

Gregory the Great and a Post-Imperial Discourse

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Last Spring, quite out of the blue, I stumbled upon an essay by Catherine Keller that was so provocative that I am no longer able to think about the relationship between Christianity and Empire as I once did.¹ It is not that I found her conclusions to be especially persuasive but rather I was transfixed by the profound insight with which she begins. Her first sentence reads: “Christianity suffers from an imperial condition.” A paragraph or so later she observes, “When [Christianity] opened its young mouth to speak, it spoke in the many tongues of empire—nations and languages colonized by Rome, and before that Greece, and before that Babylon, which had first dispersed the Jews into an imperial space.” Keller rightly identifies Christianity’s transitions from its subaltern position, to its adoption of imperial symbols, and then its ascendance to an imperial status of its own. The bulk of her essay is devoted to an argument for the compatibility of postcolonial critique and the Christian theology of love.

I must confess that prior to reading this essay it had never occurred to me just how much Christianity in general, and Orthodox Christianity specifically, has always been entangled with empire. This is such an obvious truth, and yet it is something that I had never considered in any deliberate way. And perhaps it is because it is such an obvious truth that we, as Orthodox, have so failed to engage its implications, let alone attempted to chart any “postcolonial” or better yet “post-imperial” theological vision. When we aren’t calling outright for a return to Byzantine or Tsarist society,² we argue about what elements of those imperial societies are essential to Orthodoxy or what aspects of Byzantine theology are intrinsic to Orthodox thought, but in the process we almost never acknowledge the fact that Orthodox theology has always been articulated in reference to, and in dialogue with, its many

¹ Catherine Keller, “The Love of the Postcolonialism: The Interstices of Empire,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 221-224.

² See Aristotle Papanikolaou’s insightful critique of Harakas and Guroian in “Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Democracy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (2003): 75-98.

imperial *pasts* and *presents*. And while it makes perfect sense that the Christians of the late ancient, medieval, or early modern worlds would have done so (for empire was the context in which they narrated Christian belief), it is no longer the case that an imperialized Christian discourse fully speaks to our particular *presents*. A convocation such as this one, which pursues a self-conscious and self-critical analysis of the twin forces of power and authority within our tradition cannot come at a better time. We simply must confront, whatever the outcome, the reality that Orthodox Christianity has, from the Gospels to the near present, been intrinsically linked to an imperial context and, as a consequence, now suffers a form of post-imperial identity trauma. And it is only after we acknowledge this historical and contextual reality that we can respond to the radically “new” situation in which Orthodox Christianity must now speak to its world.

Christianity’s Imperial Condition

While the greater share of my comments today will focus directly on a rereading of the correspondence between St. Gregory the Great and the Byzantine emperor Maurice, I would like to begin by situating that correspondence not just within its late sixth-century Mediterranean milieu but, more broadly, within the interstitial complexity of Christianity’s imperial identity.

There has been no shortage of scholars eager to consider the imperial context of the biblical texts in recent years. Stephen Moore, perhaps most provocatively, offers a prime example of the varying ways that New Testament texts mimic and replicate fundamental facets of Roman imperial ideology for the purpose of resisting that very ideology.³ Indeed, whether we look at Mark’s naming of the Gerasene demoniac as “Legion,” or see Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on a donkey⁴ as a parody of an imperial triumphal procession, the Biblical texts are infused with imperial symbols and responses. Of course, not all New Testament authors were critical of Roman colonization. Some (Luke foremost among them) appropriated imperial concepts for the purpose of smoothing the passage of the Christian mission into the Roman world. As far as I’m concerned, it does not matter if the New Testament authors provide a consistent response to empire, my point is simply that the

³ Stephen Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006).

⁴ Note, of course that only the Gospels of Matthew and John identify a donkey; Mark and Luke describe a colt.

Roman colonization of the Near East provided such an important and contested reality for the earliest Christian communities that all Christian texts of the New Testament era respond, in one way or another, to their colonial and imperial reality. Put more succinctly, the New Testament authors narrated and re-narrated the Christ event within and against empire.

The same, of course, was true for Christian authors of succeeding generations. St. Ignatius of Antioch, for example, was a political prisoner and however much we might cull from his theological insights, our appraisal of his letters should never lose sight of the colonial and imperial reality that conditioned his forced march to execution. Moving beyond the Apostolic Fathers like Ignatius, it would seem that the writings of the Apologists were more self-conscious of Christianity's subaltern identity. So much so, that one might argue that the actual purpose of their apologies was to defend against the charge that Christianity was a subversive political movement. It was for this reason that Justin, Athenagoras, and others stressed the compatibility of Christianity and empire, arguing that Christians were better citizens than pagans because of their particular faith commitment. Perhaps more significantly, it was in and through this process that the Apologists, and thereby the Christian tradition as a whole, appropriated the symbols of imperial ideology as their own. While it is certainly true that the Constantinian moment was a watershed in the imperial/Christian relationship, it was not nearly as unprecedented as most scholars (especially of the Hauerwas school) would have us believe. Christianity and empire had been intertwined in one way or another from the outset—the legalization of Christianity and its eventual privileged position within the empire was a transition, not a break, from its earliest days.

And I can continue. Shall we look at the Ecumenical Councils? There is simply no way to narrate the circumstances of the councils or the manner in which their verdicts were enforced without the acknowledgement of Christianity's imperial condition. The schism between East and West: should we talk about the Acacian schism, the so-called Photian Schism, the papacy's rebuffing of Byzantium and its turn to the Carolingians? What about 1054, the Second Council of Lyon, or the Council of Florence? I am not arguing that theological concern was irrelevant, but any objective interpreter of these events must acknowledge that these historical moments always occurred within (often against) an imperial context.

Orthodox Christianity's imperial *Sitz im Leben*, of course, did not end with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Under the Ottomans,

Greek, Bulgarian, and Romanian Christians may have transitioned to a new imperial reality, but they remained *within* an imperial reality.⁵ The Russian church of the early modern period, with its “Third Rome,” not only retained but deliberately advanced the links between Russian Christianity and its idiosyncratic idealization of imperial Rome (let us not forget that the word Tsar, derives from Caesar). In short, the majority of Orthodox Christians until the twentieth century had always found themselves, in one way or another, imagining, adopting, negotiating, mimicking, and/or resisting empire.

With this brief jaunt through our history, I have not even engaged the imperial symbols that crowd our hymns and icons, the imperial prototypes for our earliest church structures, or the imitation of imperial procession that dominates our liturgical movement. Empire is such an intrinsic part of our past, an inescapable referent for our texts, liturgies, fathers, and imagination that it seems inconceivable to think of historic Orthodox Christianity without reference to empire. Indeed, what would our tradition be if we stripped all reference to Rome—whether Old, New, or Third? But in the twenty-first century, we no longer have empire (at least not real empire). So what are the implications of this? What relevance can texts steeped in the image and ideology of empire have for today?

My purpose is not to argue that we need to renounce our imperial origins or to argue that everything the Church did during the Roman, Byzantine or Tsarists periods is contaminated by its association with empire and colonialism. I simply believe that we need to think in a far more sophisticated way than we have about what impact empire and imperial ideology have had on our tradition, on the narration of our tradition, on the extent to which the conditions of empire underlie the theological arguments of our fathers, and the extent to which empire continues to dominate our own theological presuppositions. I believe that it is only after this kind of examination that we can aptly employ the resources of the past for the context of the present.

There are, of course, many ways that we might pursue that kind of theological project. As a historian, my own approach is to revisit moments in our collective past and to examine the extent to which the

⁵ The Ottoman experience was, in fact, quite different than the pre-Constantinian Roman one. Not only was Christianity an international religion of far greater political and intellectual power than it had been in Roman times, there remained among the Ottoman Christian’s the memory of a Christian imperial past. The legacy of that memory and the many different ways in which it has been pursued by the successor Orthodox nation-states, is an element crucially related to the complexities of Orthodoxy’s relationship to empire.

considerations of empire and the subversion of empire either directly or indirectly informed the strategies of persuasion embedded in theological discourse and ecclesial correspondence. I am not simply talking about doing the historical work of situating Christianity within its imperial context—such as examining its social and institutional conditions. That project has been done and redone. I am, instead, proposing an examination of the ways in which Christian leaders co-opted the imperial “discourse” and made it their own.⁶ In other words, I am interested in the appropriation, transformation, and subversion of imperial signs and symbols that came to exist within Christian discourse as dynamic factors in and of themselves. A reassessment of this kind will provide, I hope, a greater sense of the way that the sophisticated writers of pre-modern Christianity, especially those of late antiquity, engaged certain elements of their imperial condition while resisting or transforming others in order to achieve specific theological goals. Such insight provides, I believe, one of the only ways in which we can untangle the threads of Christian thought and imperial ideology that are so clearly interwoven into the tapestry of our religious heritage.

My task in the present essay, therefore, is to reconsider the ways in which St. Gregory the Great, the bishop of Rome from 590-604, employed the language of empire, imperial privilege, and imperial obligation, in his correspondence with the Byzantine emperor Maurice. It is my contention that Gregory leaned on and gestured toward imperial sensibilities for the very purpose of undermining imperial sovereignty in ecclesiastical matters so as to re-inscribe the Church (and its leaders) as the “imperial,” that is the “authoritative,” voice in all important matters. By paying closer attention to the specific ways in which Gregory maneuvers within an imperial discourse (through mimicry, appropriation, resistance, and subversion), we gain a fuller appreciation for the intricate dynamics of power and authority that characterize episcopal letter writing at the close of late antiquity.

Gregory’s Correspondence

St. Gregory the Great, often known to Eastern Christians as St. Gregory the Dialogist, is one of the very few Latin saints to have been well respected in the East in the middle ages. He was, I believe, the only late-ancient Latin author to be translated into Greek during his lifetime.

⁶ In part, I have been inspired in this approach by Averil Cameron’s *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of a Christian Discourse* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

In part, this is a testament to the extent to which his pastoral and hagiographic treatises resonated with early Byzantine Christians. Perhaps equally as important, however, is the extent to which the pontiff was well-connected in the Christian East. Gregory, in fact, had spent several years in Constantinople in the early 580s as *apocrisiarius*—that is, papal ambassador to the Eastern emperor. As a consequence, Gregory had many contacts in the Eastern capital, both ecclesiastic and political. In fact, his relationships were so well-placed that Gregory became the godfather for the emperor’s eldest son, Theodosius, when the child was baptized in 584, six years prior to Gregory’s election as pope.

Gregory’s correspondence is the largest surviving collection from the ancient world. More than eight hundred letters have survived from an estimated eight thousand that were produced during his pontificate.⁷ Among his religious correspondents were Leander of Seville, Augustine of Canterbury, John the “Faster” of Constantinople, and John Climacus of Mt. Sinai. His political correspondents included Aethelbert (the Saxon king of Kent), Brunhilde (the Queen of the Franks), Reccared (the Visigothic king of Spain), as well as, of course, Maurice and Phocas, the two Roman (Byzantine) emperors whose reigns overlapped with his own tenure as Pope. In addition to these sovereigns, Gregory wrote to dozens of leading military and political officials in East and West. He also maintained a regular correspondence with the sisters, wives, and children of the various secular rulers of his era. And while I believe that Gregory’s correspondence with each of these figures would be illuminative, I will concentrate my energies today on the eight surviving letters that Gregory wrote to Maurice.⁸

The Byzantine emperor, Maurice, who was born in Cappadocia during the reign of Justinian, began his career in the military and quickly rose through its ranks. He became emperor in 582, succeeding Tiberius II, his father-in-law, and ruled the Christian East for twenty years. What is generally regarded as a successful reign, was brought to an abrupt end in 602, when one of his own generals, Phocas, usurped the throne by murdering Maurice and each of his six sons (including Theodosius, Gregory’s godson). A military man until his end, Maurice successfully negotiated a peace with the Persians, drove the Avars north of the

⁷ This number was proposed by Conrad Leyser at the 2007 meeting of the Oxford Patristics Conference.

⁸ Gregory, Ep. 3.61, 5.30, 5.36, 5.37, 6.16, 6.64, 7.6, and 7.30. All Latin selections are taken from *CCL* 140-140a. An English translation of Gregory’s letters, based upon this critical edition was completed by John Martyn, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, 3 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004). For simplicity, I have relied primarily on Martyn’s translations for all quoted material.

Danube, and established the exarchate of Ravenna in an attempt to halt the advance of the Lombards. In religious matters, Maurice is generally thought to have been tolerant of the Monophysites, despite his support for Chalcedon. It may, in fact, be the case that Gregory's diplomatic strategy for engaging Maurice on ecclesiastical matters was informed by a conviction in Rome that Maurice's interests were never especially theological. Indeed, unlike Justinian who had taken such an active hand in setting imperial theological policy, Maurice seems to have simply wanted the various theological players to get along with one another.

Let's begin with a quick overview of the eight surviving letters Gregory sent to Maurice (none of Maurice's letters to Gregory survive) before moving on to a critical analysis of Gregory's methods. The letters span roughly four years (August of 593 to June of 597) and cover a range of topics.

- Ep. 3.61, Gregory offers an impassioned defense of the monastic life, hoping to convince the emperor that he should rescind a new law forbidding soldiers from leaving the army for monasticism.
- Ep. 5.30, written in March of 595, records the arrival in Rome of money sent by the emperor to offset the spiraling costs of poor relief, brought on by the number of refugees fleeing Lombard invasion.
- Ep. 5.36, dated to June of the same year, is the most critical and defensive of the collection. Gregory had recently negotiated a peace settlement with the Lombards only to have been criticized by the exarch in Ravenna for having done so. Moreover, the pope's actions had recently been characterized by Maurice as teetering between the naïve and the treasonous. In this letter, Gregory defends his actions, his patriotism, and the dignity of the priesthood (which is his way of saying that the emperor should never have questioned his motives).⁹
- Ep. 5.37, which was delivered by the same courier as Ep. 5.36, is one of Gregory's most pronounced critiques of the "Ecumenical" title then being employed by John, patriarch of Constantinople. Gregory's diplomatic efforts in this regard were wide-ranging

⁹ For an overview of the complicated interaction between Gregory and the exarch, see Peter Kaufman, *Church, Book, and Bishop* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 118-22.

but his arguments in this letter to the emperor were unique and, as we will see, leaned heavily on imperial expectations and responsibilities.¹⁰

- Ep. 6.16, dated to September of the same year, is ostensibly nothing more than a notification that an Eastern priest has been exonerated of the charges of heresy. Upon further investigation, however, we learn that the case is actually directly related to the controversy between Gregory and John of Constantinople over the former's jurisdictional claims and the latter's use of the ecumenical title.¹¹
- Ep. 6.64, dated nearly a year later, records Gregory's concern for the re-emergence of Donatism in North Africa.
- Ep. 7.6, from October of 596, congratulates the emperor for the selection of Cyriacus as the man to replace the recently reposed John of Constantinople.
- Ep. 7.30, registers Gregory's disappointment that Cyriacus has, like his predecessor, taken to using the Ecumenical title.

Christianizing the Imperial Discourse

Focusing on empire and imperial identity as hermeneutical keys to understanding Gregory's rhetorical strategy in these letters, we find the pontiff making a series of sophisticated moves. Let's begin with the way in which Gregory recasts what we might anachronistically call the "divine right of kings" and how he employs the features of imperial election as a means to dictate imperial action. In two of these letters (Ep. 3.61 and 7.6), Gregory asserts the divine authorization of Maurice's rule but does so for the explicit purpose of identifying Maurice's responsibilities (responsibilities, of course, that reflect Gregory's own theological concerns). So, for example, in Gregory's first letter to the emperor, the pontiff notes: "The power over all men has been given by Heaven to my Lordship's piety for this reason, that those who seek good

¹⁰ See George Demacopoulos, "Gregory the Great and the Sixth-Century Dispute over the Ecumenical Title," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 300-21 and "Gregory the Great and the Appeal to Petrine Authority," in *Studia Patristica*, ed. J. Baun et al., (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2010), 333-46.

¹¹ Demacopoulos, "Sixth-Century Dispute."

things are given help, that the path to heaven is opened more widely and that an earthly kingdom is in service to the heavenly kingdom.”¹² While it is true that God has placed Maurice in the position of supreme leadership, he has done so for the explicit purpose that Maurice use his authority for heavenly service. Maurice, to live up to his responsibilities, must “open the path more widely” for salvation. What Gregory has in mind, of course, is the law forbidding soldiers from leaving the army for monasticism. A law, in Gregory’s reckoning, that closes the path to salvation.¹³

I would argue that there are at least two levels of re-inscribing imperial authority in this passage. The first, which we can pass over rather quickly, is the subtle elision (perhaps even subversion) of the earthly and heavenly kingdoms. By linking one to the other, Gregory gestures toward Maurice’s authority but simultaneously, and not so subtly, asserts that there is both a more exalted kingdom and a more exalted ruler (i.e., God). Maurice might be the rightful ruler of the earthly kingdom, but his authority here has been established there. And, as a consequence, not only must he rule the “here” in a manner that leads his subjects “there” but he is also under the constant inspection of the supreme ruler, who can revoke Maurice’s earthly rule.

The second level of critique concerns Gregory’s reformulation of imperial obligation. To be sure, the Greco-Roman tradition had a series of sophisticated and ancient traditions of linking responsibility to leadership—these tradition were literary (e.g. Homer), philosophical (e.g. Aristotle), political (e.g. Augustus’ *Res Gestae*), and legal (e.g. *pater familias*). But Gregory shrewdly supplements (one might even say subverts) the traditional concepts of imperial obligation by inserting himself into the decoding of where and how that obligation should be employed. In other words, Maurice is not left to his own devices to interpret the obligations and responsibilities of imperial leadership, nor is he instructed by tradition or Roman law alone, but rather Gregory implies, as an ambassador of God (in other words as the ambassador of the heavenly king), that he is more qualified than Maurice to identify and interpret imperial obligations. Even more to the point, as priest and servant of the heavenly kingdom, Gregory has not only the right but the responsibility to critique a lapse in imperial obligation. The pre-Constantinian Roman tradition had no such framework for imperial critique. In other words, this is a decidedly Christian usurpation of

¹² Ep. 3.61.

¹³ See Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 152.

imperial privilege. Looking, again, at this first letter we see precisely how Gregory justifies such a transformation of imperial authority. Concerning the question of whether soldiers should have the right to avail themselves of the monastic life, he writes:

Behold, Christ answers through me, the lowest of his servants and yours, saying: “from notary I made you commander of the imperial guard, from commander of the guard I made you crown-prince, from crown prince I made you emperor, and not just this, but even I made you the father of emperors. I have entrusted my priests to your hand, and you withdraw your soldiers from my service.”¹⁴

There are multiple plays on imperial right and obligation in this single passage. For example, at issue is an imperial edict banning soldiers from deserting their posts in favor of monasticism. Rather than acknowledge the emperor’s right to legislate policies concerning the military, Gregory not only scrutinizes the theological implications of Maurice’s law but implies that he, Gregory, alone speaks for Christ, the ultimate sovereign, in the matter. That Christ, rather than Maurice, is the ultimate sovereign, the ultimate patron, is dramatically narrated by Gregory through the listing of imperial privileges that Maurice holds in fief to God (i.e. Maurice’s promotions from notary to general, from general to emperor, and from emperor to the father of emperors). But Maurice has not, in turn, sufficiently honored the heavenly king who granted these privileges to him. In other words, Maurice has breached his contract with God, raising the possibility that the continuation of his rule is in jeopardy.

Note, also, the reverse play on the concept of military service. Maurice has forbidden soldiers from entering monasticism because he fears it will deplete the size of his army at a time of military need. But Gregory metaphorically transforms the concept of “service” from a soldier who defends the empire to a monk who is a soldier of God—i.e., a spiritual warrior rather than an imperial one. He later adds, “For it should certainly be considered that every soldier is being prohibited from leaving the secular world now, just at the time when the end of the world is at hand. For behold, there will be no delay, and as the Heavens blaze, the earth blazes and the elements flash and the terrifying judge will appear with angels and archangels.”

¹⁴ Ep. 3.61.

Taken as a whole, we might say that Gregory's Ep. 3.61, engages imperial authority in three distinct ways: (1) it affirms the divine sanction of Maurice's imperial authority; (2) through various means, it subtly undermines and qualifies the extent of Maurice's authority; and (3) it identifies specific legal policies that Maurice must enact if he wishes to remain faithful to God and rule the empire properly. That Gregory is able to interweave such distinct reflections of imperial authority, and do so without ever appearing treasonous, is a testament to the sophistication of his thought and the rhetorical force of his letters. The same three elements are at work, of course, in each of the eight letters.

Building on his subtle redirection of Maurice's imperial authority for ecclesiastical purpose, Gregory also holds out specific warnings and rewards in writing to the emperor, all of which were designed to appeal to and, in a sense, shape his imperial concerns. For example, in at least five of these letters, Gregory, in one way or another, links the emperor's temporal success, and the success of his armies, to his piety or lack thereof. Thus, in Epistle. 5.30, in which Gregory thanks Maurice for his donations to the poor of Rome, the pontiff uses the occasion to assert that the emperor's piety presages a long and prosperous rule. But even in the act of thanking the emperor, Gregory subtly undermines Maurice's temporal and spiritual self-determination by ascribing a personal role in Maurice's future success. In appreciation for Maurice's gift, Gregory notes that: "... all of us with tearful prayers ask that almighty God, who has stung the heart of your Clemency so that you would [send these gifts], should preserve the empire of our Lordship safely, in the constancy of His love and extend your victories in all nations with the help of His majesty." The emperor's temporal successes, the successes of his armies, in Gregory's account, will be successful through a combination of divine grace, imperial piety, and priestly prayer. Imperial success is thus doubly dependent upon pious action and the support of faithful priests.

In most cases, however, the rhetorical structure of the relationship between imperial action and temporal prosperity is inverted. Indeed, of the eight letters, only Ep. 5.30 anticipates future success as a consequence of past imperial piety. In all other cases, Gregory's future expectations are more guarded, more dependent upon future action. Ep. 5.37, the letter in which Gregory beseeches Maurice to intervene in the controversy over the ecumenical title, might be the most illuminative in this regard. Among all of the arguments that Gregory musters to condemn John's supposed arrogance, perhaps the most provocative is the evaluation that imperial armies are failing to halt the barbarian incursions

(coupled with a prediction that they will continue do so), for no other reason than because the Patriarch of Constantinople has insisted on calling himself “Ecumenical Patriarch.” Contained within the letter are the following three excerpts:

For what human virtue, most serene Lordship, what strength of arms would presume to raise its irreligious hands against the glory of your most Christian rule, if the minds of priests burned to beseech their Redeemer as one, on your behalf, and as was proper of your merits? Or what sword of a most ferocious race would proceed violently and so cruelly to destroy the faithful, if the lives of us who are called priests, and are not priests, were not weighed down by most wicked deeds? But while we leave what is appropriate for us and consider what is inappropriate for us, we associate our sins with barbarian forces. Our sin has sharpened the enemy’s swords, which burdens the strength of the republic.

For when you press down [the arrogance of priests] you raise up the republic and when you cut away [arrogant presumption] you drag it from the width and breadth of your kingdom.

I am compelled to exclaim and say: “What Times, What Immorality!”¹⁵ Look, in parts of Europe everything has been handed over to the control of the barbarians, and cities have been destroyed, army camps overwhelmed, provinces depopulated, and no farmer inhabits the land. Worshipers of idols run riot and daily oversee the deaths of the faithful. And, yet, priests, who should have lain on the pavement and in the ashes with tears in their eyes, seek out names for themselves full of vanity, and boast of new and profane titles.

Such direct statements, of course, hardly require a complex analysis. Gregory boldly connects John’s arrogance to recent military defeats. The implication is that the emperor has only himself to blame for his military losses. Also implicit in Gregory’s critique is the promise that Maurice’s military fortunes will change as soon as the emperor takes a stronger hand with the patriarch John.

¹⁵ A reference to Cicero that is an exceptionally rare example of Gregory using a direct quote from a pre-Christian author.

A more complete examination would be able to show that Gregory's political theology is not nearly as Eusebian as it might appear from these few excerpts. Taken as whole, Gregory's corpus generally resists the temptation to link secular fortune to divine favor. This is especially true of his more theoretical and theological writings. But it is certainly a hallmark of Gregory's pastoral technique to appeal to the temporal desires of his political correspondents, whenever he seeks to persuade them to adopt a specific policy. Indeed, when he writes to Aethelbert, King of Kent, Gregory holds out the possibility that the Saxon king will be like a new Constantine and that his armies will always be successful, so long as he hastens to convert his subjects to Christianity.¹⁶

One final observation about the links between imperial action and imperial fortune in Gregory's letters to Maurice is that they, of course, do not focus entirely on temporal or secular fortune. The pontiff also frequently extols the eternal benefits of adjusting imperial policies to reflect theological concerns. Writing in August of 596 about his concern for the reemergence of Donatism in North Africa, Gregory notes: "For that reason, I beseech the Christianity of your Lordship that, for the sake of the salvation of your soul and for the life of your most pious son, you issue a strict order, commanding that those whom you find out to be of this sort should be punished."¹⁷ Here, Gregory is making the case that the emperor must execute his office in a certain way and that if he does not do so according to the precepts of the Church (and those precepts are, of course, here outlined by Gregory himself) not only will the guilty go unpunished but the emperor will put his soul, and the soul of his son (Gregory's godson) in jeopardy.

While there are additional ways that Gregory transforms imperial discourse for ecclesiastical purposes, my final example will concern the ways in which he appropriates the symbols and ideology of imperial stature in order to assert Petrine authority. Although it has long been a historiographic commonplace to speak of the papacy from the fifth-century onward as a synthesis, or balance, between *Christianitas* and *Romanitas*—in other words, a relationship or fusion between Christian and Roman identity, which marks papal rhetoric and self-promotion—I believe that scholars have not yet sufficiently understood the extent to which the "imperial discourse," the discourse of imperial rights and

¹⁶ Gregory, Ep. 11.37. See Demacopoulos, "Gregory the Great and the Pagan Shrines of Kent," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1 (2008): 353-69.

¹⁷ Gregory, Ep. 6.64.

obligations, was appropriated and transformed by the bishops of Rome.¹⁸ And while I have argued in a number of places that Gregory's own use of Petrine privilege and his promotion of papal authority were more nuanced, more sophisticated, and more collegial than most other late-ancient popes, there is no doubt that he too re-inscribed the Petrine narrative through the media of imperial signs and symbols.¹⁹

The most explicit examples of this in the correspondence with Maurice stem from a single letter, Ep. 5.37, the letter containing his critique of Patriarch John. Two examples from this letter should suffice:

It is clear therefore, to all who know the gospel, that the Lord's voice committed the care of the whole Church to the apostle, St. Peter, the prince of the apostles [*apostolorum principi*]. Because it was to him that it was said "Peter do you love me . . ." To him it was said " . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven." Behold, he accepts the keys of the kingdom of Heaven, to him the power of binding and of loosing is attributed, to him the care of the whole Church and of the empire is committed [*cura ei totius ecclesiae et principatus committitur*], and yet he is not called the "universal" apostle [*universalis apostolus*].

It was certainly due to the eminence of St. Peter, the prince of the apostles, that [the ecumenical title] was offered to the Roman pontiff [*Romano pontifici*] through the venerable synod of Chalcedon. But none of [the popes] ever consented to use this title of singularity, in case, while a personal honor was given to one person, universal priests might be deprived of their due honor.

For our purpose, there are at least four things to note about these twin passages. First, whatever Jesus' listeners might have imagined when they heard him use the phrase "kingdom of heaven," it is extremely unlikely that a sixth-century inhabitant of the Roman empire could have conceived of the "kingdom of heaven" without mental recourse to the

¹⁸ The *Christianitas/Romanitas* thesis is perhaps best articulated by Jeffrey Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages: 476-752* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979).

¹⁹ See, especially, Demacopoulos, "Petrine Privilege."

imperial signs and symbols of the empire. However transcendent and ethereal the heavenly kingdom might be in comparison to the earthly one, in the late sixth-century the earthly empire was the only real referent for which Peter received the keys. Second, Gregory's marking of Peter as prince, the Prince of the Apostles, certainly reinforced (rather than distanced) the connection between a heavenly and an earthly kingdom. To be sure, Gregory was not the first pope to advance Peter's status as a *princeps*,²⁰ but there is absolutely no reason to believe that the significance of the term was lost on him. Indeed, *apostolorum principi* simultaneously provided a subtle but authoritative imperial purchase for papal privilege and transferred a key imperial term, *princeps*, to the Church.²¹

Third, the first passage, in particular, offers a sophisticated play on the words *oikoumenikos*, *universalis*, and *totus*. The Greek word *oikoumenikos* is the adjectival form of the noun *oikoumenē*, meaning the "the inhabited earth." The Byzantines, drawing from their Roman predecessors, understood the borders of the empire to constitute the entire inhabited earth. As I've argued at great length elsewhere, there are a myriad of ways to interpret the specific jurisdictional claims embedded in the assertion of the ecumenical title.²² And, as is well known, Gregory rather famously took the Greek word *oikoumenikos* to be the equivalent of the Latin word *universalis* when he publicly challenged John's use of the title in 595. What is significant here, is that in addition to making a series of comparisons between the "universal" Church, Peter's "total" authority, and John's "ecumenical" title, Gregory is also, doubly, asserting the "totality" of Peter's jurisdictional authority throughout the *oikoumeni*—in other words, the empire. Indeed, the passage concludes: "to him the care of the whole Church and of the empire is committed and, yet, he is not called the 'universal' apostle." Thus, we see, once again, how the language and symbols of empire are appropriated and put in the service of a specifically Christian discourse—in this case, it is a

²⁰ The Latin word *princeps* conveys both a princely referent (in a dynastic or imperial sense) and an authoritative referent (as in the source of something). In theological language, *princeps* is often used as the Latin translation of the Greek *arche*.

²¹ The emperor Augustus three times in the *Res gestae* refers to himself as the *princeps*, meaning here the "first citizen" (13; 30.1; 32.3). For more on Augustus' usage of the term, see John Percy Vyvian, Dacre Balsdon, and Miriam T. Griffin, "Princes" in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, rev.2003), 1246-1247 and Ronald Syme *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 313-30. I would like to thank Matthew Briel, a doctoral student at Fordham, who first introduced me to this connection.

²² Demacopoulos, "Sixth-Century Dispute."

discourse of Petrine authority, which Gregory obviously develops to protect what he believes to be traditional papal prerogatives vis-à-vis the Patriarch of Constantinople.

My fourth observation concerns the convenient elision between imperial and papal symbols contained in the simple Latin word *pontifex*, pontiff. In the second excerpt from Ep. 5.37, Gregory asserts that the ecumenical title had once been offered to Pope Leo, the “Roman pontiff,” *Romano pontifici*, because of the “eminence of Peter, prince of the apostles.” In pagan Rome, the *pontifex maximus* was the high priest of the college of pontiffs, the most important person in ancient Roman religion. Beginning with emperor Augustus (d. 14 CE), the office was usurped by the emperor himself—the title was famously included among the imperial privileges in Augustus’ *Res gestae*, and remained among the list of imperial titles, even for Christian emperors, throughout the fourth century. Thus, just as was the case with his assigning the term *princeps* to Peter, Gregory’s ascribing the title *Romano pontifici* to the bishop of Rome rather than the Roman emperor, may have been a contested claim. And while I would argue it would be out of character for Gregory to insult the emperor directly, this choice of words in Gregory’s letter, once again, demonstrates the pope’s nimble use of linguistic subtlety to make the power of the imperial discourse his own.

Conclusion

Let me begin my concluding remarks by noting that my goal in the preceding analysis was not to discern, in any comprehensive way, Gregory’s understanding of empire or his understanding of the relationship between empire and Church.²³ Either of those analyses would require a different method and would require a much wider reading in Gregory’s corpus than his correspondence alone. Rather, I have sought to expose and examine the “discourse of empire” employed

²³ It is important to note that for as much as Gregory wants to inject his own influence into imperial decision making, especially as it relates to the political situation in Italy, he is no way suggesting that the church (whether generally, or his office specifically) is the supreme secular authority. We should not read into Gregory’s statements an anachronistic Papal government model that would develop in the later middle ages. Indeed, Gregory wants and expects the court to be the dominant secular authority. But he hopes that the court will act in a certain way and he dangles the possibility of secular success as a prize for specific model of deference to the church and its leaders. Even the relations with the Lombards should not be interpreted as Gregory rebuffing the emperor with a “this is my sandbox” attitude but was instead implying “you should have respected my objectivity and motivations because I am a priest of God and therefore I have no personal investment other than the salvation of my flock.”

by Gregory as he sought to achieve specific theological, pastoral, and diplomatic goals in his correspondence with Maurice. As we have seen, Gregory carefully supplemented and transformed traditional Roman understandings of imperial rights and obligations in order to advance his concerns. In doing so, he exploited imperial ambition by modeling righteous imperial behavior as the gateway to political and military success. And he appropriated and transformed the signs and symbols of imperial authority to re-inscribe St. Peter as the supreme Christian authority.

In his authoritative biography of Gregory, written ten years ago, Robert Markus insisted that the pontiff viewed himself as a loyal subject of the empire—patriotic, submissive, and thoroughly Roman. While I have always been sympathetic to that position, I am now increasingly convinced that Gregory's actual statements of loyalty, patriotism, and submission require a more careful analysis than Markus affords them. That Gregory availed himself of the rhetoric of empire, in all of its manifestations, should not be misinterpreted as an uncritical endorsement of a Constantinian or Justinianic political order. Nor, more generally, is Gregory's an innocent submission to the concepts of empire or the imperial structures. On the contrary, I hope that the preceding analysis has shown that Gregory may have employed imperial signs and symbols, but in doing so he actually exploited them for alternative purposes. At the same time, this does not mean that Gregory was decidedly anti-empire or un-patriotic; it simply means that his loyalties and statements of loyalty are far more complex than most interpreters have acknowledged.

So where does this leave us? I began this essay by submitting that those of us who are accustomed to prescribing for the present by trolling the past have failed to acknowledge the extent to which early Christian authors did what they did, wrote what they wrote, and thought what they thought, through an imperial register that no longer exists and no longer defines the Christian present. The dramatic change in context does not, I believe, render the insights of the past irrelevant for the present but the change in context does require a more sophisticated engagement with the authorities of the past than we generally render.

I actually think that the fathers were far more alert to their imperial condition than we are aware of its embedded legacy in us. Gregory is a prime example of this. He was ever conscious of his imperial condition, of the reality of empire, and of the distinction between the earthly and the heavenly kingdoms. It was for this reason that he was able to mimic imperial discourse for the purpose of resisting imperial hegemony in religious matters. He was able to operate (and

operate well) within a political system but he never sacrificed his prophetic critique of the political order.²⁴ I'm not so sure that we, so distanced from empire, retain the ability to critique our political past or present.

For example, far too many of us idealize the Byzantine and Tsarist periods, naively, perhaps blindly, assuming that the political structures of those societies were somehow decidedly more conducive to Orthodox culture than our modern options. That, of course, is rubbish. One could argue that the Church suffered more at the hands of the Byzantine emperors than at any other point in history. Athanasius, Basil, John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, John Damascene, Theodore the Studite, Gregory Palamas, and many others all knew just how evil the empire could be. Gregory the Great, of course, also knew it. So, before we go seeking a recreation of some mythical golden-age of Christian politics, I recommend that we pay closer attention to the ways in which the Church fathers actually condemned the imperial authorities and political structures of their day.

A careful reading of Gregory's correspondence with Maurice does not endorse empire for empire's sake, nor does it suggest that political action will enable a temporal fusion of the secular and heavenly kingdoms. And yet, it is critical to remember that Gregory's correspondence also demonstrates that a saintly Christian leader never loses sight of his responsibility to minister to those in political power and to do so in a language that they can understand.

²⁴ The possible exception being that no record survives to indicate that Gregory chastened Phocas for his bloody usurpation of the throne.