Ethnophyletism, Phyletism, and the Pan-Orthodox Council

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The Pan-Orthodox Council held in Crete in June 2016 established its succession to the Council held in Constantinople in 1872. Both councils dealt with the topic of nationalism, which the majority of scholars agree is a modern phenomenon: nationalism, and even national identity, constitute an intrinsic feature of modernity. Yet each of the two councils addressed this phenomenon in its own way.

The Council of Constantinople gathered specifically to address the issue of nationalism at the time of the Bulgarian "national awakening." The Council of Crete, in contrast, convened without a particular issue to solve. It met for the sake of meeting, in order to demonstrate the ability of the Orthodox churches to come together. Without such a council, the idea of "conciliarity" as the core of modern Orthodox identity would not stand. Crete dealt with the issue of nationalism on the margins.

Despite this difference, I would argue that Crete handled the matter of nationalism in a more comprehensive way than Constantinople. First, the two councils tackled two different kinds of nationalism. One is *ethnic* nationalism, and the other is *imperial* or *civilizational* nationalism. The former helps shape an "imagined community" (to use the famous phrase of Benedict Anderson), which shares the same language, culture, and ethnic origin. The latter also shapes an imagined community, but in this case the community may include several languages and cultures, as well as people with different ethnic backgrounds. Such a group places a greater value on its belonging to a common political milieu—in other words, an empire. When there is no acknowledged empire, people instead want to think that they belong to a common "civilization." This sense of imperial or civilizational identity may lead to imperial-civilizational nationalism—a feeling of superiority over other civilizations.

Imperial-civilizational nationalism is larger and less particularistic than ethnic nationalism. Nevertheless, it is not large enough for Christianity. Neither type of nationalism is compatible with Christianity, which is opposed to the idea of superiority on the basis of any criterion—including ethnic and civilizational criteria. Furthermore, these two types of nationalism are incompatible with each other either. The bloodiest battle in human history was between extreme examples of these two nationalisms: Nazism was a monster grown from ethnic nationalism, and its rival in World War II, Soviet Communism, was another monster, but one which grew from class-based quasi-imperial nationalism. The initial friendship between Stalin and Hitler (founded on their opposition to

the free democratic world) and their subsequent, deadly clash reveal the homogeneity of the two nationalisms on the one hand and the existential incompatibility of their purposes on the other.

In some cases, both sorts of nationalism can be identified within a single nation. Take the recent history of the Greek people. Since the beginning of the struggle for the independence of a Hellenic state in the early nineteenth century, proponents of Greek ethnic nationalism were confronted by advocates of Greek imperial nationalism, such as Phanariots. Later, these bearers of imperial nationalism were succeeded by adherents to the idea of "Greek civilization," as represented by the concepts of *Megali Idea* and *Romiosyni*. The two groups still wrestle with each other in modern Greek political discourses. For instance, the famous philosopher and publicist Christos Yannaras, who leads the group of "civilizational" nationalists, tirelessly attacks what he calls the "Neo-Hellenic" or "Helladitic" myopia of the modern ethnic nationalists in Greece.
We can interpret the 1872 Council as one of the battlefields between ethnic and civilizational nationalisms. Ethnic particularism was condemned there under the name of "ethnophyletism." However, it appears that it was condemned from the perspective of its rival, imperial-civilizational nationalism. The latter was supported by the Ottoman government, which pursued its imperialist aims, and by the Phanariots, who also had in mind the interests of the Ottoman Empire—as far as they coincided with those of what Arnold Toynbee would later call "the civilization of Hellenism." It is remarkable that the Council of Constantinople was not attended or endorsed by the other churches which pursued ethnic agendas or represented an alternative imperial-civilizational nationalism, such as the Russian Church, which promoted Pan-Slavism. Instead, these churches perceived the Council as an attack by the Hellenic world against Slavic ethnic particularism.

The 2016 Council dealt with a different sort of nationalism and did so from a different perspective. I would argue that the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete addressed not only ethnic, but also—and primarily—civilizational nationalism. It both reaffirmed the condemnation of ethnic nationalism, by endorsing the Council of

An early twentieth century postcard showing the Bulgarian Orthodox Church of St. Stephen in Constantinople, set up as a result of the Bulgarian national awakening.

Delegates to the 1872 Council of Constantinople.

Constantinople of 1872, and tackled a particular instance of imperial-civilizational nationalism we now know as *Russkiy Mir*, or the "Russian World."

Before proceeding to analyze *Russkiy Mir* and its implied condemnation by the Pan-Orthodox Council, I must briefly address the matter of whether the condemnation of imperial-civilizational nationalism at Crete came from its rival ethnic nationalism or from an alternative "Greek World." I think the Council of Crete stood above *all* these forms of nationalism, and its condemnation of nationalism was not inspired by any other sort of nationalism, but rather by a universal vision of Christian mission in the modern world. The 2016 Council of Crete, unlike that of Constantinople in 1872, was not attended exclusively by Greek-speaking churches. Also, unlike the Council of 1872, the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council did not pursue the political agenda of any particular state. These and other factors made the 2016 Council correspond more closely to the ideal nature and purpose of Orthodox councils than even the Council of 1872.

Of course, the Council neither mentioned the concept of "the Russian World" nor condemned it explicitly. Nevertheless, it dealt with the issue of four absent churches: Antioch, Moscow, Georgia, and Bulgaria. It has become more or less common wisdom that the activity of the Russian Church was behind the absence of the other three. The strategy of the Russian Church in pressing other churches not to go to Crete is similar to the hybrid war that the Russian Federation currently leads in Ukraine. The Russians pretend they are not there, even though they send money, weapons, and troops (without military insignia). Russian propaganda presents the separatist groups in eastern Ukraine as acting on their own, but there is no doubt that the separatists would not last for even a few weeks without constant backing from Russia. The same can be said concerning the churches which did not go to Crete. Moscow pretends it has nothing to do with their decision to boycott the Council, but there can be little doubt that they would have attended if they did not have competing motivations stemming from allegiance to Moscow.

With this apparently in mind, Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus stated in his opening address: "In my opinion, the inter-Orthodox rivalries on account of ethnophyletism were the first reason why the preparations for the Council took so long. Ethnophyletism is what blocked the question of autocephaly and of the diptychs from coming to the Council, and it is also the cause behind the

less-than-canonical solution given to the issue of the Diaspora." In this and other speeches at the Council, there was severe criticism of the motivations of those churches who did not attend. Russian imperial-civilizational "phyletism" was the main reason for the absences. This reason was kept in mind by the fathers of the Council when they urged condemnation of phyletism: Russian civilizational phyletism threatened the rationale of the council *per se*—to meet for the sake of meeting and to demonstrate Pan-Orthodox unity.

The condemnation of nationalism at Crete in 2016 was not only broader than at Constantinople in 1872—it was also harsher. The Council of Constantinople chose rather cautious language for its official statements: it called the Bulgarian Church that had separated from the Ecumenical Patriarchate an "illegal gathering" (*parasynagōgē*), and condemned "national differences" (*phyletikai diakriseis*) and controversies on "ethnic grounds" (*ethnikē eris*). It was only the official periodical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, *Ekklisiastiki Alithia* (Issue 52, 1908), which applied stronger language, calling nationalism a "Bulgarian heresy" (*boulgarikē kakodoxia* and *heterodoxia*) and an "anti-Christian doctrine" (*antichristianikē didaskalia*). Crete, in its *official* documents, called phyletism "an ecclesiological heresy"—a much stronger characterization.[1]

The words "ethnophyletism" and "phyletism" are often usually used interchangeably. However, I would distinguish between them for the sake of clarity. I would prefer to use "phyletism" to refer to the imperial-civilizational sort of nationalism and would reserve "ethnophyletism" for the ethnic kind of nationalism. In these terms, we can say that the Council of Constantinople in 1872 condemned ethnophyletism, while the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete in 2016 condemned both ethnophyletism and phyletism. An unnamed target of the latter Council was, in my opinion, the ideology of *Russkiy Mir*.

Just as ethnic nationalism was the main enemy of the Council of 1872, so the civilizational nationalism of the "Russian World" appears to be the main target of the 2016 Council. More than a year after the council, a feud continues between the theology of the Council and the ideology of *Russkiy*

[1] *Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church* (Crete, 2016), 1:3.

Archbishop Chrysostomos II of New Justiniana and All Cyprus.

Mir. At this stage of the reception of the Pan-Orthodox Council, the Russian World continues to undermine it. Thus, a group of supporters of *Russkiy Mir* in Ukraine, headed by Archbishop Longin (Zhar) of Bancheny, has anathematized the Council and wants to convene an "anti-council." They are strangely allied with a group in Greece which is also opposed to the Council. This group combines its anti-Crete sentiment with ethnic nationalism, of the sort which was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 1872. Thus, some ethnic nationalists from Greece (and other countries) have formed an unholy alliance with the civilizational nationalists from Russia (and other countries), in a joint effort to undermine—and indeed, overthrow—the 2016 Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church.

The councils of 1872 and 2016 both took place within, and are thereby confined by, the context of modernity. Opponents of these councils often criticize them for their modernism, but these groups are even more deeply anchored in modernity than the councils they criticize. These zealots curse modernity in their rhetoric, but they remain fundamentally modern, because they are motivated by the nationalistic phenomena which are characteristic of modernity. The Pan-Orthodox Council of 2016 was more successful (and more irritating for its opponents) than the Council of 1872 in dealing with issues of modernity. In condemning imperial-civilizational nationalism in addition to ethnic nationalism, Crete filled a lacuna left by Constantinople. Without taking this step, the Orthodox Church would not have been able to leave the era of modernity. Now it can, and should, go beyond it.

To conclude, I would like to suggest an alternative to these two types of nationalism: the civic self-awareness of nations. This self-awareness builds not on the idea of ethnicity or civilization, but on the idea of citizenry and its virtues upheld by civic society. Justice, solidarity, and political transparency are more valuable in this sort of national self-awareness than ethnic identity or civilizational messianism. These civic values are not much appreciated in the Orthodox world, yet they are not completely absent either. I believe that the Ukrainian Revolu-

Protesters gather at the Maidan. November 2013.

tion of Dignity (2013–14) showed that civic awareness is possible even in an Orthodox context. The majority of the protesters who came to the central square of Kyiv—the Maidan—pursued its agenda. Remarkably, most Ukrainian churches embraced this agenda as well. Only a minority of protesters came to the Maidan with slogans in support of ethnic nationalism.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine, which followed the victory of the Maidan, was a reaction against the rise of civic society. Russian propaganda, however, justified the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine as an attempt to "protect" the Russian World from Ukrainian nationalists. If we believed this propaganda, we might assume that, in Ukraine, there is a classic clash between civilizational and ethnic nationalisms, with the forces of the "Russian World" representing civilizational nationalism and the Ukrainians being moved by ethnic nationalism. However, we should not believe the Russian propaganda, because the civilizational nationalism of the Russian World attacked not Ukrainian nationalism but Ukrainian civil society, which had begun to emerge at that time. It was not Ukrainian ethnic nationalism but rather the Ukrainian civil meritocracy of the Maidan that became an existential threat to the Russian kleptocracy. Certainly there were nationalistic groups at the Maidan in Kyiv, but they constituted a minority. The majority of the protesters stood for the dignity of each individual and not for the interests of a particular ethnic group. It is noteworthy that the first victims of shooting at the Maidan were not Ukrainians but a Belarusian and an Armenian. The self-awareness of the majority of the protesters was civic in nature, and this awareness constitutes an alternative to both ethnic and civilizational nationalism.

Imperial-civilizational nationalism is incompatible with both ethnic nationalism and civic awareness. It is still an open question for me whether civic and ethnic awareness are compatible with each other. They coexisted in the Maidan, but began to separate from each other thereafter. In the post-Maidan Ukraine, there is an increasing tension between civic and ethnic self-awareness. Russian aggression enhances the latter and weakens the former. Still, in my observation, the civic self-awareness in Ukraine is stronger than nationalism, despite the war. What I am sure about is that the next Pan-Orthodox Council should add to the condemnation of the historic forms of Orthodox nationalism an endorsement of the civic awareness of Orthodox Christians. ✠

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