



Emperors and Elections: Reconciling the Orthodox Tradition with Modern Politics

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

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Can the social and political values of Orthodox Christianity play a role in stabilising democratic-republican regimes in the states which comprise the traditional heartland of Orthodoxy? For sixteen centuries, from the time of Constantine to the rise of Lenin, the orthodox world was characterised by a close relationship between imperial throne and holy altar. To what extent, however, is this the only acceptable pattern for defining the relationship between Church and political society? This work seeks to reexamine the traditional understanding of the role of the Emperor in the Orthodox world as well as to provide insight into the Orthodox notion of 'conciliarity' as reflected both in Church and state structures of the historic Orthodox world. Far from being a semi-divine figure, the Emperor's position in the Church developed based on his position as the representative of the laity. The concept of popular election is not a modern or 'Western' idea but very much rooted in the historic experience of local Orthodox congregations and communities. The Fathers of the Church saw human beings as being gifted with free will, reason, and responsibility, capable of self-determination and choice. Not only can Orthodoxy comfortably co-exist with the institutions of modern democracy, Orthodox concepts about the dignity of the individual and the importance of the community can make a valuable contribution to modern political thought. A short discussion on Orthodox attitudes towards economic problems and education is also included.

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