Christ did not imprison Satan, after all; rather, he “fell like lightning,” as Christ says he witnessed himself, and Satan fell to earth, “where he will not remain inactive.” Carl Schmitt turned Saint Paul’s prophecy into a broader political concept, that some authority must restrain chaos and maintain order, perhaps the Emperor in Saint Paul’s time, another force now—but not the popular will, certainly, and not any element of liberal government. It seems the *katechon* is a matter of timeless interest, as with most apocalyptic prophecy.

Bozinis, however, focuses on what the Fathers said about the *katechon*, making no comment on modern views. Saint Irenaeus viewed Paul’s verses through the prism of the apocalyptic prophecies of both the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. Daniel explicitly sees the Antichrist as emerging from the fourth of four great kingdoms, a figure who will fearsomely war against Christ’s Church until defeated by the Son of Man, and this prophecy is reflected and amplified in Revelation. Both Irenaeus and Chrysostom saw Rome as that fourth kingdom, and its continuation as the *katechon*. If Rome were to fall, it followed that the Antichrist would appear. Thus, despite that Rome, until Constantine less than a century before Chrysostom’s time, was not Christian, it was held necessary by several Fathers for Christians to continually support the health of the Roman state.

Chrysostom again takes a different tack. He offers very limited support to the Roman state as the restrainer of the Antichrist. He is certainly opposed to anarchy, which leads to confusion and injustice, and prevents the universal spread of the Church. But this does not mean that Rome, or any other secular authority, is a fount of virtue. Rather, it is a reason to accept, in a proto-Machiavellian view, that the secular state must rule through fear, not a set of virtues as other Fathers claimed. Thus, it can very easily become unjust, as it had under numerous Emperors. It is not so much the Antichrist, in fact, whom Chrysostom fears; he rejects

specific exegesis of apocalyptic prophecies and often cautions against reading too much into them. He merely advocates that secular order must be maintained in order to, as Bozinis says and prefiguring Girard, prevent the revealing of “the demonic power that lies dormant in the very heart of society.” Man is fallen, so the state is necessary; no more. Only the Church, however, is eternal. Rome is not, and Chrysostom was not interested in furthering the Caesaropapism of Eusebius.

This is the sum of what Bozinis offers, and it’s not bad. Even if it’s less substantive than might be desired, that’s not the author’s fault, although the subtitle of the book arguably promises more than the book delivers. To round out the book, Bozinis spends a third of it analyzing pre-Christian Classical writers who influenced Chrysostom, notably Demosthenes and Plato. But while also interesting, this is only tangentially related to the topic of the book.

As I say, Chrysostom certainly never thought for a moment about democracy as a possibility for any *polis* larger than a city, and then only in historical context as a failed experiment in Classical Greece, nearly a thousand years before his time. His sole concern was that the state promote the flourishing of mankind, defined as order and stability that led toward the universal acceptance of Christ through His Church. From the perspective of sixteen hundred more years, and many centuries after the dissolution of the Empire, we can draw some conclusions about what he might have said about the political systems of today.

He would not likely be surprised that synchronic parallelism is long discredited, at least as an ongoing driver of the story of the Church. The ebb and flow of history has frequently gone against Christians, in many places and times making the spread of the Gospel very difficult, from the conquests of Islam to the heresies of Modernism. Moreover, few have been the later governing systems which made Christianity a top priority, though many Western systems have claimed to do so, and most, on balance, assisted the spread of Christian belief, at least some flavor of it. None today do, though perhaps Vladimir Putin’s Russia is the most friendly modern state to Christian belief, as America was until the anti-Christian Left (a tautology) gained near-total power. But Chrysostom would have seen much deficient in every modern system. In his nature he was a critic, demanding never-ending effort to reach towards Christian perfection, and you would not find him today heartily

endorsing any of our systems of government, or likely any from his time to ours. Still, is there a theoretical system for which Christians should strive?

Channeling Chrysostom, we can say that the primary Christian principles of the form of the state are that governmental authority must not conflict with Christian belief or doctrine and should directly aim at the Christian spiritual flourishing of the citizenry. The secondary goal is that the authorities should strive for the non-spiritual flourishing of the people, physical and mental, the common good, though here we enter into the realm of tradeoffs, for example between great societal achievements and maximizing individual liberty and ease. Regardless, it follows from this that any action by the state which runs counter to these goals conflicts with the demands of Christ.

There is no reason whatsoever to believe that either Christian belief or the common good is better protected by maximizing popular participation, roughly what is broadly termed democracy; quite the contrary. Such arguments might have held some small weight a hundred years ago, in the early untried days of modern democracy, but certainly not now, when Christianity is persecuted in many places in the West and the common good is not aimed at by more than a tiny fraction of the population. Rather, the masses have learned, as the ancient Greeks well knew, to vote themselves pleasures and money at the expense of others, and corruption is the default from top to bottom in our societies. Moreover, religious freedom for other religions is not a Christian imperative; it may be desirable in some circumstances and not in others. And it is irrelevant to the choice of political system that all men and women are created in the image of God, or that among Christians as Christians there are to be no distinctions of class or ability. Contrary to claims sometimes made, those principles do not imply any need for popular participation in governance.

But what actual system of governance is best, given these goals? That is a question with different answers in different times. We can state with confidence, however, that democracy in the sense of majority rule on most or all questions is the worst of all possible systems, except perhaps occasionally for a tiny state with ethnic and religious homogeneity. Even then, though, democracy always and everywhere tends toward ochlocracy, mob rule. Virtue is never to be found in the mob. Christians should

not forget that in a very real sense, it was democracy that killed Christ. The Jewish multitude that celebrated Christ on Palm Sunday a week later, under the influence of the Jewish leaders, coerced the Romans into actually doing the deed. But it was the democratic mob expressing the demands of its members, not Pilate, which was primarily responsible, despite occasional modern pretense to the contrary. (Christians have always viewed Pilate's sin as of lesser gravity than that of the Jewish leaders or Judas Iscariot. And in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, Pilate later converted and along with his wife Procla is venerated as a saint.) True, this crime was necessary for the salvation of mankind, for reasons which are obscure to us, but was nonetheless the greatest crime in the history of mankind.

If the mob must be muzzled, and it must be, always and everywhere, it follows that a subset of any society needs to be in ultimate charge. Even a tiny society has a ruling class. In the normal course of a society's life, that ruling class typically initially deserves that position. It consists of those with the talents most beneficial or necessary to that society. They may be men of violence, needed to defend the society's mere existence. They may be men of other talents, users and creators of technology, or simply those who work harder and are more intelligent or with other talents, and are recognized as such by common consent—not democratic consent, but by the yielding of power to them. They may simply be more charismatic and more decisive, able to lead, of which most men are incapable. The necessary conclusion, both theoretically and empirically, is that the best system, on average, is one in which the natural ruling class holds the lion's share of power.

In a sense this is a truism, for the ruling class always holds disproportionate power. But contrary to much of what is today called "elite theory," it is false that the ruling class holds all power in modern so-called democracies, the systems which are universal throughout the West. A great deal of ruling class action is constrained and dictated by the demands of voters, even if the opinions of those voters can, to be a degree, be shaped by propaganda. Thus, modern democracy is inherently a defective, inferior system (though this is not to say that the ruling class of the West is not rotten; it most definitely is).

Even quasi-democratic systems that are not so terrible as true democracy, at least at inception, quickly decay. The American Founding Fathers,

well-versed in history but wedded to popular participation, tried to solve this conundrum by creating a constrained republic with a written constitution limiting popular power. But despite reasonable early success, that constitution and that form of government died more than a hundred years before today, and it cannot be restored, for many reasons, among them that the nation is too large and too differentiated, and that the virtue of the people of 1787 evaporated long ago.

To be sure, the interests of the masses always require protection from oppression, because it is easy for a ruling class to become extractive. The Romans, in the time of the Republic, developed the tribunes of the plebs for this reason—sacrosanct individuals, serving each for a limited time, with the power of absolute veto over most actions of the ruling class, who held the Senate and the consulship. Although this system ultimately fell apart, even before the end of the Republic, it worked well for its purpose. By contrast, the Empire lacked any such structural limitations, meaning that in practice the state appeased the mob when necessary, rather than adopting a longer-term view, which meant the Empire was inherently a less stable and less just system. Various other methods used to protect the masses arose during the history of the West; for example, King Saint Louis IX used *enquêteurs*, royal agents sent to right injustices done to the common people by lesser powers. The tension always remains; it is simply a question of managing it, never ending it by finding some perfect system.

Christian thinkers, notably Saint Thomas Aquinas, have therefore long recognized that a system of mixed government tends the most toward good governance—meaning, in short, just governance, one which gives to each his due. All Western systems have always been mixed governments. Contrary to myths spread about by thinkers of the so-called Enlightenment, no Western monarchy has ever been absolute, and even those very few which tended toward absolutism, such as that of Louis XIV, were in practice forms of mixed government, where the monarch was constrained within a web of custom and by other ruling-class powers in the society. (I note that the converse of this conclusion is that in any system which becomes tyrannical, whether that of an absolute monarch or of a modern so-called democracy, rebellion is an entirely appropriate response, as I have analyzed at length elsewhere.) No doubt Chrysostom would have agreed with the desirability of a mixed



system; his own focus on the *polis* suggests that he recognized his own system, putatively imperial, was really a form of mixed government. (What he thought of rebellion, given the constraints of his horizon, it is impossible to say.)

In any case, we, twenty-first century America, are also an empire, if without an emperor. All empires have a short shelf life; the choice for any complex polity, especially a huge multi-ethnic polity, seems to be between restraint and lengthy sclerosis, of which the best example is Ancient Egypt, and expansion and domination followed by decay and collapse, the path taken by Rome and many others, and on which America seems to be following. The most optimistic road for us is the ending of the current system, in practice if not in name, by a Caesar figure, followed after a period of chaos by a mixed government in which the average person no longer has any role at all in, or substantial concern with, national government. Chrysostom would have no objection to this; he would see it as entirely natural. His only concern would be whether the new government protected and prioritized Christians and Christian belief, and made it possible for the Church to bring salvation to the people.

Whatever its desirability, such a system does not appear imminent. But who can tell? I like to say that the chances that so-called artificial intelligence will do nothing of importance are ninety-nine percent, a prediction wholly borne out so far, but at the same time there is a one percent chance it will call forth the Antichrist. Maybe the *katechon* is not an empire or government at all, but our own lack of technological capability. Probably not; more likely history will continue as always, a cork bobbing on the ocean, sometimes resulting in justice and flourishing for mankind, sometimes the opposite. Again, though, Chrysostom would not be surprised at this. He was a realist about how we are governed, and that is the substance of what this book shows.