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Holiness and Power: The Nature of Ecclesiastical Guidance in Early Byzantium

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Abstract

This paper will examine the nature of episcopal guidance in early Byzantium. In this period, as we know, the bishops of the Church were put in a situation to cooperation with the Empire. Therefore, the political power of the bishop increased in the early Byzantium. In this context we point out that there is a close connection between the holy life of bishop and his leadership, namely the affinity between bishop and holiness because the bishop is portrayed as a model of spiritual authority. And the other hand, the bishops played a central role in early Byzantium, but their civic role derived from their spiritual authority. Our conclusion is that the bishop has developed both a spiritual guidance and episcopal leadership in early Byzantium.

Keywords

Bishop, episcopal guidance, early Byzantium, holy man, spiritual authority.

This paper will examine the nature of episcopal leadership in early Byzantium. This is the formative period during which the church was propelled to assume an ever-increasing role in the public life of the later Roman Empire, and its representatives, the bishops, were charged with ever-increas-

ing public roles. Therefore, the bishops' public role and their civic power increased in this period.

The present paper builds on two assumptions, one chronological, the other ideological. First, it takes as its central theme late antique attitudes regarding the interrelation of personal holiness and episcopal office, thereby combining the study of the role of the bishop with that of the holy man. And second, it consciously departs from the established binary opposition of religious and secular power and introduces a new interpretive model of kind of authority.

The paper is divided into two major sections. The first section assimilates bishops and holy men, and it deals with the nature of spiritual authority in early Byzantium.

Section two deals with the role of the bishop within the social context of his community. As we will see, the concrete realities of the episcopal office serve as fundal for his understanding as civic leader (*patronus*), but his holiness extends the role of bishops in their cities. The idea that I want to point out here is that the bishop is more than a civic functionary or *patronus*, he is in fact a spiritual guide. This expanded understanding of the significance of the bishop as a holy man (saint) made the ascetic life accessible to those who lived in cities and were active in the public life. Briefly, the bishop is a part of a long tradition of the saint-bishop in the Christian East.

First of all, the purpose of this section is to revisit the issue of holiness in early Byzantium. Its point of departure, shared with Brown¹, is the premise that "the holy" is a useful tool of analysis for our understanding of Byzantine world.

¹ Peter Brown reserved a privileged place for the rise of the holy man in the Christian church and Mediterranean society in late antiquity. As we know, the holy man transformed his territory into a sacred space and created a new site for the interrelation between world and holiness ("the holy man" in Brown's terminology). For the Peter Brown's classic description of the holy man as patron, and as a spiritual authority (as spiritual father), see *The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity*, in "Journal of Roman Studies" 61 (1971), pp. 80-101; reprinted in P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, University of California Press, 1982, pp. 103-152; now revised in P. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Chapter 3: *Arbiters of the Holy: The Christian Holy Man in Late Antiquity*), Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 57-78.

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In my opinion, the holy man or Christian saint is the key for to understanding the nature of episcopal leadership in the late Roman Mediterranean. As Brown put it succinctly, „the rise of the holy man is the Leitmotiv of the religious revolution of late antiquity”²

The saint or holy man has long been recognised as a figure of importance in the social and religious context of late antiquity. In this period the Christian saint or holy man embodies the contrasting element of secular and spiritual leadership. In other words, in this period there is no distinction between the secular and the spiritual, because as Claudia Rapp has remarked:

“The appreciation by his contemporaries of an individual as a holy man depended to a large extent on his ability to bestow on them benefactions of a very concrete, worldly kind: healing from illness, relief of famine, and restoration of social order”³.

Thus,

“it is more fruitful to conceive of secular and religious authority as the opposing ends of a sliding scale, where each individual, whether holy man, or bishop, has his own place, depending on his role in society and his own personal conduct.”⁴

The holy men of late antiquity were monks who were endowed with special spiritual gifts of teaching, prayer, and miracle working⁵. Given such displays of spiritual power on behalf of bishops, little wonder that emperors attempted to elicit their support.

Therefore, the type of authority exercised by bishops in this period has been described as a “novelty” and a “multifaceted.” In other words, Christianization required that imaginations be reoriented toward new cultural

² P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, p. 148. Many appraisals are performed in Howard-Johnston and Hayward, *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Age. Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

³ Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, University of California Press, 2013, p. 6. For more details, see Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁴ C. Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, p. 6.

⁵ More recently Brown has proposed a model of cooperation or alliance between the monk as holy man and the bishop as patron of the poor. Cf. P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 71-117.

icons, based not only on scriptural examples but also on living exemplars who vividly embodied the ideals that the Scriptures described⁶. As Sobrinho has remarked in this period

“churchmen continued to engage in a colossal struggle for the definition of God and the control of the church. The motivation for the dispute remained theological: to ensure the salvation of humankind against the dangers of false teaching and blasphemous worship, but the stakes were much higher because one’s theological views could compromise access to the church’s expanding resources and the perquisites of ecclesiastical office precisely at a time when these were becoming indispensable for the legitimation of episcopal authority”⁷.

Indeed “the emperor’s willingness to listen to bishops, as he had once listened to philosophers, implied his recognition of new forms of local power.”⁸ While these observations refer to the role and function of the bishop in general, they are all the more poignant in light of the increasing asceticization of the episcopate in this period. Episcopal authority came to be based on the bishop’s “spirituality as an ascetic and holy man”⁹. Briefly, the ascetic life has been a decisive factor in the formation of spiritual authority.

From this perspective, the ascetic life – as *locus* of intense spiritual experience – was a tool to achieve spiritual authority. In this context we point out that the bishop was a source of spiritual authority in early Byzantium¹⁰.

⁶ For these “new cultural icons” of Late Antiquity, see P. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 3-26, and pp. 57-78; also, Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, University of California Press, 1991.

⁷ Carlos R. Galvao-Sobrinho, *Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, University of California Press, 2013, p. 126.

⁸ P. Brown, response to Chadwick, *Role of the Christian Bishop*, pp. 15-16, and P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p. 5.

⁹ Ramsey MacMullen, response to Chadwick, *Role of the Christian Bishop*, p. 29. Henry Chadwick, *The Role of the Christian Bishop in Ancient Society*, Protocol Series of the Colloquies 35, Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1980.

¹⁰ For bishop as a source of authority in the Byzantium, C. R. Galvao-Sobrinho, *Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman*

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In fact the ascetic life had become the feature of episcopal leadership for a new generation of bishops. In the saint-bishop we find the quintessence of spiritual authority, so that asceticism is linked with both spiritual power and institutional authority¹¹. Briefly, the bishop was both spiritual guide and patron in this period, so that the monk-bishop assumed positions of spiritual authority in early Byzantium¹².

And indeed, the ideal bishop of Late Antiquity assumes a role comparable to that of the holy man. From this perspective, the bishop embodies “the institutional authority of the triumphant Nicene church and the spiritual power of the holy ascetic.”¹³ As Andrew Louth has remarked,

Empire, University of California Press, 2013; A. Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: Concepts and Images of Authority in Paganism and Christianity before the Age of Cyprian*. Boston, 1999; H. Chadwick, E. C. Hobbs and W. Wuellner (eds.), *The Role of the Christian Bishop in Ancient Society, Protocol of the 35th Colloquy*, Center for Hermeneutical Studies, Berkeley, 1980; Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, Berkeley, 2005. Also, the late fourth and early fifth centuries were a crucial time for subordinating ascetic laymen to the institutional authority of church leaders. This ecclesiastical process is sketched in broad strokes by Rita Luzzi, *Il potere episcopale nell' Oriente romano: Rappresentazione ideologica e realita` politica (IV-V sec. d.C)* (Rome: Edizioni dell' Ateneo, 1987). An entire volume of essays was dedicated to the interconnection of episcopal power and pastoral care in 1997 (*Vescovi e pastori in epoca teodosiana*, vol. 2 (Rome, 1997).

¹¹ For more details, see P. Rousseau, *The Spiritual Authority of the "Monk-Bishop": Eastern Elements in Some Western Hagiography of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries*, in “Journal of Theological Studies” n.s. 23, 1971, pp. 380-419.

¹² Recent research has shown that ascetic life was important in early Byzantium. On this theme, see especially A. Camplani, G. Filoramo (eds.), *Foundations of Power and Conflicts of Authority in Late-Antique Monasticism*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 157, Leuven, 2007; D. Caner, *Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, University of California Press, 2002; Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man*, University of California Press, 1983; Susanna El, “*Virgins of God*”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, 1994; C. Rapp, *C. Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*. Berkeley, 2005; P. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, Oxford University Press, 1978; S. Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*, Fortress Press, 1995, and A. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Mass., 2004.

¹³ A. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 191.

“Holiness was one of the touchstone of authority in the Christian community, so the claims and counterclaims, and claims to adjudicate, become one of the continuing threads determining the authenticity of Christian experience.”¹⁴

Spiritual authority is the precondition of civic or secular authority¹⁵. This feature is essential to the understanding of the public role of bishops in late antiquity. Thus, the complex nature of episcopal leadership as a combination of civic and spiritual authority provides a model for the role of bishops in early Byzantium:

“...the bishop who occupies the middle ground between the two poles of secular and religious leadership. His responsibilities as administrator of a diocese involve him in very mundane matters from financial administration to building works, while his duties as the shepherd of his flock entail such religious obligations as pastoral care, the preservation of doctrinal unity, and the celebration of the liturgy and other Christian rites.”¹⁶

The role of bishop in early Byzantium illustrates a new *modus operandi*: in his struggle to rise to and remain in office, he fashioned the new style of church leadership of the early years of the controversy into an assertive model of episcopal authority. The new pattern of action brought bishops enormous power, establishing them as formidable public forces after Constantine’s death and beyond. Below we talk about the bishop as model for leadership in the church.

As we know, the spiritual authority remain a fertile topic for Byzantium. The bishops played a huge role in disseminating notions of spiritual authority in this period. According to A. Sterk this authority explain the eventual triumph of a distinctly monastic episcopate in the Byzantine church¹⁷.

The exemplary life was a strong condition for the activity of the bishop. Moreover, this life was a major premise or precondition for bishop’s

¹⁴ Andrew Louth, *Holiness and Sanctity in the Early Church*, in Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (eds.), “Saints and Sanctity”, The Ecclesiastical History Society: The Boydell Press, 2011, p. 18.

¹⁵ On individual figures of spiritual authority see especially Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt (eds.), *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient*, Leiden: Brill, 1999.

¹⁶ C. Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Cf. A. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Mass., 2004.

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leadership. Briefly, the bishop acted as a model who instilled in his community the desire to imitate him. From this perspective, as we have just seen, the bishop plays a role comparable to that of the holy man. In other words, he engaged in pastoring his flock and pursuing spiritual perfection.

In this sense, the bishop was moved between the two poles of secular and spiritual leadership:

“His responsibilities as administrator of a diocese involve him in very mundane matters from financial administration to building works, while his duties as the shepherd of his flock entail such religious obligations as pastoral care, the preservation of doctrinal unity, and the celebration of the liturgy and other Christian rites.”¹⁸

Therefore, bishops were actively involved in the secular world, and this feature of the bishop illustrates the rise of the shepherd of the Christian flock to unprecedented political power. As Sterk has observed “Far from being an outsider or an episcopal anomaly, the bishop has become a typical player on the imperial stage”¹⁹. Briefly, the bishops’ social prominence and their public role increased in the Byzantine world²⁰.

According to P. Brown the bishop assumes the role of *patronus* in the socioeconomic context in which he operated²¹, but in my opinion, the bish-

¹⁸ C. Rapp, *The Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, p. 6.

¹⁹ A. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, p. 214.

²⁰ For the effort to link the bishops’ public activities with their spiritual position as spiritual guides, see C. Rapp, *The Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, and Rafael Kosiński, *Holiness and Power: Constantinopolitan Holy Men and Authority in 5th Century*, Walter de Gruyter, 2016. A. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2004; *L’ évêque dans la cité du IV au V siècle: Image et autorité*, ed. E. Rebillard and C. Sotinel, Collection de l’École Française de Rome 248, Rome, 1998. H. Chadwick, *Bishops and Monks*, in “*Studia Patristica*” 24 (1993), pp. 45-61. P. Rousseau, *The Spiritual Authority of the “Monk-Bishop”: Eastern Elements in Some Western Hagiography of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries*, in “*Journal of Theological Studies*” n.s. 22, 1971, pp. 380-419.

²¹ According to P. Brown, in Late Antiquity, the bishops gained greater importance as part of a tighter administrative web that extended a closer grip on cities than ever before. In the *The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity*, Brown explored the holy man’s public role as a *patronus* and its connection to asceticism. P. Brown, *The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity*, in “*Journal of Religion Studies*” 61 (1971), pp. 80-101, repr. in his *Society and the Holy*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982. See now also the important retrospective article by P. Brown, *The Rise and Function of Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997*, in “*Journal of Early Christian Studies*” 6 1998, pp. 353-76.

op assumes a more nuanced picture (role) than a patron. The role of bishop involve the spiritual fatherhood²². For example, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, or Gregory of Nazianz are models for leadership in the church.

In the study of bishops, the tendency has been to neglect this spiritual element. In my opinion, the bishop assumes both personal holiness and episcopal authority²³. This way of exercising spiritual authority, combined with all the means of secular power, was a new phenomenon in the early Byzantium²⁴.

Therefore, the authority of the bishop is a multifaceted in this period. This new phenomenon offer insight into the multifaceted relations between church and world in the late Roman world²⁵.

Our conclusion is that ascetic life provides the foundation and legitimation for episcopal power in Byzantine world. In this context, we point

²² On this subject, see especially A. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.), 2004.

²³ For more details, see C. Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, and C. Rapp, *For Next to God, You Are My Salvation: Reflections on the Rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity*, in J. Howard-Johnston and P. A. Hayward (eds.), "The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown", Oxford University Press, 1999.

²⁴ For the relation of the spiritual authority to the Empire, see G. Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, Cambridge University Press, 2003; G. Dagron et al. (eds.), *Évêques, moines et empereurs (610–1054)*, Histoire du christianisme 4, Paris: Desclée, 1993. H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000; Peter Hatlie, *Spiritual Authority and Monasticism in Constantinople during the Dark Ages (650–800)*, in J. W. Drijvers and J. W. Watt (eds.), "Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient", Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 195-222.

²⁵ Fortunately, several more recent works have treated this period in greater depth. On this theme, see especially J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom Clerics between Desert and Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2011; Nicholas Marinides, *The Beautiful Bishop: Physiognomy and Holiness in the Life of St. Eutychius of Constantinople*, in J. McGuckin (ed.), "The Concept of Beauty in Patristic and Byzantine", Sophia Institute, New York, 2013; Theresa Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrhus: The Bishop and the Holy Man*, The University of Michigan Press, 2002, and Maria Chiara Giorda, *Bishops-Monks in the Monasteries: Presence and Role*, in "The Journal of Juristic Papyrology", vol. 39, 2009, pp. 49-82. Also, Hatlie's essay is a welcome addition to the studies on monks or spiritual authority during this period. See, P. Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350-850*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

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out that the bishops' public actions are perceived to be a manifestation of their spiritual authority. There is a fundamental distinction between civic leader and bishop. The emphasis on the spiritual element in bishop' public role provides the method that allow to understand the bishops and holy men within the same theological and socioeconomic context.

Thus, the importance of the personal holiness in the assertion of episcopal leadership remains a touchstone in the Byzantine world. From this perspective, the charismatic feature plays a decisive role in the establishment of personal holiness of the bishop. There is no contradistinction between charismatic authority and institutional (episcopal) authority. The bishop was a spiritual guide for his community, so that he was perceived as a holy man in the early Byzantium.