

Sacred Monarchy and the Modern Secular State - Fr. Michael Azkoul

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Addressing the relationship between Church and state, Fr. Michael delivers an essay that makes several very important points about the role of Christianity in the world and the function of the state. Historically grounded and philosophically informed, Fr. Michael opposes secularization and segregation of Church and state with a well-reasoned argument in favour of Sacred Monarchy. While this might seem an anachronism in our post-monarchical world, it is nothing of the sort – Fr. Michael explains the implications of this reality for the unique struggle of Christians living after the fall of the “third Rome”.

THE 20th century has brought an end to sacred monarchy. To be sure, several nations yet possess a king or queen, but with few exceptions, they reign without ruling. In the West, none of them pretend to hold their position by “the Grace of God,” despite the liturgical rhetoric surrounding their coronations. As for the Arab Sheikdoms and the Ayatollah Khomeini, were it not for humanism (and their oil) they would be laughed out of the United Nations, for basing their life, laws and political policies on the Koran. To what extent the idea of “sacred kingship” does in fact influence them, one cannot always determine; nevertheless, nothing is more certain than the disappearance of “sacred kingship” from among so-called Christian nations.

In any case, there has never been a monarch who ruled in the East or in the post-Orthodox West by “the Grace of God,” because the existence of true kingship depends upon true faith. Furthermore, we cannot speak of a heretical society as *societas christiana*. The Holy Russian Empire – the last phase of the Roman Imperium, successor to Byzantine or Christian Rome – was the last Christian society and Nicholas II was the last Christian Emperor. His death brought the extinction of “the age of Constantine,” the end to God’s Plan concerning holy empires.¹

With the disappearance of Christian Rome, that which restrained world revolution, world atheism, world anarchy, world apostasy, is no more (cf. II Thess. iv, 6). Secularism characterizes the present age and nowhere is it more obvious than in the principles and policies of the modern democratic state, in which power ascends from the electorate to the elected, to officials and bureaucrats whose only concern, if any at all, is the material and earthly happiness of their constituents. If there is a place for religion in these “pluralistic societies,” it does not inform their attitudes, aspirations and decision-making process. The self-styled “separation of church and state” is a political dogma because it is already a spiritual condition.

The secular state is always atheistic. St. Gregory the Theologian observed in the 4th century that there are three fundamental kinds of government: monarchy, the rule of one, is associated with belief in one God or, at least, one supreme God. Polyarchy (aristocracy, the rule of the few or best, is linked with polytheism; and the rule of the many, which the Saint called Anarchy (democracy), is bound with atheism. We Orthodox, be it said, hold monarchy "in honour", because it imitates the unity of God, whereas polyarchy implies a division or dispersion of His Power, a "severance of His Essence," that is, among many gods. Finally, anarchy, the government of the people, implies theologically that the Essence of God is pulverized; or, in other words, power is so completely spread out or distributed that He cannot be conceived to exist (Theol. Ora. III, 2). We ought not be confused by St. Gregory's explanation. He did not mean that nations always make conscious, philosophically elaborated choices, but that there is always a direct connection between theology and politics.

Saint Gregory the Theologian We can see this fact even more clearly in the "political theology" or "christology" of Christian Rome where the monarchy and the empire imitate the Incarnation. Thus, as Jesus Christ was both God and man, so Orthodox monarchical society likewise possessed two dimensions, one earthly and one heavenly, united as the two Natures in Christ. The Basileus or Tsar', the imperium, Emperor, represented the humanity of Christ and the priesthood or sacerdotium was the analogy of His Divinity. They collaborated in the perfection of Christian society even as "the Whole Christ" works for the salvation of the world. In very broad terms, the domain of the Emperor was the body while the priesthood cared for the soul. Of course, the Emperor's subjects were, like himself, members of the Church; for, in a real sense, the Empire was the Church.

Orthodox peoples have known only monarchy – whether pagan, Christian, Moslem or heretic. For a while, at least, the West was Orthodox and maintained the correct "political theology" and "christology." Falling away from the true faith, it has evolved those political forms about which St. Gregory spoke. Europe was divided among numerous kings while the Papacy pretentiously sought to replace the Byzantine Emperor whom it had deserted. Eventually, Catholic religious unity began to crumble, as the Renaissance writings of Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa and Dante testify. By the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, both the political and religious unity of the West was totally disrupted. Transparently, many rulers with many religious creeds, Trinitarian and otherwise, sprouted everywhere to match the individualism and relativism which Protestantism had wrought.

Kingship and the idea of descending political power – that is, political power "descending" from God to the king for the benefit of the people – finally expired with the "republicanism" of the French Revolution. The year 1789 marks the traditional date for the beginning of the complete and radical secularization of the Western world. From this moment, "democracy" becomes its political ideal and atheism its political

consequence. God is forever shut off from human affairs, dying a quiet death in the scientific madness of the 19th century, with no one to grieve him, as Nietzsche moaned. Now the universe was in the hands of man and, as August Comte proclaimed, he was its "god" and the love of humanity his religion.

II

In historical terms, the word "secularism" refers to that Western cultural enterprise whose end is to "liberate" mankind from the supernatural and the transcendent. The creature becomes the ruler of the creation. He is the caretaker of the only homeland, this world, he will ever know. It is his city, his everlasting grad, and he does not, as St. Paul wrote, look forward to that City which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. xi, 10). Everything man thinks or does has no other purpose than happiness in this life, a happiness which he will make for himself.

Saint Apostle Paul According to Jean Jacques Rousseau, the state originated in this hope. Individuals came together for mutual protection in a "social contract," a pact which would insure the permanent benefit of its signatories. Thus, the state and all its institutions (including religion) exist for the single purpose of achieving the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Unlike the Christian State or Commonwealth which has both the restraint of evil and the promotion of its citizens' salvation as its *raison d'être*, the secular state is completely indifferent to anything but their earthly happiness. As Machiavelli said, the state exists for man and, consequently, any price may be paid to achieve this goal *raison d'état*. 2

The creed of the secular state is formulated in The Declaration of the Rights of Man, that formidable document of the French Revolution. No modern political announcement more clearly severs Western civilization from its traditional supernatural perceptions. The Russian philosopher, Alexei Khomiakov, condemned the Declaration as a surrender of all things good and holy that the West yet possessed. There is no hope for its salvation, he said, while its destiny rests in the hands of supercilious social reformers, godless ideologues and dreamy utopians. Western philosophers, however, were boasting of a new beginning for a new humanity.

The motto of the City of Man to come also derives from the French Revolution – "liberty, fraternity, equality". The "liberty" or "freedom" about which these and other revolutionaries rhapsodize is not passionless. In fact, as the French philosopher, Helvetius maintained, the passions, skillfully managed, are the fundamental force in the formation of human character. If they are "evil", they are the "evil" of our "dark side" or, in the words of Lord Byron, the source of energy, boldness, strength and imagination. The "passions" provide the drive for perfection. Therefore, liberty, in one sense, is understood as the possibility of personal growth and, in another, it means the

legal or social condition for it. Law exists to remove the obstacles that hamper man's earthly pursuits.

Of course, the single limitation on liberty is that no one may deprive another of the same right. Liberty for one is liberty for all. It is not the privilege of class, sex, race or religion. Everyone must have the opportunity to forge his own destiny, that is, no externally imposed standards of conduct, no moral absolutes, no foreign ideals, no selfishness, may be imposed which favors one person over another. The place of the state in the human experience is simply to guarantee, as we have already mentioned, "equal rights" to all, recognizing always that the first principle of life is *amor sui, amour de soi*. In other words, the teaching of the Christian Faith on "God, the flesh and the Devil" evaporates in the face of the secular "higher consciousness".

Man suffers the same fate as God: the life of the spirit vanishes from culture and history with Him. The result of God's banishment is the reduction of the human race, as Professor Erich Voegelin said, to "the fraternity of equal automata". Liberty and equality for all, - the two are connected, for only equals are free - according to their modern definition, presupposes the unity of all, a universal brotherhood. Men are brothers not because they possess a common Father and Mother, God and the Church, but because they spring from their earth, are subject to the same natural laws, suffer the same fate.

When a secularist employs the expression, "spiritual regeneration", he refers to an emotionally adjusted, humanitarian, self-fulfilled individual. In order for him to achieve this goal, society rears legislators and technicians, its priest and prophet. They provide the atmosphere in which men and women are permitted "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In the first instance, this means "education", the inculcation of secular knowledge - preparation for living in this world. Public or secular education assumes that the individual is soulless and that his training is primarily adjustment to a changing material environment. Emperor Ivan Vasilyevich the Dread

That such a program will succeed, that the entire secular enterprise will succeed, is assured by Progress - modernity's substitute for Providence. Such optimism, says Professor Tuveson, is belief in magic, the same kind connected with the secular dream for utopia. 3 Utopia, of course, is a heaven surrogate. Progress is that combination of human intelligence and cosmic design that insures that everlasting beatitude is man's destiny. To be sure, there are temporary delays, disillusionment, suffering, but these are a discipline, a purging, a preparation for the golden age to come.

In the very simplest terms, we are living in a world hostile to the Christian Economy. Democracy or the secular state - the agent of Progress - is a political situation not congenial to Christ and His Church. In fact, democracy would not exist without secularization. There is a certain irony in all this, if the Marxists are right, because

Progress will eventually eliminate democracy and all forms of the state. When there is complete moral responsibility and total freedom, there will be no need for any political institutions. The worker's paradise will have no need for them.

III

The historical evolution of the Western political system from monarchy to democracy is also a process of secularization. By that we mean not only that power was gradually transferred from the ruler to the ruled, the electorate, but also that God and Christian values has come to have less and less influence upon Western life and thought. Power no longer descends from God to His viceroy for the salvation of the people and, of course, the state no longer bears the image of Christ.

Emperor Peter I Romanov the Great The modern political situation is antithetical to that condition which prevailed under the Christian Emperors – or, indeed, under kingship in general. St. Constantine initiated the Christian Roman Empire, the *societas christiana* in which two ministries, the *imperium* and *sacerdotium*, the government and the priesthood, governed one people, a single body politic. Hence, the double-headed eagle of Byzantium which was later adopted by the Tzars, that is, when Moscow “the Third Rome” succeeded Constantinople, “the Second Rome”, on its fall to the Turks in 1453. 4

Christian Rome, Russian and Byzantine, bore the image of the divine-human Christ. The relationship between the Church and the Empire, after their mating, compared to the connection between the humanity and divinity in Christ as defined by the Council of Chalcedon (451). They were united without loss of identity, without loss of the truth that the Empire would eventually perish but the Church would not. Likewise, the Emperor and the priesthood ruled as a “symphony of powers,” as the Emperor Justinian wrote in his 6th Novel. They collaborated in the governing of the Empire, albeit the Emperor did not meddle with doctrine and the Priesthood did not directly interfere with his political decisions.

Christian Romans believed they dwelt in an Empire which should encompass the whole world because that Empire was founded on a religion intended for all men. As a matter of historical fact, the claims of the Empire depended upon the truth of the Christian Faith. The loss of that Faith meant the loss of any claim to the Empire. Thus, for example, the medieval Popes denied to the “Greek Emperors” the title of “Roman” and the right to govern because, as they said, “the Greeks” did not hold the True Faith. In the same way, the Orthodox denied to “the Latins” or “Franks,” as Westerners were sometimes called, any share in the Roman government, because they did not possess the Faith of Christ. Clearly, since the purpose of the Empire was the salvation of its subjects, not to have the true Faith implied the loss of the Christian monarchy.

The Christian Emperor was not an ordinary ruler. He was *vicarius Christi*. His coronation was a Sacrament, for he was anointed, as was Saul, David and Solomon, to protect and guide God's People. He was a "messiah," the Saviour, the Spouse of the Bride, the Empire, His Body or, as Professor Kantorwicz puts it, the Empire was his "mystical body," his "second body." 5 Incidentally, as the head of the Christian Roman Empire, the ruler had to be a man, even as Jesus of Nazareth was a man. Never could a woman rule in her own name and to my knowledge never did a woman legally succeed to the throne. Only after Peter the Great did a woman presume to rule in her own right. You will understand in a moment how such a violation of tradition was possible.

Furthermore, the Emperor was viewed as more than a layman. His robes resembled the priests vestments. The Russian Tzars claimed to have received their regalia from the Byzantine Emperor, Constantine Monomach in the 10th century. Also, the coronation of the Basileus or Tzar and the pageantry surrounding it compared to a liturgy. The Patriarch poured oil on his head, a sacramental oil, which signified the king's or emperor's sacred and messianic character, his leadership of God's People. He was the very personification of the "lay priesthood" about which the Apostles spoke. His position as God's "servant" involved the privilege of entering the sanctuary during the Divine Liturgy to receive the Holy Communion in his hand as was the privilege of the bishop and presbyter. Clearly, then, his authority was not simply political or administrative but spiritual. He was expected to be holy that he might lead his nation into holiness.

He was "the father of his people" whose duties were more than the execution of justice, the prosecution of war and resistance to evil. He was obliged to help the widow and the orphan, to clothe and feed the poor and to defend the Faith. In other words, when he took his coronation oath, he also obliged himself to *philanthropia*, an imitation of Divine Providence. On the other hand, the people were expected to obey him as a child obeys his father. No Orthodox spoke of his "rights" - he humbly performed his duties: to God, to the Emperor, to the nation. From the king or emperor, the people looked for encouragement in their common religion, not a tool in the pursuit of "life, liberty and property," to borrow John Locke's celebrated phrase.

Western historians and philosophers have never understood the Orthodox World. Their writings seem always to give a curious and sometimes cynical twist to the words and deeds of Orthodox rulers. They have taken the religiously moving Testament and Prayer of Vladimir Monomach, for example, or his pious letter to Oleg, son of Svyatoslav to be politically motivated. Likewise, when the Grand Duke, Vassily, arrested his emissary to the Council of Florence for betraying Orthodoxy, historians find fanaticism or irrational fear. Nothing else but lust for power can explain Ivan the Dread's crusade against the Tartars and Moslems at Astrakhan and Kazan'. And, later, the beautiful hymn of Feeder Alexeievitch to the Virgin Mary is viewed as superstition if not hypocrisy. And, of course, Western historians interpret the Crimean War as a

failure of Russian imperialism. They would never concede that the actions of Nicholas I was a fulfillment of the Tzar's lofty calling.

Emperor Nicholas I Romanov Perhaps, it was Peter the Great who gave the West reason to judge the Russian monarchy with the same Machiavellian skepticisms they judged their own governments. Surely, it is accurate to say that the decline of spirituality among the rulers of Russia began with Peter. He initiated the process of "Westernization," that is to say, the process of secularization which culminated in the terrifying atheism of the Bolshevik Revolution. In order to give Russia a new direction, it was necessary for Peter to change the very nature of the monarchy itself. As Professor Cherniavsky tells us, Peter transformed and altered the "theology" of kingship. No longer did the Tzar resemble the humanity of Christ, but he mirrored now the sexless Creator. As it was in the West after the Protestant Reformation, a female might now sit upon the Russian throne. In fact, the 18th century was dominated by the two Catherines, Anne and Elizabeth, the opposition of the Church notwithstanding. That they may have ruled well is not the point, Christian society was not the same as we observe, for instance, in the conflict between the classes.

In addition, the emperors and empresses became less and less paternal and Russia less and less a family. Power was not so much spiritual as it was legal. If administrators were not Frenchmen or Germans, they were Russians who had lost their faith. The autocracy of love and faith became the autocracy of force and cunning. The Freemasons, Bible Societies and theosophists invaded holy Russia. Her seminaries and academies spewed Western rationalism and skepticism. The people were confused and discontented.

IV

The Orthodox Church has lived with monarchy from the day the Lord established her nearly two thousand years ago. The first monarchy was Roman, sacred and pagan. Of course, some have argued that the Church is "in the world and not of it" and, therefore, it makes little difference what the political structure under which the Church lives; in fact, she ought to have no association with the world whatsoever. God wished to refuse the Hebrew nation a king and the Orthodox Church is the New Israel. Finally, it would seem that "democracy" would suit Orthodoxy far better than any other form of government, because it is secular. The Church is free to act without the encumbrances of an imperial hierarchy.

Saint Emperor Constantine the Great (contemporary coin) First of all, it is important for Orthodoxy to live under a form of government, which is not hostile to Her, even more one, which would encourage Her spiritual and physical growth. The world belongs to Her, as it belongs to Her God. She must, therefore, associate Herself with it in order to sanctify it, to recover it from the Devil. Thus, when the Lord commanded that all

creatures be converted and baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt xxviii, 18), we must assume that those nations would have governments and that these governments themselves must also become Christian. It is useless to argue that the Church is "in the world but not of it," because that nation converted to Christ is no longer "of it," no longer "from it." Consequently, if God hoped to deny the request of the ancient Israelites for a king, it was because He did not wish His People to imitate their neighbors. In any case, they had a government whose ruler was God Himself, directing them with a Law from Above through His appointed Judges - Joshua, Samson, etc.

And this leads us to the last point in question. It is difficult for me to conceive an Orthodox democracy, especially a modern democracy which is, as you know, pluralistic, individualistic and secular. 6 In the first place, no democracy complies with the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." If God is King in heaven, he must likewise be King on earth. If all of heaven and earth belong to the Lord, then, similarly the Lord's viceroy is governor of the earth. This explains, in another way, why those not subject to the Orthodox emperors were also heretical and pagan.

Emperor Justinian Let us say, then, that no Orthodox worth his salt can live comfortably in a society where the Will of God is not accomplished. How, for example, can we be reconciled to a society in which self-interest is the first principle of all action and where confusion, heresy and skepticism are described as good and creative? How do we share in a government whose authority is human and sometimes deliberately anti-Christian? One cannot imagine a democracy in which the people humble themselves before the bishop. Worst of all, there is no secular society in which Christ, as a cultural fact, is recognized as God. Moreover, if the state must resemble Christ and the state is secular; then, Christ must be viewed as totally human.

In any case, the modern world does not allow for "sacred democracies" and the president is not anointed with "the oil of gladness." Thus, it would seem to me that an Orthodox Christian is faced with the dilemma of living in a society which is basically hostile and alien to him. Of course, we must honor the president, obey just laws and do no harm to any man. Yet we cannot allow ourselves to become an intrinsic part of secular society. The early Christians were accused of being "anti-social" because they would not become involved in the affairs of the pagan Roman Empire, so we must expect the same reproach. Furthermore, we must understand that nothing exists to protect us, no Tzar. We will be threatened even more with the appearance of the Anti-Christ. He will be the product of secular society. He will, almost ironically, establish a secular monarchy, an ecumenical or world kingship. In the end, of course, he will be overthrown by Christ whose kingdom will have no end.

FOOTNOTES:

1. The Prophet Daniel declared that 4 great Empires will rule on the earth: the Egyptian, the Persian, the Greek and the Roman after which will come the End time and the reign of Christ. The Roman Empire was both pagan (inaugurated by Augustus Caesar) and Christian (inaugurated by St. Constantine). The Christian Roman Empire had two phases - the Byzantine and the Russian. Nicholas II and his predecessors were successors to Constantine and those Greek or Byzantine Emperors that followed him. The capital of the pagan Empire was Rome; of Byzantium, Constantinople or New Rome ("2nd Rome") and the capital of Christian Russia was Moscow (The Third Rome, Sec. 5, F. Platonov, Textbook of Russian History, Vol. I, Prague, 1924-25, p. 128 f; H. Schraeder, Moskau, Des Dritte Rorn, Darmstadt, 1957. [Return to Main Text](#)

2. Machiavelli's *The Prince*, written during the Italian Renaissance, was, among other things, an attempt to define new criteria for the secular state. Kingship as a vehicle of salvation was no longer acceptable. Machiavelli offered *raison d'état* - "by reason of state," "in the best interest of the state." [Return to Main Text](#)

3. *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress*, New York, 1964, p. 201. [Return to Main Text](#)

4. See W. Hammer, "The Concept of the New or Second Rome in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, XIX (1944), 51-62; and R. L. Wolff, "The Three Romes: the Migration of an Ideology and the Making of an Autocrat," *Daedalus* LXXXVIII (1959), 291-311. [Return to Main Text](#)

5. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study In Medieval Political Theory*, Princeton, 1957. [Return to Main Text](#)

6. The so-called non-Christian Russian intelligentsia (Bulgakov, Berdyaev, Kartashev, etc.) hailed the fall of the Russian monarchy as the beginning of the Church's freedom. The "end of the Constantinian age," they said, meant that the destiny of the Russian Church was now in the hands of the Russian people. They mentally, at least, tried to impose their democratic and socialist principles on the Church Herself. The attempt to unite their political views with the hierarchical system of Church government naturally failed. The history of the post-revolutionary Russian Church, in part, has been a conflict between non-Christian laicism and traditional episcopal authority. The intelligentsia and their followers always placed their "creativity" before any allegiance to the Church and obedience to their bishops. See the interesting discussion in Michel d'Herbigny et A. Beubner, "Eveques Russes En Exile," *Orientalia Christiana*, XXI, 67 (1931), 256-271.

This essay, for the first time, was delivered to the attention of The Russian Youth Congress, held in Toronto, Ont., August 1979, by it's author Fr. Michael Azkoul.