

Heresies in the early Byzantine Empire: Imperial policies and the Arab conquest of the Near East

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Resumen: Algunos estudiosos modernos han considerado que las numerosas herejías que invadieron las provincias orientales del Imperio bizantino, al comienzo de la conquista islámica, fueron movimientos nacionalistas encubiertos generados por los nativos contra la autoridad bizantina. Nuestro propósito en el presente artículo es ofrecer nuevas evidencias que demuestren que dichos movimientos heréticos contribuyeron en escasa medida a la de por sí fácil conquista islámica de Oriente Medio, que se debió, esencialmente, a factores militares y sociales de diversa índole.

Abstract: On the eve of the Arab conquest, the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire were riddled by numerous heresies which were considered by a number of modern scholars as disguised nationalistic movements expressed by the local peoples against the central authority of Constantinople. Our aim in the present article is to offer new evidences to demonstrate that those heretic movements contributed little to the easy Moslem conquest of the Near East. This conquest was due, in essence, to several military and social factors.

Palabras Clave: Monofisitas. Egipto. Alejandría. Siro-Palestina. Heraclio. Cristología. Política imperial bizantina. Conquista islámica.

Key Words: Monophysites. Nestorians. Egypt. Alexandria. Syro-Palestine. Heraclius. Christology. Byzantine imperial policies. Moslem conquest.



The aim of this paper is to present a cursory introduction of heresies in the Early Byzantine Empire, and to relate them to the reaction of the central government in Constantinople, inspired mainly by political considerations. Moreover, the paper will discuss the possible relationship which may have existed between the so-called nationalistic tendencies of the local populations

where the heresies appeared and their detrimental effects on the Byzantine defense against the Arab conquest in the Near East and in particular in Egypt.

The enormous size of the Early Byzantine Empire included a large variety of people of different origins who spoke a multitude of languages. At the time of Constantine the Great, 4th c. A.D., which is considered either the beginning of the Byzantine Empire or Late Roman period, a number of separatist religious movements appeared and multiplied especially in the Near East. The Fathers of the Church, anxious to secure the unity of the Church and of the Empire, labeled “heresy” (αἵρεσις, lit. “sect”) any dissident movement contrary to the officially accepted Christian dogma.¹ Bishop Epiphanius (5th c. AD) estimated their number to eighty. According to Epiphanius, the first who actually started the heresies, as early as in the apostolic times, was Simon the magician who believed that he was “the Great Power of God”, and engaged himself in miracles.²

While heresies mushroomed in the Byzantine Empire through the whole span of its long history, they acquired particular importance in the period before the early Islamic conquests, completed roughly by the year 700, when Syria-Palestine, Mesopotamia and North Africa, inhabited by a large number of various populations with a great variety of beliefs and traditions, were still part of the Byzantine Empire.

The central Byzantine authorities in the far distant Constantinople, under the authoritarian power of the emperor, in order to silence any resistance to the officially accepted religious policies, applied all means of persuasion including ruthless persecution and proposing artificial compromised religious formulas which were doomed to fail. The personalities and personal religious tendencies of the emperors played a key role in the controversies since the Byzantine Church usually accepted his choices with servility.

It is worth mentioning here the personality of the emperor Julian (361-363) whose activities to revive paganism reveal the impotence of the Byzantine emperors to impose their own religious beliefs when they are in collision with

¹ See “Heresy in Oxford”, in *The Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 1991), II, p. 918. See also W. BRANDES, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Seventh Century: Prosopographical Observations on Monotheletism”, in Averil CAMERON (ed.), *Fifty Years of Prosopography. The Later Roman Empire, Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 103-118. Brandes examines analytically the theological aspects of Monotheletism without any effort to relate them to any possible political implications. See also N. A. MATSOUKAS, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (Thessaloniki, 1992), in Greek.

² EPIPHANIUS, “Κατὰ αἱρέσεων”, *Patrologia Graeca*, XLI, col. 288c. For the personality of the bishop Epiphanius of Salamis (Constantia) in Cyprus and his attitude towards heresies, see also C. RIGGI, “La figura di Epifanio nel IV secolo”, *Studia Patristica* 8 (1966), pp. 86-107.

their subjects.³ Julian ordered that Christians be excluded from high administrative positions, since, according to their beliefs, they could never implement capital punishment. Likewise, he excluded the Christians from teaching classical studies because he considered them unable to understand pagan culture. In spite of such actions against the Christians, Julian publicly condemned any cruel actions by the pagans against the Christians and thus he avoided the enmity of the Christian leaders. Saint Athanasius of Alexandria called his policies “just a little cloudy”.⁴ Julian’s strong prohibition of violence and persecution was not to be followed by the later Byzantine emperors who harshly suppressed their religious opponents who professed heresies.

The heretical movements in the Byzantine Empire acquired great intensity in the fifth century, concentrating on what is now called “Christology”, i.e. understanding of the conception of the divine-human unity of Christ. The Byzantine Church, anxious to reach an acceptable agreement on the Christological problem, organized the Council of Chalcedon in 451, in which it was proclaimed in a rather elusive way that divinity and humanity are to be conceived as unmixed, inseparable in one Christ.⁵ The Council of Chalcedon confirmed and supplemented the Synod of Nicaea (325 A.D.).

The Council of Chalcedon of 451 formed the basic pattern to be followed in the following desperate attempts of the later Byzantine emperors to secure religious compromise. The emperor Marcian (450-457), who succeeded the young and weak emperor Theodosius II (408-450), inspired solely by the desire to keep the solidarity and universal unity of the Empire, declared that in the future “no one shall dare speak about the birth of our Lord and Saviour except as handed down by the Council”, and so the Council’s decision became an imperial law. Anybody who did not obey this law was punished, or suffered other severe punishments.⁶

³ For the emperor Julian’s policies, but without a deeper insight of his character, see G. W. BOWERSOCK, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978). See also J. BOUFFARTIGUE, *L’empereur Julien et la culture de son temps* (Paris, 1992).

⁴ SOCRATES, *Ecclesiastical History*, in PG LXVII, col. 416A: “νεφύδριον γαρ’εστι, και παρέργεται”.

⁵ For a general discussion on the Council of Chalcedon, see P. T. R. GRAY, *The Defense of Chalcedon in the East (451-553)* (Leiden, 1979).

⁶ See all relevant passages translated from Latin into German by A. GRILLMEIER, and from it translated into English by P. ALLEN and J. CAWTE, *Christ in Christian Tradition 2* (London-Oxford, 1987), pp. 94 ff. Of particular interest is the passage of the Pope of Rome LEO (440-461) concerning heresies, “Certainly heresies, however dissimilar they may be, are all together rightly to be condemned. For all that, the individual heresies have something of truth in one or other of their parts. ARIUS (in the 4th c.) propounded that the son of God is less than the Father, [he] is his creature; it is from this [son] that the Holy Spirit with the universe was created.”

Emperor Marcian's intervention and the forced imposition of the decisions of the Council of 451 intensified the opponents' resistance. Nestorius, influenced by the theological school of Antioch, taught that although the two separate natures, divine and human, co-existed in Christ, his mother Mary should be called "Christotokos" (mother of Christ) instead of "Theotokos" (mother of God) because it is impossible for a god to be born by a human being.⁷ Reacting to Nestorius' emphasis on the human nature of Jesus Christ, the Alexandrians followed the dogma that the divine nature was separate and came into contact with the human after incarnation.⁸ The followers of this theory were labeled "Monophysites" much later.

These two religious movements acquired gigantic proportions and each was followed by thousands of believers. Monophysitism spread mainly in Egypt and eventually in Syria, while Nestorianism, starting from Syria, spread to Mesopotamia.

To sum up, the formula of heresies established by the middle of the fifth century acquired the following characteristics:

- (a) The Church and the emperor established a loose compromising formula on a given controversial religious matter, i.e. Christology, which eventually becomes a law.
- (b) Those who refuse to accept it are considered heretics and are pitilessly persecuted.
- (c) Thousands of opponents react vehemently creating their own Church, building their own churches or confiscating those of their rivals.

G. Ostrogorsky had correctly pointed out that the conflict between the dyophysite Church of Constantinople and the Monophysite Churches of the Christian East damaged the Byzantine administration seriously in the eastern part of the Empire.⁹ Nevertheless, his remark that monophysitism became "a rallying cry of the Copts and Syrians in their opposition to Byzantine rule"¹⁰, I believe, should not be accepted. Such outdated statements, which are frequently repeated by other scholars dealing with the causes and the impact of Monophysitism on the eve of the Arab conquests, are inspired by our modern

⁷ EVAGRIUS SCHOLASTICUS, *Church History*, in PG LXXXVI, col. 2425a: "Θεοτόκον την Μαρίαν καλεῖτω μηδεὶς. Μαρία γὰρ ἄνθρωπος ἦν, ὑπὸ ἀνθρώπου δε θεόν τεχθῆναι ἀδύνατον".

⁸ See the short articles "Monophysitism" and "Nestorianism" in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, II, pp. 1398-1399 and 1459-1460.

⁹ G. OSTROGORSKY, *History of the Byzantine State* (Oxford 1980), p. 60.

¹⁰ G. OSTROGORSKY, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 60.

criteria. A most conspicuous contemporary example is illustrated in the history of modern Poland, a classical example of a nation whose identity was closely related to the Catholic religion.¹¹ Catholicism during the Communistic rule in Poland served as a link between religion and national resistance. There is not the slightest indication in any sources that ethnic feelings of the natives of Egypt and Syria were disguised as dissident movements. The elite of the native peoples of Syria and Egypt, residing in Antioch and Alexandria, were sincerely and passionately interested in all details of religious issues. Actually, even within the broad heresy of the Monophysites, numerous splitting groups sprang fighting against each other. Thus, Michael the Syrian mentions the groups of Phantasiasts and Gayanites.¹² He reports that these two groups were united and appointed their own bishops all over Egypt, and in Ethiopia they even had their own patriarch.

The interference of the emperors in the religious conflicts, which constantly undermined the unity of the Empire, led to a desperate attempt for reconciliation of the followers of the Council of Chalcedon of 451, known as Orthodox Chalcedonians, with the Monophysites and Nestorians. With the help of the patriarch of Constantinople Acacius, Emperor Zenon (474-75 and 476-79) issued an edict called "*henoticon*" (edict of unity) on the basis of a formula written in vague way in order to secure reconciliation of the three religious fractions (Orthodox, Monophysites, Nestorians).

The abrupt artificial efforts of Emperor Zenon to reconcile and solve the religious differences of the Empire with the edict of unity (*henoticon*) ended, in fact, in disunity. Zenon's edict of unity threatened that those who opposed the edict would be anathematized.¹³ Not only did the *henoticon* fail to unite Constantinople with the East but also it eventually led to a thirty year separation from Rome known as the Acacian Schism (484-515).

The greatest disturbance in the Byzantine Empire caused by imperial religious policy was Emperor Heraclius' interference, along with the collaboration of the patriarch of Constantinople Sergius, in the christological problem of the doctrine of Monothelism. While Heraclius' triumphant victories against the Persians, the reconquest of the Near East and the setting up of the Holy Cross, which he took from the Persians, in Jerusalem on March 21, 630, helped him

¹¹ For an analytical study of the situation in Poland, see P. MICHEL, *Politics and Religion in Eastern Europe: Catholicism in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia* (Cambridge, 1991).

¹² MICHAEL THE SYRIAN, *La chronique de Michel le Syrien*, ed. and trans. J. B. Chabot (Paris, 1905, repr. Brussels 1963), III, p. 265.

¹³ W. T. TOWNSEND, "The Henoticon Schism and the Roman Church", *Journal of Religion* 16 (1936), pp. 78-86.

to gain immense popularity, his religious policies failed miserably.¹⁴ Anxious to reconcile the heretic movements of Monophysitism and Nestorianism with the Chalcedonian Orthodox, he tried to impose forcibly a mellow compromise. Although the emperors prior to him had mingled in religious conflicts and heresies, Heraclius' interference was absolutely totalitarian, fabricated solely by himself and Patriarch Sergius.

Heraclius' artificial compromise passed through two stages, first "monoenergism" (one energy) that was transformed later to "monothelitism" (one will). According to this movement, the divine and human natures of Christ, while quite distinct in his own person, had but one operation (energy) and one will (*thelima*). The "watery compromise" was rejected by both Chalcedonian Orthodox and Monophysites. In 638 Heraclius issued the "Ekthesis" (= Statement of Faith), which formulated his dogma. The patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, a Monophysite who never accepted this compromised formula, surrendered Jerusalem to the Arabs without a battle in the same year (638). A few years later, in ca. 642, the Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria, Cyrus, surrendered Egypt to 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ. An attempt by the Byzantines in 645 to regain it failed.

Some questions on the subject of heresies¹⁵ arise here relevant to our discussion: What was the cause of heresies? How perilous were the heretic movements for Byzantium and its defense against the Arabs? In the numerous discussions on this topic we can discern three tendencies of interpretation.

According to the first, the poor and deprived of the Byzantine population expressed their dissatisfaction through heresies as a social protest. Thus, it was simply a hidden protest of the poor classes. According to the second view, the creation of heresies was the hidden intense expression of national patriotism of natives (poor and rich) against the foreign Byzantine rulers. The third interpretation claims that there could be simply an intense religious attempt to understand the nature of God inspired solely by religious motives.¹⁶

¹⁴ For Heraclius' expeditions against the Persians, see E. KAEGI, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, (Cambridge – New York, 2003), *passim*.

¹⁵ A book concerning the Arab conquest of Egypt remains a desideratum. A. FRAZER's important book, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion*, published in 1902, contains valuable material based on the Byzantine sources but the Arabic sources are absent. The new edition adds little to the first. The article "Egypt" in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, I, 679-681, is disappointing; in three lines it describes the Arab conquest of Egypt. For a short comprehensive article on Egypt, see V. CHRISTIDES, "Miṣr", *IE*² VII, pp. 152-160.

¹⁶ See the article "Heresy", in *The Dictionary of Byzantium*, II, p. 919, where those three theories are presented without any attempt of elaboration.

An effort here will be made to approach these three aspects concentrating solely on Egypt with a reference to Syro-Palestine. As characteristically pointed out by S. Thomas Parker, the main reason for the easy Arab conquest of Syro-Palestine was caused by the decline of the Byzantine military frontier of the *Limes Arabicus* and “by the early seventh century the fortified frontier system in Palestine and Transjordan no longer existed.”¹⁷ Thus, with or without the passionate resistance of the Monophysite patriarch of Jerusalem, Sergius, and his followers against the Orthodox Chalcedonians, Syro-Palestine would have easily fallen into the hands of the Arab army, which proceeded swiftly into Egypt, with the assistance of the nomadic Arab tribes who had already penetrated Syria and beyond.

In Egypt an abundance of papyri provides valuable information concerning the religious, socio-economic conditions which prevailed before its conquest by the Arabs. It should be noted that while heated religious discussions were taking place in Alexandria, as E. R. Hardy remarks, “in the greater part of Egypt people were almost unaware that there was any division of the Church. In the small towns and villages of the Delta and Upper Egypt, the Byzantine emperor was a remote source of authority and even the Patriarch at Alexandria was scarcely actual. Local magnates were the effective power in the state, and local bishops and abbots were the effective authorities in the Church.”¹⁸ This is the most important remark by Hardy whose work remains the best concerning the thorough interpretation of the situation in Byzantine Egypt. The later historian-papyrologists provided new editions with valuable philological remarks but added little to their interpretation concerning the socio-political environment of Byzantine Egypt. Outside Alexandria the land of Egypt belonged to the Egyptians. Both the peasants and their landlords were Egyptians and both could be either Chalcedonians or Monophysites.

The situation in the countryside was harsh for the peasants exploited by the local wealthy landlords, some of whom paid their taxes directly to Constantinople. The wealthy landlords had enlisted a number of police guards, who acted almost like a private army to defend the landlords who had the law in their hands.

In contrast, in Alexandria the ecclesiastical circles were constantly involved in religious disputes. The Greek culture prevailed although one could not say, “who was Hellenized Egyptian or Egyptianed Greek”. In Alexandria, at the

¹⁷ S. Thomas PARKER, “The Defence of Palestine and Transjordan from Diocletian to Heraclius”, in L. E. STAGER and al. (eds.), *The Archaeology of Jordan and Beyond* (Winona Lake, In., 2000), pp. 367-388, especially 381 ff.

¹⁸ See E. R. HARDY, *Christian Egypt: Church and People; Christianity and Nationalism in the Patriarchate of Alexandria* (New York, 1902).

time of Heraclius, a mortal struggle was taking place between the Monophysites under their patriarch, Benjamin, and the Chalcedonians under their patriarch, Cyrus; the latter were called now “Melkites” (royalists) because they were supported by the Chalcedonian central government of Constantinople.¹⁹ Actually, the Monophysite movement in Egypt was not dictated by any anti-governmental separatist movement; the Monophysites wanted their dogma to be accepted by the whole Byzantine population. Both Monophysites and Chalcedonians had true differences in religious matters and material possessions. They were constantly fighting for the possession of church buildings. During Heraclius’ period the best buildings were given to the Melkites. Moreover, in order to strengthen Cyrus’ position, Heraclius also appointed him *Augustilus* (Governor of Egypt). Finally, Benjamin, fearing for his life, escaped to Upper Egypt.

In spite of the fact that the leader of the Chalcedonian Church surrendered Egypt to the Arabs, nothing could have saved it. The semi-feudalistic landlords, fighting against each other, had undermined the unity of Egypt. Worse than the religious antagonism between Monophysites and Chalcedonians was the struggle between “Greens” and “Blues” in the streets of Alexandria when the Arabs were before its gates.

The development of the two churches in Egypt, the Melkite and the Monophysite, after the Arab conquest, clearly demonstrates that the latter did not represent any separatist tendencies and that the former was not simply a tool of the central government of the Byzantine Empire. Both churches now, under the Islamic control, had the same fate of all churches in *Dār al-Islām*, as part of the *ahl al-kitāb* or *ahl al-dhima*, protected by concrete regulations. The preference of the local governors and/or caliphs towards one or another depended solely on their personal feelings.

After the Arab conquest, as correctly St. Skerslet pointed out, the Monophysites and the Melkites were treated similarly²⁰; but the new circumstances

¹⁹ There are two excellent works on the Melkite Church: Chr. PAPADOPOULOS, *History of the Church of Alexandria* (Athens, 1985, 2nd ed.), in Greek, and the typewritten dissertation by St. SKRESLET, *The Greeks in Medieval Islamic Egypt: A Melkite Dhimmi Community under the Patriarch of Alexandria (640-1095)* (New Haven, 1987). Nevertheless, a full discussion on the Melkite Church of Egypt is still a desideratum, needless to say that the Arab conquest of Egypt has not been yet written thoroughly.

²⁰ St. SKRESLET, *The Greeks in Medieval Islamic Egypt*, p. 80. Skreslet did not take into consideration that the persecuted Coptic Church was re-established after the Arab conquest. In contrast, Chr. PAPADOPOULOS (*History of the Church of Alexandria*) considers the efforts of the conqueror of Egypt, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, and the new Egyptian authorities as acting in favor of the Copts, while in reality they re-established a persecuted Church.

obviously favored the predominance of the Monophysite Church. Patriarch Benjamin, who had been forced to hide in Southern Egypt during the Byzantine rule, was reestablished and a large number of persecuted monks and priests of the Monophysite Church returned to their positions. In contrast the Orthodox Church was heavily damaged by the flight of the patriarch Cyrus to Constantinople, followed by his successor Petrus (642-651).²¹ Thereafter, the seat of the Orthodox Church was vacant and it was administered by a “topotereites” (temporary occupant of the seat), who participated as its representative in the synods of Constantinople.²² It is only in the 8th century that the patriarchate seat of Alexandria was taken by Cosmas (727-768). Interestingly enough, his appointment was caused by the decision of the governor of Egypt ‘Abdallah whose wife was Cosmas’ sister.

The appointment of the Melkite patriarch Cosmas is of particular importance because it took place at the time of the icon dispute and while the Byzantine emperor was Leo III (717-741), a fanatical iconoclast. It should be noted that the Melkites under their patriarch Cosmas did not ally this time with the religious trends of the iconoclast Byzantine emperor.

The development of the Church of Alexandria after this period is beyond the scope of the present work. Suffice to mention here that, as Yaḥyā b. Sa’id reveals, in 961 there were in Alexandria two Nestorian churches and at least two Monophysite churches, while the cathedral belonged to the Orthodox.²³

To sum up, the study of the history of Islamic Egypt reveals that dogmatic differences dominated mainly the religious disputes between Melkites and Monophysites. Of course, politics were also interwoven but, similarly to the previous Byzantine period, they played a minor role.

²¹ See A. JULICHER, *Die Liste der Alexandrinische Patriarchen in VI and VII Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1922).

²² Chr. PAPADOPOULOS, *History of the Church of Alexandria*, p. 603.

²³ Chr. PAPADOPOULOS, *History of the Church of Alexandria*, p. 532. See also an English translation of the relevant text in V. CHRISTIDES, *The Image of Cyprus in the Arabic Sources* (Nicosia, 2006), pp. 156 ff.