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PREDRAG KOMATINA, Church Policy of Byzantium after the Triumph of Orthodoxy (843–886) (New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2025. XVII, 514 pp. – ISBN 978-3-031-91253-5

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The half-century after the ending of Byzantine Iconoclasm was a highly significant one for both Byzantium and the Orthodox Church. Questions about how to deal with the Iconoclasts needed resolving. The triumphant Iconophiles swiftly fell out with each other, re-litigating old disputes as well as dividing over new ones. Patriarchs were enmeshed in shifting court politics, and had a turbulent relationship with an imperious papacy. The Christianisation of the Slavic world quickened, with actions taken at this time that would fundamentally shape it for centuries to come, including the conversion of Bulgaria and the invention of the Slavonic script. All this and more played out in a blizzard of councils, letters, plots and missions. Despite this the period has long been neglected by modern (especially Anglophone) scholarship, which has been more focused either on the Iconoclast controversy that preceded it, or on Byzantium's tenth-century medieval heyday that followed it, with a partial exception for a steady drumbeat of work on Photios and the Photian Schism. This book by PREDRAG KOMATINA is, therefore, a welcome addition, offering a long and detailed narrative anchored in deep analysis of a vast range of often highly complicated sources.

The book is divided into three parts, and further subdivided into twenty-one chapters, all unnumbered and varying dramatically in length, which are arranged broadly chronologically. Unfortunately, the introduction does very little to set out either the structure of the work, or to explain what the 'Church Policy' of the title actually means. Rather, we are offered a very rushed explanation of what Iconoclasm was, alongside some pointed, even partisan commentary. The reader is told clearly that the Iconoclasts were the villains, and the whole affair an imperially imposed bolt from the blue forced on the Church much to its disgust. Even as an immediate introduction for the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy' in 843, this introduction falls short, unsurprisingly given it is only 2.5 pages long. That it is not designed

as an introduction to the whole work but rather as jumping-off point for the first chapter is reinforced by its inclusion within the first part of the book, entitled 'Orthodoxy Re-Enthroned (843–56)'.

Fortunately, what follows is of a much higher quality. The first chapter examines the critical but poorly documented period from the death of Theophilus in 842 to the official repudiation of Iconoclasm the following year. KOMATINA argues it was Theodora who was the real mover of the change, and for reasons of actual devotion. This is based on a close examination of what sources we have, in particular hagiography. Already KOMATINA reveals an impressive wide reading, and a happiness to engage in critique of particular details, while at the same time being highly reluctant to engage in the type of more strident source criticism that has been typical of recent scholarship on Iconoclasm. The next chapter is an excellent exploration of the patriarchate of Methodios (843–47). In particular, KOMATINA expertly teases out Methodios' condemnation of the Studites, which he cogently argues was not about how lenient the Church should be vis-à-vis the Iconoclasts. Rather the dispute arose due to the Studites' refusal to condemn their sainted champion Theodore's critiques of Tarasios and Nikephoros, Methodios' Iconophile predecessors as patriarch. KOMATINA also argues for a relatively strict purge of Iconoclasts from the clergy that became total on Methodios' deathbed, an entirely reasonable reconstruction of the sources though I would personally argue for a slightly more lenient initial position. Part 1 is finished with a chapter on the initial nine years of Ignatios' patriarchate (847–56), seeing the end of one schism, with the Studites, and a subsequent attempt to erase it from history, but the emergence of another one with Gregory Asbestas of Syracuse.

Part 2, 'The Expansion of the Byzantine Church (856–67)', is considerably longer, comprising seven chapters. The first recounts Ignatios' deposition, after excommunicating Bardas, Michael III's new chief minister, for Bardas' relationship with his own daughter-in-law, and then not supporting the confinement of Theodora and her daughters to a monastery. Deposed at one council in November 868 and condemned at another in February 859, Ignatios was exiled, and replaced with Photios, who was rushed through the required clerical grades in a mere six days in a process overseen by Ignatios' rival Gregory Asbestas, recalled to his own see following Ignatios' fall. Seeking support Photios turned to the indomitable Pope Nicholas I (858–867). However, Nicholas was instinctively supportive of Ignatios, and also reiterated longstanding claims to papal jurisdiction over Sicily and the Balkans. Thinking he was despatching legates on a simple fact–finding

mission, Nicholas was aggrieved when they fully participated at a council in 861 that supported the change, the legates swayed in part because Ignatios, unaware of Nicholas' sympathies, had resolutely attacked their involvement. After becoming aware that the pope actually inclined towards him, Ignatios had no qualms appealing to Nicholas, who duly held his own council in 863 to condemn that of 861.

KOMATINA leaves the first act of the complicated dance that is the Photian Schism here, and devotes the next five chapters to the affairs outside the empire. The first is a short chapter detailing the response to an epistle from al-Mutawakkil (847–861) criticising Christian doctrine. Apparently, Michael III convened a council c. 856–58 that delegated to Niketas of Byzantium the task of composing a response, which he did along with a detailed refutation of the Quran. This is also linked to the visit of Constantine-Cyril to Samarra to debate the Muslims, the opening episode in the famous *Life of Constantine*. Much of this chapter is devoted to the minutiae of dating, which while clearly important and KOMATINA's arguments are well made, it does rather crowd out discussion about the arguments supposedly made by Constantine-Cyril. The next chapter turns north, and discusses some evidence for missionary activity among the Rus following their sudden descent on Constantinople in 860. Most of the chapter again follows the *Life of Constantine* as the saint journeys to the Khazars to debate the Jews. There is slightly more discussion about what the argument was this time, though this is still more limited than this reader would like, and there is very limited engagement with the idea that this and the proceeding expedition are to a least some extent constructed narratives designed to build up the authority of its hero.

KOMATINA then shifts tack to Photios' relationship with the Armenians. With Byzantine forces pushing further eastward, and a massive Armenian rebellion in the 850s crushed by the Abbasids disturbing power relations among the Armenian elite, Armenia was more open to Byzantine influence than it had been in generations, and there was a flurry of diplomatic activity. Considerable space is given to the dating of the surviving epistolary exchange, and again KOMATINA's central argument that they belong to Photios' first patriarchate is convincing. The highpoint of all this activity was the Council of Shirakavan in 862, which declared a union of the Churches that KOMATINA avers was clearly Dyophysite. Yet soon Armenian politics shifted once again, and no permanent gains were made for either the Byzantine Church or State.

The next chapter shifts back to the *Life of Constantine* and its climax: the mission to Moravia and the invention of Slavonic. KOMATINA tells us that this mission was a 'matter of exceptional state importance' (p. 209). Yet famously the Byzantine histories do not mention it at all. The next chapter turns to the conversion of the Bulgarians, a matter Byzantine sources do mention, though hardly in much depth and nor were they in agreement with each other. KOMATINA prefers the version in the Chronicle of the Logothete that has Bulgarian conversion following a Byzantine attack in 864. This is entirely reasonable, though it does rather ignore the persistent anti-Bulgar stance in the Logothete that would favour a strategy of coercion. More tenuously, KOMATINA argues the attack was prompted by a desire to protect Moravia and by extension the Moravian mission from a Frankish-Bulgar alliance, which does assume that the Moravian mission was significant to Constantinople, and to prevent the pope from converting the Bulgars, a fear that is not mentioned in the sources.

The second part ends with a brief overview of Photios' activities in Constantinople until his sudden fall from power in 867 with the accession of Basil I. This is somewhat artificially hived off from the first chapter of the third part, 'The Emperor's Church (867–86)', which deals with the recall of Ignatios and the Council of 869/70 that confirmed the change. Again, KOMATINA prefers a personal reason for the abrupt changeover of patriarchs, with Photios denying Basil communion and this leading to a personal animosity that encouraged Basil to make the switch. KOMATINA also argues that the Council's condemnation of Iconoclasm was reacting to a real attempt to revive it amid all the uncertainty in the Church. Maybe, but it is perhaps more likely to be an occasion for all sides, and especially the new emperor, to burnish their Orthodox credentials.

The next chapter demonstrates, largely on the basis of a close analysis of the *Notitiae*, that the Bulgars did not as yet have an autocephalous archbishop of their own, but rather were once again under the jurisdiction of Constantinople following a brief period under Rome. In the next chapter KOMATINA displays an excellent command of a wide range of sources as he unpicks the stories concerning the Christianisation of the Serbs and Croats in *De Administrando Imperio*, showing that Basil I did not send a mission to either. He did however build up the episcopal network among the Slavs in the Peloponnese, engage in a failed attempted to convert the Jews, and attacked the Paulicians, all covered in the next chapter. While the previous chapter was something of a *tour de force*, there is little connecting these topics and a rushing of all of them. In particular, the handling

of the Paulicians is disappointing, essentially reduced to an overview of the military campaigns against them. The reader gets no sense of what they either believed or were purported to have believed, and the highly debated idea that they were the forerunners of the Bogomils and Cathars is simply asserted without evidence either way. KOMATINA then returns to close study of the *Notitiae* which seem to chart the expansion of the patriarchate of Constantinople's jurisdiction over Cyprus and Dalmatia, and with new sees in Khazaria and among the Rus. All of this is possible, but all of which had failed by c. 880.

KOMATINA then, surprisingly briefly, examines the return of Photios in 877 and the Council of 879/80 confirming this, with Photios securing papal support in exchange for renouncing jurisdiction over Bulgaria. There is then a tiny chapter (7.5 pages) centred on the ideology expressed by Photios in the *Eisagoge*. As it stands there is very little point to this chapter, and it is odd that in a part grandly entitled 'the Emperor's Church', Basil I has become almost invisible. The next chapter returns to the story of the mission to Moravia, now focused on Constantine's brother Methodios and based on his eponymous Life. The last chapter on the creation of autocephalous church for Bulgaria is essentially a follow up to the previous chapter on the Council of 879/80.

KOMATINA ends with a three-page conclusion called 'The Results of Byzantine Church Policy'. The most important lasting success, with many others proving ephemeral, was the Christianisation of Bulgaria, especially after it accepted the disciples of Constantine and Methodios expelled from Moravia. That this was the most important phenomenon in the Orthodox world in the latter ninth century is relatively uncontroversial, though one might therefore ask why the book ends here when the process was only just beginning. Moreover, was this really 'the result' of something that be called 'Byzantine Church Policy'? That does rather underestimate the role of the Bulgars themselves, and overplay the extent to which this was planned from Constantinople. KOMATINA adds that the main legacy of the period was that 'all territories that are under the direct political influence of the Empire on the Bosporus should also be under its direct spiritual influence' (pp. 459–460). If this means no more than the political boundaries of the empire and the jurisdiction of the patriarchate should overlap, then this had been essentially achieved in the eighth century. KOMATINA ends with a grand, sweeping statement about a 'special Byzantine cultural circle', invoking OBOLENSKY's *Byzantine Commonwealth*. Just how important or not that idea was is highly debatable, but I shall simply note here that the conver-

sion of Bulgaria would do little to prevent war with Byzantium only a few years after this book's end.

As the above hopefully conveys, this is a decidedly mixed book. At its best, there is technical scholarship of the highest calibre. KOMATINA has brought together an array of textual sources that is remarkable in scope. Inevitably in such a long and detailed book, specialists will find some specific arguments more compelling than others. More importantly, the book is let down by framing. There is barely an introduction or conclusion. The insistence on a strict chronological framework leads to darting from subject to subject, and therefore a degree of repetition when one returns to the subject later in the book. Often the argument would have been more persuasive if a more thematic structure had been pursued. The narrative element also tends to exaggerate the importance of personality and personal conviction. Of course, figures like Methodios or Photios had personal agency, but more consideration of the structural factors would be good. Nor is there any compelling reason for stopping where the book stops. If it had been designed as a comparison of the patriarchates of Methodios, Ignatios, and Photios, or of the policies of Michael III and Basil I, then 886 makes sense. But that is not what is presented, and either an arbitrary date of say c. 900 or the reign of Leo VI would work better. There is also no real definition of what 'Church Policy' actually means. Certain aspects of religious life in the period find no or next to no discussion, for instance about the building and embellishment of churches and monasteries. There are also some decidedly odd declarations for a scholarly book. For instance, there are 'the always unpleasant Bulgarians' (p. 208), while we are told that 'Armenian Christianity was schismatic' (p. 180). I presume these statements are meant to be read along the lines that from the perspective of Byzantium at the time, the Armenians were schismatic and the Bulgarians unpleasant, and that something has been lost in the translation into English.

For all my frustrations, this is still an important book on a critical and understudied period that should be welcomed.

Keywords

Patriarchate of Constantinople; Photian Schism