

The Orthodox Church and Geopolitics

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“Judah and Israel dwelt safely, each man under his vine and under his fig tree” (1 Kings, 5:5).

The Orthodox blogosphere is ablaze with conspiracy theories of geopolitical infiltration into the Orthodox Church. The Moscow Patriarchate and Russian propaganda have whipped up the rapidly morphing territorial challenges facing the former iron curtain into an opportunity to ferment disunity. Bishops, clerics, and theologians of various ethnic persuasions submit personal interpretations, opinions, and condemnations based on discernable self-interests and not so obvious fallacies. Several prominent bishops with long standing outright and blatant posturing, proxies of Russian state proclaiming the “inconsistency” of geopolitical interference in Orthodox church administrations. Directing their ire at the Ecumenical Patriarchate. I can't help but question these learned men: Seriously?

The Ecumenical Patriarchate soberly renders canonically valid positions backed Holy Tradition, theological foundations, and accompanied by historical documentation. Whereas the Russophile sentimentalities utilize ad hominem, derisive languages and pseudo-theology.

I must confess participating in online forums, sometimes with less than fruitful interactions on various social media outlets. That said, the Russo-chauvinistic propaganda and disinformation is staggering. The Moscow patriarchate, primarily ROCOR talking points merged with the strong-arm cold-war tactics of the Department of External Affairs (MP). The muscovite talking heads clearly demarcating the choice, and the die is cast: either you support the position of the Moscow church or you are schismatic and lack patriotism.

Let's take a step back from the Muscovite fabricated brink and examine the complexities of the relationship between the Orthodox faith and geopolitics as they developed within the Orthodox mindset and Christian scriptures.

The English term "geopolitics" was coined at the beginning of the twentieth century by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén¹ and commonly refers to “politics, especially international relations, as influenced by geographical factors.”² He developed this based on the crisis which was slowly enslaving the Eurasian continents and would eventually evolve into WWI. The current myopic affirmations of Kjellén's contemporary definition seem to overlook a long and documented intertwined relationship between faith and geopolitics. “The multiple layers of meaning that are developed as the theological narrative which links God to a particular “chosen people” in a “promised land” (ancient Israel) is transformed into one which links God in Christ to a worldwide trans-territorial community (“the people of God”).³

An analysis demonstrates different typological interpretations that have been subject to ideological selectivity in their historical appropriation by the "Orthodox Christian" nations. Particularly the last century of Orthodoxy coinciding with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and rise of the communist Soviet Union reveals the geopolitical claims by the Russian Orthodox Church, as corrupt.

The hypocrisy of church leadership, (whether Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian...) denouncing various political influences as antithetical to the Orthodox Church seems to be dishonest, and ironically political in nature. Let's take a moment and reflect.

The Bible is replete with geopolitical commentary, and I'll limit my comments to just a few examples. One need mention Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael to conjure up a geopolitical situation, which still dominates the world's geopolitical crisis in the middle east. Who is not familiar with the story of Moses? Under divine guidance leading Israel from servitude to Mount Sinai and the creation of the "Nation." It was King David after all who managed to unite the 12 fractious Israelite tribes under a centralized monarchy after a nine-year insurgency against King Saul and his successor... Is this not geopolitical? The Psalmist summed up a geopolitical strategic situation in the following manner (83:4–9):

*They hold crafty converse against Thy people,
And take counsel against Thy treasured ones.
They have said: 'Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation;
That the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance.'
For they have consulted together with one consent;
Against Thee do they make a covenant;
The tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites;
Moab and the Hagrites;
Geba and Ammon, and Amalek;
Philistia with the inhabitants of Tyre;
Assyria is also joined with them. . .*

Solomon ruled an *empire* that stretched "from the river [Euphrates] unto the land of the Philistines."⁴ Nebuchadnezzar the most powerful king of the Neo-Babylonian empire⁵, whose victories over Pharaoh Neco and the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish and again at Hamath had far-reaching implications in the geopolitical power structure of the eastern Mediterranean world.⁶

The New Testament is not lacking a geopolitical element. The stories of Jesus' birth; Magi from the East, the census and fleeing to Egypt are the most striking example of how the geopolitical world of the Near East and King Herod are prominent early in Jesus' life.

Furthermore, Jesus uses *geopolitics* as illustrations throughout his teachings:

"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities."⁷

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."⁸

"My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But now (or 'as it is') my kingdom is not from the world" ⁹

“Jesus also used political means, most dramatically in two public political demonstrations. First, his preplanned entry into Jerusalem on a donkey.¹⁰ Fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 “righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Exemplifying symbolically the political realities of this world and the next. Second, he publicly indicted the temple as “a den of robbers” because it had become the center of collaboration with Roman imperial rule and taxation.”^{11 12}

In terms of imperial Roman geopolitics let’s consider rule under Emperor Tiberius; the example of the Jews and Pontius Pilate seems obvious. Jesus is called “Lord.” Living under Roman rule, this was a seditious political statement: Caesar alone was to be worshiped as Lord. Geopolitical influence is present with the Sanhedrin¹³ trial of Jesus. It is an event reported by all four canonical gospels of the New Testament, although John's Gospel does not explicitly mention a Sanhedrin trial in this context.¹⁴ Thereafter, in Pilate's Court, the Jewish elders ask Pontius Pilate to judge and condemn Jesus, accusing him of claiming to be the *King* of the Jews. Such a claim would be considered treasonous, being a direct challenge to the Roman authorities.¹⁵

The Apostle Paul recognized the changing geopolitical landscape. “Endangered by agents of Aretas, he fled Damascus in AD 37 after his three-year residence. Thus, counting back from that departure, Paul had encountered his epiphanous vision on the Damascus road in AD 34.”¹⁶ Paul in his letters states that the church has broken down social divisions between people. Men and women, rich and poor, national enemies (in Paul’s case, “Jew and gentile”)—all are one in Christ Jesus and part of a new entity, a supra-geopolitical body as exemplified by the great commission of Christ Matthew 28:19-20 (KJV):

19 Go ye therefore, and **teach all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

The early Christian community was, from its inception a tool of geopolitics, whether pro or con. The cypto-Christians used secret symbols and signs to identify themselves in a pagan empire and beyond in barbarian lands. Christians existed maintaining their vision of being a unique and internationalist nation from Antioch, where they were first called Christian.¹⁷

It was not until the fourth century, when Christianity became institutionalized in the Roman Empire. The Roman pagan Emperor Constantine, convened a council of Christian bishops in the Bithynian city of Nicaea.¹⁸ This undisputed history clearly contradicts the contemporary assertion that geopolitics plays no role Orthodox administration. Orthodox history over the next two millennia will also disprove this argument of partisan bishops.

Throughout Orthodox Christian faith, both Old and New Testaments geopolitics has informed, influenced, and occasionally directed the Orthodox Church. From the Pentarchy, the Seven Ecumenical Councils, eventual east-west Schism, and modern granting of various autocephalies, geopolitics are implicitly and intrinsically part and parcel of our tradition; to deny it, is to become a partisan in political or ecclesiastical engagement.

With the onslaught of Islamic nation and its incursions into Christendom, geopolitics influenced each Patriarchate starting with Alexandria, the first to succumb to Islam. Followed by Jerusalem, Antioch, and eventually the first throne and capitol city Constantinople in 1453. Whereupon the Ecumenical

Patriarchate takes the additional role as facilitator of “The Great Nation” of Christians within the Ottoman Empire.

The stranglehold of geopolitical influence would oppress the Orthodox Church for the next four centuries. Constantinople managed to protect the “Christian Nation” in the Ottoman Empire. Allowing the Orthodox throughout the middle east to survive; securing treaties and protections for the Holy Lands and sacred sites, establishing renowned institutions, securing monastic communities from Sinai, Patmos, to Athos and beyond. The positive accomplishments of the Ecumenical Patriarchate during these years of occupation are astonishing. The Martyric yoke of Orthodox Christians under the Ottomans cannot go unmentioned from Pascha of 1463 in Lesbos with the martyrdom of Ss Raphael, Nicholas and Irene to Holy Week in April of 1821 with the lynching of Ecumenical Patriarch Gregory V at the gate of the Patriarchate which would spur the war of independence of Greece in 1821.

Allow me to take a step back in history. As was the case with the Bulgarians, Ecumenical Patriarch Photios found it prudent to send “to the barbarians” bishops from Constantinople. Among them were the Apostles to the Slavs, two brothers from Thessaloniki, Cyril and Methodius, who planted the seed of Orthodoxy in the Northern Barbarian lands in the 9th century.

It was after all Vladimir the Great who sent envoys to study the various religions of neighboring nations. "We no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth." After being baptized "Vladimir exhorted the residents of his capital to the Dnieper river for baptism. Vladimir sent a message to all residents of Kiev, "rich, and poor, and beggars, and slaves", to come to the river on the following day, lest they risk becoming the "prince's enemies." Vladimir's uncle, Dobrynya, forced the Novgorodians into Christianity "by fire", while the local mayor, Putyata, persuaded his compatriots to accept Christian faith "by the sword." ¹⁹

The Muscovite Church fared no better geopolitically from its inception.

From the forceful move of the Metropolis from Kiev to Moscow, geopolitics become more relevant than ever in the 15th & 16th century with the introduction of the Muscovite ideologies into the story of Orthodoxy. An influence which has never quite been corrected. From placing the Ecumenical Patriarch under “house arrest” until they received the title patriarch. More damaging canonically is the Moscow Patriarchate adopting Czarist ideologies; such as unreserved expansionism. It progressed like a rouge church disregarding canons and developing a new phronema (mindset). For example, in its exuberance it stretched out in the “Barbarian Lands” across Siberia and beyond alongside the Russian military and merchants.

Recognizing Muscovite tendencies early on Ecumenical Patriarch Jerimiah in 1589, immediately after granting the title “Patriarch” from Constantinople, the Ecumenical Patriarch installed a Metropolitan of Kiev. For the next 483 years the geopolitical and ecclesiastic tension would shudder until the Ecumenical Patriarch granted the Tomos of autocephaly to the Kiev Metropolis in January 2019.

Moscow’s “Patriarchate” has been in constant turmoil due to its geopolitical ties with “Mother Russia.” Beginning with its first schism by 1650’s and the “Old Ritualists” then the abolishment of the Patriarchate under Peter the Great in 1721. The next two centuries, this Czarist appointed “Synodical” church would unilaterally expand as part of Russian colonization beyond its geographical territory.

Taking advantage of the era Moscow autonomous actions during a time of turmoil in the Ottoman empire. It developed Moscow's perceived geographical jurisdiction "We go where we want" irrespective

of Canons. This novel yet uncanonical sentiment continues today “wherever there are Russians, there is the Moscow Patriarchate.”

After nearly two centuries as a defunct patriarch, the modern Patriarchate of Moscow was self-restored by a decision of the “All-Russian Local Council” on 28 October 1917. Another novel innovation of Moscow, for the first time in orthodox history a “local” church establishes its own rendition of a “Patriarchate.” Soon the horrific repercussions of the Revolution and onslaught of the new Leninist regime... “In the first five years after the Bolshevik revolution, 28 bishops and 1,200 priests were executed.”

Almost immediately, the repercussions self-proclaimed Patriarchate of Moscow caused multiple schisms, a fracturing which continued for well over a decade. These factions of schismatics include: the Renovated “Living” Church, Josephites, Russian True Orthodox Church, Sergianism, and ROCOR (Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia). In 1927, Metropolitan Eulogius (Georgiyevsky) of Paris broke with ROCOR in Paris and becoming the Exarchate of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Western Europe, repercussions which lead international headlines today.

After the death of Patriarch Tikhon in 1925, the Soviet authorities forbade patriarchal election. Again leaving the Moscow Patriarchate without a patriarch. “After Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, Joseph Stalin revived the Russian Orthodox Church to intensify patriotic support for the war effort. On September 4, 1943, Metropolitans Sergius (Stragorodsky), Alexius (Simansky) and Nicholas (Yarushevich) had a meeting with Stalin and received a permission to convene a council on September 8, 1943, which elected Sergius Patriarch of Moscow and all the Rus'. This is considered by some as violation of the XXX Apostolic canon, as no church hierarchy could be consecrated by secular authorities.²⁰ A new patriarch was elected, theological schools were opened, and thousands of churches began to function.”

To this day the Moscow Patriarchate has been unable to shake the oppressive influence of Czarist, Marxist, Soviet, KGB, and now the influence of the “democratically elected” Vladimir Putin. There are many similarities between how Stalin used the patriarchate and how Putin is utilizing it today. Moscow's short sordid history is reflected the facts.

430 Years since Moscow received title “Patriarch”
216 Years without a Patriarch 1721-1917, 1925-45
205 Years with Patriarch
127 under Czars 1589-1721
8 years under Synod 1917-1925
70 under Soviet Rule 1945-2019

There is much more that could be said by exploring the church of Jerusalem's, Antioch's, Alexandria's long histories with Islam and or current State considerations. Or Romania's, Bulgaria's, Serbia's, and Georgia's chronicle with the Soviet Union. It seems obscene to attempt to separate geopolitics from the Church's history. At a minimum it's not an honest review of the history of the Orthodox Church to say, “geopolitics plays no role in faith.” And its exceptional cheap coming from certain hierarchal mouths.

In closing I return to my initial question to those opinionated hierarchs: Seriously? In every Orthodox Liturgy, in some variation, we as Orthodox Christians repeat these “geopolitical” petitions;

For our country, for the president, and for all in public service, let us pray to the Lord.

For this city, and for every city and land, and for the faithful who live in them, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

"...there is no power but of God, the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom 13:1)

¹ Kjellén was inspired by the German geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel, who published his book *Politische Geographie* (Political Geography) in 1897.

² The Dictionary

³ Lain Wallace, *Territory, Typology, Theology: Geopolitics and the Christian Scriptures*

⁴ I Kings, 5:1

⁵ 612 - 539 B. C.

⁶ NIV Bible Study

⁷ Romans 13:1

⁸ Matthew 22:21

⁹ John 18:36

¹⁰ in the ancient Biblical world, a leader rode on a horse if he was coming in war and a donkey to signify peace.

¹¹ Matt 21:13, Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46

¹² Marcus J. Borg Professor, Oregon State University

¹³ a Jewish judicial body

¹⁴ Mark 14:53–65, Matthew 26:57–68, Luke 22:63–71, and John 18:12–24

¹⁵ Holman Concise Bible Dictionary 2011 ISBN 0-8054-9548-7 pages 608-609

¹⁶ G.W. Thielman *Did Paul Witness the Crucifixion*

¹⁷ Acts 11

¹⁸ now İznik, Bursa province, Turkey

¹⁹ *Novgorodskaia tretiaia letopis*, (PSRL 3), 208. On the initial conversion, see Vasilii Tatishchev, *Istoriia rossiiskaia*, A. I. Andreev, et al., eds. (Moscow and Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 112-113.

²⁰ Alekseev, Valery. Historical and canonical reference believers leave the Moscow patriarchate