Orthodox Christianity and Liberal Democracy –

Theoretical Inroads

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Abstract

This article aims to explore compatibility of Orthodox Christianity with the liberal democracy. It shares the argument that core premises of liberalism such as the freedom of choice, individual autonomy and tolerance intrinsically antagonize Christian religion's absolutism and universality. The cohabitation of conflicting ideologies is only possible through state-church separation and strong prevalence of liberalism over the religious value framework. While Protestantism and Catholicism followed this path, the Orthodox Christianity has never intended to find either theological properties or ideological determination, positively corresponding to the liberal democracy, the article concludes.

Key words: *Liberal democracy, Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, Religion*

Introduction

The remarkable figures in social and political sciences, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, heralded that modernity would bring religion to the periphery of political concern (Vlas & Gherghina, 2012). However, the recent empirical data shows alternative picture, depicted in a growing importance of religion in peoples' lives and politics, regardless of developed or developing countries (Berger, 1999; Fox & Sandler, 2004; Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003; Thomas, 2005)

Such progression has vigorously revived debates over the impact of religion on the process of democratization. The secular prone authors deemed religion as an antidemocratic force and an intruder in the political sphere (Rorty, 1994), while a great deal of scholars considered some denominations of Christianity more compatible with democracy than the others (Berger, 2004; Fukuyama, 2001; Huntington, 1991; Lipset, 1994; Weber, 1905)

One of the founders of the sociology of religion, Peter Berger (2004, p, 80) to the question, how Christianity relates to democracy, responded: "*In the cases of Catholicism and Protestantism, the answer is pretty definitely yes. In the case of Orthodoxy, it is maybe*"

This article aims to cast light on Orthodox Christian traditions in attempt to bring more certainty to its relation with the liberal democracy and modernity. The paper assumes that having illiberal legacy and lack of Reformation traditions, Orthodox Christianity holds the weakest affinity to the liberal democracy, compare to Catholicism and Protestantism, and potentially negatively relates to it.

Methodology

Since the article is purely theoretical, we choose qualitative method as more appropriate for this study. To address the major claim of the paper, we operationalize two variables: *liberal democracy and Orthodox Christian traditions.*

Initially, the study intends to conceptualize the liberal democracy as the major driver ad conceptual component of modernity. This analytical tool will help to catch the insight of liberalism–Religion contradiction through disclosing core premises of each and their intrinsically conflicting nature. Then, we briefly unfold how Catholicism and Protestantism achieved peaceful cohabitation with liberal democracy; and against this background, unpack traditions of Orthodox Christianity; Finley, on the bases of these finding we try to detect correlation between the variables and explain why Orthodox Christianity may relate negatively to the liberal democracy.

Analysis

1. Modernity and Liberal Democracy

Modernity involves hardware and software realms reflected in modernization and modernism respectively. Modernization implies scientific and technological advances caused by industrial revolution, while modernism comprises a set of liberal ideological premises, directly challenging religion traditions (Lawrence, 1990).

In liberal democracy, democracy is not the first idea and even not the fundamental one. Instead, at the fore comes tradition of protection of an individual's autonomy, deeply rooted in Western history, started from Greeks' appreciation of individual liberty and Romans' respect to rule of law, continued by Magna Carta (1215), Fundamental Orders of Connecticut (1639), Enlightenment (1685-1815), Declaration of Independence (1776), The French Revolution (1789-1799) and Helsinki Final Act (1975), (Litonjua, 2007).

Frequently, especially in the young democracies there is no conceptual distinction between democracy and liberal democracy, which in fact is "theoretically different and historically distinct" (Zakaria, 1997, p. 22; Welzel, 2013). The lack of liberal foundations creates elected autocrats in many developing countries, never bothering themselves to ensure balance "between the will of the majority and the rights of the minority—or, more broadly, between liberty and democracy" (Zakaria, 2003, p. 135).

If democracy is not capable to protect liberal law, then there are not many hopes for its survival since, this kind of democracy is rather susceptible to economically powerful interest groups paving the way for the governments, encumbered with wealthy politicians (Greider, 1992; Litonjua, 2007; Zakaria, 1997, p.23).

"As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism" (John Paul II, 1991, p. 46).

We assume, therefore that neither democracy nor modernization held capacity to challenge Christian religious essentials; Only the conceptual part of modernity - liberal ideology – with its values, attitudes and orientations, appeared empowered to contradict religious dogmas and create supportive value system for the liberal democratic governance (Basáñez, 2016; Inglehart, 1997; Welzel, 2013).

2. Religion-Liberalism Controversies

Given the Christian ideology's strong, steady and consistent belief schemes, the process of its replacement by liberalism lasted for a long and included crucial moments such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and Globalization. These landmarks, made liberal ideology determining sociopolitical value framework in the West and caused the decline of Christian ideology gradually (Widdows, 2004).

Liberalism, with its central premises of freedom of choice and tolerance, does not allow penetration of innately opposite traditional value system. Firstly, it questions moral absolutes of religion and rejects to embrace any authority uncritically (Dupre, 2004). Secondly, it contradicts religious universality, which allegedly gives Christians a 'legitimacy' to attack violently non-Christians and use force against those who refused to convert (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003).

Such a set of beliefs contends the liberals' understanding of freedom of religion. To deal with this challenge, the founding fathers of United States of America, themselves men of religious conviction, moved religion to the private field. Thomas Jeffersonian understanding of democracy implies that one can be either religious or irreligious but not 'fanatical,' being capable to keep personal beliefs remoted (Owen, 2001, pp. 90-95).

That meant the separation of church and state, where the latter is neutral and tolerant to religious pluralism. In this distinction between sacred and secular, or alternatively, between the spiritual and temporal orders, the religious citizen has been assumed to be a bridge linking two realms (Litonjua, 2007).

3. Religion-Liberalism Coexistence

State-Church separation was not quick and straightforward process and the different branches of Christianity dealt with it in their own way (Philpott, 2004).

A great deal of scholars thinks that among Christian denomination, Protestantism holds the strongest affinity with liberal democracy (Basáñez, 2016; Huntington, 1998; Weber, 1905; Woodberry & Shah, 2004).

Martin Luther's doctrine of universal priesthood of all believers, played decisive role in bringing Protestantism closer to modernity and capitalism (Weber, 1905).

The doctrine, implying that each Christian is a priest regardless of his vocation, surged Protestants' dedication to their work and enabled them to grant greater purpose to their jobs and tasks, what meanwhile increased social coherence and meaningfulness of secular life. Protestant ethic teaches that salvation comes through the everyday "accumulation of correct actions" (Basáñez, 2016, p. 43) such as: hard work, tolerance, honesty, frugality etc. These "mediating mechanisms" have developed cultural foundations easily translated into liberal democracy (p. 35).

Catholicism, unlike Protestantism, has never considered dedication to the vocation as an enough practice for the salvation. Indulgence of a sin could only be possible with the continual prey, confession and forgiveness through the mediation of Catholic Church, pushing the importance of the religious institute ahead of a men's morally approved conduct (Basáñez, 2016, pp. 126).

More community accepted Catholic Church as an indispensable and exclusive way for the salvation, stronger and powerful was its massage to the public. However, all changed with overwhelming wave of modernity, signaling the declining importance of Catholic Church's delivery to the modern society without recognizing its diversity and pluralism.

Against this background, the Catholic Church made quick and "theologically justified embrace" with liberal democracy (Diamond, 2005, p. 147). At the Second Vatican Council (1965-1969), it openly recognized the universal human rights, religious liberty, and democracy as the best form of

governance; And later, even greatly contributed to the dispersal of democracy thanks to the Roman Church's global influence. In fact, the "third wave" of democratization of 70s and 80s has been largely stimulated and catalyzed by Roman Church (Diamond, 1999; Huntington, 1991; Philpott, 2004).

4. Illiberal Traditions of Orthodox Christianity

Formation of Christian theocracy traces back to the period of Theodosius I and Constantine Great, when Byzantine political theory of Christian Empire and Emperor was elaborated on the bases of Eusebius of Caesarea's works, granting Orthodox Christianity cultural and political dominance.

Orthodox Christianity served as an axis of Byzantium unity. It theologically supported imperial structures and during the centuries was established as the state-sponsored religion. Consequently, Eusebius' works succeeded in "sacralization of Empire" (Fowden, 1993, p. 89) by presenting it as the divinely willed order of one true God (Papanikolaou, 2003, p. 82).

As Justinian I (527-565) claimed "by the will of God we govern an Empire that has come to us from His Divine Majesty … [and] can rule the world with justice" (Papanikolaou, 2003, p. 82).

In his sixth Novella, Justinian theorized the model of cooperation between the emperor and the patriarch of Constantinople as a harmonic, something, similar to 'symphonia.' The model expressing State-Church "cohesion of one single human society." (Paul, 1977, pp. 238-264)

The Orthodox Christianity penetrated in all layers of political and social life. The ecclesia formed cultural aspects of Empire through the system of beliefs, institutional arrangements, practices, art etc. while the ecclesial canon laws were frequently enforced as the civil ones (Papanikolaou, 2003).

Although it is often dubbed as a 'multinational Empire,' the Byzantine theocracy showed a low acceptance of multiculturalism where non-Christian confessions were unprivileged and even prosecuted time to time. When Ottoman Empire conquered Byzantium in fifteenth century, Orthodox Christianity became a minority religion. To resist to the politically and culturally dominant Islam, orthodox Christians were less engaged in the religious debates or the reforms of the Enlightenment. (Paul, 1977).

Another turning point was introduction of Soviet Union and the spread of communism, again preventing Orthodox countries, except Greece, from interacting with modern democracy.[1]

5. Interaction of two variables

The liberal democratic ideology with its central values of freedom of choice, individual autonomy and tolerance does not allow penetration of traditional value system in its realm. Coexistence possible but only if religion operates in the private sphere as a secondary source of value framework (Owen, 2014).

This is so since the liberal democratic ideology does not come from value-neutral background. The core liberal values define communication line with other values and belief systems. For example, the endorsement of tolerance bears high costs for traditional moral understanding (Widdows, 2004, p. 204). Yet, tolerance naturally excludes intolerance of alternative beliefs.

Thus, the principal facilitator of liberalism-religion cohabitation is the state-church separation via recognition of primacy of liberal democratic system and ideology.

Orthodox Christianity's Byzantian heritage and the historical setting in which it has been struggled to survive, fundamentally antagonize the concept of state-church separation since the model theorized by Justinian I, was constructed on the state-church cohesion. The latter aimed to ensure the unity of multicultural Empire, with low tolerance to the ethnically and culturally diverse society.

"Byzantine notion of a Christian theocracy is a classic case of religious influence on the understanding of the imperial authority" (Papanikolaou, 2003, p. 82). The history of two Orthodox Empires – Byzantium and Russia – seems illustrative in this regard. One school of historians even coined the word 'Caesaropapist' to describe the emperors' status, being Caesar and Pope at the same time. That feature has firmly distinguished Orthodoxy Christianity from its Western European counterparts (Runciman, 1957, p.1).

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[1] Under the Orthodox countries, we imply those whose majority of population is Orthodox Christians: Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Belarus, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Moldova, Georgia, North Macedonia, Cyprus and Montenegro.

Orthodox Christianity has not ever experienced neither something similar to the conflict, taken place between papacy and empire nor the period of Reformation. It was fully isolated from 17th and 18th centuries' theoretical debates and after the failure of communism, appeared face to face to the processes of liberalization and democratization and had to cope with the religious pluralism, multiculturalism and a church-state separation concepts (Papanikolaou, 2012; Dobrijevic, 2006).

Since the Byzantine Empire appeared to be a formative rather than sporadic period for the history of Orthodox Christianity, the latter chose the model of church-state cohesion, endorsing itself as a source of national identity and unity. (Tevzadze, 2009; Zedania, 2009; Papanikolaou, 2003, pp. 76-84).

Regaining traditional influence, lost in the Soviet times, Orthodox Churches of post-communist courtiers hardly express desire either to move to the private sphere or contribute to the liberal democratic transition.

On the contrary, in its fair of modernity, Orthodox Church strongly rejects individualism, relativism, globalization and new experiences brought by liberal democracy (Gavashelishvili, 2012; Sulkhanishvili 2012)

Since Orthodox Church considers modernity as a destructive force for its institutional buildup, it potentially relates negatively to the liberal democracy.

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