Anarchism and Orthodoxy

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How can one be a Christian, meaning a *citizen* of the Kingdom of God, and, at the same time, a loyal citizen of "earthly kingdoms" (states)? Would this not be a divided loyalty, a submission to two incompatible logics of life, since "no one can serve two masters." (Mt 6:24)

These questions, and the general problem of how to articulate the relationship between Christianity and the socio-political sphere, go back to the earliest periods of Christianity, and continue to be relevant today.

Historically, there were various attempts to articulate an approach that would bridge the apparent gap between the Christian proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the political reality of "this world." Bridging this gap meant, more often than not, giving the political sphere a religious meaning, and thereby providing a religious justification for the exercise of state power.

In the "Christian" Roman Empire, theologians, patriarchs and emperors were trying to find a satisfactory solution offering different models that are commonly referred to as the "Byzantine symphony." It is needless to say that there was not one "symphonic" model in the history of the Eastern Roman Empire, but rather many

different theologies of the political, as there was little of those "symphonies" in practice. However, it is true that there were many attempts to theoretically articulate some kind of a theocratic form of government, without contrasting, or even merely dividing, the political and the Christian/ecclesial. The church was effectively integrated in the political (imperial) domain, although, from time to time, claims for the autonomy of the ecclesiastical sphere would be advanced.

In spite of the formal differences, the situation in Western Europe was, structurally, not very different from that in the (Eastern) Roman Empire. In the absence of a powerful empire and emperor, the popes assumed imperial prerogatives, and became political leaders. The claims of their superiority both in the "spiritual" and in the political sphere were advanced during the Medieval period, and, following the logic of the *argumentum unitatis*, the theological ideology of the papacy would result in the aspiration to integrate the sphere of the political into the one unified theocratic sphere, in which the papacy was the supreme authority due to its "spiritual" prerogatives.

A "theocratic" (although, effectively, often "secular-theocratic") understanding of the socio-political sphere, that aspired to integrate Christian eschatological concerns and the ethnic/national/political, can be found in the post-Reformation world as well. The English parliament, for instance, would promulgate religious doctrines, approved by the monarch (e.g. the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* from 1563), which resembled the typically ancient Roman practice wherein the Senate was the supreme religious authority and not particular priestly colleges (that acted primarily as advisory boards to the Senate and the consuls). Great Britain remains, formally, a *theocratic* state, where the head of state is the *ex officio* head of the church (although, as H. W. Schneider remarks, "[an Englishman] knew that both the British state and the Anglican Church were in fact secular in origin and aim").

for Christians freedom and love. However, freedom and love can never fully become the foundation of the historical reality, the reality that is based on the logic of necessity. And this is the fundamental conflict between Christianity and the logic of "this world," the conflict that will be resolved only in the world to come.

The puritans of New England, to take just one more example, also dreamed of a perfect society, a version of the Kingdom of God on Earth. However, as it usually happens with attempts to identify a particular political group with the "chosen nation," the prototype of this "God's people" becomes the Old Testament Israel not the eschatological (and *a-political*) Kingdom of God. The confusion between the socio-political reality, with its laws and ethics, and the religious-ecclesial (which stands for a secularized eschatology), becomes thus unavoidable again.

The sacralization of the political sphere and, consequently, the secularization of the ecclesial sphere, is not something that was associated only with monarchies, or modern attempts to reconcile a *reformed* Christianity with the socio-political realm. On the contrary, these attempts can be seen in the contemporary context as well, in formally secular states that (again, formally) have a democratic system and political pluralism. The temptation to glorify "our" nations or "our" States, and their exercise of power, seems to be so great that most religious institutions and believers find it hard to resist. Thus, in spite of the formal secularity, we hear of the "holy wars" that the imperial powers fight nowadays. Many *loyal* and *God-fearing* citizens often ask God to "bless our country," and we often hear of the "chosen nation" that has a special, God-blessed (political) mission in this world. All of this is, of course, *nothing* but a useful political ideology that can justify all sorts of violence and terror, that the political elites launch on behalf of their states, and often with the enthusiastic support of some segments of the population.

The question, then, is an obvious one: does this mean that the only Christian approach to the sphere of the political is to seek some kind of harmony (not to say *symphony*) between the sphere of the political and the Christian eschatological orientation? Furthermore, should Christians*pray* for their countries, the leaders of these countries, and for, say, triumphant military campaigns that their countries may lead? Is it not the duty of *good* Christians

to contribute to the endurance and well-being of their states? Or, should they, on the other hand, offer a specific political program, to oppose with it *secular* ideologies and polices? Should Christianity, on the contrary, limit itself to the promotion of certain *ethical* principles, as its primary concern?

My claim is a simple one: to take any of the things listed above as the primary concern of Christianity, is to miss the most profound (and only really important) aspects of (Orthodox) Christianity. *Authentic Christianity is not an ethical system*, it is not a particular ideology or a political program (which, course, does not mean that it has not often been used precisely for those purposes).

Orthodox Christianity (at least the way I understand it), is primarily a proclamation of the Kingdom of God as a new existence, and making this (future) mode of existence present already "here" and "now." It is an attempt to transform the historical existence into this new being, the being that will fully be manifested at the end of history and time as we know them. And this new, eschatological being (which is, for Christians, the only "real reality"), is life based on *freedom* and *love*. It is life freed from all necessities, including the necessity of one's own being. To identify one's existence with freedom and love means to exist in a God-like manner. Another word for this, common in the Orthodox tradition, is *theosis*.

This is the reason why the sphere of the political – with its exercise of power, and the necessity attached to it – is, from the eschatological point of view, *a priori* illegitimate. Viewed this way, the logic of this new being is, clearly, in a direct contradiction to the logic of "this world." One of the clearest manifestations of the necessity of "this world" is found in institutions of power, such as states or corporations, and their exercise of power over other human beings and the rest of creation. The foundational logic of "this world" is not that of freedom and love, but one of subordination to the (physical, biological, ethical...) norms, domination, self-interests, and egotism.

Because of that, the Christian approach to the socio-political sphere should be an approach of constant skepticism when it comes to all systems of power and every exercise of power that goes against concrete human beings, their lives and their well-being. All power structures, ranging from patriarchal families, oppressive ethical norms, states with their apparatus and laws, to multinational corporations or just local gangs, are from a Christian perspective illegitimate, as they go against the (eschatological) dignity of the human being, and the basic logic of the new being, which Christianity, through liturgy, manifests already "here" and "now". This opposition to all systems of power and oppression, from individual and local, to collective and global, is what makes some kind of *anarchism* the only consequential Orthodox Christian position vis-à-vis the socio-political realm.

Is there, then, a specific model of an ideal *Christian society*, or an ideal form of political organization that Christians should champion? In history, in "this world" – no. The only "ideal society" from a Christian perspective is the Kingdom of God.

This means that Christians should be opposed to the necessity of "this world" (including the political realm) with their logic of love, keeping always in mind that their Kingdom is not of "this world" and that any confusion between the Kingdom of God, as the eschatological reality, and "earthly kingdoms" is the best way to betray Christianity. Those who have their "kings" on earth do not have Christ as their *king*.

However, this also means that in each given historical period and each given society one must find ways to change that reality to become more meaningful and humane, based on the affirmation of human freedom and dignity, mutual support, care and compassion. There are no (and should not be any) universal prescriptions and abstract models that one could simply apply to all contexts. The existence of such ready-made "ideal" models is often the best way to end up with some form of totalitarianism. The guiding principles for changing reality, including the socio-political reality, remain