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Marie-Hélène Blanchet, Frédéric Gabriel, Laurent Tatarenko

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Frédéric Gabriel

Methodological Reflections on Approaching Phenomena of Autocephaly¹

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Prof. Dr. Julia Herzberg

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First of all, I'd like to highlight the method we chose to use: this volume aims to historicize and de-confessionalize a subject that is often only addressed in the context of controversy, and that is built upon contemporary political and identity-based claims. Autocephaly is a phenomenon that reveals the dynamics of a community that is in the process of being formed, a community that wants to access self-government. When we talk about autocephaly, what we are really talking about is government, to the point that this form was central to the emergence of the Bulgarian and Serbian Empires in the Middle Ages, and later to the nationalisms of the nineteenth century in the Slavic world. In this context, the government sees itself as jointly civil and ecclesiastical, with all the dissensions that can occur between these two domains, but also in relation to external authorities: the Byzantine or Ottoman Empires, the ancient Eastern Patriarchates, the Roman Church, neighboring states, etc. This is why autocephaly is still a highly controversial subject, and why these debates often prevent a historicized and sufficiently objective grasp of the subject. This has been our goal here: the non-partisan and above all comparative examination of an ecclesial form that reveals profound tensions, and that is too rarely studied with sufficient distance from these controversies.

I would also like to insist on the semantic trap represented by the terms we commonly use to designate a transhistorical reality. They may mislead us into thinking its essence has remained unchanged over the ages. Diverse phenomena may continue to be referred to by a single term, even though the objective of many official discourses is to establish a natural continuity between different periods and heterogeneous institutional forms, especially since autocephaly is not separable from the very delicate notions of people, ethnos, nation and state, all of which also evolve over time. This is why it is imperative to observe and compare practices

¹ Translation by Sarah Novak

of autocephaly over the long term, all the while remaining careful not to shift from the notion of a government to that of a norm.

Why we chose this long millennium, from the ninth to the twenty-first century, is explained by our purpose: in the nineteenth century, the many claims of autocephaly were repeatedly presented not as the creation of a Church, but as the reactivation of medieval autocephaly, which was legitimized by its antiquity, and which coincided with the heroicizing of political independence. We may suspect that the institutional, demographic and geopolitical parameters are very different, but this appeal to the past is central to the consciousness of those who form the Church and it must be taken into account. Faced with these mechanisms, historians are not the guardians of an illusory axiological neutrality, but at the very least they do not presume to judge past events, and their role is not to exalt a great identity-based narrative.

The ninth and tenth centuries may be seen as the inaugural era of autocephaly in the Slavic world, where this form of Church was particularly prominent. Bulgaria is an exemplary case in that it shows us that autocephaly itself is difficult to date, and even to define, simply because, for a long time, it was not theorized or canonically described by any higher dogmatic authority: at most there are some indications of it among Byzantine canonists in the twelfth century.

Concretely, each time an autocephalous Church was created, it was the result of negotiations that were highly dependent on the specificities of the geopolitical situation. Even today, specialists of medieval Bulgaria have differing arguments and hypotheses that only partially overlap. The differences in dating are indicative of the various possible interpretations of (incomplete) sources and of political and identity issues, but also of the long-lasting absence of any predetermined codification of autocephaly. It would therefore be wrong to systematize the processes of autocephaly a posteriori and even more wrong to classify historical cases according to this systematization.

These first instants of Bulgarian history can teach us about the decisive role of sovereigns in the emergence of something resembling autocephaly: on the one hand, sovereigns intervened in the choice of the head of “their own” autocephalous Church and managed to avoid appealing to the historical patriarchy on which the constituency in question depended, and on the other hand, they worked to ensure that this constituency was accorded a level of dignity in accordance with that independence.

But Günter Prinzing noted how, despite the existence of autocephaly, the archbishops of Ohrid remained connected to the Byzantine emperor. It was the emperor who validated their election, and most of the hierarchs of the archdiocese were Byzantines. When the Byzantine Empire annexed Bulgaria in 1018 and recognized a specific status for Ohrid as an autocephalous archbishopric, the emperor reserved the right to choose the name of the archbishop to be elected from a short list submitted to him by the Synod of Ohrid. Even if we consider that the former

Bulgarian autocephalous Church thus became an autocephalous archbishopric, it still had a special status that implied a relationship of subordination towards the Byzantine emperor.

Moreover, this was a major feature of the balance of power that led to the emergence of Balkan autocephalies: they “benefited” from periods during which the power of Constantinople was diminished and local civil and military structures grew stronger. To put it even more clearly, the claim of autocephaly accompanied attempts to translate a rise in political-military power into an imperial regime (following a Byzantine model). After 1330, this was the case of the Serbian kingdom, which gained territories from the Byzantine Empire and which took advantage of the confrontation between the two Byzantine co-emperors, John VI Kantakouzenos and John V Palaiologos, to proclaim the autocephalous patriarchate of Peć.

In Greek sources, this kind of “patriarchy” is never considered on a strictly equal footing with other historical patriarchates: around 1361 or 1362 Kallistos I claimed that the autocephalous Patriarch of Bulgaria had obligations towards the See of Constantinople. So this was not a case of full autocephaly, but rather of a slightly lower degree of independence. This device was in fact a way for the Patriarchate of Constantinople to avoid completely losing its authority in the Balkans.

We can hypothesize that the existence of the Byzantine Empire rendered complete ecclesiastical independence (almost) impossible. Before the nineteenth century, when ecclesiastical institutionalization ended up distinguishing between the two terms more strictly, *autocephaly* was close to a more or less advanced *autonomy*. It was essentially the constitution of a locally designated ecclesiastical hierarchy, which would therefore most likely be Slavophone, while still maintaining a symbolic subjection to Constantinople. The codification of autocephaly as strict independence must be dated to the nineteenth century. In the case of medieval Serbia, we could simply speak of a more advanced form of autonomy than in other Orthodox regions.

On the other hand, the modern period witnessed evolution on this point, because the disappearance of Byzantium made it possible to present the autocephalous Churches as institutions that enjoyed a kind of political independence, reporting only to local sovereigns (for the commemoration of the emperor no longer had any meaning at that point).

These contingent developments are important for our subject, because they show us how complex and shifting the phenomena of autonomy and autocephaly could be depending on the conjuncture, not only with regard to the emergence of autocephalous churches, but also with regard to their disappearance: let us recall the end of the Patriarchate of Tărnovo (in Bulgaria) in 1393, and the end of the Patriarchate of Peć (in Serbia) after 1459, because of the political fall of the civil structure that gave them their consistency. For another decisive sign of the change brought about by the modern era and the disappearance of the Byzantine Empire: the

re-establishment of the Patriarchate of Peć in 1557, which separated from the jurisdiction of Ohrid, was not the result of an act of the Patriarchate of Constantinople but rather of the Sultan.

We can thus see how different degrees of independence coexisted and affected various aspects of ecclesiastical government; the modalities of this independence resulted from negotiations and power relations. This point is essential, because—a priori—it does not enter into the internalist considerations of autocephaly, which place it within the framework of the definition of Church unity, the first of its characteristics named in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed. Underneath the apparent simplicity of this qualification lies a remarkable flexibility in the thinking and practices of unity. Autocephaly is one of these practices; originally, it referred to archbishops and metropolitans, elected locally without requiring the validation of a higher authority. The head of the community *created* a community as a guide for the faithful, a decision-making center, an appeal function, and more broadly, as evidenced by the diptychs, a figure of unification and recognition.

Autocephaly reveals itself both as an original expression of the idea of Church unity, with a legitimacy based on the imperative of external recognition, even belatedly, and at the same time, it generally reflects the centrifugal aspirations of local religious structures. Autocephaly thus integrates into its very origin, an element that tempers the proclaimed independence and motivates a salvo of questions that are the guiding themes of our book: is autocephaly the rigidification of a local Church or an intensification of intra- and inter-ecclesial communion? How should we conceive of primacy in the dialectic created between independence and recognition? With autocephaly, we are talking about a Church-to-Church relationship, but it is an asymmetrical, and therefore hierarchical, relationship.

The old patriarchates tended to regard autocephaly as an exception to the rule produced by a kind of privilege of which they themselves would be the guarantors. From this point of view, it is not possible to describe historical patriarchates as “autocephalous”: they appeared from the outset at a supra-hierarchical level, while the Churches that wished to become autocephalous had to demand a change of status. For the same reason, it cannot be said that all Churches were originally autocephalous: while their Sees were more or less independent, the patriarchal echelon appeared only later, and an autocephalous Church is precisely a Church that detaches itself from the patriarchy on which it depends (apart from the case of Cyprus, which was only qualified as an autocephalous Church *a posteriori*).

The privilege we have just talked about was called into question by Moscow, which was not a historical patriarchate, but ended up acquiring power and prestige on par with those of Constantinople, if not superior. Each patriarchate claimed the exclusive power to grant or refuse autocephaly to the disputed territory. The patriarchates confronted each other across interposed territories, and the Balkans as well as Ukraine were borderlands and zones of influence.

Historically, autocephaly described *relationships* between Churches (for the recognition of autocephaly implies that there was also communion). It was not only the establishment in law and in fact of a complete, codified and definitive independence. One constant remains: these relationships between Churches were primarily dependent on political, military and economic circumstances, and their independence often resided at the level of the “administrative” functioning of the local Church, while doctrinal and liturgical communion with other Churches is still attested. But there is another parameter that is not without importance: language and *ethnos*. The linguistic aspect accompanied and reinforced that of territorial defense: the Slavization of the liturgy and of ecclesiastical personnel followed this dynamic and was a decisive element of the relationship with oneself and with the other Churches. But in the Archdiocese of Ohrid in the medieval period, the geographical distribution of dioceses varied between Albanian, Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian settlement areas, so that very different peoples were part of it: so in this case, we cannot speak of a national Church or a State Church as we can for Peć or Tărnovo. And this last situation was controversial, because it was perceived as an ethnic deviation within the Church, which, by definition, does not take this criterion into account in order to form a community.

Thus, for our subject, a major break occurred in the nineteenth century, which could be said to be the century of the invention or reinvention of autocephaly as we know it today, an autocephaly based on a reference to the past, but constituted on essentially ethnic and national bases that had practically nothing to do with the medieval model. In other words, at a time when autocephaly was truly becoming a technical term, with widespread use, its new ethnic-political dimensions made it a problematic notion. After the medieval period of Byzantine control, after the early modern period of Ottoman domination, a third period, which could be easily identified based on practices of autocephaly, was therefore distinguished as the age of the Nations.

Imperial universality was followed by the claim of national legitimacy, which could not long tolerate the tutelage of a patriarchate without an emperor; moreover, this patriarchate was no longer in Christian territory. In short, we can see it as a struggle against the yoke of double domination (the Ottoman power, the Patriarchate of Constantinople), which was still strong in the late eighteenth century. There remained the paradox of granting autocephalous status: during the nineteenth century, it was the Patriarchate of Constantinople that granted these autocephalies, more or less quickly, even if other processes were possible – I am thinking, for example, of the Ottoman Empire, which established the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870.

There is a major issue linked to autocephaly: the legitimacy of this or that Church, as “opposed” to another Church that is always perceived as dominant. Hence the great difficulty of approaching this subject without falling into positions that disrupt its historicization. Autocephaly can be troubling or disturbing, for it is too intimately linked to political imperatives, and too strongly identified with a community constituted by a specific people; on

the one hand it is seen as an ancient form specific to Orthodoxy and rooted in the identity of this or that community; on the other hand, it is perceived as the vector of numerous tensions and open conflicts, and it is even supposed to be at the origin of phyletism. There is an oscillation between autocephaly as a model or as a pathology. For this reason, we did not want to study this notion as a timeless and legitimizing essence, but rather as a testimony to conflicts within the framework of “forming a Church”.

This is why, in our title, after we wrote *autocephalies* in the plural, we chose to emphasize the *exercise* of independence, which is always contingent and singular. While knowledge cannot get by without the use of general categories, nothing prevents us from critically re-examining them by going back to singularities. It is not a question of working from a general definition that predetermines whether or not autocephaly is indeed present, but instead of comparing different formalizations of it. As a result, the term autocephaly appears only lately, and it remains rare and above all very poorly or barely defined. It is only recently, on the scale of Christian history, that it has really attracted the attention of hierarchs, canonists and historians.

How does a Church come into being? In the end, autocephaly might well be one of the answers to this question, an answer that has often been forgotten by Western ecclesiology. The phenomenon of autocephaly shows us what a “Church” is (but not everything that it is): it is an entity that is always dynamic, under construction, highly dependent on geopolitics and in particular on border disputes, on the boundaries of empires and on militant nationalisms, which can be very noticeable in the Balkans. This aspect is quite different from the timeless and hieratic image of “*the Church*”, the one and only. As if unity had to be unique, and as if the concept of autocephaly had to be aligned with this uniqueness through a continuist narrative. However, we are dealing with very different forms of degrees of independence and autocephaly, and these cannot be reduced to a normative framework, which remains a bone of contention even now.