

The Heresy that Never Was: The “Ethnophyletism” Hoax, Usury and Historical Illiteracy

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Nothing shows historical illiteracy among the Orthodox than the pious and smug use of the term “Phyletist.” Completely ignorant as to its meaning and origin, it seems very strange to the typical American, so it is occasionally used to make one sound distinguished. Normally this accusation comes from the Antiochian group in America, a very Americanist, liberal, middle class, bourgeois religious body. It have inserted itself totally into the American anti-culture and thus hold any ethnic attachment as deeply suspect. By calling one a “Phyletist,” they believe they are speaking some profound truth. Unfortunately, this is the typical pseudo-intellectualism that marks that specific body.

They use the term as a “Christian” reason to reject nationalism and the “far right.” It is a term used to satisfy the Regime, to reassure elite forces that they are harmless and conforming members of America's “diverse landscape.” The problem is that American life is terminally sick, dedicated exclusively to self-interest and materialism. Any church body trying to conform to it is equally infected and useless. Antioch, at least in the USA, is graceless since it serves materialism and the bourgeois order.

If pressed, they might pompously tell you that the Synod of the Patriarch of Constantinople 1871 “condemned nationalism” under the name “Phyletism.” Hence, they can condemn their enemies without thought or argument, thinking that nationalism is thus heresy. They will tell you that the Bulgarian nationalists created an “Exarchate” that only permitted Bulgarians to be members and removed all non-Bulgarian bishops from the Balkan sees. The errors here are on so many levels that volumes could be written on it. A few important points will have to do instead.

Nothing of the above claim is true. Regardless of the endless heresies and non-canonical actions of the Antiochian body, the synod at the time did not condemn “nationalism” and certainly, was not a legitimate synod in the least. Nationalism was and has been the creed of the Orthodox faith since its inception, and the prophets – deliberately left unread by the Americanists – were firm ethnonationalists in very much a modern sense.

So what actually occurred in 1872?

The “Patriarch” was a highly compromised institution under the Tourkokratia, or the rule of the Turkish empire over southern Europe. Greek elites and moneylenders were the real forces behind this “synod” and created the district of Istanbul known even today as the Phanar. The Phanar took shape in Constantinople at the end of 16th century. A money economy began to emerge among the Greeks at this time, creating an oligarchy based around usury. Calling themselves the “archons of the Greek people,” they built their homes in this location, adjacent to the buildings of the Patriarchate. They were almost one and the same institution for a time.

One after another, senior church positions were brought into their hands. Representatives of these powerful families had no interest in religion. They did have the power – the exclusive power – to chose the patriarch in that all Patriarchs needed to buy their sees from the Sultan. The

price that was paid by the Orthodox Church for their submission to these Phanariotes was great. This meant that the Church was governed more for the benefit of the “archons” and was considered a business investment rather than a religious body.

The result was a policy of Hellenization by Phanariotes against the entire Orthodox church in the Balkans. This caused the Bulgarian “schism” in 1872. Already in the 1850s, the Bulgarian church in honor of St. Archdeacon Stephen in Constantinople was angry at this elite. Their main complaints were that the Bulgarians saw Greeks as just an extension of Turkish rule (Venediktov, 2008).

At the Constantinople Council of September 1872 the Bulgarians were accused of a new heresy called “Phyletism,” a reference to “tribalism.” This Council stated: 1) We reject and condemn Phyletism, ie tribal differences, national strife, rivalry and strife in the Church of Christ, as being contrary to the teachings of the Gospel and the canons of our blessed fathers. . . 2) This movement dares to be based on its tribal connection we proclaim – in accordance with the sacred canons – that it is alien to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. This condemnation was utterly absurd. It was issued by a purely Greek body, one deeply ingrained into the Turkish and Jewish financial system of the empire. The decision was, like everything at the Phanar, bought with bribe. At the beginning of this synod, the Greek state sent three thousand pounds to Patriarch Anthimus to reject the Exarchate (Venediktov, 2008).

The reaction of other Local Churches to the sobor was mixed. The Jerusalem Patriarch Kirill II resolutely refused to accept the decision of the council. The bishops of the Church of Antioch refused to make the decree public, though accepting it only in theory. The Patriarch of Alexandria loudly rejected this new heresy and accused the “Patriarch of Constantinople” of acting purely from financial motives. The Romanian and Serbian Orthodox churches rejected this new “heresy.” Most importantly, Russia too rejected this “new heresy.”

The Russian delegation in Istanbul, with the full support of the synod, took the Bulgaria side. It retained relations with Bulgarian and refused to accept this new heresy. St. John Maximovich describes the circumstances:

The Ecumenical Patriarch had received from the Turkish Sultan, even before the taking of Constantinople by the Turks, the title of the head of the Greek ethnos (“millet”), and he was considered the head of the whole Orthodox population of the Turkish Empire. This, however, did not prevent the Turkish government from removing patriarchs for any reason whatever and calling for new elections and collecting a large “tax” from the newly elected patriarch. . . . In order to make up the sum that he paid on his accession to the Patriarchal Throne, a patriarch made a collection from the metropolitans subordinate to him, and they, in their turn, collected from the clergy subordinate to them. This manner of collecting money to repay loans left an imprint on the whole order of the Patriarchate's life. . . . Almost always, the episcopal sees were filled by Greeks, even though in the Balkan Peninsula the population was primarily Slavic(Quoted from Titov, 2006).

The Greek bishops under the Ecumenical Patriarchate bought their offices. The normal price for the Patriarchate was 15000 ducats while a regular yearly sum was required to keep their see. The result was that the Turks removed most Patriarchs, then collecting fees for the new occupants, leading to ecclesiastical chaos and the total illegitimacy of the Phanar church.

To collect the money to pay his creditors, the Patriarch would then sell his signature for

lower appointments. He would agree to the appointment of whoever paid him the most. Sees were seen as investments rather than religious offices. Some “bishops” were not religious at all and not even priests. Monastic offices were also bought and sold, with the peasants and townsmen forced through taxation to pay it back with interest. In some cases, some bishops, when they became desperate for cash, excommunicated a village for no reason. Then, excommunication rendered all civil rights forfeit. It permitted them to take all movable property and sell it to pay his debts. The system was tyrannical and without a shred of legitimacy. Bulgarians and Serbs were taxed beyond their ability to pay. John McGuckin writes:

Thus the patriarchate, degraded by simony and made the sport of intrigue by its own people, has come to be regarded by many of the Orthodox as an agent of the Turkish government, and identified with its oppression. But the patriarchate has also come to be identified by such of the Orthodox as are non-Greek, with the cause of Hellenic nationalism. . . . A widespread hostility has thus pursued the Phanariot clergy among the non-Greek Orthodox; and the revolts which the Phanar puts down to Phyletism have issued in the enforced recognition of national churches, as a refuge from Phanariot oppression.

After the first cabal of Greek merchants from Trebizond offered the sultan a bribe of 1,000 florins to depose the incumbent patriarch Mark II (1466–7) and replace him with a candidate of their own choice, the sultan’s eyes were opened to the possibilities. By 1572 the standard ‘investiture fee’ for the patriarch was the substantial ‘gift’ of 2,000 florins, and an annual payment of 4,000 more, gathered from taxation of the Christian ‘Rum’ people who were placed under the patriarch’s supreme charge throughout the Ottoman empire. There were always more than enough Christian factions lining up to pay the highest premium to ensure the election of their candidate after that point. Accordingly the tenure of the patriarchs under Turkish rule was usually very short. Sometimes the same candidate acceded to the office, was deposed, and re-elected to it five or six times (each time paying the necessary fees). Between the sixteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century 159 patriarchs held office. Of this number the Turks drove out of office 105. Several were forced to abdicate, and six were judicially assassinated. The cadre of Greeks who sailed this stormy sea, trying to keep the prestige of the patriarchate intact and effective (sometimes using it for unworthy ambitions), tended to live in what was then the wealthy suburb called the Phanar; and were thus known as Phanariotes. Many of the higher offices of the church were subsequently put into their hands when a new patriarch acceded, and this in turn led to the Phanariot Greek clergy becoming a kind of colonial superior race directing churches in distant lands, using the mandate of the sultan and the decree of the patriarch to justify it (McGuckin, 2010: 33).

These businessmen needed to give

bribes in order to take some other innocent man’s job, and make themselves bishops or metropolitans. They are ambitious and jealous fellows, and as the Orator [John Zygomalas] says, ‘uneducated asses.’ In addition, once they received the appointment they desired, they had to pay for all of the installation

ceremonies, and entertaining connected to it. If he didn't have the money, he would have to borrow it. Therefore, their whole aim is to get together the money to become bishop or metropolitan. And if someone has reached that goal, he will scratch from his subordinates within three or four years the money to repay what he had borrowed and given to Kantakouzenos (Quoted in Papademetriou, 205).

And finally, from Tom Papademetriou's recent work on the Tourkokratia,

The hierarchy, because of their responsibility to the Porte, was forced to pay the pişkeş in order to take their position, and yearly dues thereafter. In a sense, this responsibility to the sultan, which became institutional, forced all bishops to commit simony by virtue of being ordained in the Ottoman Empire. One had to pay the investiture fee in order to take the position. It is for this that Patriarch Raphael was first criticized. It is for this reason that subsequent patriarchs were also condemned. Simony had become the way in which one became a bishop. There was no need, therefore, to be reminded of the moral concern with the system (Papademetriou, 2015: 113).

This is why the Slavs revolted. For many decades they were exploited by “bishops” with no right to their sees, forced to work as slaves to the Turks, Jews and their “bishops” who usually knew nothing about theology, their populations or even laid eyes on their see. It was a business investment. The creation of the Exarchate, clearly, was a legitimate reaction to this absurd situation. Thus, predictably, the “patriarchate” quickly condemned this as “nationalism” because it was a direct threat to their business interests, as the Patriarch of Alexandria stated. The synod was a fraud, as was the “heresy of Phyletism.”

A historical and legal analysis of the problem was a member of the Holy Synod, Archbishop Macarius (Bulgakov) of Lithuania, who rejected this “heresy” in his article of 1873. Exploring the history of the subordination in 1767 of the Ohrid Archbishopric to Constantinople, the Archbishop concludes: “The Greek Patriarchate should recognize the firman of the reigning Sultan Abdul-Aziz as quite legitimate. Bulgaria should have full ecclesiastical independence.”

The point of the above is that the Bulgarians created the Exarchate to escape this level of taxation and a ecclesial stricture that was institutionally simoniacal. The 1872 synod was a plea from the Phanar community to maintain their taxing privileges and “ecclesial investments” and had nothing to do with the church, nationalism or “tribalism” in any way. Their motives were transparent. The Bulgarian Exarchate and its subsequent condemnation was about usury.

That being said, the second question concerns “nationalism” in the Orthodox church. This term cannot be defined as the writer sees fit. It has to be defined in context and be a part of an intellectual tradition and not an ignorantly emotional condemnation. “Nationalism” is part of natural law, it is the extension of the family idea where a specific group of people, existing for many centuries in the past, speaks the same language. “Language” here is meant in the broad sense: it is all forms of communication; it is what make a people a people. St. Filaret of Moscow writes: “Instead of parents, we have the fatherland; because it is a great family, in which the Emperor is the father, and the subjects are the children of the Emperor.”

Nations have always existed. Such a proposition is easy to prove: national movements sounding quite modern existed in the middle ages and before. Ireland, Poland and Ukraine are

just three medieval movements that took the ethnic principle and made it an essential aspect of their political and social creed. References to the “Ruthenian faith” were a daily part of the Ukrainian attacks on Polish national imperialism in the 16th century.

Notice the lack of the word “state.” The state is something quite different from the nation and serves – at its best – as the outer coating of a people that organizes for its protection and well being. Nationalism is the love of the people at their best: the “structures of survival,” as I have termed it, that permitted the ethnos to survive all manner of oppression in the past. Nationalism then has its opposite in “imperialism.” Imperialism is the crushing of nations for the domination of a ruling class, one often quite non-ethnic. Empires can function while overseeing the cultural development of nations, but it can also try to cancel their nationhood. National language is often an important rallying cry against empires. If nations are imaginary, then so is imperialism. Imperialism is bad only in that it destroys national independence. If there is no ground for independence, then imperialism is neither bad nor good. In fact, the term refers to nothing.

The Orthodox church, organizationally speaking, is founded on national organization. Sts. Kyril and Mefodii, in rejecting the thesis that only Latin, Greek and Hebrew can be religious languages, they laid down the principle of acculturation. The native language was to be used in all services. This created a great strength of Orthodox organization in that in taking the linguistic community as paramount, it can penetrate the entire life of the population. Unity and the general will all make the most sense in the tradition of the Orthodox faith, which is communal and anti-individualist.

There are two levels of analysis that need to be dealt with in order to make sense out of “autocephaly” in the Orthodox world. First, that of the center – Orthodoxy has a specific liturgical and canonical order that cannot be overthrown by any specific ethnic autocephalous movement. This is found mostly in the nature of doctrine and basic church organization. All Orthodox nations must adhere to this general structure. This of course, does not vitiate nationalism in any way, since universal truths abound, but are manifest in specific ways.

Language, like “state,” is used differently depending on the cultural context. In Russia and Germany, the state is not defined in formal terms. Hegel referred to the state as not just coercive authority, but the entire culture of the population. The “state” in this case, is mostly the nature of what unifies the community – language is not enough, since its development is co-determinate with the development of the ethnos as a whole.

The old, neo-marxist line of Eric Hobsbawm holds that nationalism is an “invented tradition.” In fact, that was his entire career – to debunk nationalism and ethnic culture in favor of cosmopolitan Marxism. He failed to do this, largely due to his fundamental dishonesty – he cared little for facts, much for trendy ideology. There are as many problems with defining a specific national culture as there are with defining class status, the “egocentric, utility-maximizing consumer,” or the “average voter.” This, by itself, does not remove the usefulness of these ideas.

In Ukraine, the national movement takes institutions of both ancient and modern Ukraine in the creation of the Ukrainian essence. The old, democratic *viche*, Cossacks, the agrarian life, the Orthodox church and even the 20th century Rada are taken as representative of Ukrainian identity. There is nothing “mythical” about any of this as they were all quite real and culturally specific. The Cossack did fight for Ukrainian independence and did organize themselves into basically democratic communes. Ukraine does have a long experience with foreign occupation and is strongly Orthodox in faith, even to this very day. What here is “mythical?” It is not so much that the followers of Hobsbawm reject the truth of these things, but reject, from ideological

motives, that they should serve as models of politics.

This is the point – the “nationalism-as-myth” opinion derives from intellectual misconduct. The concept is to create an alienated, culture-less population that can be easily influenced by corporate capital. Without the ancient culture of a people, all that is left to create identity is major media. Corporate capitalism and statist Marxism both depend on an entirely de-cultured, “generic” people in which to function. Ethnicity has a history as a springboard for insurrection against imperialism.

Imperialism does not exist if the ethnos is purely unreal. No nations – no imperialism. If Ukraine is occupied by Russia, then on what grounds is this occupation illicit? If Ukrainian patriotism is a myth, then there are no grounds for complaint. Imperialism is morally as good as independence, since there is no body of cultural life that can be liberated. This can only serve the interests of the new, post-modern imperialism of capitalist consolidation and media imagery.

In the Orthodox world, the ethnos can never take the place of the unity of the canons and basic traditions. The nation exists to develop with the faith and the population as a whole, reciprocally enriching each other. In Ukrainian history, for example, the Cossack force was an Orthodox, libertarian, communalist movement dedicated to fighting for the moral truths of Orthodoxy everywhere. There is nothing “mythical” about this as many thousands gave their lives in its pursuit.

What is “mythical” is the nature of a “generic Orthodox” person. This is an untruth. The construct is a) to hold that there is such a thing as a purely autonomous will and b) that the faith can exist in a cultural vacuum. In America, today a culture-less entity, sees ethnicity as somehow un-Christian and vaguely menacing. To those with no identity, culturally embedded persons must seem bizarre. Nationalism is not an invented tradition, since there is no reason to invent something that actually exists in history. The abstractions, however, of the “sovereign individual” or the “homo economicus” are creations of capitalism. Such entities do not exist, they are imaginary inventions that act as congenial reference points in a purely quantitative social science. The “homo economicus” is an ideal type that justifies the dominance of capitalist institutions. It does not exist in reality, but is the invention of modern capitalism to provide a cultureless, personality-less individual often referred to as a “rational consumer.” This is pure invention; it dehumanizes the subject of “social science” and reduces the people to a mass that exists to serve those having access to capital.

This is the nature of Orthodox nationalism. It exists as a hierarchy of basic values all bringing out one side to the well rounded human personality. Healthy humanity lives in a thriving, ethnic tradition, with its own suffering, victories, heroes and institutions. These are all quite real, important historical realities that have created a separate people. Again, in the Ukrainian case, the Cossack host, Orthodoxy, and the agrarian life are all rich concepts and institutions that are not “myths,” but the very building blocks of reality.

Hobsbawm tried to refute these things because he hated them. Marxism, like capitalism, does not recognize anything but class. Therefore, all but class needs to be swept away. All is quantitative. Class, the individual and the behavior of university professors can all be brought under the same technique of deconstruction. National cultures (which are cultures as such, since they are bounded by language and its experience) are the core identity of any healthy person. The Orthodox faith is not separate from it, but has an international character that can never be harmed by the ethnic tradition.

Coming into America, the Orthodox church found a mostly protestant culture. The immigrants from Ireland and Italy too, were becoming assimilated to the American idea, the

concept of an “American dream” which is quite mythical. Orthodox people, because of their ethnic organization, were capable of maintaining their ethnic identity even as they were pressured to conform to American capitalist ethics – one that is wholly ideal.

The problem came in the form of a “generic Orthodox man,” largely the creation of the modern Antiochian (Syrian) Orthodox church in America. There is no clear American culture, and what there is of it is Anglo- or Celto-protestant, today largely forgotten. The US, a materialist and identity-less mass, cannot serve to be the basis of anything except passivity. The faith has no culture in which to transform. Therefore, ethnic enclaves came into existence, largely protecting both the universal faith and the specific, cultural manifestation of it.

Instead of some ethnic identification, the American idea is federalist, hence permitting the existence of power centers, churches and ethnic identities in America that thrive within a decentralist structure. Post-modern capitalism – largely functioning through major media – seeks to create a homogeneous mass (oddly enough, in the name of “diversity”) that is both ahistorical, an abstract invention, and without any precedent in human history. It is the creation of a “homo economicus” out of the ancient ethnic traditions that have thrived in America. If “economic man” actually did exist, he (it) would be a horrid abortion – the very opposite of a human being.

Russia, under the tsars and commissars for a long time, will develop different personalities and priorities than those living under Anglo-American republicanism or federalism. It is the same with individuals growing up under different circumstances and classes, and as a result, developing very different personalities and social ideas. It is not something to destroy (especially in the name of the mythic “American dream”), but something to cherish. Modern “diversity” nonsense is always and everywhere mythical – it is about the creation of a cultureless void whose “personhood” is mass produced. The system's own economic health is dependent on creating such a person. This is why national communities are called “imaginary” while the “rational consumer” is the foundation of all liberal ideologies.

There is no such thing as a generic human or a generic Christian. All system of thought developed under a specific set of languages (in the broad sense). They are all acculturated objects, the culture itself coming from the institutions under which the people have lived under for a very long time. This changes, and hence the ethnos changes. The one thing that is truly mythic is the abstract ego of modern social science. Attacking the ethnic idea is an absurdity when it is meant to give way for the stunted “homo-economicus.”

From the Orthodox point of view, ethnicity is the situation of the canonical tradition. It cannot interfere with this tradition, but it can provide it with a very real, political and social hypostasis in the ethnic culture and the institutions that it has created (or suffered under). It is not a stretch to hold that “modernism,” at least in part in the church today, is based on the mythic creation of an “abstract Christian” going to an abstract church and hearing an abstract liturgy with no culture whatsoever. This is a void, something less than human. Autocephaly is meant to join the truly universal canonical and liturgical tradition and making it real for the embodied self. The “rational modern,” another mythical creation, will see in the ethnic tradition something threatening, something that accuses the “abstract man” of his own alienation. Those that have no culture should hold their tongue when judging others who do. It's time to dig into your own people and way of life, rather than pointing the abstract finger at those who maintain their traditions. These are not “myths,” but the existence of the “abstract, rational Christian” most certainly is.

In a rarely cited work, St. John Maximovich describes why the church is always ethnic:

Every nation God's special gifts towards the Orthodox people. Each church carries out its mission, in accordance with those talents. Therefore, every nation or ethnic group has its own church, and this division of church authority makes preaching effective. Therefore the Orthodox Church allows for the establishment of new local Churches and new centers of church life. So there are Russian and Slavic Churches. Thus, every nation has its own characteristics and its own spirit that is the foundation of each local church.

All of them together make up the one universal Church, and bring into it those characteristics and talents, as the servants brought those talents for God. So God is worshiped with a pleasing combination of spiritual sounds and colors that adorn the church, with the glory of God uniting all peoples. The Russian Church brings its specific color and is seen as harsh sometimes compared to others. Russian saints are examples.

The spiritual manifestation of the Church in all nations are the same, but the types of peoples, our language and customs, are different. The division of ministries and gifts it has pleased the Creator of the Savior God. We know and feel the spiritual benefit and experience the joy of seeing how different people, different characters and talents, and give glory to the One God. Therefore, for example, guided by an authentic ecclesiastical consciousness and feeling, the Serbian Church is being built together with joy by the Russian Church, witnessing the spiritual benefit of its world (Sermons and Works of our holy father John, Archbishop of Shanghai and San Francisco the Wonderworker, "Russian Shepherd," San Francisco, 1994, pp. 246-247; translation mine).

The church is universal, but it is not cosmopolitan. Just as a community cannot be created by crushing the identities of the persons within it, neither can universality be created by denying nations (and hence, nationalism). St. Kronstadt writes concerning Russia,

I foresee a recovery of a powerful Russia, one even more strong and powerful on the bones of these martyrs. On this foundation will be erected new Russia; strong in their faith in Christ, God and the Holy Trinity. Today, the Church ceases to understand what Russia is: it is the footstool of the throne of the Lord; the Russian people must realize this and thank God for the fact that he was born a Russian (St. John of Kronstadt, 1907)

Christ possesses two natures, the divine and the human. The nation, like the economy, literature, language or the political order, is part of the human. There is no reason to leave these things out of Christ's saving plan merely because it is politically incorrect. Since that is the exclusive reason these Orthodox churchmen reject it (or do not understand it), they have no justification for their silly opinions. Archbishop Averky of Jordanville writes:

The most pernicious lie of our time is heavily distributed many thought that" religion is a private matter of each person, and that the social and public life of the people should take place outside of religion, it should be separated from her. And nobody wants to notice the absurdity of such a statement. It's like saying that the private life of a person has no relation to the social. The source that creates

these lies, however skilfully disguised under various plausible concepts, is clear for us. Only the Enemy is served by rejecting Christ's rule over the public life of the people (Abp. Averky, works, Volume 1, "For the upcoming Synod of Bishops").

Not only is this position factually wrong, but is also rejection of Christ's human nature. It is autonomous, with its own will, and hence, voluntarily cooperates with God. That means all human things are part of the divine plan. In his work "Politics and the Church" from 1961, he writes:

The Church must be above vulgar politicking, but not totally apolitical. Making the Church apolitical grants those irreligious and immoral politicians, who want to fully take into their own hands the irresponsible management of social and public life. They will deprive the Church of its role in transforming public life in the spirit of the Gospel. . . . Those who in the twentieth century invent some new way to justify the "non-interference of the Church in politics" is a way to keep anyone from challenging their conscience and permit their own self-interest to rule. They should rather serve God, is truth and their native land (cited from Fr. Georgy Titov, 2006).

"Politics," of course, is not identical with campaigns and elections. Under certain circumstances, even these can be subject to church influence, but in general, the questions of justice as social, cultural and legal and quite human. Since Christ contains all that is human, this too is part of the church's life. As seen above, the church is far from reproach, but the dark days of the Patriarchate under the Turks were a radical and embarrassing exception. It was also not clearly the fault of those involved: the unscrupulous were just playing the hand they were dealt.

The point of all of this was twofold: first, to explain how "Phyletism" was little more than a way to protect the investments of Greek elites at the Phanar. This is undeniable. It is a fake heresy and, on its face, is stupid. Every prophet of the Old Testament was a Phyletist by this definition. Second, that nationalism, when defined by someone actually conversant in the literature in this field, is canonical, healthy and should be pursued. Only a sick society can be threatened by it.

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