Apocalypticizing Warfare: From Political Theology to Imperial Eschatology in Seventh- to Early Eighth-Century Byzantium

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1 Introduction

Medieval Eastern Orthodox attitudes to the problems of warfare, and of just and holy war in particular, offer important parallels to and differences from the respective Western Christian attitudes, but have not received the more or less exhaustive treatment of the corresponding attitudes to the same phenomena in Western Christianity. Yet, lately, an interesting debate has developed among Eastern Orthodox theologians and scholars centred on the historical development and transformations of the notions of “justifiable war” and “just war” or the categorization of war as a “lesser good” or “lesser evil” in Eastern Orthodox Christianity.1 It is worth mentioning at this stage that it is still difficult to present a definitive reconstruction of the evolution of the notions of just and/or justifiable war in Eastern Orthodox thought and societies, since some of the main relevant works in its classical representative tradition, Byzantine Christianity, have either not been edited and published or, when edited, have not been translated into modern Western European languages and thus remain inaccessible to the larger scholarly audience.2

As in Western Christianity, the roots of the prevalent attitudes to war and peace in Eastern Orthodoxy can be easily traced back to the New Testament and its well-known passages concerning the use of force, violence, Christ’s moral teaching and its emphatic pacifistic perspective (Mt 5–7, 26:52; Lk 2:14, 3:14, 6:29; etc.). At the same time Eastern Orthodoxy inherited the potential for a non-pacifistic and even militaristic exegesis of the New Testament passages containing military imagery (e.g., 1Thes 5:8; Eph 6:10; 1Cor 9:7; 2Tim 2:3–4; etc.), Jesus’s “sword” allusions (Mt 10:34; Lk 22:35–38) and the heavenly war imagery

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1 One of the recent issues of St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly 47(1), 2003, has been entirely devoted to these debates.
2 See, for example, the brief and cautious overview of this field in Miller 1995, 11–12; cf. the comments in Haldon 1999, 2–7, passim.
in Rev 20, which, as in Western Christianity, in suitable circumstances and through suitable literalist interpretations, could be used to sanction the use of force. Eastern Orthodoxy inherited also the evident tensions between the ideas of war and peace respectively in the Old and New Testament, which despite the continuity between the notions of the ultimate universal eternal peace in some trends of Jewish prophetic and messianic thought and early Christian messianism, diverged substantially in other areas.

Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313, his conversion to Christianity and the legitimization and institutionalization of the Church in the Roman Empire inevitably led to various patterns of rapprochement between the State’s and the Church’s attitude to war and war ethics. This rapprochement is exemplified by Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260–c.340) but occurred against the protests and opposition of anti-militarist Christian groups such as the Donatists. The newly evolving concord between secular and clerical authorities followed somewhat differing patterns in the West and East Roman Empire, conditioned by the contrasting ways in which church-state relations developed in the Latin West (which amid the “barbarian” invasions and the formation of the Germanic states could also provoke frequent secular-ecclesiastic rivalries) and the Greek East (in the framework of the crystallization of Byzantine political theology within a centralized imperial state). In the specific political and religious conditions in the Latin West (where the very survival of the Christian empire, forced to wage defensive wars, was at stake) St. Ambrose (c.339–397) and St. Augustine (354–430) eventually laid the foundation of the medieval Western Christian just war tradition, which through a process, well explored in western scholarship, was systematized in the commentaries/syntheses of Gratian (d.c. 1160), Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–74), etc. Adhering to a different corpus of patristic writings and a different set of relationships with the East Roman (Byzantine) state and ideology, the Eastern Orthodox Church retained important elements from pre-Constantinian Christian attitudes to war and its morality, while the Byzantine state itself inherited and retained core elements of the secular just war tradition of the pre-Christian Roman Empire and Greek antiquity.

In the East Roman world the pacific tendencies of pre-Constantinian Christianity could be brought into the framework of the newly evolving Christian imperial ideology by figures such as Eusebius, St. Cyril of Alexandria (376–444) and St. John Chrysostom (345–407), who argued that the establishment of the Christian empire fulfilled a providential design to pacify the world and put an end to humanity’s violent conflicts and strife. Such notions drew to a certain degree on some earlier patristic views that, even in the pre-Constantinian period, the Pax Romana had in effect provided favourable