

AUTOCEPHALY AND AUTONOMY

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Over the last century few subjects provoked as much controversy in the Orthodox world as autocephaly and, closely related to this, autonomy. One need only mention disputes between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Constantinople concerning the autocephalous status of the Polish Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). The Russian Orthodox Church recognizes all three as autocephalous, on the basis of tomes of autocephaly issued by it as their “mother church” in 1951 (for Poland and Czechoslovakia) and 1970 (for America). Constantinople, on the other hand, recognizes only the first two as autocephalous, on the basis of its own tomes of autocephaly issued in 1924 (for Poland) and 1998 (for the Czech Republic and Slovakia), and it has denied the autocephalous status of the third. Less often considered, but no less controversial, have been the unilateral claims to autocephaly put forward by “the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kiev Patriarchate,” “the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church,” and “the Macedonian Orthodox Church.”

Autonomy also has been a source of controversy. Part of the Russian Orthodox Church in czarist times, the Finnish Orthodox Church, autonomous under Constantinople since 1923, was recognized as such by the Russian Orthodox Church only in 1957. More dramatic was the much-publicized dispute between Constantinople and the Russian Orthodox Church over Estonia, which in 1996 led briefly to a break in communion. In the wake of this clash, two Orthodox jurisdictions now divide the Orthodox population of Estonia: the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, an autonomous church under Constantinople, with about 20,000 faithful, mostly Estonian speaking; and the Estonian Orthodox Church

of the Moscow Patriarchate, a semi-autonomous diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, with about 150,000 faithful, mostly Russian speaking. The Japanese Orthodox Church, autonomous under the Russian Orthodox Church since 1970, has not been recognized as such by Constantinople. The same holds true for a number of now-autonomous churches that were integral parts of the Russian Orthodox Church before the break-up of the Soviet Union, most notably the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (as distinct from both “the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kiev Patriarchate” and “the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church”) and the Moldovan Orthodox Church (whose role in independent Moldavia is contested by the Romanian Orthodox Church’s revived Metropolis of Bessarabia). The list of controversies and conflicting claims could go on and on.

Most often disagreement concerning autocephaly has centered on accession to autocephaly, i.e., the way in which autocephalous status is attained. But while debate on this subject has proceeded with great acrimony, the nature and content of autocephaly itself has been left relatively undefined. The word is assumed to have a simple, univocal meaning. In fact those who use the term tacitly make certain assumptions that others may not share, but which nonetheless color their outlook and arouse their emotions. Much the same can be said for disagreement concerning autonomy. Clearly no term can be properly understood without considering the wider historical context in which it is used. Clearly, neither autocephaly nor autonomy can be properly understood without careful attention to the wider historical context in which the terms are being used.

In present-day usage, a church is termed *autocephalous* if it possesses (1) the right to resolve all internal problems on its own authority, independently of all other churches, and (2) the right to appoint its own bishops, among them the primate or head of the church, without obligatory expression of dependence on another church.¹

1 Alexander Bogolepov, *Toward an American Orthodox Church*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001), 8. Much the same definition is given in typical popular presentations, such as Ronald G. Roberson, *The Eastern Churches: A Brief Survey*

An autonomous church, on the other hand, is one whose primate must be appointed or approved in some way by the “mother church” that granted it autonomy. Similarity between the two aspects of autocephaly just noted and the internal and external sovereignty of the modern state, as presented in textbooks on political science, is hardly coincidental. From the nineteenth century onward, autocephaly typically has been understood as radical independence analogous to that which the modern sovereign state enjoys in the secular sphere. The autocephalous church, often referred to as the “local church,”² is regarded as the fundamental ecclesiastical organism, of which all lesser bodies are but parts, administrative subdivisions, or dependencies. This tendency is reflected in many governing statutes and in older canon law textbooks, which are preoccupied with identifying and defining the competence of the highest authority within the church (holy synod, patriarch, council ...). While detailed regulations may also be drawn up for the erection or suppression of “lesser bodies” (dioceses, exarchates, monasteries, and other institutions ...) and for their operation, the ecclesiological significance of these bodies is seldom explored.

The weaknesses of this understanding of the autocephalous church have become ever more conspicuous over the past century. Like the international system of sovereign states, on which in so many respects it was patterned, the modern system of autocephalous churches has failed to meet demands placed on it in a rapidly changing world. Possession of internal sovereignty has by no means assured spiritual health within an autocephalous church. Insistence on external sovereignty, according to which “every autocephalous church is a full and equal subject of international law,”³ has inhibited the creation of effective structures for maintaining communion (or even communication) between autocephalous churches. The result too often has been indifference, absence of common activity, and

(Rome: PIO, 1995⁵), 40.

- 2 *Pomestvennaia tserkov'/topikē ekklēsia*, “local church,” “church of the place,” in the standard Russian and Greek canon law text books, but “Partikularkirche” in Nikodim Milash, *Das Kirchenrecht der morgenlandischen Kirche* (Czernowitz: 1897), 200–209.
- 3 S. V. Troitskii, “O tserkovnoi avtokefalii,” *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhu* 7 (1948): 48.

periodic confrontations on such matters as the recognition of new autocephalous and autonomous entities.

The approach to ecclesiology lying behind this modern understanding of autocephaly now is generally discredited in Orthodox theological circles, though its continuing influence can still be felt in the practice and official utterances of the autocephalous churches. Its reliance on the language and thought-patterns of law and diplomacy has given way to a more “churchly” approach, with emphasis on Scripture, the Liturgy, and the Church Fathers.

The point of departure for this more recent approach to ecclesiology has been the Eucharist—or more specifically the Eucharist as it is revealed in the letters of St Ignatius of Antioch and other early Christian texts. The Eucharist is seen now, not just as one of several means of grace at the disposal of the Church conceived as a divinely instituted body politic, but as the very basis for the Church’s life. It is when all the clergy and faithful, with all their diverse gifts, are gathered under the presidency of the one bishop in eucharistic celebration that the Church becomes truly herself, the very icon of the Kingdom which is to come. But even as the Eucharist proclaims, anticipates, and participates in the banquet of the Kingdom, gathering up the faithful of all times and all places and indeed the whole creation in its prayer, it is celebrated in the time and space of this world. Until the coming again of the Lord, the Eucharist is necessarily a local event, “placed” in a specific context.

The insights of “eucharistic ecclesiology” help explain the evolution of church structures in antiquity. The fundamental ecclesiastical organism was understood to be the local church—“local” in this case meaning the church of a relatively compact face-to-face community, considerably more limited in its geographic extension than the modern autocephalous “local” church. Though modest in scale, each local church was “the sacramental manifestation of ecclesial plenitude,” as the late Archbishop Pierre L’Huillier put it.⁴ They related to each other “not as parts of a whole, but on the principle

4 P. L’Huillier, “Problems Concerning Autocephaly,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 24 (1979): 165–91, at 168.

of *mutual identity*.⁵ Each in its place was the concrete realization of the Church of God.⁶ This, however, did not negate the need for communion with the other local churches but rather implied it.

The ~~mutual~~ identity of the local churches—the profound communion uniting them with Christ and with each other—was expressed most tangibly in and through the collegiality of their bishops, especially as these met together in council. Long before the establishment of Christianity as the favored religion of the state, before structures for coordination of church life were defined in the form of conciliar canons, ecclesiastical organization in the Roman Empire tended to follow the lines of civil administration. By the fourth century, synods of bishops were meeting with some regularity in most provinces of the Roman Empire, typically under the presidency of the bishop of the metropolis, i.e., the chief city of the province, to address matters of common concern, to resolve disputes, and to elect and ordain their comprovincial colleagues, including their primate, the bishop of the metropolis. Roughly speaking, and with several important exceptions, the churches of each province constituted an autocephalous entity. They did not *become* autocephalous, they *were* autocephalous. To be sure, the word *autokephalos*—coined several centuries later—was not applied to them at the time. But Byzantine canonists and other later writers will have recourse to that word because it aptly expressed an existing reality. As Peter L’Huillier concludes after extensive study of the relevant sources, Byzantine canonists clearly identified the fundamental meaning of autocephaly:

[It] consists precisely and uniquely in the fact that all the bishops of a territory are elected and consecrated by the episcopal college of that territory and that the primate ... does not need to receive his investiture from any other primate.⁷

5 Kallistos Ware, “Communion and Intercommunion,” *Sobornost* ser. 7, no. 7 (1978): 554.

6 Cf. the beautiful address of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*: “The Church of God which sojourns at Smyrna, to the Church of God which sojourns at Philomelion, and to all the communities in each place of the Holy and Catholic Church. ...”

7 P. L’Huillier, “Problems Concerning Autocephaly,” 168. For the historical overview that follows, see also his later and more complete “Accession to Autocephaly,” *SVTQ*

It is not necessary here to trace the complex process of consolidation and centralization that transformed ecclesiastical structures in the Roman Empire in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries. Out of a constellation of autocephalous ecclesiastical provinces, five major ecclesiastical divisions emerged, a *pentarchy* of patriarchates whose preeminence in the universal Church would be assured by imperial legislation and theological reflection even after the rise of Islam in the East and barbarian invasions in the West limited their practical significance. But notwithstanding the ascendancy of pentarchic theory from the fifth through the twelfth centuries, in practice there were several exceptions—churches besides the five patriarchates with the right to appoint all their own bishops, including their primate. The status of the Church of Cyprus, a surviving example of the autocephalous ecclesiastical province, was confirmed at the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) against encroachment by Antioch and subsequently bolstered by the discovery of the relics of St Barnabas and by imperial edict. The Georgian Church, originally dependent on Antioch, gradually progressed from a state of autonomy (its *Catholicos* was responsible for the election of diocesan bishops, but his own election had to be confirmed by Antioch) to full autocephaly. The church of Justiniana Prima was established as a fully autocephalous archbishopric, with jurisdiction over much of the Balkan peninsula, by a novella of Emperor Justinian. It is noteworthy that in none of these cases did the patriarch of Constantinople or, for that matter, an ecumenical council, play a determinative role.

These ancient autocephalous churches—whether patriarchates or the odd metropolitanate or archbishopric—share certain characteristics that distinguish them from the modern autocephalous church. First of all, they arose and functioned within a single *politeuma*, a single *commonwealth*, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, in which the coincidence of Church and Empire was taken for granted as part of God's plan for the

37 (1993): 267–304, and John H. Erickson, "Autocephaly in Orthodox Canonical Literature to the Thirteenth Century," *SVTQ* 15 (1971): 28–41, revised and expanded in *The Challenge of Our Past* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1991), 91–113.

world. As Christian apologists had recognized long before, the Church's universal vocation ("go into all nations ...") and the Roman Empire's aspirations to universality neatly complemented each other. The geographic boundaries of the autocephalous churches might coincide with those of civil administration, but neither civil nor ecclesiastical boundaries were directly related to political independence or to nationality. And while the bishops of the autocephalous entity were expected to manage their own internal affairs, they were obliged to do so in accordance with the norms set forth in the canons. The universal canons, not the particular law of the autocephalous entity, set forth basic principles of church order: the number of bishops required for episcopal elections and ordinations, the relationship between diocesan bishops and their primate, the competence of the synod of bishops, etc. The universal canons also provided mechanisms for the resolution of serious disputes: appeals could be carried to a higher court, contentious issues could be considered by an "enlarged" synod (*meizōn synodos*), etc. Autocephalous entities developed in order to strengthen the bonds of communion uniting the local churches of a given region with each other and with all the churches of the *oikoumenē*. They were intended to unite, not divide. They provided a practical administrative arrangement for self-rule at the regional level without claiming self-sufficiency.

For many centuries, despite adverse changes in circumstances, Roman-Byzantine imperial ideology remained largely intact, and with it the sense of belonging to a single Christian commonwealth. But this began to change in the wake of the 1204 Latin conquest of Constantinople. The thirteenth century saw the establishment of two new autocephalous churches in the Balkans, the Serbian archbishopric of Peć and the Bulgarian patriarchate of Trnovo. Both came into existence through bilateral treaties between the emerging Serbian and Bulgarian kingdoms and the Greek rump empire of Nicaea. Autocephaly was on its way to becoming an expression of national and political independence, "the status symbol of a new 'Christian nation.'"⁸ Whereas autocephaly formerly had meant

8 Alexander Schmemmann, "A Meaningful Storm," in *Church, World, Mission* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1979), 98. This essay was originally published in *SVTQ*

independence on a purely ecclesiastical level, it now was related to political independence.

Evident also in this period are signs of incipient nationalism. This is most conspicuous among the Balkan Slavs. For example, the bishops consecrated by St Sava for his newly autocephalous church were Serbs as distinct from Greeks, and in places where there was a Greek incumbent, he was ousted. A similar sense of national identity can be seen in some Greek circles. Intellectuals in the court of Nicaea praised classical letters and art and even began to use the word Hellene—Greek—in a positive sense. (Hitherto it had meant *pagan* as distinct from Christian.) At the same time, a new sense of (Orthodox) universalism can be detected. Old symbols of unity and order—the emperor and his once-universal empire, the pentarchy of patriarchs—were fading in significance. Taking their place on the institutional level was the patriarch of Constantinople, who effectively replaced the emperor as the symbol of the unity of the Orthodox Christian world. Taking their place on the spiritual and ideological level was what some modern scholars have referred to as “political hesychasm” or the “hesychast international,” so called because many exponents of hesychast spirituality also advanced a social, cultural, and political program that profoundly affected the entire Orthodox world.⁹ These agents of institutional and cultural continuity would provide a measure of leadership, stability, and unity for the Orthodox *millet-i-rum* during the long centuries of the Turkocratia. In this *Byzance après Byzance*, shared religion, now reinforced by shared marginalization, would continue to unite Orthodox Christians as one people, one Roman nation, trumping whatever power ethnicity, language, and similar factors might have had to divide them.

15 (1971): 3–27.

9 The terms are used by Fr John Meyendorff, among others. See now Daniel Paul Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought: The Political Hesychasm of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), and Christopher D.L. Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm: Contesting Contemplation* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010).

Nationalism—replete with romantic myths about national origins, language, character, genius, etc.—would reemerge as a significant factor in Orthodox church life only in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and with nationalism, the modern autocephalous church. The first stirrings of this modern nationalism in the Balkans can be felt among educators and other intelligentsia (e.g., Voulgaris among the Greeks, Dosithei Obradović among the Serbs, Sophrony of Vratsa among the Bulgarians), who promoted the study of national language, history, and culture. But, as Paschalis Kitromilides observes:

Nationalism became a real, as opposed to a theoretical problem for Orthodoxy once the peoples of the Balkans rose up in arms against Ottoman rule in the early nineteenth century. The protracted revolts in the Balkans [...] provided the crucible for the transformation of the Orthodox religious communities of the Balkans into modern nations. Part of the transformation involved the radical reshaping of local ecclesiastical communities from branches of ecumenical Orthodoxy into components of new nations.¹⁰

Throughout the Balkans, the revolt of subject Orthodox minorities against Ottoman rule involved, on the ecclesiastical level, independence from the *millet-bashi* (the religious and political leader responsible for Christians in the East), that is the patriarch of Constantinople. Because of this coincidence, scholars sometimes explain autocephaly simply as a function of nationalism—as one aspect of national consolidation, a process marked by the nationalization of religion and the sacralization of the nation. Pedro Ramet, writing in the late 1980s as nationalist resurgence in Eastern Europe was again becoming a matter of analytical concern, offers an example of this approach:

The equation of religious unity with political unity and later with national identity became the *raison d'être* for

10 "The Legacy of the French Revolution: Orthodoxy and Nationalism," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity 5: Eastern Christianity* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 229.

autocephaly in the Orthodox world. Especially with the growth of nationalism in the nineteenth century, to be a nation meant to have a church of one's own, and to be entitled to one's own state. By contrast, subject peoples, such as Macedonians, Belorussians, and Ukrainians, were described as "lacking a true history"; they were said to speak the "dialects" of other "historical" nations and were denied the right to have their own autocephalous churches.¹¹

The story, of course, is more complex. As the quotation from Ramet itself suggests, a sense of national identity in the absence of other factors seldom, if ever, has been sufficient for the establishment of an autocephalous church—at least for the establishment of an autocephalous church recognized as such by all its "sister" churches. What has made a decisive difference is state involvement and—closely related to this—changes in "political geography," most often as the result of wars and revolutions. Indeed, examining the case of Greece, Victor Roudemetof has argued that in the Balkans national identity itself has been largely a creation of the state.¹²

Over the last two centuries, state involvement in the establishment of autocephalous churches has taken a variety of forms. Comparatively well-known are circumstances leading to the establishment of the Church of Greece, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Romanian Orthodox Church. Attainment of political independence from Ottoman rule was quickly followed by requests—or demands—by the civil authorities of the new states for Constantinopolitan recognition of ecclesiastical autocephaly. Less well-known are some other examples

11 Pedro Ramet, "Autocephaly and National Identity in Church-State Relations in Eastern Christianity: An Introduction," in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 4–5.

12 See especially V. Roudemetof, "From *Rum Millet* to Greek Nation: Enlightenment, Secularization, and National Identity in Ottoman Balkan Society, 1453–1821," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 16 (1998): 11–48. On the subject see also Paschalis M. Kitromilides, "Imagined Communities' and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans," *Eastern European Quarterly* 19 (1989): 149–94. For a stimulating discussion of Orthodox and national identity—in this case Greek—today, see Roudemetof's article, "Greek Orthodoxy, Territoriality, and Globality: Religious Responses and Institutional Disputes," *Sociology of Religion* 69 (2008): 67–91.

of state involvement in Orthodox ecclesiastical life in this period.

In the nineteenth century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire attempted to manage its multiple Orthodox minorities (Serbs, Romanians, Bukhovinians, etc.) by establishing two autocephalous churches: the Patriarchate of Sremski-Karlovci (Karlowitz), with jurisdiction over all the Orthodox in the vast kingdom of Hungary, and the Metropolitanate of Czernowitz (now Chernovtsy), which exercised comparable jurisdiction over all the Orthodox in the rambling Austrian portion of the empire, from Bukhovina to Dalmatia. This arrangement neatly balanced Hungarian and Austrian interests, but at the expense of the interests of the Orthodox minorities. The churches in question enjoyed only tacit recognition by the other Orthodox churches of the Balkans, and—when political boundaries changed following World War I—their populations were eagerly gobbled up by the churches of the neighboring Orthodox nation-states, ecclesiastical irredentism going hand in hand with national irredentism.

Equally self-interested was the Sublime Porte's attempt to accommodate Bulgarian national aspirations by the establishment of a Bulgarian Exarchate within the Ottoman Empire in 1870. As is well-known, this prompted the convocation of an ostensibly pan-Orthodox council in Constantinople in 1872, which condemned Bulgarian "phyletism" as heresy. (Notably absent from the gathering were representatives of the patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Russian Orthodox Church, which continued to supply the Bulgarian Church with chrism as well as other forms of support until its eventual recognition by Constantinople.)

As these examples suggest, state involvement in the establishment (or, one might add, suppression) of autocephalous churches has been motivated by state interests, and only secondarily by religious considerations. Many examples could prove it. Whether in the case of the predominantly Orthodox nation-states of the Balkans or in the declining Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, autocephaly assured that the ecclesiastical entity in question would serve state interests, or at least not undermine them. The episcopate

of the church in question might have the right to manage its internal affairs and to elect all its bishops, including the primate—of course under close state supervision. But communication with other Orthodox churches was strictly limited. Typically, external church contacts had to go through the state's foreign office.

With new changes in political geography in the wake of World War I, the issue of accession to autocephaly took on new urgency. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the 1923 exchange of Greek and Turkish populations, the patriarch of Constantinople was left with only a tiny flock in the new Turkish republic. Perhaps as a consequence, the patriarchate of Constantinople became more inclined than before to emphasize its wider primatial authority within the Orthodox world. Meanwhile, relentless Communist persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church brought an end to its once-enormous influence for several decades. This set the stage for a long series of confrontations and controversies concerning autocephaly, autonomy, and related issues during the remainder of the twentieth century.

When political boundaries were redrawn in the wake of World War I, nearly four million Orthodox Christians who hitherto had been under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church found themselves within the new Polish republic. Under heavy pressure from the Polish government, a reluctant hierarchy petitioned the patriarchate of Constantinople for autocephaly, which was quickly granted. Needless to say, the Russian Orthodox Church regarded this as unwarranted interference in its own internal affairs. Similar disagreements arose when Constantinople, acting in response to requests from the newly independent Finnish and Baltic states, granted the status of autonomy to the Orthodox churches in those lands, even though they had been part of the Russian Orthodox Church throughout their history.

In all these dealings, the actual sentiments of the Orthodox populations and hierarchies in question were hardly taken into consideration. In the newly autocephalous Polish Orthodox Church, for example, official documents and even sermons

had to be in Polish, even if very few of the Orthodox faithful could understand that language. Similar efforts at re-fashioning national identity took place in Finland. Ecclesiastical autocephaly or autonomy served the interests of the new Polish and Finnish nation-states (e.g., by facilitating Polonization or Finnification). It did not necessarily serve the religious needs of the Orthodox faithful within those nation-states.

Disagreement over the status of these churches—and more recently over the status of the OCA—led the Russian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Constantinople to formulate contradictory positions regarding accession to autocephaly. The resulting polemical literature was uneven in quality. Both parties appealed to historical precedents and the ancient canons, but they showed little sensitivity to their historical context. However, as both parties appear to have recognized, reference simply to the past will not overcome this impasse in inter-Orthodox relations. Historical evidence does not offer a clear and compelling procedural pattern, particularly if one takes into consideration the ways in which the notion of autocephaly itself has changed under the impact of nationalism, statism, and other extra-ecclesial forces. And as for the canons, it would be difficult not to concur with a statement made by Ecumenical Patriarch Benjamin (1936–1946) in 1937: “It is known [...] that concerning the manner of establishing the autocephaly of any part of the Church, none of the sacred canons provides direction or inkling.”¹³

Inter-Orthodox cooperation in the early 1990s began to suggest a way forward. As is well-known, the agenda initially developed for a Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church back in the 1960s was limited to “easy” topics (e.g., Scripture and tradition, fasting regulations, marriage impediments ...). In the wake of the “meaningful storm” stirred up by the autocephaly of the OCA in 1970, the list of agenda topics was amended in 1976 to include the

13 “Letter to Patriarch Nicholas of Alexandria, December 7, 1937,” in Apostolos Glavinias, *Orthodoxē Autokephalē Ekklesia tēs Albanias* (Thessalonica, 1985): 63, cited by P. L’Huillier, “Accession to Autocephaly,” 33.

“diaspora,” autocephaly, autonomy, and the diptychs. Thereafter the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission for the Great and Holy Council worked away, first on the “easy” topics, then on the more challenging ones.

In 1990 and 1993, meetings of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission addressed two closely intertwined topics, the “diaspora” and “autocephaly and how it is to be proclaimed,” and it also touched on “autonomy and how it is to be proclaimed.” The Commission’s point of departure was background reports from the churches—texts that by this point were over ten years old. In them three main lines of thinking can be discerned:

1. The report of the Romanian Orthodox Church argued that each autocephalous national mother church has the right to govern its own national “diaspora.” It also acknowledged that churches formed as a result of missionary activity constitute a special case, “since they belong to a different nationality than the members of the missionizing church.” In such cases, autocephaly may be envisioned.
2. Reports of the churches of Greek heritage (Alexandria, Constantinople, Greece, ...) appealed to I Constantinople canon 3 (“As for the bishop of Constantinople, let him have the *presbeia tēs timēs*—the prerogatives or primacy of honor—after the bishop of Rome, since this city is the New Rome”) and above all to Chalcedon canon 28. Because of its *presbeia tēs timēs*, Constantinople and only Constantinople has the right to exercise jurisdiction outside its own territorial limits, in all geographical areas that lie outside the boundaries of the duly established and recognized autocephalous churches. According to this interpretation of Chalcedon canon 28, Constantinople has jurisdiction not only over Pontus, Asia, and Thrace, but also the right to consecrate bishops “among the barbarians”—i.e., in the “diaspora”—thus modifying earlier provisions such as I Constantinople canon 2, which stated that “the churches of God in heathen nations must be governed according to the custom which has prevailed from the time of the fathers.” As

for autocephaly, only a council of ecumenical standing (such as a Great and Holy Council) can definitively establish an autocephalous church, and any interim arrangements depend upon approbation by Constantinople acting in its capacity as ultimate “mother church” and “first among equals.”

3. The report of the Russian Orthodox Church (and also the much shorter report of Antioch) takes a more pragmatic approach. Like the Romanian report, the Russian report (and also the Antiochian report) rejects the Greek interpretation of Chalcedon canon 28. According to the Russian position, the phrase “among the barbarians” in canon 28 historically referred to regions adjacent to Pontus, Asia, and Thrace. It did not refer, e.g., to regions adjacent to Orient (Antioch) or Egypt (Alexandria), and in no way did it override I Constantinople canon 2 concerning the governance of churches in “heathen” regions. Modern situations are quite different, the report continues. Each should be considered on its own terms—whether arising from mission or from multiple immigrations. But whether born of mission or of immigration, churches of the so-called diaspora “must gradually receive the opportunity to grow into new local churches and to receive autocephaly (or initially autonomy) from their own mother churches.” In America, the multiplicity of jurisdictions is the result in part of mission, in part of immigration. Several possible solutions are conceivable. The best possible solution, the report concludes, would be for Constantinople to grant autocephaly to its Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America just as Moscow did in the case of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), so also for the other churches to grant autocephaly in the case of their own “jurisdictions,” and for these then to form a single autocephalous church. As for autocephaly and how it is to be proclaimed, any autocephalous Orthodox church has the right to grant autocephaly—the right of self-rule, including election of its head—or autonomy to a dependency, provided that conditions necessary for independent church life are present (e.g., an adequate number of bishops).

How can the positions represented in these highly divergent reports be reconciled? That was the question facing the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission in 1990 and again in 1993. The commission, in effect, chose not to attempt to reconcile the divergent interpretations of the historical record evident in the background reports and chose instead to develop specific proposals for the future. One result was a draft text on the “diaspora,” which—after a long hiatus—finally was reviewed, modified at several points, and approved for implementation by the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference, which met in Chambésy in June 2009.¹⁴

The 1993 draft text on autocephaly has fared somewhat less well. As set forth in the draft text, requirements for accession to autocephaly include: (1) consent and action of the mother-church, (2) the obtaining of a pan-Orthodox consensus, in a process overseen by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and (3) the issuance of a *tomos* proclaiming the autocephaly of the applying church. At the time, the Preparatory Commission did not reach agreement concerning who is to issue and sign the *tomos* of autocephaly, and it referred the matter to a future meeting of the Preparatory Commission.¹⁵ After a hiatus of over fifteen years, the draft text was taken up again at a December 2009 meeting of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission. One may infer from press releases and

14 The approved text of this “Decision on the Diaspora” and its supplementary “Rules of Operation of Episcopal Assemblies in the Orthodox Diaspora” are widely available online at this point. In an English translation they can be found at http://www.scoba.us/resources/chambesy_documents.html, accessed August 8, 2012.

15 Draft texts for eventual submission to a Great and Holy Council are prepared by the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Committee, but in principle these drafts are not to be published before being reviewed, possibly revised, and then approved for publication by a Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference. The 1993 draft text on autocephaly in fact has been published at least twice, in French in Vlassios I. Phidas, *Droit Canon: Une Perspective Orthodoxe* (Centre Orthodoxe du Patriarcat Oecuménique, Chambésy: 1998), 136–38, and in English in John H. Frickson, Foreword to Bogolepov, *Toward an American Orthodox Church*, xvi–xix. Pre-Conciliar Conferences prior to the Fourth met in 1976, 1982, and 1986. A Fifth Pre-Conciliar Conference is expected to consider draft texts on autocephaly, autonomy, and the diptychs, thus completing work on topics in the announced agenda for the Great and Holy Council. It would be hard to predict when this Conference actually will meet.

follow-up interviews that this was a difficult meeting. According to Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, head of the Russian Orthodox delegation,

this procedure should conform to the principle of *sobornost*, traditional for the Orthodox Church in making decisions on important common church matters. In this understanding, a *tomos* on autocephaly should be signed by the heads of all the Local Churches. ... At the same time, the delegations of some Churches insisted that the signature of the Ecumenical Patriarch alone was sufficient for granting autocephaly. As a result of a prolonged discussion the Commission adopted a wording that presupposes signatures of the primates of all the autocephalous Churches. It was also agreed that the actual contents and procedure for signing a *tomos* would be specified by the next meeting of the Preparatory Commission.¹⁶

The Final Statement issued at the conclusion of the December 2009 meeting offers the official final wording of the controversial paragraph:

With the agreement of the Mother Church and the obtaining of Pan-Orthodox consent, the Ecumenical Patriarch will officially proclaim the autocephaly of a Church which requests it, by issuing the *tomos* of autocephaly. This *tomos* will be signed by the Ecumenical Patriarch, witnessed by the signatures of Their Beatitudes the Heads of the Most Holy Orthodox Churches invited to do so by him.¹⁷

This wording, however, does not appear to have been met with universal satisfaction. Meeting again in February 2011, the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission failed yet again to reach agreement on outstanding issues relating to autocephaly. According to a press release from the Russian Orthodox Church, “As a long

16 “‘We have reached consensus on the autocephaly procedure’—DECR chairman’s interview with the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*,” accessed July 28, 2012, <http://www.mospat.ru/en/2010/05/04/news17608/>.

17 “The Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Committee for the Holy and Great Council meets at Chambésy,” accessed July 28, 2012, <http://www.antiocheurope.org/en/news/details/105/>.

discussion has not led to a unanimous decision, the necessity of further studying the issue of autocephaly was recognized.¹⁸

While the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission still has not reached full agreement on the subject of autocephaly, it has reached agreement on autonomy. In accordance with accepted practice, the agreed upon text has not been officially published, but a fairly detailed summary has appeared in at least one press release:

It was agreed that the initiation and completion of the procedure for granting autonomy to a certain part of its canonical jurisdiction is exclusively under the competence of the respective autocephalous Church. It is noted that in church practice there are different degrees in which an autonomous Church depends on the autocephalous Church that has granted autonomy to it. A petition for autonomy is considered by the autocephalous Church which, having assessed the prerequisites and reasons for this petition and taken a favourable decision, issues an appropriate *tomos* defining the territorial boundaries of the autonomous Church and its relationships with the autocephalous Church to which it belongs in accordance with the established criteria of church Tradition. Then the primate of the autocephalous Church notifies the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other autocephalous Orthodox Churches on the declaration of an autonomous Church.

The draft document also provides for measures to find a canonical settlement of an issue in case of differences arising from two autocephalous Churches granting the autonomous status to church communities in the same geographical church region.¹⁹

How are we to evaluate these texts on autocephaly and autonomy in light of the historical considerations raised earlier in this paper? A few observations may be in order.

18 "Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission completes its work," accessed July 28, 2012, <http://www.mospat.ru/en/2011/02/26/news36896/>.

19 "Second Chambesy meeting discusses autocephaly, autonomy," accessed August 8, 2012, <http://www.mospat.ru/en/2009/12/17/news10309/>.

Many decades ago, when the topics of autocephaly and autonomy and the closely related topic of the “diaspora” were added to the agenda for a Great and Holy Council, two sharply divergent positions were evident. According to the Russian Orthodox Church and its allies, any autocephalous church has the right to grant autocephaly or autonomy to one of its parts. According to Constantinople and its allies, on the other hand, only an ecumenical council or its equivalent can definitively establish an autocephalous church, and any interim arrangements relating whether to autocephaly or to autonomy depend upon approbation by Constantinople.

Notwithstanding their obvious differences, both of these positions envisioned accession to autocephaly and accession to autonomy as being very similar processes. The draft documents on autocephaly and autonomy, on the other hand, envision these processes as dissimilar. The process for accession to autonomy prescribed in the draft text is consonant with what the Russian Orthodox Church envisioned for both accession to autonomy and accession to autocephaly in its original background reports. The process seems straightforward, realistic, appropriately flexible, and pragmatic. It is harder, however, to characterize the draft text on accession to autocephaly. It could be described as “balanced,” inasmuch as it tries to take into consideration multiple factors, including the role of the mother-church, the role of Constantinople, and the importance of pan-Orthodox consensus. But is it realistic, even if agreement can finally be reached on how the *tomos* of autocephaly is to be signed? The draft text envisions a “best-case” scenario. Few, if any, historical accessions to autocephaly have gone so smoothly. Let us consider just one possible sticking point. According to the draft text, “Pan-Orthodox consensus is expressed by the unanimous decision of the synods of the autocephalous churches” (para. 3.b). It would appear that failure of just one Orthodox church, for whatever reason, to approve a proposal for accession to autocephaly would effectively kill that proposal.

If the draft text on accession to autocephaly is unrealistic, this may be because it fails to consider the nature and content of autocephaly itself. The draft text affirms that

the institution of autocephaly expresses in an authentic way one of the fundamental aspects of the Orthodox ecclesiological tradition concerning relations between the local church and the universal Church of God (para. 1),

but it does very little to elucidate and demonstrate the truth of this proposition. What is meant here by “local church”? Is it “the sacramental manifestation of ecclesial plenitude” epitomized in the gathering of all the clergy and faithful of a given place, under the presidency of the one bishop, in the Eucharist? That would be the point of departure favored by many modern Orthodox theologians and historians. Or is it the autocephalous church as we now know it? The draft text on accession to autocephaly fails to address basic ecclesiological questions of this sort.

Like so many of the texts developed in the course of the Great and Holy Council process, the draft text on accession to autocephaly ducks the hard issues. It avoids any reference to the many extra-ecclesial factors that have affected and in many ways transformed our understanding of autocephaly, most notably nationalism and statism. This makes it difficult to imagine any real progress in inter-Orthodox relations, even if a Great and Holy Council does eventually meet to approve the texts now under discussion. What is needed is constructive engagement with our past—something that may be painful, yet also invigorating. If we know where we have been, it will be easier to know the way forward to fuller communion with God and with each other.

