

## THE SPECIFICS OF THE BYZANTINE MODEL OF GRANTING AUTOCEPHALY: FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

**Background.** The article delves into the Byzantine model of granting autocephaly, a critical component in shaping ecclesiastical autonomy within the Orthodox world. The author explores the historical foundations of this model, particularly the interconnection between ecclesiastical and state structures under imperial influence.

**Methods.** The study examines the key criteria required for acquiring autocephaly, such as the maturity of the church, the number of parishes, and the ability to ordain new bishops. The author emphasizes that autocephalous churches cannot emerge independently without the involvement of pre-existing ecclesiastical structures, a necessity dictated by the principle of apostolic succession. Historical examples of granting autocephaly, such as the privileges extended to Constantinople and the formation of new ecclesiastical units during the Byzantine era, are discussed in detail.

**Results.** The article highlights the challenges faced in the process of granting autocephaly, including political influence and conflicts between local churches.

**Conclusions.** The author concludes that, despite its historical significance, the Byzantine model does not always guarantee the automatic acceptance of a newly proclaimed autocephalous church by all other local churches, underscoring the need for deeper investigation of this topic within the context of contemporary trends in Orthodoxy.

**Keywords:** Autocephaly, Byzantine model, Orthodox Church, Historical development, Apostolic succession, State authority, Ecclesiastical autonomy.

### Background

The article addresses the complexity and historical development of the Byzantine model of granting autocephaly to Orthodox Churches, a process that has been integral to the alignment between ecclesiastical structures and state governance. The problem is framed around the challenges of adapting ancient ecclesiastical principles to contemporary political and religious contexts. This issue is particularly significant given the historical ties between church organization and state boundaries, and how these ties have evolved and, in some cases, become contentious in modern times.

### Methods

#### *Analysis of recent research and publications.*

Recent research highlights the intricate relationship between the establishment of autocephalous churches and the political environment in which they exist. Scholars such as S. Kolot, V. and R. Kobriy, and others have examined how ecclesiastical autonomy is often a reflection of political independence, with the formation of new autocephalous churches frequently driven by state interests rather than purely theological or canonical considerations. Publications have also scrutinized the canonical basis for autocephaly, noting that while historical canons provide a framework, they often lack specific guidelines for the creation of new autocephalous entities, leading to ongoing debates and conflicts within the Orthodox world.

**Formulation of the goals.** The primary goal of this article is to explore and critically analyze the Byzantine model of granting autocephaly, tracing its historical roots and evaluating its application in contemporary contexts. The study aims to identify the key factors that influence the recognition and establishment of autocephalous churches, particularly in relation to political changes and the evolution of state boundaries. Additionally, the article seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse by providing a nuanced understanding of the canonical and theological issues surrounding autocephaly in the Orthodox Church.

### Results

From the early centuries of its existence, Christianity has shown a significant alignment with state-political factors. One of the crucial elements in the Church's subordination to the

state was the adoption of administrative divisions of dioceses and autocephalous churches in accordance with the imperial governance of state lands.

As S. Kolot aptly notes: "A short time passed from the moment of the apostolic preaching to the growth of separate territorial communities. Each of these distinct house churches, which expanded into communities over certain territories, required spiritual structuring and participation in ecclesiastical sacraments. For this purpose, the hierarchical institute of the priesthood was established: deacons, priests, and bishops. The bishop (from the Greek 'overseer'), as the highest hierarchical rank, could not personally oversee every community. Typically, the first prototypes of modern dioceses emerged, uniting several neighboring communities. A bishop led this unified ecclesiastical unit. Over time, and with new conquests by the Roman Empire, new provinces and metropolises of state governance were formed. The Church, in turn, sought to adapt its structure to the state's hierarchical administration. Concurrently, the role of major cities, especially the capitals of entire provinces and regions, grew. Urbanization (from the Latin 'urbanus') led to a significant increase in the urban population. As a result, a substantial portion of the economy, and thus material wealth, concentrated in cities" (Kolot, 2008, p. 115).

A similar situation was observed in ecclesiastical life. The Church was always oriented toward the people. Therefore, where the population was more densely concentrated, there were more communities. It was according to this principle that the first ecclesiastical unions were formed, which, in modern terms, corresponded to dioceses. Cities could better provide wealth and meet the cultural, spiritual, and physical needs of citizens (Lahodych, 2012, p. 80). Therefore, one of the primary principles of the administrative division and governance of the ancient Church was its dependence on the factor of growing urban importance and population. When we examine the history of the formation of the first autocephalous churches, which arose from the union of several dioceses (bishoprics), we see that they were all established in accordance with the 34th Apostolic Canon, which states that bishops of a given territory must recognize the one among them who is the

first, i.e., the Primate. Such were the provincial churches of Lycia, Egypt, Pontus, and Bithynia (Klimenko, 2010, p. 40).

These were the first Local Churches in a theological and ecclesiological sense, meaning they were "in place" within a specific territory. Over time, the term "local" became synonymous with "autocephalous", meaning an independent church. This ecclesiastical unit is fully self-governing, situated within a particular territory inhabited by a specific people, and an essential condition is its unity in doctrine and Eucharist with other Orthodox churches worldwide (Andrusyshyn, & Bondarenko, 2011, p. 91). Throughout history, the first metropolises and archdioceses were established in capitals such as Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, and Cyprus. They were later transformed into the first patriarchates, which today hold the highest ecclesiastical authority.

According to the 34th Apostolic Canon, the Primate of a particular region, i.e., the local autocephalous bishop, is the "first" in the individual national church. This assertion can be derived from the apostolic positions themselves. If there is a distinct Christian people, then by the canons, they must have a "first bishop", meaning the head, the leader of ecclesiastical life. And if there is both an episcopate and its leader, then such an ecclesiastical formation, according to the already mentioned canon, must be independent, i.e., autocephalous.

Simply put, "autocephaly", as emphasized by researchers V. and R. Kobriy, presupposes a certain level of ecclesiastical development on the part of the newly established autocephalous church for it to be legitimately declared self-governing: a part of the Orthodox Church that claims autocephaly must be sufficiently mature to organize its own ecclesiastical life; it must have a sufficient number of parishes and parishioners, the capability to train new clergy, and a hierarchy canonically capable of further appointing new bishops... Importantly, concerning the latter, the ability not only to ordain (the Apostolic Canon 1 requires only two bishops) but also the ability to appoint (according to Canon 4 of the First Ecumenical Council, requiring at least three ruling bishops)" (Kobrii, & Kobrii, 2013, p. 45).

This, in turn, means that autocephalous churches cannot arise "ex nihilo", necessarily because, considering the role of apostolic succession in the Church (the idea of continuous succession of ecclesiastical hierarchy back to the apostolic period), the very identity of a particular local church, embodied in the person of its senior bishop, must come through ordination by other bishops in another (parent) church. Therefore, "since no autocephalous church has the right to appoint bishops for any other diocese besides its own, as noted by V. Bondarenko, the bishop of a new Church initially had to be appointed by ruling bishops of one of the established Autocephalous Churches to the diocese of that particular [emerging autocephalous] Church. As a result, the entire ecclesiastical region claiming autocephalous status must be part of [an existing] Autocephalous Church, its diocese, or its mission" (Bondarenko, 1993, p. 238).

Thus, it is axiomatic that new churches always originate from existing autocephalous churches. Any ecclesiastical area that was not part of an Autocephalous Local Church and whose governance was not organized by this Church cannot claim autocephaly. In other words, the parent church gives rise to a subsidiary, and according to ecclesiastical institutions, the autocephaly of a mature subsidiary organization occurs with the formal consent of the parent.

All these criteria of autocephaly are part of the institutional framework regulating organizational change. Since individual churches are located within specific political territories (e.g., empires, kingdoms, states), the administrative or ecclesiastical divisions of the Church usually closely corresponded to the political divisions of these territories (although this alignment began to break down during the period we can call the post-national period) (Butynskiy, 2014, p. 78).

Regarding the practice of granting autocephaly, it is important to note that the Ancient Patriarchates (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) and the autocephalous Church of Cyprus were established by Ecumenical Councils.

Regarding the dependence of the autocephalous structure on the growing significance of individual cities and provincial capitals, an illustrative example of this dependence is the formation of autocephaly based on the status of a particular city – namely, the new capital of the empire, Constantinople. It is important to note that other ancient sees had undeniable apostolic origins and a long (300-year) history of the establishment of Christian communities, as seen in Rome and Alexandria. However, after the founding of Constantine's city, the emperor endowed the "metropolitan hierarch" with special powers. The 3rd Canon of the Council of Constantinople granted the metropolitan see the second place in the diptychs after Rome, because the new capital was New Rome. The leadership of the Constantinople see within the Christian world was finally established at the Council of Chalcedon (Kolot, 2008, p. 318).

The 28th Canon of this council (not recognized by Roman Catholics) declared equality between Rome and New Rome in all matters (Sahan, 2004, p. 756). Pope Leo I the Great opposed linking metropolitan and ecclesiastical privileges, arguing that a church see had cultivated its own tradition and history over centuries, whereas a capital city was an artificial state formation. Therefore, the growing role of Constantinople was, in his view, secular rather than ecclesiastical. Ultimately, this canon infringed upon the rights and ancient privileges of Alexandria and Antioch, which were demoted by one position in the diptychs. Moreover, this canon was established in violation of the 6th Canon of the Council of Nicaea. The rights of the ancient metropolises of Pontus, Asia, and Thrace were violated, as they lost their independence and were forced to receive episcopal ordinations from Constantinople. Leo the Great urged the emperor not to proceed with this, asserting that the status of a capital should not be tied to ecclesiastical matters. According to S. Chobych (1998), this led to anarchy in the church order and arbitrariness in governance (Damaskin (Papandreu), 1994, p. 128).

Another significant historical precedent for direct ecclesiastical dependence on the status of a city occurred during the reign of Justinian the Great (527–565). The emperor issued a decree transforming his native village into a powerful city – New Justiniana. He then granted the bishop of this city an autocephalous charter and the title of archbishop. The jurisdiction of the new primate extended over several neighboring dioceses. Thus, two important conclusions can be drawn:

The emperor's power in ecclesiastical matters reached its zenith. Without the Patriarch and the Council, the emperor alone decided to create a new independent ecclesiastical unit.

Once again, in ecclesiastical matters, the capital or the ruler's native city rises in prominence. Ecclesiastical life

and governance directly depend on the status of a city or a particular province.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the decline of Byzantium with its cultural and religious heritage, Eastern Christianity underwent significant changes. Firstly, this had a negative impact on the level of theology, which virtually disappeared. On the other hand, on a pan-Orthodox level, the role of the Moscow Empire and the Russian Church grew. Gradually, a theological idea of equality and parallel existence of Local Independent Churches developed, which replaced the old theory of "pentarchy" (power in the Church concentrated in the hands of five patriarchs). Additionally, in the context of Muslim expansion, the idea of the symphony between the state and the Church lost its relevance.

We can agree with the perspective of Protopresbyter M. Shcherban that "Orthodoxy ceased to play a significant cultural role among the population of the former powerful empire" (Shcherban, 2014, p. 240). This had a profound impact on both religious and national self-identification. The Greeks faced an overwhelming threat of assimilation within the Muslim world. It can be argued that under such circumstances, Orthodoxy transformed from a purely religious marker to a national characteristic of identity. This led to the perception among the successors of the Byzantine Empire that Greek Orthodoxy lost its universal nature, taking on more narrowly defined ethnic characteristics.

Today, within the scientific and theological discourse, the interpretation of the canons and decrees of the Ecumenical Councils and the writings of the prominent Fathers of the Church remains a pressing issue. This is particularly relevant in the context of the subjects of our study. The canonical and dogmatic works from the period of the Ecumenical Councils provide very little material directly addressing the theme of autocephaly. Only a few specific decrees of the Councils directly mention certain autocephalous churches, or more precisely, acknowledge their existence and the peculiarities of their titles. The mechanism for the establishment of a new autocephalous church is absent from the sacred canons. Therefore, it is necessary to thoroughly examine the limited canonical work of the holy fathers on the subject of autocephaly.

The canons are the primary source of canonical law, as they contain the most reliable information on ecclesiastical matters and the ways the Church has resolved them. However, evaluating the canons as a source of canonical law requires an objective approach and consideration of the historical context in which they were created (Kolot, 2008, p. 125). Each canon arose from a specific and objective necessity, making it essential to distinguish between the temporal preconditions and the literal historical reasons for the precise content of the canons.

This is particularly relevant to the issue of autocephaly for a new Local Church. Each of the canons related to this topic pertains to a specific church and its domain of governance, without indicating the universality of such a prescription. Moreover, the research must uncover all historical reasons and purposes behind specific canons, the legislative tendencies of the historical period, the overall state of the Church, the importance of the issues addressed by the canons, their connection to existing ecclesiastical problems, the canonical terminology used at the time, the authority of ecclesiastical bodies to adopt canons, subsequent procedures for their state approval and regulation, as well as the level of support they received from the broader Church.

Thus, interpreting the canonical heritage requires meticulous work and the application of various methods of scholarly research. The rules and decrees of the Ecumenical Councils regarding the issue of autocephaly must be studied through the lens of the entire ecclesiastical experience and the existing canonical tradition. While most of the canons addressing autocephalous matters remain relevant today, their practical application is often unrealistic. During the conciliar period, the Church Fathers did not develop a clear algorithm for the formation of a new autocephalous church, which has led to numerous canonical conflicts and misunderstandings between Local Churches in the future.

As Metropolitan Damaskinos (Papandreou) aptly observes: "The new autocephalies that were proclaimed from the 16th century onwards were all declared exclusively by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Each of these proclamations was associated with a political factor, and autocephaly was declared as a means of ensuring the unity of the Church within each of these states, as well as the unity between the Local Churches. Throughout the history of the Orthodox Church, no other local church, apart from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, has proclaimed autocephaly, as it is considered an exclusive privilege of the First Throne of Orthodoxy" (Damaskin (Papandreu), 1994, p. 159).

At the same time, it is important to note that despite the fact that "the Ecumenical Patriarchate holds the exclusive prerogative to grant autocephaly, one of the key factors in its proclamation is the politico-geographical factor. The organizational form of the Church at any given time is closely tied to the political geography, i.e., the political borders of the state to which a particular church belongs. The reconfiguration of this geography – for example, the delegation of an empire into separate states – encourages corresponding changes in the organizational form of the Church. This can happen for various reasons. Sometimes, it becomes unacceptable for one church to maintain relations of dependency or hierarchy due to new political borders (e.g., with governance structures and funds located in one newly established state, and a subordinate diocese situated in another), forcing what was once a unified ecclesiastical unit to divide into administratively autonomous entities. Often, it is politically advantageous for ecclesiastical boundaries to mimic political ones" (Damaskin (Papandreu), 1994, p. 197).

Thus, we can state that self-governance for a church that suddenly finds itself within a new autonomous political entity is not automatic, and organizational changes cannot occur without restrictions. Institutional constraints limit the ability of agents to effect organizational changes by redrawing ecclesiastical boundaries. Autocephaly requires compliance with certain institutionally established criteria, and enforcement by third parties must be reliable to ensure adherence to these institutional rules.

The restructuring of these political boundaries necessarily entails a corresponding restructuring of ecclesiastical borders. To the extent that the process of changing political borders results in an independent political entity, the ecclesiastical equivalent is often an autocephalous church. An autocephalous church is administratively independent and is characterized by the "coincidence of [its] jurisdictional boundaries with the borders of the corresponding state" (Daniil (Chokaliuk), 1997, p. 50). The "corresponding state" plays a significant role as a third party that ensures the enforcement of the institutional rules governing organizational changes and acts as a logical protector of the church within its political borders, meaning

the institutional structure effectively anticipates and largely depends on this unique role of the state.

Therefore, our alternative theory suggests that under conditions of relative political stability, we can expect to observe a corresponding degree of stability in the internal organization of the Church (for example, the Church's organization in its earlier centuries largely corresponded to the major metropolises and provincial boundaries within the Roman Empire, as long as the empire remained intact). Redrawing borders within principalities or empires, the delegation of empires into separate states, political upheavals within and between states, or any combination of these phenomena, leads to corresponding changes in the forms of ecclesiastical organization.

This tendency of the Church toward "territorial adaptation", which became evident during the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire in what some specialists have termed "Byzantine theocracy", persisted even after the fall of the empire itself. The state's imprimatur on ecclesiastical organization, as Archimandrite Dimitry (Rudyuk) argues, continued to be seen by the Church as a necessary prerequisite for organizational decisions and played a significant role in the concept of the convergence and co-location of state and church, a notion that endured well into the 20th century (Dymytrii (Rudyuk), 2000, p. 78).

#### Discussion and conclusions

In conclusion, while the Byzantine (Greek) model of granting autocephaly is the most established, ancient, and one that has certain ecclesiastical and legal foundations, this did not always guarantee the automatic acceptance and recognition of a newly proclaimed autocephalous church by all other local churches throughout different periods of history. The granting of autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to a particular Orthodox church in a given state was not solely based on quantitative or qualitative criteria. Instead, it was often the result of negotiations among various political actors who had a vested interest in ensuring that an independent state had its own local church, free from external influence over its faithful citizens. The Byzantine model of proclaiming autocephaly to a large Orthodox structure is not without flaws, especially in light of modern trends within global Orthodoxy. This is particularly relevant when considering the creation of parallel Orthodox organizations (dioceses, exarchates, archbishoprics, metropolises) in countries that are historically non-Orthodox or even non-Christian. This sets a precedent for determining the territorial limits of a newly proclaimed local church and raises questions about how to engage in dialogue with other autocephalous churches in this context.

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## СПЕЦИФІКА ВІЗАНТІЙСЬКОЇ МОДЕЛІ НАДАННЯ АВТОКЕФАЛІЇ: ВІД МИНУЛОГО ДО СУЧАСНОСТІ

**Вступ.** Присвячено дослідженню візантійської моделі надання автокефалії, яка є одним із ключових складників формування церковної автономії у православному світі. Висвітлено історичні передумови становлення цієї моделі, зокрема зв'язок між церковними і державними структурами в контексті імперських інтересів.

**Методи.** Розглянуто основні критерії, необхідні для отримання автокефалії, такі як рівень церковної зрілості, кількість парафій та можливість висвячення нових єпископів. Підкреслено, що автокефальні церкви не можуть виникати самостійно, без участі церковних структур, які вже існують, що обумовлено принципом апостольської спадкоємності. Також розглянуто історичні приклади надання автокефалії, такі як надання особливих привілеїв Константинополю та утворення нових церковних одиниць у візантійську епоху.

**Результати.** Увагу зосереджено на проблемах, що виникають у процесі надання автокефалії, включаючи політичний вплив і конфлікти між місцевими церквами. Визначено, що візантійська модель, попри її історичну значущість, не завжди гарантує автоматичне прийняття нової автокефальної церкви всіма іншими місцевими церквами, наголошуючи на необхідності глибшого вивчення цієї теми в контексті сучасних тенденцій у православ'ї.

**Висновки.** Зроблено висновок, що візантійська модель, незважаючи на її історичне значення, не завжди гарантує автоматичне прийняття новопроголошеної автокефальної церкви всіма іншими помісними церквами, наголошуючи на необхідності глибшого дослідження цієї теми в контексті сучасних тенденцій православ'я.

**Ключові слова:** автокефалія, візантійська модель, православна церква, історичний розвиток, апостольська спадкоємність, державна влада, церковна автономія.

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