# Self-Governed and In Communion: The Orthodox Case for the Self-Determination of Peoples

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## Three Words That Are Not Interchangeable

Most political arguments in America founder on a failure of vocabulary. The words "nation," "state," and "country" are used interchangeably in common speech, as though they describe the same thing from different angles. They do not. They describe fundamentally different realities, and the failure to distinguish them has corrupted American political discourse for more than a century. That corruption has consequences far beyond politics. It distorts how Americans, including American Orthodox Christians, understand the relationship between peoples, governments, and the right of self-governance.

A nation is a people. It is a group bound together by shared identity, culture, history, language, and a sense of common belonging that persists across generations. Nations predate governments. They predate constitutions. They predate the modern concept of the state itself. The Scots were a nation before there was a Scottish parliament. The Poles were a nation when Poland did not appear on any map in Europe for 123 years, partitioned among Russia, Prussia, and Austria from 1795 to 1918. The Jews were a nation for two thousand years without a state, scattered across dozens of countries, and remained a nation throughout because nationhood does not depend on political structures. It depends on the people themselves. A nation is not created by a government. It exists because a people exists.[1]

A state is a political and legal entity. Under the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933), statehood requires four things: a permanent population, a defined territory, a functioning government, and the capacity to conduct international relations.[2] This is a structural definition. A state is a machine of governance. It can be imposed upon a people from outside, as the Soviet Union imposed state structures upon the Baltic nations. It can be reformed, as Japan was reformed after 1945. It can be dissolved, as Czechoslovakia was dissolved in 1993. It can be replaced, as the Republic of Texas was replaced by incorporation into the United States in 1845. A state is not a people. It is a structure that serves a people, or fails to, and when it fails, the people do not cease to exist. Only the structure changes.

Sovereignty is the third and distinct concept. It is the right and capacity of a people to govern themselves without subordination to another power. Sovereignty is what connects nation and state: it is the condition in which a people exercises genuine self-governance through political structures of their own making and consent. A nation can exist without sovereignty, as Poland did for over a century. A state can exist without legitimacy, as many colonial administrations did.

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[1]The sociological and philosophical distinction between "nation" and "state" has been developed extensively in the modern literature. See Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006). For a concise treatment of the distinction in the context of Texas, see Daniel Miller, *TEXIT: Why and How Texas Will Leave the Union* (Nederland, TX: Defiance Press, 2018), chapters 1-2.

[2]Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, Article 1 (1933).

Sovereignty is neither nationhood nor statehood but the living relationship between them: the condition in which a people's government is truly their own.

These distinctions are not academic exercises. They are the difference between clarity and confusion on every question of self-determination. And they find remarkable parallels in the vocabulary of the Orthodox Christian tradition, parallels that most Orthodox Christians in America have never been asked to notice.

## *The Orthodox Vocabulary*

The Greek of the New Testament and the canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church employ terms that map with striking precision onto these political categories. Understanding these terms is not optional for an Orthodox Christian who wishes to think clearly about peoples, governments, and self-governance. They are the Church's own words, used in its foundational texts, and they carry theological weight that secular political theory cannot supply.

*Ethnos* (ἔθνος) corresponds to "nation" in its proper sense: a people. It is the word Christ uses in the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, Matthew 28:19). It is the word employed in Apostolic Canon 34, which organizes the Church's governance according to the bishops "of every nation," where the Greek word for "nation" is *ethnos* (ἔθνος).[3] The *ethnos* is not a political unit. It is a human reality. It refers to a people with shared identity, shared customs, shared life. The Church recognizes the *ethnos* as real, legitimate, and enduring. Christ did not command his Apostles to dissolve the nations. He commanded them to go to the nations, to enter into their particularity, to baptize them as they are.

*Politeia* (πολιτεία) corresponds more closely to "state" or "civic order." In classical and Byzantine political thought, the *politeia* refers to the governing arrangement through which a people organizes its common life.[4] It is the constitution in the broadest sense: not merely a written document but the entire structure of public order. The *politeia* can change. It has changed. The Byzantine *politeia* lasted for a thousand years and then fell. The Ottoman *politeia* replaced it in many of the same territories. Empires, republics, monarchies, federations: these are all forms of *politeia*. They serve the common good of the people, or they fail to, and when they fail, they can be reformed or replaced. The *politeia* is not sacred in itself. It is instrumental. It exists to serve.

*Ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία), the Church, stands in relationship to both the *ethnos* and the *politeia* but is subordinate to neither. The Church is organized along the lines of the *ethnos* and the territory, not because the Church is a department of the nation, but because the Gospel takes root in particular peoples in particular places. When the *politeia* changes, when a people achieves political independence, the Church's own structure has historically followed. This is not an accident or a political convenience. It is the Church's recognition that its own life is properly

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[3]Apostolic Canon 34. The Greek text and a thorough analysis of its ecclesiological implications can be found in Brian E. Daley, SJ, "Primacy and Collegiality in the Fourth Century: A Note on Apostolic Canon 34," *The Jurist* 68 (2008): 5-21. The English translation used in this paper follows Daley's rendering.

[4]For the Byzantine concept of *politeia* and its relationship to the Church, see John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983).

ordered according to the realities of peoples and places, not according to the dictates of distant imperial capitals.[5]

The Orthodox Christian, therefore, already possesses the conceptual vocabulary to distinguish between a people, a governing structure, and the right of self-governance. These are not foreign categories imported from Enlightenment political theory or modern nationalism. They are the Church's own categories, embedded in its Scripture, its canons, and its two-thousand-year practice of organizing itself according to the peoples it serves.

## *The Lincolnian Error*

For Orthodox Christians in America, however, these categories are obscured by a historical misunderstanding that must be addressed directly before any productive conversation about self-determination can occur. This misunderstanding is not unique to Orthodox Christians. It is shared by the vast majority of Americans. But it has particular consequences for Orthodox thought because it distorts the application of the Church's own categories to the American situation.

Orthodoxy in America is largely a post-Civil War phenomenon. The great waves of Orthodox immigration from Greece, Russia, the Levant, and Eastern Europe arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[6] They arrived into a country whose reigning political mythology had already been fundamentally reshaped by the outcome of the Civil War and the ideology of the victors. The version of American history these immigrants absorbed, and which their descendants continue to hold, is in its essentials the Lincolnian version: the "American nation" is a singular, indivisible entity that pre-dates and supersedes the states; the Union created the states, not the other way around; and any attempt by a constituent part to withdraw from the whole is rebellion against the nation itself.

This version of history is false, and demonstrably so from the primary sources.

The American colonies pre-existed the Union by more than a century. Virginia was founded in 1607, Massachusetts in 1620. The Continental Congress that declared independence in 1776 was a congress of delegates from distinct colonies, each with its own charter, its own government, its own legal tradition, and its own identity. The Declaration of Independence itself refers to the former colonies not as provinces of a new nation but as "free and independent States" in the plural, each possessing "full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do."[7] The Declaration did not create one nation. It recognized thirteen.

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[5]The pattern of autocephaly following political independence is extensively documented. See Pedro Ramet, "Autocephaly and National Identity in Church-State Relations in Eastern Christianity: An Introduction," in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 4-7; Victor Roudometoff, *Globalization and Orthodox Christianity: The Transformations of a Religious Tradition* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

[6]The major waves of Orthodox immigration to North America are documented in Thomas E. Fitzgerald, *The Orthodox Church* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998). The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America was not formally established until 1922; the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese traces its American origins to 1895.

[7]Declaration of Independence of the United States (1776), final paragraph.

The Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781, were explicit on the point. Article II reads: "Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled."[8] The Articles did not create a nation. They created an alliance of sovereign states, each of which retained its sovereignty as a matter of law.

The Constitution of 1787, which replaced the Articles, was ratified not by a single national plebiscite but by each state separately, through state ratifying conventions, as an act of consent by pre-existing sovereign political bodies. The ratification debates make the nature of this act clear. The Federalist Papers, written to persuade the states to ratify, repeatedly describe the Constitution as a compact among sovereign states delegating limited and enumerated powers to a common government. James Madison, in Federalist No. 39, described the Constitution as "neither a national nor a federal Constitution, but a composition of both." In Federalist No. 45, he asserted that "the powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined."[9] The states did not dissolve themselves into a new nation. They consented to a new *politeia*, a new governing arrangement, while retaining their identities, their cultures, and, critically, the sovereignty they had not delegated.

"America," in other words, was never a nation in the sense that the Orthodox tradition understands *ethnos*. There was no single American people with a shared identity, a shared culture, a shared history stretching back into the deep past. There were multiple peoples, Virginians and New Englanders and Carolinians and New Yorkers, with distinct cultures, distinct economies, distinct religious traditions, and distinct identities, who entered into a common political arrangement for limited purposes. The United States was a *politeia*. It was never an *ethnos*. The mythology that says otherwise was constructed after the fact, primarily during and after the Civil War, to justify the coercive consolidation of a voluntary union into a centralized state.

This distinction matters enormously for the Orthodox reader, because the Lincolnian premise, if accepted uncritically, makes self-determination sound like schism. If there is one American nation and the states are merely its administrative subdivisions, then a state seeking independence is a part rebelling against the whole. In Orthodox ecclesiological terms, that would sound like a diocese attempting to break communion with its mother church unilaterally and without cause. Of course an Orthodox Christian would reject it.

But if the Union is a voluntary compact of sovereign peoples, then the frame changes entirely. A people choosing to withdraw from a political arrangement that no longer serves it is not schism. It is the exercise of the same self-determination that the Orthodox world has recognized, honored, and reorganized its own most sacred governance structures to reflect for the past two hundred years.

The Orthodox Church in America already lives this reality, even if it does not recognize it as such. The jurisdictional situation of Orthodoxy in the United States is, by the Church's own

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[8]Articles of Confederation, Article II (1781).

[9]See in particular *The Federalist* No. 39 (James Madison), which describes the Constitution as "neither a national nor a federal Constitution, but a composition of both," and *The Federalist* No. 45 (Madison), which asserts that "the powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined."

acknowledgment, a canonical anomaly. Greek Orthodox, Antiochian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox (under multiple jurisdictions), Serbian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, and other parishes exist side by side in the same American cities, each answering to a different mother church overseas. There is no single American Orthodox Church. There has never been one. The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America exists as a coordinating body, but it has not produced and shows no signs of producing a unified autocephalous American church.[10]

The reason is simple, even if it is rarely stated so plainly: "America" is not an *ethnos*. It is a political arrangement containing many peoples. The Church has never been able to unify on American soil because the theological foundation for an autocephalous American church, a single American *ethnos* whose church could be self-governing, does not exist. The Church's own inability to unify in America is itself testimony to the fact that the United States does not possess the national character that the Orthodox tradition requires as the foundation for an autocephalous church. The canonical anomaly of American Orthodoxy is not a failure of organization. It is an accurate ecclesiological reflection of the political reality that America is not a nation.

## The Scriptural Foundation

The Orthodox case for the self-determination of peoples does not begin with political theory. It begins with Scripture, read through the interpretive tradition of the Church Fathers, and it rests on two foundational moments in the biblical narrative: the Great Commission and the event of Pentecost.

### *The Great Commission and the Reality of Peoples*

The Great Commission, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, contains an instruction that is both missionary and anthropological: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The word *ethne* here is not incidental. Christ does not say "go and make disciples of all individuals" or "go and make disciples of all humanity considered as a single undifferentiated mass." He says "all nations," all peoples. The command presupposes the existence of distinct peoples as a feature of the created order and commissions the Church to go to them. The nations are the addressees of the Gospel, not its casualties. The Gospel enters into the life of a people; it does not require that people to first dissolve itself into a universal monoculture before it can receive the faith.

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[10]The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America was established in 2010, following the Fourth Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambesy, Switzerland (2009). It has produced no movement toward a unified autocephalous American church. See Alexander Schmemann, "Problems of Orthodoxy in America," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1964): 67-85, for an early and prophetic treatment of the canonical disorder of American Orthodoxy. See also Metropolitan Jonah (Paffhausen), "Episcopacy, Primacy, and the Mother Churches: A Monastic Perspective," delivered at the Conference of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius at St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary, June 2008.

This is precisely the principle that the Ludwell Orthodox Fellowship articulates in its statement of mission: "Christ, in his Great Commission, bid his disciples to 'go into all the world and make disciples of all nations (ethnoi).' From the day of Pentecost, when visitors to Jerusalem first heard the Gospel in their own languages, the Church has recognized that the one human family is composed of many distinct peoples, each of which has an absolute claim on the promises of Christ and his Church."[11]

The missionary history of the Orthodox Church confirms this reading. When Saints Cyril and Methodius brought the Gospel to the Slavic peoples in the ninth century, they did not require the Slavs to become Greek. They created a Slavonic alphabet, translated the Scriptures and the liturgical texts into Slavonic, and planted the faith in the soil of Slavic culture.[12] When the Russian Church sent missionaries to Alaska in the eighteenth century, the missionaries translated the liturgy into Aleut and Tlingit languages. The pattern is consistent across centuries and across continents: the Gospel enters the *ethnos* as it is, transfiguring it from within rather than replacing it from without.

The theological principle at work is what the Fathers call *theosis*, deification: the transformation of human nature by the grace of God without the destruction of that nature. Just as the human person is deified without ceasing to be human, so a people is baptized without ceasing to be itself. The Greeks remain Greek. The Georgians remain Georgian. The Arabs remain Arab. The faith does not erase the particular. It transfigures it.

### *Pentecost: Unity Without Uniformity*

The event of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12) deepens and confirms this principle. The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles is the founding moment of the Church, and its character is not accidental. It is programmatic.

The narrative in Acts describes the Apostles speaking, and every person present, drawn from across the known world, hearing the Gospel "in his own language" (Acts 2:6). The text is specific. It lists the peoples present: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs (Acts 2:9-11). The miracle is not that these peoples are fused into one. The miracle is that each of them hears the truth in his own tongue, from within his own identity, without being required to become something other than what he is.

Pentecost is often described as the reversal of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). This is correct, but it is essential to notice what Pentecost reverses and what it does not. At Babel, God scattered the peoples and confused their languages. The result was division: peoples could no longer understand one another. At Pentecost, the Apostles speak and every person understands. But the diversity of languages is not abolished. The diversity of peoples is not erased. What is

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[11]"About: Our Mission," The Philip Ludwell III Orthodox Fellowship, accessed March 2026, https://southernorthodox.org/about/.

[12]On the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius and the principle of vernacular liturgy, see Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453* (New York: Praeger, 1971); and A. P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

restored is communion across that diversity. The curse of Babel was not diversity itself but the inability to communicate across diversity, the fracture of communion. Pentecost heals the fracture without collapsing the diversity.

The great twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky described this principle in terms of the Church's universality: the Church is catholic not because it abolishes particularity but because it contains and sanctifies all particularities within itself. The wholeness of the Church is not a featureless unity but a communion of distinct persons and distinct peoples.[13]

## *The Trinitarian Pattern*

This pattern, distinction without division, unity without absorption, is not a peripheral feature of Orthodox theology. It is the deepest pattern there is, because it reflects the life of the Holy Trinity itself.

Orthodox Trinitarian theology, as articulated by the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian (Gregory of Nazianzus), and St. Gregory of Nyssa, insists on the full reality of both the unity of God and the distinction of the three Persons. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God: one essence (*ousia*), one will, one divine nature. But they are three Persons (*hypostases*), each fully distinct, each irreducibly himself. The Persons are not dissolved into a featureless unity (the Sabellian heresy). Nor are they divided into three separate gods (the Arian tendency). They are distinct and they are one.[14]

The contemporary Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas has drawn out the ecclesiological implications of this Trinitarian theology at length. For Zizioulas, the very concept of personhood, of being a distinct individual who exists in and through communion with others, is rooted in the Trinitarian life of God. The Person does not exist in isolation. The Person exists in relationship. And the communion of Persons does not destroy their distinction. It constitutes it.[15]

The political analogy is not trivial. A vision of human community that demands the dissolution of all particular identities into a single universal order mirrors the Sabellian error: it collapses distinction into unity. It is the political theology of empire, of Rome, of centralized authority that tolerates no self-governing part. A vision that treats every particular identity as absolutely sovereign and unrelated to any other mirrors the Arian tendency: it divides what should be held in communion. It is the political theology of pure isolation, of peoples with no obligations to one another.

The Orthodox vision, grounded in Trinitarian theology, holds a third way. Peoples can be fully themselves, fully distinct, and fully in communion with one another. Neither absorption nor

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[13]Georges Florovsky, "The Church: Her Nature and Task," in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Collected Works, vol. 1 (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972).

[14]For the Cappadocian theology of the Trinity, see especially St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*; St. Gregory the Theologian, *Orations* 27-31 (the "Theological Orations"); and St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*.

[15]John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), esp. chapters 1 and 3. For a critical engagement with Zizioulas's use of Trinitarian theology in ecclesiology, see also Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

isolation. Both distinction and unity. This is not a compromise between two extremes. It is the pattern revealed in the life of God himself.

This is the theological ground upon which the self-determination of peoples stands.

## The Canonical Foundation

The canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church translates this theological vision into concrete structures of governance. If the preceding section established the theological principle, this section demonstrates that the Church has encoded that principle into law.

### *Apostolic Canon 34*

The most important canonical text for the question of self-determination is Apostolic Canon 34. Though attributed to the Apostles, the text dates to the late fourth century and is included in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a Syrian church order. It was affirmed by the Council in Trullo (692) and has been received as authoritative throughout the Orthodox world. Its significance for ecclesiology can scarcely be overstated. Bishop Kallistos Ware has described it as "a text of great importance for the Orthodox Church today."[16]

The canon reads in full:

> The bishops of every nation (ἔθνος) must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head, and do nothing of consequence without his consent; but each may do those things only which concern his own parish and the country places which belong to it. But neither let him who is the first do anything without the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity (ὁμόνοια), and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit.[17]

Several features of this text deserve careful attention.

First, the canon organizes the Church according to *ethnos*. The unit of ecclesiastical governance is not the empire, not the province, not an arbitrary administrative district, but the nation, the people. The Church does not impose an alien administrative grid upon the world. It organizes itself according to the peoples it serves. As Brian Daley has noted in his study of the canon, the text has in view "the relationship between local bishops and their metropolitans" within a given people, and it assumes that each *ethnos* constitutes a natural unit of ecclesiastical organization.[18]

This is emphatically not phyletism. Phyletism, as will be discussed in the following section, is the conflation of church and nation, the error of making the Church subordinate to the *ethnos*. Apostolic Canon 34 does not subordinate the Church to the nation. It recognizes the nation as the natural context in which the Church's governance operates. The distinction is between saying

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[16]Kallistos Ware, "L'exercice de l'autorite dans l'Eglise orthodoxe (II)," *Irenikon* 55 (1982): 25-34, at 27.

[17]Apostolic Canon 34, as translated in Daley, "Primacy and Collegiality," 6. Cf. the translation in *The Apostolic Constitutions*, Book VIII, Section IV, Canon 35, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886).

[18]Daley, "Primacy and Collegiality," passim.

"the Church exists to serve our people" (phyletism) and "the Church organizes itself according to the reality of peoples" (canonical order). The canon affirms the latter.

Second, the canon establishes the principle of conciliar self-governance. The bishops of each *ethnos* govern themselves. They acknowledge a first among them, but that first bishop governs not by unilateral authority but by the consent of his brother bishops. And those bishops, in turn, do nothing of consequence without the consent of their first hierarch. Authority flows in both directions. It is mutual, consensual, and bounded.

This is the antithesis of centralized imperial authority. No single figure holds absolute power. The primate is a coordinator, a chairman, a servant of communion, not a ruler. The model is conciliar: decisions are made by the synod, not dictated by the primate. This is not a modern democratic innovation projected backward onto ancient texts. It is the ancient text itself, describing a form of governance that the modern world would recognize as constitutional: authority distributed, power checked, consent required.

Third, the canon explicitly requires that the primate "do nothing without the consent of all." This is a canonical requirement, not a polite suggestion. The governance of the Church is synodal. The primate is "first among equals" (*primus inter pares*), a title that describes a ministry of service and coordination, not a position of jurisdiction over others.[19]

Fourth, and most importantly for our purposes, the stated purpose of this arrangement is *homonoia*: unanimity, like-mindedness, concord. "For so there will be unanimity, and God will be glorified." The structure of self-governance is not an end in itself. It serves communion. Self-governance is the condition that makes genuine communion possible, because communion that is coerced, communion that is imposed by a central authority against the will of the governed, is not communion at all. It is subjection.

## *The Conciliar Structure of Orthodoxy*

Apostolic Canon 34 is not an isolated text. It is the canonical expression of a principle that governs the entire structure of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church is, in its actual constitution, a communion of self-governing bodies.

There is no pope. There is no central ecclesiastical government. Each autocephalous church governs itself through its own synod of bishops. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople holds the title "first among equals," but this title confers honor and a coordinating role, not jurisdiction over other churches.[20] The Patriarch of Constantinople cannot overrule the Patriarch of Antioch. The Church of Russia cannot dictate to the Church of Romania. Each church is

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[19]For the Orthodox understanding of primacy as a ministry of coordination rather than jurisdiction, see Ware, "L'exercice de l'autorite," and John Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia: A Study of Byzantino-Russian Relations in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[20]The Ecumenical Patriarchate's status as "first among equals" without jurisdictional authority over other autocephalous churches is standard Orthodox ecclesiology, though it has become increasingly contested in recent years, particularly in the context of the Ukrainian autocephaly dispute. See the Ecumenical Patriarchate's 2020 Social Ethos document, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, which addresses the relationship between the Church and political order.

*autocephalos*, literally "self-headed," governing its own affairs while remaining in full communion with the others.

The communion is real. All autocephalous churches share the same faith, the same sacraments, the same canonical tradition. A priest ordained in the Church of Greece can celebrate the liturgy in the Church of Antioch. The faithful of the Church of Romania can receive communion in the Church of Serbia. The unity is not organizational but sacramental and doctrinal. It is, in the precise theological sense, a communion: a bond of shared life that does not require, and indeed would be damaged by, the imposition of a single centralized authority.

If one were to design a political analogy for this structure, one would not design a unitary nation-state governed from a single capital. One would not design the United States as it exists today, with a federal government exercising sweeping authority over all constituent parts. One would design something closer to what the founders of the American republic intended: a confederation of self-governing peoples, each managing its own affairs, united not by the coercive power of a central authority but by shared principles, shared commitments, and free consent.

This is not a coincidence. This is the Church's own witness to how communities of people ought to be ordered. The Church did not borrow this model from modern political theory. Modern political theorists, insofar as they have articulated principles of federalism and subsidiarity, have discovered principles that the Church has practiced for two millennia.

## The Historical Record

The canonical principles of the preceding section are not abstractions preserved in ancient texts and ignored in practice. They have been applied, tested, and validated across two centuries of modern Orthodox history. The pattern is consistent and unambiguous: when a people achieves political self-determination, the Church recognizes that self-determination by reorganizing its own governance to match.

This is the historical record. It is not disputed by serious historians of Orthodoxy. What is disputed is the theological significance of the pattern and the question of how autocephaly should properly be granted. But the pattern itself is clear.

**Greece.** The Greek War of Independence (1821-1829) resulted in the establishment of an independent Greek state, formally recognized in 1832. In 1833, the Greek government unilaterally proclaimed the Church of Greece autocephalous, independent of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Patriarchate did not initially accept this proclamation, and a period of tension followed that lasted seventeen years. In 1850, the Ecumenical Patriarch Anthimus IV issued a tomos recognizing the Church of Greece as autocephalous. The sequence is instructive: political independence first, then ecclesiastical self-governance, initially contested but ultimately recognized. The Church did not resist Greek self-determination. It absorbed it, processed it through its own canonical mechanisms, and ultimately affirmed it.[21]

[21] On the autocephaly of the Church of Greece, see Charles Frazee, *The Orthodox Church and Independent Greece, 1821-1852* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

**Serbia.** Serbian political independence was recognized at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, after decades of uprisings and wars against Ottoman rule. The autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which had a complex history stretching back to the medieval Archbishopric of St. Sava (established 1219), was re-established in the context of modern Serbian statehood. The Serbian Patriarchate was restored in 1920, following the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes after World War I. The Serbian case demonstrates that the connection between political self-determination and ecclesiastical autocephaly is not a modern innovation but a recurrent pattern in Orthodox history, with medieval precedents that the modern era simply renewed.[22]

**Romania.** The Romanian Orthodox Church's autocephalous status was legally mandated by Romanian authorities in 1865, two decades before international recognition of Romanian independence. The Ecumenical Patriarchate formally recognized the autocephaly in 1885, following the Congress of Berlin's recognition of Romanian independence in 1878. The Romanian case is particularly instructive because it demonstrates the interaction between political sovereignty and ecclesiastical self-governance: the state asserted independence, the church followed, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate eventually recognized the fait accompli. The King of Romania, Carol I, stated that the Church "has always been undetachable from the destinies of the country" and that it possessed, "beyond its own character, a totally national character as well."[23]

**Bulgaria.** The Bulgarian case is the most complex and the most relevant to the phyletism discussion. In 1870, the Ottoman government established a Bulgarian Exarchate, granting the Bulgarian church a degree of independence from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Exarchate, however, organized itself along ethnic rather than territorial lines, claiming jurisdiction over all ethnic Bulgarians regardless of where they lived, including in cities like Constantinople where Greeks and Bulgarians lived side by side. This produced the canonical crisis that prompted the 1872 synod and its condemnation of phyletism. The Bulgarian Church was not fully recognized as an autocephalous patriarchate until 1945, after decades of schism. The condemnation of phyletism targeted the method (ethnically overlapping jurisdictions in the same territory) and the ecclesiology (the church as an instrument of national identity), not the principle that the Bulgarian people could eventually have their own self-governing church. The eventual recognition of Bulgarian autocephaly, seventy-three years after the condemnation, proves the point: the principle survived the condemnation of the method.[24]

**Georgia.** The Georgian Orthodox Church has one of the oldest Christian histories in the world, tracing its origins to the conversion of the Iberian royal house in the fourth century. Its autocephaly was originally granted by the Church of Antioch in 466 AD. After centuries of

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[22]On the Serbian Church's complex history of autocephaly, see Ramet, *Eastern Christianity and Politics*.

[23]On the Romanian Orthodox Church's autocephaly, see Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Southeastern Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). The quotation from King Carol I is drawn from the proceedings of the Romanian Holy Synod as cited in "Constitutional Tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy: Political-Theological Aspects," in *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

[24]On the Bulgarian Exarchate, the condemnation of phyletism, and the eventual recognition of Bulgarian autocephaly, see Leustean, *Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism*; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), which treats the relationship between phyletism and Orthodox political theology; and "Constitutional Tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy," in *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

independence, the Georgian Church was forcibly absorbed into the Russian Orthodox Church following Russia's annexation of Georgia in the early nineteenth century. In March 1917, following the collapse of the Russian Empire, the Georgian Church proclaimed the restoration of its autocephaly. The Moscow Patriarchate did not recognize this restoration until 1943, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate not until 1990. The Georgian case demonstrates that the desire for ecclesiastical self-governance can persist through centuries of foreign domination and reassert itself the moment the political conditions change. Once again, the pattern holds: political independence or its aspiration, followed by ecclesiastical self-governance, eventually recognized by the broader Church.[25]

**Ukraine.** The most recent and most contested case. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine in 1991, the question of Ukrainian ecclesiastical autocephaly became intensely fraught, entangled with geopolitics, great power rivalry, and competing claims of canonical jurisdiction. In 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarchate granted a tomos of autocephaly to the newly constituted Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The Moscow Patriarchate and several other churches rejected this action, and the question remains a source of profound division within world Orthodoxy. Whatever one's position on the canonical legitimacy of the process, the underlying principle invoked is the same one that animated every previous case: a people asserting political self-determination and the Church reorganizing to reflect it. The Ukrainian case also demonstrates the political dimensions of the question: the Moscow Patriarchate's resistance to Ukrainian autocephaly is inseparable from Russia's claim to political authority over Ukraine. The ecclesiological dispute and the political dispute are two faces of the same question about the self-determination of a people.[26]

The scholarly literature is explicit about this pattern. As Pedro Ramet has documented, "the issue of autocephaly has been closely linked to the issue of self-determination and political independence of a nation."[27] The newly formed states with predominantly Orthodox populations in the nineteenth century "were shaped as constitutional monarchies, based on popular sovereignty, accepting the rule of law and the separation of powers as their guiding principles." The national Orthodox churches that achieved autocephaly in this period "coexisted and cooperated with established constitutional authorities without questioning their form and legitimacy from a Christian theological perspective."[28]

The Orthodox world, in other words, does not treat the desire of a people to govern themselves as an aberration, a rebellion, or a sin. It has consistently treated it as a legitimate expression of the life of an *ethnos*, and it has reorganized its own most sacred structures to honor that legitimacy. For two centuries, the Church has followed the peoples. When a people achieves self-governance, the Church recognizes the fact and orders itself accordingly.

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[25]On Georgian autocephaly, see Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[26]On the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, see the extensive coverage in *Public Orthodoxy* (Fordham University), particularly Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Whose Autocephaly?," *Public Orthodoxy*, January 2019; and Cyril Hovorun, "Autocephaly as a Political Project," *Public Orthodoxy*, November 2018.

[27]Ramet, "Autocephaly and National Identity," 4.

[28]"Constitutional Tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy: Political-Theological Aspects," in *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

## The Phyletism Objection

Any serious engagement with this topic must address the charge of phyletism directly, because it is the first and most forceful objection that an Orthodox interlocutor will raise when confronted with an argument connecting Orthodox theology to the self-determination of peoples.

### *What Phyletism Is*

In 1872, a synod convened by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople condemned "phyletism" (ἐθνοφυλετισμός) as a heresy. The synod was chaired by Patriarch Anthimus VI and included the Patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch, the Archbishop of Cyprus, and representatives of the Church of Greece. Its condemnation was directed at the Bulgarian Exarchate, which had been established by the Ottoman government in 1870 and which claimed jurisdiction over all ethnic Bulgarians within the Ottoman Empire, regardless of their geographic location.[29]

The problem was not that Bulgarian Christians wanted their own church. It was how they proposed to organize it. Under the Exarchate's model, a Bulgarian Christian in Constantinople would answer to a Bulgarian bishop, while a Greek Christian in the same city would answer to a Greek bishop. This produced overlapping jurisdictions based on ethnicity rather than territory, violating the canonical principle that each city and province should have one bishop with jurisdiction over all Christians within that territory, regardless of their ethnic origin. The canon violated was not obscure. It was the foundational principle of territorial episcopacy that had governed the Church since the Council of Nicaea.

The synod condemned this arrangement as "phyletism": the principle of nationality applied to the ecclesiastical domain. The condemnation specified that the Church "should not be confused with the destiny of a single nation or a single race."[30] The Church is universal. It is for all peoples. It cannot be reduced to an instrument of any one people's national aspirations.

### *What Phyletism Is Not*

The condemnation was precise, and its precision matters enormously for the argument of this paper. What the synod condemned was the conflation of church and nation: the idea that the Church's structure should be determined by ethnic identity rather than by geography and conciliar governance. What the synod did not condemn was any of the following:

It did not condemn the organization of the Church according to the *ethnos* as envisioned in Apostolic Canon 34. The Church has always organized itself according to peoples and territories. What the synod condemned was the organization of parallel, overlapping jurisdictions based on ethnicity within the same territory.

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[29]The Council of Constantinople (1872) and its condemnation of phyletism are summarized in the entry on "Phyletism" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[30]Ibid. The language of the condemnation specifies that "the Church should not be confused with the destiny of a single nation or a single race."

It did not condemn the aspiration of a people to have its own autocephalous church. If it had, the subsequent recognition of Greek, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Georgian, and Ukrainian autocephaly would all be incoherent. The pattern of the past two centuries proves that the principle of national churches survived the condemnation of phyletism intact.

It did not condemn the political self-determination of peoples. The synod addressed an ecclesiological question, not a political one. Nothing in the condemnation of phyletism says or implies that a people does not have the right to govern itself politically.

### *Why the Objection Fails*

The argument of this paper is not that the Orthodox Church should reorganize itself to serve the Texan nation. No one is proposing an autocephalous Texan Orthodox Church. The argument is that the Church's own principles of governance, conciliar self-governance, the legitimacy of the *ethnos*, the refusal of centralized imperial authority, the insistence that genuine communion cannot be coerced, resonate with and provide theological grounding for the political principle of self-determination.

This is not phyletism. Phyletism says, "The Church belongs to our people." That is the Sabellian error applied to ecclesiology: it collapses the universal Church into a particular nation. The argument of this paper says, "Our people have the right to govern themselves, and the Church's own structure witnesses to that principle." The former subordinates the Church to the nation. The latter observes that the Church's own life is ordered according to the reality of nations without being subordinate to any one of them.

The distinction runs along the very line that the condemnation of phyletism was designed to protect. The condemnation says: do not reduce the Church to the nation. This paper says: the Church recognizes nations as real and organizes itself accordingly, and that recognition has political implications for the legitimacy of self-determination. These two statements are not in conflict. They are complementary.

The charge of phyletism, when leveled against an argument for political self-determination, is therefore a category error. It confuses a political claim about governance with a theological claim about the nature of the Church. The two are related, as this paper has shown, but they are not identical. And the Orthodox tradition, in both its canonical texts and its historical practice, has always distinguished between them.

## The Case of Texas

The preceding sections have established a theological, canonical, and historical framework. This section applies that framework to a particular case. The application is not arbitrary. Texas provides a test case that illuminates the framework precisely because it challenges assumptions that most Americans, including most American Orthodox Christians, hold without examination.

### *Texas as Ethnos*

Texas is a nation. It is a people bound by shared identity, history, culture, and a deep sense of common belonging that has persisted for nearly two centuries. This is not sentiment or regional pride inflated beyond its significance. It is sociological fact.

Texans share a distinct history that is qualitatively different from that of other American states. Texas declared independence from Mexico on March 2, 1836, fought a revolution to secure that independence, and existed as a sovereign republic for nearly ten years before entering the Union in 1845 by an act of free consent. No other American state has this history. The experience of revolution, of republican sovereignty, and of the deliberate choice to enter (and later to leave and re-enter) the Union has created a historical memory that shapes Texan identity to this day. When Texans refer to the Alamo, to Goliad, to San Jacinto, they are not merely recalling historical events. They are invoking the founding narrative of a people.

Texans share a distinct culture, shaped by the convergence of Southern, Western, Mexican, German, Czech, and frontier traditions into something that belongs to none of those sources individually but is recognizably Texan. They share a fierce regional identity that is recognized not only by Texans themselves but by the entire world. The six flags that have flown over this territory, those of Spain, France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederacy, and the United States, are not merely historical trivia. They are the markers of a people who have lived under multiple governing arrangements and have retained their identity through all of them. The *politeia* has changed six times. The *ethnos* has endured.[31]

Texas also meets the criteria for statehood under the Montevideo Convention. It has a permanent population of over 31 million. It has a defined territory of 268,596 square miles. It has a complete governmental structure with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. It maintains trade offices worldwide and engages in state-level diplomatic initiatives, demonstrating the capacity to conduct international relations.[32]

What Texas lacks is not nationhood. Texans are already a nation. What Texas lacks is not the qualifications for statehood. Texas already meets them. What Texas lacks is sovereignty: the independence to govern itself without subordination to another power.

## *Self-Determination, Not Schism*

The Orthodox framework developed in this paper illuminates the Texas situation with a clarity that secular political arguments alone cannot achieve. Texas is an *ethnos*, a distinct people, currently governed within a *politeia* that it did not create in its present form, that was imposed in its current centralized character by conquest in 1865, and over which it exercises diminishing influence. The federal government of the United States, whatever its original constitutional design as a limited compact of sovereign states, has evolved over a century and a half into a centralized authority that bears more resemblance to the imperial models the Orthodox tradition has consistently resisted than to the conciliar, consensual governance the tradition affirms.

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[31]On Texan identity as a distinct cultural and political phenomenon, see T. R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*, updated ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000); and Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[32]These criteria are drawn from the Montevideo Convention, Article 1. For application to Texas specifically, see Miller, *TEXIT*, chapters 2-3.

Texas independence, understood in this light, is not rebellion. It is not schism. It is not the fracture of a sacred union, because the Union was never sacred. It was a *politeia*, a political arrangement, entered into by consent and subject to the ongoing consent of the peoples who compose it. The withdrawal of that consent by a people who no longer find the arrangement just or functional is not an act of destruction. It is the exercise of the same self-determination that the Orthodox world has recognized every time a people has sought to govern itself.

The question for the Orthodox Christian is not whether Texas has the right to exist as a distinct people. The tradition affirms that right without hesitation. The question is whether that people has the right to govern itself. And on this question, the testimony of the tradition is overwhelming.

The Church is organized as a communion of self-governing bodies because the Church understands that genuine authority is local, consensual, and accountable. Apostolic Canon 34 envisions governance in which no primate acts without the consent of all, and no bishop acts outside his own parish. The principle is subsidiarity: decisions are made at the lowest competent level, by the people closest to the matter at hand. The historical record shows that the Orthodox world has consistently honored the self-determination of peoples by reorganizing its own governance when peoples achieve political independence. This is not a peripheral tradition. It is the dominant pattern of Orthodox ecclesial life in the modern era. The condemnation of phyletism does not obstruct this argument. It reinforces it, by drawing the precise line between the error of subordinating the Church to the nation and the legitimate recognition that peoples are real and their self-governance is consonant with the Church's own principles.

Texas independence asks only that the Church's own principles, conciliarity, subsidiarity, the dignity of the *ethnos*, the refusal of centralized coercion, be acknowledged as having political implications. And those implications point clearly in one direction: toward the right of a people to govern itself, in free communion with its neighbors, without subordination to a distant and unaccountable power.

## Conclusion: Distinction Without Division

The Orthodox Christian faith holds within its theology, its canon law, and its lived history a consistent witness to the principle that peoples are real, that their identities are legitimate, and that their self-governance is not merely permitted but reflects the deepest patterns of how God has ordered human community.

The Holy Trinity is the eternal communion of distinct Persons in one God: distinction without division, unity without absorption. Pentecost is the restoration of communion across the diversity of peoples without erasing that diversity. The Church's own governance is a communion of self-governing bodies, each rooted in a particular people and place, each "self-headed" and yet never alone. The canonical tradition, in Apostolic Canon 34, envisions governance that is conciliar, consensual, and organized according to the reality of nations. The historical record confirms that when peoples have sought political self-determination, the Church has not resisted but has followed, recognizing the legitimacy of their aspiration by reorganizing its own structures accordingly.

The self-determination of peoples is not an innovation foreign to Orthodox Christianity. It is a principle that the Church has practiced within its own life for centuries. Those who claim that Orthodox faith is incompatible with the aspiration of a people to govern itself must contend not merely with a political argument but with the testimony of the Church's own Scripture, its own canons, and its own history.

The people of Texas do not ask the Orthodox Church to subordinate itself to a political project. They ask only what Philip Ludwell III asked in 1738, what the Greeks asked in 1833, what the Serbs and Romanians and Bulgarians and Georgians asked in their turn: to be faithful to the truth, in their own place, among their own people, in communion with the whole Church. Self-governed and in communion.

Distinction without division. This is the witness of the Trinity. This is the promise of Pentecost. This is the practice of the Church. And it is the aspiration of every people who seeks to govern itself in freedom and in faith.