THE BYZANTINE RENAISSANCE
AND THE REVIVAL OF
THE EASTERN EMPIRE

While the Islamic world was producing the brilliant civilisation of the ninth and tenth centuries, the Byzantine culture was neither decadent nor stationary. Although for a time there had been a real danger that the Empire might succumb to the victorious forces of the oriental revival, its traditions of discipline and civilised order and the strength of its religious foundation enabled it to survive the crisis. By degrees the Byzantine Empire recovered the position that it had lost in the seventh century, until it became once more the foremost military and economic power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

But it was in many respects a new empire. Both its culture and its political and social organisation had been profoundly affected by the crises through which it had passed. The bureaucratic state founded by Diocletian and Constantine perished in the century that followed Justinian, and much of the older tradition of culture disappeared with it. It was in this period, rather than in the age of the German invasions or at the time of the Turkish conquest, that so much of the intellectual heritage of the ancient world was lost. While the contemporaries of Justinian still retained much of the intellectual traditions of the Alexandrian age, the men of the ninth century possessed little more of the classical literature of Greece, apart from some historians and encyclopaedists, than we have to-day. This was partly due to the loss of Alex-
andria and the Syrian coast towns, such as Gaza, which were the chief centres of classical studies, but the fundamental cause of the change was that orientalisation of Byzantine culture, the development of which has been already described. This process reached its climax in the seventh century, when the eastern and southern provinces were overrun by the Arabs, and the Balkans by the Bulgarians and the Slavs. When the Empire was reconstituted in the eighth century, it was as a predominantly Asiatic state based upon the soldiers and peasants of the Anatolian and Armenian provinces. The old provincial organisation had disappeared and its place was taken by the new military themes, whose commanders combined civil and military authority. Under the Isaurian and Armenian soldier emperors, especially Leo III, 717-740, Constantine V, 740-775, and Leo the Armenian, 813-820, both the military and the oriental elements in Byzantine culture attained complete predominance; the tradition of learning and Hellenism, which had been maintained by the old civil service, almost completely disappeared, and the Church became, as in the West, the chief representative of literary culture.

Moreover, the same tendencies showed themselves also in the religious life of the Empire. The loss of the Eastern provinces had freed the Empire from its long struggle with the Monophysites, and it was now more than ever a unitary Church-State of which the secular and religious aspects were almost indistinguishable. But there still remained a latent opposition between the oriental and Hellenic elements in the religious life of the Empire, and the attempt of the new oriental dynasty to enforce its religious policy on the Byzantine Church led to a bitter and far-reaching strife. To Western historians the Iconoclastic controversy, even more than the Christological heresies which preceded it, has always appeared a meaningless strife about ecclesiastical trifles, and it seems absurd that such a question should have the power to shake Byzantine society to its depths. But underlying the superficial issue there was the same deep-seated opposition between two cultures and two spiritual traditions that we have already described in dealing with the Monophysite movement. Indeed the Dispute of the Images involved even more fundamental principles than the earlier controversies. It had behind it not the explicit doctrines of a theological school, but the vague and formless spirit of an
oriental sectarianism which rejected the whole system of Hellenic dogma.

From very early times there had existed in the oriental borderland a type of sectarian Christianity which had nothing in common with Western orthodoxy. Instead of the Nicene doctrine of the Incarnation, it regarded Christ as a creature who had received the divine adoption by the descent of the Holy Spirit. It rejected the sacramental teaching of the Church and the use of external forms and ceremonies in favour of a purely spiritual and interior religious ideal. Matter was evil, and all reverence paid to material objects was essentially idolatrous. The water of baptism was "mere bathwater," the material cross was an accursed instrument, and the only true Church was invisible and spiritual. All this current of ideas was not derived from Manichaeism, though no doubt the Manichaeans themselves were influenced by it. It was derived from a yet older tradition, represented by Bardanes and some of the Gnostic and Encratite sects, and also by Messalianism.

At a later date it was to appear in the West in the form of the mediaeval Catharist movement, and even to-day it still survives in the strange doctrines of obscure Russian sects, such as the Molokhians, the Dukhobors and the Khlystes.

The link between the earlier and later phases of this great religious movement is to be found in the Paulician heresy, which made its appearance in Byzantine Armenia about the middle of the seventh century and remained for more than two centuries a vigorous and militant power on the Eastern frontiers of the Empire. It was in this region that the new dynasty originated, and it is possible that Leo III himself had been affected by the influence of their ideas. Moreover, his struggle with the Moslems and his attempt to complete the religious unity of the Empire by the forcible conversion of the Jews and the Montanists had made him realise the strength of the oriental aversion to the cult of images which played so large a part in the orthodox worship.

Consequently, in 725, the Emperor inaugurated his iconoclastic policy of ecclesiastical reform and embarked on the struggle with the Church which was to last for more than a century (725-843). On the one side were the Emperor, the army and the eastern provinces, and on the other the monks, the Papacy and the West; indeed, so strong was the hostility of the European provinces to the imperial policy that it led
to disaffection and revolt both in Italy and in Greece. Thus the controversy involved on the one hand a struggle between the oriental and Western elements in Byzantine culture and, on the other, a struggle between the secular and ecclesiastical powers which Professor Diehl has compared to the Investitures controversy of the eleventh century in the West. The religious opposition saw in the Iconoclast movement the same spirit which lay behind the Monophysite heresy—the oriental refusal to admit the dignity of the material creation and its capacity for becoming the vehicle of the Spirit, above all in the Incarnation—the visible manifestation of the Divine Logos in human flesh. For was not Christ, in the words of St. Paul, the image of the invisible Deity? And did not the visible manifestation of the Divine Logos in the flesh involve the sanctification of material things and the visible representation of spiritual realities? This principle lay at the very heart of Hellenic Christianity, and the last forces of Hellenic culture rallied in defence of the holy images. Their leaders were monks, but they were also artists and poets and men of letters; in fact, the champions of the anti-Iconoclastic party such as John of Damascus, Theophanes the historian, George Syncello, Nicephorus the Patriarch, and, above all, Theodore of Studium, were practically the only representatives of Byzantine literature in this dark age.¹

Consequently it is not merely a coincidence that the final triumph of the image-worshippers was followed by a revival of art and scholarship, for their victory was the religious side of a general renaissance of Greek culture and of the waning of the oriental influences which had been in the ascendant for nearly three centuries. Learning was no longer confined to the monasteries, for the civil service recovered its old position as the representative of the classical tradition and of secular learning. The university of Constantinople was re-founded by Bardas in 863 and became the centre of the Hellenic revival. From the ninth to the twelfth centuries a series of great scholars devoted themselves ardently to the study of the classics and the recovery of ancient learning—Phocas and Arethas in the ninth century, Suidas, the encyclopaedist, and Constantine Cephalas, the editor of the Greek Anthology, in the tenth, and Michael Psellus, John Mauropus, John Italus, Christopher of Mytilene, and many more, in the eleventh. This was the culminating point of the Byzantine Renaissance, and its greatest representative, Psellus, has all
the characteristics of the Italian humanists—their romantic cult of antiquity, above all of ancient Athens, their devotion to Homer and Plato, their sedulous imitation of the classical modes of style, and not least, their literary vanity and quarellsomeness. But it was not an age of creative genius. Its typical products were the great lexicons and encyclopaedias, such as the "Library" of Photius, the Lexicon of Suidas and the compilations of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, works which resemble the literary encyclopaedias of China rather than anything in modern literature. Nevertheless, in spite of its lack of originality, it was an age of refined and sophisticated culture, and it is easy to understand the contempt of a scholar like Photius in the ninth century, or a learned princess like Anna Comnena in the twelfth, for the crudity and barbarism of the contemporary civilisation of Western Europe.

The same tendency towards a return to the Hellenic tradition which inspired the renaissance of Byzantine scholarship is no less strongly marked in the region of art. There was a reaction from the abstract symbolism of oriental art towards the naturalistic and representational ideal of the Hellenistic tradition. Both painting and ivory carving show strong traces of classical influence, and the illustrations of such manuscripts as the famous Paris Psalter are purely Hellenistic in style. Still more curious is the tendency shown in some eleventh- and twelfth-century manuscripts to illustrate the writings of the Fathers with scenes from pagan mythology, such as the legend of Artemis and Actaeon, or Zeus and Semele, or the dance of the Curetes. And apart from these instances of the direct imitation of ancient subjects and models, there is no lack of classical inspiration in the art of the new age. Even the religious art of the Church, which since the defeat of the Iconoclasts was dominated by theological ideals and subordinated to a strict liturgical and dogmatic scheme, was not immune from this influence, and the finest mosaics of the period—those of the Church of Daphni, near Eleusis—are thoroughly Hellenic in the symmetry of their composition and their statuesque dignity of attitude and gesture.

In architecture, on the other hand, the influence of the East was still supreme, and the new style of church that remained typical of the later Byzantine development was a cruciform structure with five domes, which may have had its origin in Armenia. But even here we can trace the influence of the Hellenic spirit in that the decoration is no
longer confined to the interior of the building after the oriental fashion, but flows outwards to the portico and the façade, as we see in St. Mark’s at Venice, perhaps the finest remaining example of a Byzantine building of this period. And the fact that so magnificent a specimen of Byzantine art should be found in the West is a proof of the renewed vitality of the imperial culture. In fact there is no other age, not even excluding that of Justinian, in which the influence of Byzantine art was so widely diffused. It reached Europe in many different forms and through many different channels, extending from the Black Sea to Kiev and the interior of Russia, through the Adriatic to Eastern and Northern Italy, and from the Greek monasteries of Calabria to Monte Cassino and Rome.

This renaissance of Byzantine culture was accompanied by a corresponding political revival. The Empire once more turned its face to the West and became a great European power. The Isaurian emperors had already checked the advance of Islam and restored the military power of Byzantium, but the recovery of its European provinces had been prevented by the rise of the Carolingian Empire in the West and by the appearance of a formidable barbarian power in the Balkans. The Bulgarians were, like the Magyars, a people of mixed Finnish and Hun origin, who had formed part of the confederation of Hunnish tribes in South Russia during the fifth and sixth centuries. During the decline of the Empire in the sixth century, they had established themselves as overlords of a subject Slavonic population south of the Danube in the old province of Moesia. The Isaurian Emperors had checked their advance and had planted military colonies of Paulician heretics from Armenia to guard the frontiers. At the beginning of the ninth century, however, Krum, the Khan of the Bulgarians, had taken advantage of Charlemagne’s destruction of the Avar power to found a new empire in its place, which extended from the Black Sea to Belgrade, and from the Danube to Macedonia. Henceforward for two centuries the Bulgarians were the most serious menace which the Empire had to face. Again and again they defeated the Byzantine armies and threatened Constantinople itself. Nevertheless they could not avoid the influence of the higher culture with which they were brought into contact by their conquests, and in 864 Boris, the Tsar of the Bulgarians, accepted the Christian faith.
The foundation of Slavonic Christianity was due to the SS. Cyril and Methodius, "the Apostles of the Slavs," who had devoted themselves to the conversion of Moravia; but in spite of the support of the Papacy, they were unable to overcome the opposition of the Carolingian Church and state, and it was in the Balkans above all in Bulgaria, that their work bore its real fruit. It was here, especially during the reign of the greatest of the Bulgarian rulers, Tsar Simeon, 893-927, that a Slavonic literature was formed by translations from the Greek, and a new Christian Slavonic culture was created which was subsequently transmitted to Russia as well as to the other Balkan peoples. But the new Christian Bulgarian state was not strong enough to maintain itself against the growing power of the Macedonian emperors. Eastern Bulgaria was conquered in 963-72 by Nicephorus Phocas and John Zimisces, and their work was completed by their great successor, Basil, "the Bulgaricide," who extinguished the last remains of Bulgarian independence in 1018 by the annexation of the Western or Macedonian Kingdom.

Thus the Byzantine Empire had once more recovered its old European frontiers which it had lost since the time of Justinian, but this extension of territory brought it again into contact with the warlike peoples across the Danube, who continued to raid the Balkan provinces as they had done in the fifth and sixth centuries. The Magyars, who had taken the place of the Avars in Hungary, were indeed rapidly becoming a settled Christian state, but the nomad Patzinaks who occupied the Russian steppe were a perpetual scourge to the Balkan lands as the Huns had been in the past. The menace of these nomads was, however, lessened by the growth of a new power in their rear in Western Russia. This Russian state owed its origin to the companies of Scandinavian adventurers (Ros) who had settled among the Slavonic tribes and had gained control of the trade route from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Every summer their boats descended the Dnieper from Kiev with cargoes of slaves and furs and wax to the markets of Byzantium or to those of the Khazar kingdom which controlled the oriental trade route from the Volga to the Sea of Azov. Like the western Vikings, they were pirates as well as traders, and throughout the tenth century they made repeated raids on the coasts of the Black Sea and on Constantinople itself. The most formidable of these were the great expeditions of Igor, the prince of Kiev, in 941 and
which were followed by the conclusion of a new treaty and a resumption of friendly relations between the Russians and the Byzantine Empire. Throughout the second half of the tenth century, under the wife of Igor, the Christian Princess Olga, her son, Svyatoslav, and Vladimir the Great (980-1015) the Russian power was advancing at the expense of its neighbours, until it came to replace the Khazar Empire of the Volga as the greatest political and commercial power of the North. The Byzantine Empire succeeded in checking the attempt of Svyatoslav, in 967-71, to conquer Bulgaria and establish his capital south of the Danube, and thenceforward relations between the two powers became steadily closer and more friendly. Finally, in 988, Vladimir, the son of Svyatoslav, made a treaty with the Emperor, Basil II, by which he agreed to receive baptism and to furnish the Empire with a body of 6,000 auxiliary troops, the origin of the famous "Varangian" guard, on condition that he received the hand of Boris' sister Anna in marriage. But it was not until the Russians had brought pressure to bear on the Empire by capturing Cherson, the last survivor of the ancient Greek settlements north of the Black Sea, that Basil fulfilled his part of the treaty. Thus the way was opened for the conversion of the Northern Slavs, and Russia became a part of the Orthodox world.

During the following century Byzantine influence had a profound effect upon Russian society. The bishops and teachers of the new church were all of them Greeks (many of them natives of Cherson), and they brought with them into the north the religious and artistic traditions of the Byzantine Church and the Christian Slavonic script and literature that were to be basic elements in the Russian culture. The churches and monasteries of Kiev with their purely Byzantine frescoes and mosaics bear witness to the strength of this movement in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and it extended its influence not only to the old Russian centres in the north, such as Novgorod and Pskov, but also, in the course of the twelfth century, to the newly-settled lands in the north-east—the region of Suzdal and Moscow that was later to be the centre of Russian national life.

This external expansion of Byzantine influence was the outstanding achievement of the Middle Byzantine period. Unfortunately the spiritual conquest of the Slavonic world was counterbalanced by the decline of Byzantine influence in
the West and by a growing alienation between the Eastern and the Western Churches. The close of the Macedonian period saw the consummation of the schism between the Byzantine Empire and the Papacy. The seeds of this process lie deep in Byzantine history. The real cause of the schism was not the dispute between Michael Cerularius and Leo IX, or even the theological controversy concerning the Procession of the Holy Spirit which had arisen in the time of Photius; it was the growing cultural divergence between East and West. The new Hellenic patriotism of the Byzantine revival caused the ruling classes in the Eastern Empire to regard the Romans and the Franks as mere barbarians, and the gradual emancipation of Rome and the Exarchate from their political dependence on the Empire gave fresh grounds for this attitude. Already, in the eighth century, the Emperor Leo III. had deprived the Papacy of its jurisdiction over the sees of Illyricum and Southern Italy, and had confiscated the patrimony of the Roman Church in the East. Thus the Byzantine Patriarchate became identified with the Church of the Empire, and the rivalry between the Ecumenical Patriarch at Constantinople and the Pope of Old Rome was more sharply defined than ever.

This rivalry was no new thing. It goes back to the very origins of the Byzantine Patriarchate. St. Gregory Nazianzen satirised the patriotic ardour with which the Eastern bishops vindicated the religious superiority of the Orient over the West at Constantinople in 381, and both at that council and at Chalcedon the attempt was made to assimilate the ecclesiastical position of the new Rome to that of the old. Throughout the preceding centuries Rome and Constantinople were constantly divided on dogmatic questions; indeed, from the fourth to the ninth centuries the years in which they were in schism were hardly less than those in which they were in communion with one another.

Nevertheless these schisms themselves contributed to preserve the prestige of Rome in the East, since the defenders of orthodoxy from the days of Athanasius to those of Theodore of Studium regarded the Papacy as the bulwark of their cause against the attempts of the imperial government to enforce its theological ideals on the Church. It was only after the close of the age of theological controversy and the definite establishment of orthodoxy that this bond of union was relaxed, and the divergence of culture and ecclesiastical
usage became more acutely felt. And it was just at this period that Rome lost its political connection with the Byzantine Empire and became closely associated with the rival power of the Franks. The Byzantines were ready to accept the Papacy as the supreme arbiter in matters of faith and the representative of apostolic authority within the imperial church, but they were not prepared to admit the superiority of a foreign and "barbarous" church to the Church of the Empire. The acceptance of Frankish rule in Italy and the coronation of Charles as Roman Emperor were in Byzantine eyes an act of secular schism which found its natural fulfilment in a religious one. And while Rome, in the eighth century, was still almost Byzantine in culture and thought, the Frankish Church already possessed a different tradition. The distinctive Western usages that provoked Byzantine hostility, such as the addition of the Filioque clause to the creed, and the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist, were of Frankish origin and had made their first appearance in the far West in Spain and Britain.

Apart from the question of the Procession of the Holy Spirit, which only by degrees assumed the significance that it was to hold in subsequent controversy, all the matters at issue were points of ritual which to the modern mind appear of infinitesimal importance. But Byzantine religion was so largely bound up with liturgical piety and ritual mysticism that uniformity of rite was of primary importance. While the Western Church was a church of many rites and a single jurisdiction, the unity of the Eastern Church was before all things a unity of rite. Even as early as the seventh century the Council in Trullo had attempted to enforce the observance of its canons on the Western Church, and this claim was never altogether abandoned. Indeed, Michael Cerularius, in 1054, looks back to the Council in Trullo of 692 as marking the beginning of the schism between the Churches.

The Franks on their side were equally uncompromising, and Charlemagne and his bishops adopted a very aggressive attitude towards the Byzantine Church. Rome, on the other hand, occupied an intermediate position between the old Byzantine culture and that of the new Western world, and the Papacy at first attempted to act as a mediator between them; but as Rome was increasingly drawn into the orbit of the Carolingian Empire and its culture, this position became no longer possible.
In the second half of the ninth century the first serious breach occurred when Nicholas I, the forerunner of the great mediaeval popes, came into conflict with Photius, the typical representative of the Byzantine Renaissance, and though the resultant schism was comparatively brief, the restoration of unity was superficial and insecure. It no longer rested on the ideal of spiritual unity, but on the fragile basis of imperial policy. The monastic party in the Eastern Church, who had in the eighth century looked to Rome as their chief support in their struggle for the freedom of the Church against the Caesarpapism of the Iconoclast emperors, could no longer hope for anything from the Papacy of the tenth century, which had become the puppet of local factions or of German emperors.\(^6\) It was now able to rely on its own resources, and Byzantine monasticism flourished anew, not only at Constantinople, at Mount Olympus in Bithynia and at Mount Athos, but in Italy itself, where St. Nilus founded the Basilian monastery of Grotta-ferrata only a few miles from Rome. And if the monastic element no longer preserved its old sympathy for the Papacy, the secular bureaucratic element from which so many of the leaders of the Byzantine Church were drawn\(^6\) was positively hostile. It was only the desire of the emperors to remain in friendly relations with the Papacy for political reasons that preserved the unity of the Church. The decline of the Carolingian Empire had revived Byzantine ambitions in Italy, and ever since the time of Pope John VIII the Papacy had assumed considerable importance in Byzantine diplomacy. Consequently the relations between the Churches fluctuated with the changes of the political situation, and a complete breach between Rome and the East, such as threatened to occur in 1009, was disavowed by the Emperor, who required the support of the Papacy in his plans for the restoration of Byzantine power in Italy.

Under such conditions, however, schism was eventually inevitable, and it was precipitated in 1054 by the action of Cerularius, whose personal prestige and ambition were strong enough to override the wishes of the emperor. Nevertheless, even this breach might not have been final had it not coincided with the rise of the Norman power and the loss of the Byzantine possessions in South Italy. Henceloever the East had to face the growing menace of Western aggression, and the religious controversy between the Byzantine and the
Latin Churches became identified with the cause of Byzantine patriotism and political survival.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, however, no one could have foreseen the fate that was to overtake the Byzantine world. The Eastern Empire had never appeared stronger or more prosperous than in the last years of the Emperor Basil II. It far surpassed Western Europe in wealth and civilization, and the conquest of Bulgaria and the conversion of Russia offered fresh opportunities of cultural expansion. The foundations had been laid for the development of a new Byzantine-Slavonic culture in Eastern Europe which seemed to contain no less promise for the future than the corresponding Roman-Germanic development in the West. Actually, however, the former was prematurely checked and stunted while the latter was destined to give birth to the world-embracing movement of modern Western civilization.

This contrast is due in part to external causes. After the end of the tenth century the culture of Western Europe in spite of its backwardness was free to pursue its own course of development, while that of Eastern Europe was constantly exposed to violent interruptions from without. Within fifty years of the death of Basil II the Byzantine Empire had lost its eastern provinces to the Seljuk Turks, and its communications with Russia were being endangered by the renewed incursions of the Patsinaks and Kuman Tartars from the Northern steppes. In the following century these invasions almost destroyed the promising Christian Russian culture of Kiev, and shifted the centre of gravity of Slavonic Russia to the north-east—the region of Vladimir and Moscow—while a century later these territories also were overwhelmed by the Mongol conquest. And, finally, in the fourteenth century the Ottoman Turks entered Europe, and after putting an end to the short-lived career of mediaeval Serbia, completely destroyed the last remnants of the Byzantine power that had escaped the assaults of the Norman and Angevin rulers of South Italy, and the conquests of French crusaders and the Italian merchant adventurers.

But these external causes, important as they were, are not sufficient to explain the premature arrest and decline of Eastern European culture. The Byzantine culture had preserved the traditions of classical civilization far more completely than the Latin West, but they failed to propagate them or to hand them on to the new peoples. The higher culture remained the
possession of a small and highly-educated class, connected with the court and the capital, and the Slavonic peoples inherited only the religious and artistic elements in Byzantine culture. Consequently, when the end came, the intellectual heritage of Greek thought and letters was taken up not by the daughter cultures of Eastern Europe, but by their old enemies and rivals in the Latin West.

The Byzantine culture faithfully preserved its original tradition, but it was powerless to create new social forms and new cultural ideals. Its spiritual and social life was cast in the fixed mould of the Byzantine church-state and when that fell there was no basis for a new social effort. In the West, on the other hand, no such fixed political framework of culture existed during the early Middle Ages. Society was reduced to its bare elements, and the state was so poor and barbarous that it was incapable of maintaining the higher forms of civilised life. It was to the Church rather than the State that men looked for cultural leadership, and thanks to its spiritual independence the Church possessed a power of social and moral initiative that was lacking in the East. And thus, although civilisation of Western Europe was far lower than that of the Byzantine Empire, it was a dynamic and not a static force, which exerted a transforming influence on the social life of the new peoples. In the East there was one all-embracing organ of culture, the Empire; but in the West every country or almost every region had its own centres of cultural life in the local churches and monasteries, which were not, as in the East, entirely dedicated to asceticism and contemplation, but were also organs of social activity. The Byzantine ideal is typified by the sublime isolation of Mount Athos, a world by itself apart from the common life of men; that of Western Europe by the great Benedictine abbeys which were, like St. Gall, the chief centres of Western culture, or, like Cluny, the source of the new movements that had so profound an influence on mediaeval society.