

THE CONCEPT OF THE THIRD ROME AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

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In the first half of the sixteenth century an obscure Russian monk from Pskov wrote a number of letters in which he spoke about Moscow as the third Rome. The name of the monk was Filofei (Filotheos) and his letters were sent to the Pskov representative of the Moscow grand prince Vassilij III (1479–1533), to Vassilij himself and to Ivan IV the Terrible (1530–1584). In his letters Filofei explained that Rome had deviated from the true faith through the Apollinarian¹ heresy. According to Filofei therefore Rome has been imprisoned by the devil. Constantinople, the second Rome has also fallen. The crucial passage is this:

“I would like to say a few words about the existing Orthodox empire of our most illustrious, exalted ruler. He is the only emperor on all the earth over the Christians, the governor of the holy, divine throne of the holy, ecumenical, apostolic church which in place of the churches of Rome and Constantinople is in the city of Moscow, protected by God, in the holy and glorious Uspenskij Church of the most pure Mother of God. It alone shines over all the earth more radiantly than the sun. For know well, those who love Christ and those who love God, that all Christian empires will perish and give way to the one kingdom of our ruler, in accord with the books of the prophet, which is the Russian empire. For two Romes have fallen, but the third stands, and there will never be a fourth.”²

The idea that Moscow is the third Rome did not come out of blue. Before appearing in the writings of sixteenth century the concept of Rome had already been developed by Russian authors. It had a well defined meaning and it had already a long and complicated history both in Russia and in the wider Christian world. And its appearance had its subsequent implications for Russia and for a wider world as well.

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¹ In the fourth century Apollinarius (310–390) taught that Christ had only the human body. Instead of the human soul there was the Logos. In his letters Filofei connects this doctrine with the Latin custom to use the unleavened bread in the celebration of the Eucharist. **Wil van den Bercken**. Holy Russia and Christian Europe. East and West in the Religious Ideology of Russia. London: SCM Press, 1999, p. 145.

² **Bercken** 1999, p. 146.

I. The Romes in History

So actually what were the other Romes? If there is an idea of the third Rome, then there must be the first Rome and the second Rome, at least on the level of ideas.

First things first. The first Rome was of course the centre of the Mediterranean world about two thousand years ago and as its successor is the capital of modern Italy. Thus Rome is a city. But it is much more than a city. Rome is the capital of a country that is nowadays called Italy. But it is more than a capital. There have been times when it was the city and when it was the capital of the civilised world. There have been and perhaps still are other cities that may pretend to the same or to the similar honorary position. In a way Rome is or at least has been much more. Rome has been more than a geographical or political or economical or cultural reality. It has been more than an empirical fact. As a sign of its non-empirical reality is an old saying: *Roma est omnium patria fuitque*. Perhaps we could say that Rome has left the empirical reality and has become a metaphysical reality. At least it has been so for the people who have been the heirs of the European Classical civilisation.

The fact that Rome is a sort of metaphysical reality does not exclude its historical dimension. It has a number of historical layers. It has strong reminiscences of the capital of the ancient empire. However its greatness was not only grounded on its political might. It was the city of gods. This is well expressed by the Roman poet Virgil (70 BC–19 BC) in his masterpiece the *Aeneid*. The city is founded by the gods. And speaking about the empire and its centre Jupiter promised: *Imperium sine fine dedi*. Thus the Romans believed that the city would never perish. Moreover this belief in the eternity of Rome was grounded in the pagan religion.³ With the pretension to eternity was connected the pretension of Rome to universality. The ideal and the goal of the universal empire was to “supersede the disorderly competition between nations and establish world peace.”⁴ This was the ideal of the *pax romana*⁵. According to the ancient Roman religion this was the aim of the existence of the whole world. And the result should be a sort of eschaton⁶.

³ **Wilhelm Lettenbauer**. *Moskau das dritte Rom. Zur Geschichte einer politischen Theorie*. München: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1961, S. 9.

⁴ **John Meyendorff**. *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia. A Study of Byzantino-Russian Relations in the Fourteenth Century*. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989, p. 11.

⁵ “*Pax romana*” (‘Roman peace’ in Latin) refers to relative peace under Roman administration that lasted throughout the Mediterranean world from the reign of Augustus (27 BC–AD 14) to that of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180).

⁶ Eschatology is an apocalyptic doctrine of the last things, messianic government, the resurrection of dead, and last judgment. Eschaton refers to the last phase of world history.

The emergence of Christianity brought along its own additions and new emphases to the idea of Rome. By nature Christianity is a universalist religion. Therefore Christianity merged well with the old Roman universalism and transformed it. The symbol of these Christian universal intentions of Rome is the office of the bishop of Rome.⁷ In history the empirical city of Rome has fallen from its high position. But the idea of the metaphysical Rome has survived.

At the beginning of the fourth century the emperor Constantine (280–337) founded a second capital of the empire in Byzantium which he renamed Constantinople in 330. The huge Roman Empire cracked under the burden of its enormous size and in the course of time broke up into two. For quite a long period the western part was in lethargy. On the other hand the eastern part was rather alive. Thus the eastern Roman Empire, known also as Byzantium considered itself to be an empire and as the only legitimate heir of its history and tradition. The theologians of Byzantium understood their history as the continuation of the history of the ancient Roman Empire. Indeed, they pretended to even more – the empire existed according to the plan of God. The aim of the Roman, respective Byzantine Empire was to grasp the whole world for the proclamation of Christ. But together with this the aim was to spread the peace and culture. Thus their intentions were also universalist. The people of Byzantium tried to be in every respect like the Romans. Even the name they used in Greek for themselves was *Rhomaioi* – the Romans.

One important factor that influenced the development of their consciousness as Romans was their opposition to the West. This opposition was both political and ecclesial. The rulers of the Western Europe and of the Byzantine Empire pretended to be the Roman emperors⁸. And both churches pretended to be the leaders of the universal church⁹.

There were actually two different understandings of the role of Constantinople and of the relationship between Rome and Constantinople. According to the first, due to the disaster that fell to the first Rome, Constantinople became its heir successor. Constantinople continues to exercise the role and

⁷ According to Lettenbauer these two aspects of universality, the pretension of the universal political might, rooted in the ancient history and the pretension of primacy of the bishop, remained nevertheless unharmonious and separated. **Lettenbauer** 1961, p. 12.

⁸ Thus from the time of Charlemagne (768–814), who was crowned as the first Holy Roman emperor in 800, the title of a Roman emperor was used also in the West.

⁹ Usually the patriarchs of Constantinople pretended to be equal to the patriarchs of Rome. But there were some cases when the patriarch of Constantinople had pretensions to primacy as well, e. g. Photius, who was patriarch of Constantinople during 858–867 and 877–886. Cf. **Lettenbauer** 1961, p. 23.

functions of the first Rome. The Byzantine Roman Empire is actually the old Roman Empire. This is the so-called doctrine of *translatio imperii* (“translation of empire”), according to which it is exactly the same empire. The other and alternative conception is that Constantinople is the second Rome but nevertheless it is the New Rome. The old Rome had fallen and is now extinct. The new one is different from the old one. It is young and full of vitality and is able to fulfil the high mission of the first Rome. The new Rome is qualitatively better than the first one. The last conception was the dominating one in Byzantium.¹⁰

In the second Rome there was a serious attempt to connect more closely the two universalistic traditions that had rather different roots in the first Rome – the imperial and the ecclesial. This was the attempt to harmonise the two authorities, the secular and the ecclesiastical authorities.¹¹ In Byzantium this doctrine was called the doctrine of symphony. In theory the Byzantine Roman Empire was a reflection of the heavenly kingdom of God.¹² In some way the empire was already an eschatological reality on the earth. But in reality it was a utopia.¹³ It became clear with the final destruction of the empire in 1453.

¹⁰ As we shall later observe similar alternatives on the relation between the third and the second Rome were current in Moscow.

¹¹ The classic text that expresses the official version of the Byzantine social idea the Sixth Novella of the emperor Justinian: “There are two greatest gifts which God, in his love for man, has granted from on high: the priesthood and the imperial dignity. The first serves divine things, the second directs and administers human affairs; both, however, proceed from the same origin and adorn the life of mankind. Hence, nothing should be such a source of care to the emperor as the dignity of the priests, since it is for the [imperial] welfare that they constantly implore God. For if the priesthood is in every way free from blame and possesses access to God, and if the emperors administer equitably and judiciously the state entrusted to their care, general harmony will result, and whatever is beneficial will be bestowed upon the human race.” **John Meyendorff**, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1983, p. 213.

¹² Cf. **Alar Laats**, *One Kingdom in two Traditions. An Attempt to Portray the Ideas of the Advent of the Kingdom of God in the Eastern Orthodox and the Lutheran Traditions. – Endzeiterwartungen und Endzeitvorstellungen in den verschiedenen Religionen*. Manfred L. G. Dietrich (ed.), Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001, pp. 125f.

¹³ Cf. **Meyendorff** 1983, p. 216.

2. The Emergence of the Doctrine of the Third Rome

As stated above, in the middle of the sixteenth century the monk Filofei had written about Moscow as the third Rome. However the story of the emergence of this doctrine did not start with him. The story is more complicated. Nor did it end with this monk. The story of the third Rome did not even start with Moscow. There were other places in Russia that had already earlier pretended to this title.

There is a writing with the title “Eulogy of the Pious Grand Prince Boris Aleksandrovič by the humble monk Foma” written in 1453 about the ruler of Tver¹⁴. At that time Tver was the rival of Moscow. According to this writing Tver is the centre of the world. Tver is not explicitly called the third Rome. But its prince Boris¹⁵ is honoured with titles “new Jacob”, “new Joseph”, and “another Moses”. He is compared with the emperors Tiberius, Augustus, Justinian and Theodosius, and given the titles emperor and autocrator¹⁶. And the city of Tver is “the new Israel.” This writing did not say *expressis verbis* that Tver was the third Rome but the thought is not far from the expression.

Another rival of Moscow, Novgorod also had its own pretensions. In 1490 Dimitrij Gerasimov, translator and collaborator of Archbishop Gennadi of Novgorod, has written “The Story of the White Mitre.” Its main theme is that after the fall of Constantinople, Novgorod has become the centre of Orthodoxy. The content is following.¹⁷ When handing over the city of Rome to the pope, the emperor Constantine had given him a white episcopal mitre. After Rome had departed from the true faith the mitre was sent to Constantinople. The patriarch received a vision of the fall of Constantinople and he was commanded to send the mitre to Archbishop Vassilij of Novgorod. There it was put in the Sophia Cathedral as a sign that Novgorod had become the guardian of Christian orthodoxy. Thus, according to this story the centre of the orthodoxy moves from Rome to Constantinople and from Constantinople to Novgorod. Here for the first time the expression “the third Rome” is used.¹⁸

Consequently, the use of this doctrine by the monk Filofei about Moscow was prepared by developments in other parts of Russia. The relatively

¹⁴ **Bercken** 1999, pp. 141f. It is interesting that the prince Boris of Tver was a supporter of the union of the Russian church with Rome.

¹⁵ Prince Boris Aleksandrovich ruled Tver from 1425 until 1461.

¹⁶ “Autocrator” (Gr “self-ruler”) was the regular title of the Byzantine emperors.

¹⁷ **Bercken** 1999, p. 143.

¹⁸ And it was added that “all Christian lands shall come together in the one Russian kingdom for the sake of the true faith.” **Bercken** 1999, p. 144.

frequent occurrence of this kind of expressions in the second half of the fifteenth and in the first half of the sixteenth century in Russia was not an accident. The historical background explains it. There had been a number of historical events that facilitated or even evoked these developments in Russian thinking.

Byzantium had been the paragon for Russia from the time of the baptism of Russia onward. But now in 1453 something highly extraordinary had happened – Constantinople, the whole Byzantium had fallen. Thus, on the one hand the paragon, the ideal was not eternal, was declinable, was not eternally firm, was not ideal. Even more, because of the union of Florence¹⁹, Constantinople, the second Rome was fallacious. This was for Russia of course a shock. On the other hand the fall of Constantinople meant also that its place was vacant and waited for its heir or replacement. And at that time Russia was the first, actually the only pretender. However at that time there still was no country called Russia. There was the principedom of Tver and other principedoms, among them the principedom of Moscow, and there were more or less independent cities like Novgorod and Pskov, but not a kingdom or tsardom of Russia. Therefore there was more than one pretender to the vacant place of Constantinople. We already saw how both Tver and Novgorod had such aspirations. According to Wil van den Bercken:

“The fall of the Orthodox capital of the world, the new Rome, Constantinople, led among the Russians to the notion that they had been called to make good this shame on Christianity, or, as Nestor Iskander says, ‘to annihilate and obliterate this evil and godless Ottoman faith and to renew and strengthen the whole Orthodox and unstained Christian faith.’”²⁰

Although there were various pretenders in Russia, nevertheless as the principality of Moscow became politically most powerful so eventually it remained the only real pretender to the role of heir. The fact, that Moscow had defeated the old archenemy –the Tatars, added weight to the pretension. At the time of Prince Ivan III the Russian sources call their own nation the New Israel. Although the idea of Russia as the new Israel never became so popular or as influential as the idea of the third Rome nevertheless it actually

¹⁹ The patriarch of Constantinople Joseph II, 20 Orthodox metropolitans and the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaeologus participated in the Council of Florence (1438–1439). The participants of the council signed to an agreement of reunion with Rome, which did not bring along any substantial changes until 1596, when with the agreement of Brest-Litovsk (1596) millions of Ukrainian and Belorussian Orthodox Christians united with the Roman Catholic Church.

²⁰ Bercken 1999, p. 139.

never faded away. And even much later Moscow was sometimes called the new Jerusalem.

But there was still another fact that made the pretension of the princes of Moscow more legitimate, or at least made it seem more legitimate. Namely the grand prince of Moscow Ivan III (1462–1505) married princess Zoë Paleologos, the niece of the last Byzantine emperor. This all caused Ivan III to bear the Byzantine title “autocrator” and informally also “emperor.”²¹

3. The Idea of the Third Rome in the Sixteenth Century

At the beginning of our essay we saw that the monk Filofei stated explicitly that Moscow was the third Rome. It was not the only statement of the idea. The same idea was already expressed implicitly in 1512 in the writing, known as “The Russian Chronograph”.²² In the first half of this century there appeared in Russia other writings as well that defended the pretension of Moscow to the position of the religious centre of the world. Sometimes they even asserted that the family of the grand prince of Moscow descended from the emperor of Rome Augustus.²³ In some writings even the Babylonian rulers were seen as the spiritual forefathers of the rulers of Moscow²⁴. Thus in the literary and ideological world of the sixteenth century the idea of the third Rome was “well grounded.”

But the spread of this idea was not limited to the writings of the time. It penetrated the official texts of the state and became the basis of the official ideology of the Moscovite state in the sixteenth century. The first official text we have is the text of the rite of coronation of Ivan IV from the year 1547, the first time in Russian history that the coronation of a Tsar occurred. It is very likely that this coronation text was composed, or at least inspired

²¹ Ibid., p. 141.

²² **Lettenbauer** 1961, p. 51; **J. S. Lurje**. *Literatura vtoroi poloviny XV veka – Istorija russkoi literatury*. D. S. Lichatchev (ed.). Moscow: Prosvetschenie, 1980, pp. 258ff.

²³ **Lettenbauer** 1961, pp. 57, 62; **Alexander Dvorkin**. *Ivan the Terrible as a Religious Type. A Study of the Background, Genesis and Development of the Theocratic Idea of the First Russian Tsar and his Attempts to establish “Free Autocracy” in Russia*. Erlangen: Oikonomia, 1992, pp. 22f., 56; **Bercken** 1999, pp. 147f., **J. S. Lurje**. *Literatura XVI veka. – Istorija russkoi literatury*. D. S. Lichatchev (ed.). Moscow: Prosvetschenie, 1980, pp. 287ff.

²⁴ **Bercken** 1999, p. 148; **Lettenbauer** 1961, p. 57.

by Metropolitan Makary (1482–1564).²⁵ Metropolitan Makary played an important role, generally, in developing and formulating the doctrine of the third Rome. For the Tsar the text of the coronation became the grounds on which he justified his actions. Thus Alexander Dvorkin explains:

“The general policy of Ivan's rule, in the years immediately following, indicates that the coronation provided Russia with its most important source for claiming to be the continuation of the Roman Empire and for establishing the new ecumenical role of the Moscovite State, Church, and Tsar.”²⁶

Thus for Ivan IV the religious concept of the third Rome became an ideology that directed his policy, both in internal affairs and in foreign affairs. He felt himself to be the ruler appointed and sent by God. Whether he succeeded in fulfilling this theocratic ideal is of course another question. In connection with internal affairs Ivan was a real autocrat, an absolute ruler, like the Byzantine emperors. In the sixteenth century Russia was the last Orthodox country. All other Orthodox nations were by that time enslaved by the Moslems. Therefore the grand prince of Moscow was the only free Orthodox ruler. This fact made him the sole defender of the Orthodox faith²⁷. This was not a mere title. A large part of the political biography of Ivan IV is covered by wars against the last Eastern and the eternal Western enemy, the khanate of Kazan²⁸ and the kingdoms of Poland-Lithuania and Sweden.²⁹

But the title of the emperor of the third Rome was useful for Russia for peaceful diplomatic contacts with the European countries. Moscow had no longer to feel inferior to the European political powers. The doctrine of the third Rome raised Ivan IV on an equal footing with the western kings. At least so it seems Ivan IV believed. And this doctrine gave confidence to Moscow in its intercourse with the first Rome.³⁰

²⁵ **Anton V. Kartashev.** *Ocherki po istorii Russkoi Tserkvi*, vol. I. Moscow: Terra, 1993, p. 429.

²⁶ **Dvorkin** 1992, p. 39.

²⁷ The British monarch has the same title (“Defensor of Faith”) even nowadays. On the English coins, there is besides the name of the monarch an abbreviation FD – *Fidei Defensor (Defenstrix)*.

²⁸ Thus according to Dvorkin “He must fight the infidels and deliver the Orthodox from their captivity, which implies warfare with the Tatar kingdoms and eventually with the whole Ottoman Empire in order to liberate the Balkans and Constantinople.” **Dvorkin** 1992, p. 58.

²⁹ **Bercken** 1999, p. 152.

³⁰ **Lettenbauer** 1961, p. 58.

The influence of the doctrine of the third Rome is not limited by the political activity of the principality of Moscow. It had its effects in church affairs as well. If according to the doctrine of the third Rome the state of Moscow had a special politically high status then it would not be surprising if the church, especially the Metropolitan, would also have high pretensions. The Russian church also acknowledged its own high status. In the middle of the sixteenth century there occurred a large-scale canonisation of Russian saints. In this case one of the Russian ecclesial writers explained: "it was needful to prove that although the Russian Church came forth only at the eleventh hour of history, by her diligence she has nevertheless surpassed the workers even of the first hour."³¹ Thus the Russian Church asserted its high status above other churches, including the church of Constantinople³².

There was a patriarch in the first Rome and there was a patriarch in the second Rome. However there was only a Metropolitan in the third Rome. Therefore the Moscovite state and the church within it made attempts to change from a metropolitanate into a patriarchate, in the sixteenth century. The decision about the patriarchate of Moscow had to be made by the other patriarchs and they were not eager to make this decision. This happened only in 1589. Actually the title was obtained by blackmail: the Patriarch of Constantinople had become financially dependent on Russia and at this time the Patriarch of Constantinople got financial support in exchange for the title of patriarch. "This was not only an ecclesiastical but also an ideological victory for Moscow over Constantinople, since the doctrine of the Third Rome is explicitly mentioned in the document."³³ Therefore it was recognised that Russia was the political heir of Byzantium. Later the new position of the Russian Church was canonically approved by all the Eastern patriarchs. However, here, not all the expectations of Moscow were fulfilled. As Moscow had taken over the political position of the Byzantine Empire and the Moscow tsar had become the new Christian emperor there were expectations that the new patriarch would be at least the third patriarch but in 1589 he became only the fifth patriarch after the patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. At least the Tsar of Russia was recognised outside Russia as the guardian of the whole Orthodox world and he was compared with Constantine the Great.³⁴

Now there is the question of whether the Third Rome as the legitimate heir of the Second Rome was its substitute? Rather was the Third Rome

³¹ **Kartashev** 1993, p. 433.

³² Cf. **Bercken** 1999, p. 163. According to the interpretation of Wil van den Bercken now "the Russian Christianity no longer stands on equal terms alongside the rest, but above them." **Bercken** 1999, p. 150.

³³ **Bercken** 1999, p. 159.

³⁴ **Bercken** 1999, p. 160.

higher and more developed than the Second Rome in principle? In the first case Moscow would be in principle on the same level as Constantinople had been before its unfortunate fall. In the second case Moscow would have another quality and it would be something new in comparison with Constantinople. Actually this is not a new question. Similar questions had already appeared in connection with the Second Rome and the dominating answer had been that the Second Rome had much more vitality and it had been a new development in comparison with the old Rome.³⁵ It seems that now in Russia the prevailing answer would be the same – the Third Rome is something much more than the Second Rome had been. It seems that at least most Russians regarded, in the sixteenth century, the Russian customs and traditions to be much higher than the traditions of the Second Rome.³⁶

4. The Content of the Doctrine of the Third Rome

So far we have observed the historical emergence and the appearance of the doctrine in Russia. But, what did the doctrine actually mean? What was its content?

According to the doctrine of the Third Rome there were various aspects that characterised the city. The idea had a long history and therefore its different aspects had different origin.

One constitutive aspect was the so-called symphony that was formulated by Justinian in the sixth century. This idea was included in the decisions of the great council of Russian bishops of 1551, the *Stoglav* (“Council of One Hundred Chapters”). But the idea of the symphony of *sacerdotium* and *imperium* was already spread in the Moscovite society. Thus around 1500 Iosif Volockij (Joseph of Volotsk), Abbot of Volokolamsk, led a monastic movement in the Russian Church³⁷ that argued for a strong link between the church and the state, a political theocracy.³⁸ The first Tsar Ivan the Terrible used this idea as defender of the Orthodox faith. His wars were against

³⁵ Lettenbauer 1961, p. 19.

³⁶ An important factor that caused this attitude was the Union of Florence in 1439. The Russian Church had not accepted this union.

³⁷ The followers of Joseph of Volotsk (1439–1515) preferred religious uniformity in Russia and believed that a close alliance between the church and the state is the best guarantee for it. Thus, in order to achieve religious uniformity, they defended the theory of divine right of kingship and were willing to enlarge the powers of the state in church government.

³⁸ Bercken 1999, p. 151.

“Muslim unbelievers” and “the Catholic enemy of Christianity”. The mission of the Russian Church was directly grounded in the military victories.³⁹ This was an implementation of the concept of symphony, as it was then understood in Russia. But according to modern scholars this was not a real harmony. The partners in the symphony were unequal. The state or the monarch was the real head of the church. Ivan the Terrible “sees the tsardom as a divine commission and himself as head of the church and representative of God on earth.”⁴⁰ In the words of Wil van den Bercken: “The unity between religion and politics and between church and state which took form in sixteenth-century Moscow does not mean that a symphony between secular and ecclesiastical power was achieved.”⁴¹

The other constitutive characteristic of the Third Rome is its supremacy. Moscow as the newest Rome is above other countries. And as the supreme state, Russia is the holy Russia.⁴² But this means that the supremacy was not an achievement of the country itself. The Third Rome was an instrument of God chosen by him for the fulfilment of his aims.

One of the most important characteristics of all of the three Romes was their universality. If the concept of symphony was introduced at the time of the Second Rome then the concept of universality was there from the First Rome onwards. The universality of Rome was connected to the concept of *pax romana*. The goal of Rome was to establish a universal empire, which would supersede the disorderly competition between nations and establish world peace.⁴³ The monk Filofei, one of the masterminds of the doctrine of the Third Rome wrote that “all Christian realms will come to an end and will unite into the one single realm of our sovereign.”⁴⁴

According to the interpretation of John Meyendorff the universalist pretensions of the First and of the Second Rome did not exist in the real politics of Moscow at the time of Ivan IV. He asserts that the aim of the first Russian tsar was to build up a national empire and not the empire of the Romans. Therefore, as he asserts, there was no *translatio imperii*, the tsardom of Moscow at the time of Ivan IV did not pretend to be the Third Rome in reality.⁴⁵

I am not sure that John Meyendorff is entirely correct. It is true that the title of the Moscovite tsar was not the Roman emperor. But as was said he

³⁹ Bercken 1999, p. 152.

⁴⁰ Bercken 1999, p. 154.

⁴¹ Bercken 1999, p. 152.

⁴² Lettenbauer 1961, p. 36.

⁴³ Meyendorff 1989, p. 11.

⁴⁴ John Meyendorff. Rome; Constantinople, Moscow. Historical and Theological Studies. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996, p. 136.

⁴⁵ Meyendorff 1996, p. 136.

was the tsar of all Christian realms, of all Christians. In the same way the Byzantine emperor was emperor “of the Romans, that is of all Christians.”⁴⁶ This means that according to the Byzantine understandings the real Romans at that time⁴⁷ were all Christians. It is important that by the Christians is meant only the Eastern Orthodox Christians who were in communion with the patriarch of Constantinople. Now in the sixteenth century the tsar of Moscovy pretended also to be the emperor of all the Orthodox Christians. How much he was in reality able to exercise his authority over the orthodox Christians is another question. But neither was the Byzantine emperor able in practice to exercise his authority all the time over all the orthodox Christians. Both, the Byzantine and the Russian rulers were in a way universal emperors inside their own world.⁴⁸ And the Russian tsar tried successfully to enlarge his world. At first the so-called gathering of Russian land is actually drawing of the orthodox people under his sovereignty. One after another the Russian principalities and the free cities in Russia were incorporated into the ever-growing body of the Moscovite principality. But its appetite for enlargement was not extinguished by the Orthodox East-Slavonic countries. Ivan IV conquered Kazan and Astrakhan and incorporated their surroundings into his empire. But his appetite reached to west as well. Thus he hoped to incorporate into his tsardom the Baltic countries as well. Although according to the title he did not pretend to be the Roman emperor nevertheless his intention was to be the universal emperor of all Christians. Even more, his intention was to enlarge step by step his world of the Orthodox Christianity.

There is another important aspect of the Third Rome that was not noticeable in the case of Constantinople but that was essential in the case of Moscow. This is the eschatological dimension. Moscow is not only the most important city but it is chosen by God and in a way set apart from other places on the earth. Moscow has a special religious function. It is the Christian centre. It is in some way closer to God. But that is not all. According to Filofei Moscow is the Third Rome and “the third stands, and there will never be a fourth.”⁴⁹ Moscow is the last Rome. Moscow was the centre of history and therefore its fulfilment⁵⁰. This means that Russia had to preserve its rich store of faith in purity in the last phase before the end of the world⁵¹. And this fact puts a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of the Russians⁵². It is

⁴⁶ **Meyendorff** 1996, p. 133.

⁴⁷ This was written at the end of the fourteenth century.

⁴⁸ And at least in theory outside this world there were only barbarians.

⁴⁹ **Bercken** 1999:146.

⁵⁰ **Lettenbauer** 1961:58.

⁵¹ **Bercken** 1999:147.

⁵² Cf. **Dvorkin** 1992: 32.

rather likely that at least the monk Filofei expected a close end of history⁵³. According to Florovsky this idea is rooted in Byzantine theological thinking⁵⁴. The world is approaching its end. The world exists only while Moscow exists. And Moscow exists only whilst it is the centre of the Christian, i. e., of the Orthodox world. If Moscow perishes or ceases to be this centre then it is the end of the world.

Now if the tsardom of Moscow is the eschatological tsardom then its ruler is the eschatological emperor. This eschatological aspect makes him a special figure. From one side he has special functions to play. He has to protect the Christian, i. e., the Orthodox purity of the last Rome. And more – he has to establish its universality. In practice it means that he has to expand the realm of the eschatological empire. On the other side being the eschatological ruler enables [empowers?] the tsar with special qualities and abilities. He must be able to fulfil his obligations. He must be able to preserve the religious purity and must be able to execute the universality of the Third Rome. This is beyond human abilities. Therefore he receives these qualities and abilities from God. They are divine. Thus the eschatological ruler is in a way deified. In this respect nobody in the world is equal to him. Even the head of the church is not like the tsar. This means that he, as the divine ruler of the tsardom, is also the divine ruler of the church. However the result of this self-understanding is the abolishment of the symphony of the church and the secular government. Actually it does not mean the abolition of the concept. In the case of the divine eschatological ruler the church and the state are rather closely connected. They both are under one ruler. So it is more a monophony than the symphony. It is impossible to discern where the church starts and where the state ends i. e., we cannot observe the difference between the two realms.

There was a tendency in Byzantium towards the caesaropapism. But the doctrine of the symphony resisted vehemently against this tendency. In Russia this doctrine was not able to oppose the idea of the eschatological ruler. The eschatological aspect dominated over the idea of symphony. And henceforth the state has always dominated the church.⁵⁵ Although the rulers have never officially pretended to be divine or semi divine beings, nevertheless they have sometimes been treated practically as half-gods. This has even been so in the secularised Russia. In a way even the Communist rulers were holy.

⁵³ **Dmitrij Tschizewskij**. *Das heilige Russland*. Russische Geistesgeschichte I. Hamburg: Rowohl, 1959, S. 102.

⁵⁴ **Georges Florovsky**. *Ways of Russian Theology*. Part one. Balmont: Nordland Publishing Company, 1979, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Actually the basis for the dominance of the state over the church was laid down around 1500 by Iosif Volockij, abbot of Volokolamsk. Cf. **Bercken** 1999:151.

But not only was the ruler of Russia divine and holy. Russia itself was holy as well. Of course, Russian Christianity was above the rest of Christianity. But the holiness of Russia was something more. It was the self-understanding of Russia as elected by God and as having a special task in the divine story within the world. This consciousness of being elected and therefore being the messianic nation has survived even into the secular era.

5. Conclusion

Although the religion-political idea of Moscow as the Third Rome was not used so explicitly after the reign of Ivan the Terrible nevertheless it was not buried in oblivion⁵⁶. One tragic effect of it was Raskol – the Great Schism in the Russian Church. This was the emergence of the so-called Old Believers or Old Ritualists in seventeenth century Russia. The event of the Great Schism was a rather complicated one with many different aspects. But at least one aspect is connected with the idea of the Third Rome. It seems that both parties of the schism – the Old Believers and the official Russian Orthodox Church – grounded their theology on this idea. The issue of controversy was devotion and worship.⁵⁷ Patriarch Nikon (1605–1681) and Tsar Alexis (1629–1676) were inspired by the idea of the Third Rome⁵⁸ and their aim was to restore in the Russian Church the model of Greek devotion. Thus according to their understanding the Third Rome was the successor and the heir of the Second Rome and had therefore to preserve its heritage. To be the Third Rome Moscow had to follow the example of the Second Rome. Their adversaries, the defenders of the Old Russian worship and devotional life were also inspired by the same idea of Moscow as the Third Rome. But according to their understanding the Russian Orthodox Church was above the Greek Orthodox Church, i. e., the Third Rome was qualitatively higher than the Second Rome. Therefore according to their understanding the reforms of the patriarch Nikon were actually the lapse of the official Russian church into the Greek heresy.⁵⁹ This means that the Third Rome had fallen in the same way as the Second Rome. But as the last, the Third Rome had fallen; the end of time must have dawned. According to their understanding,

⁵⁶ The idea had its implications in the art as well. Cf. **David J. Melling**. Third Rome. – The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity. Ken Parry, David J. Melling, Dimitri Brady, Sidney H. Griffith, John F. Healey (eds.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p. 490.

⁵⁷ **Nicolas Zernov**. The Russians and their Church. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994, pp. 91ff.

⁵⁸ **Meyendorff** 1996:144.

⁵⁹ **Bercken** 1999:164.

the Old Believers started to live in the eschatological era and many of them still live in this era.

Thus the Old Believers had given up the doctrine of the Third Rome. But also the official church had to give it up, at least officially. At the council of Moscow in 1667 the Russian Orthodox Church had to submit itself at least theologically and canonically to the Greek Church and had to declare that the literary sources of the idea of the Third Rome were fabrications.⁶⁰

From this time onwards the idea appeared neither officially in the church nor in government statements⁶¹. But it had smouldered and is still smouldering in the Russian sub-consciousness and has occasionally emerged in one or another form, sometimes more and sometimes less veiled. Thus it has demonstrated its existence in the policies of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855) and of Tsar Alexander III (1881–1894). And it has been quite visible under the secularised veil of the communist regime. Had it not been a tragedy for millions of people one could call it a parody of the original religious idea. It had its universalist claims. Its rulers had divine pretensions, especially claims to omniscience and to immortality. There even used to be an attempt to form a sort of symphony between the government that ran the everyday life and the party rulers that were in charge of ideology.⁶²

Thus in this essay we have treated the history of the idea of the Third Rome and its emergence in Moscow. We have introduced its three essential elements – universality, symphony of powers and its eschatological setting. These elements were not in balance. And it is possible that because of this unbalance the idea has been unable to be a stable guideline in Russian history.

The idea has a clear religious origin but does it belong to politics as well? Has it influenced and directed Moscovite political history? Or was it only an ideological garment for some Russian rulers to cover their otherwise naked imperial pretensions? I do not have clear short answers to these questions. It is most likely that the rulers have used this idea as a pretext and this idea, itself, has given rise to the imperial appetite.

⁶⁰ **Bercken** 1999:166.

⁶¹ There is at least one exception. The formula “Moscow is the Third Rome” was trotted out in 1948 at a conference of the Eastern Orthodox Churches in Moscow. This conference was organised on the occasion of the commemoration of five hundred years of autocephaly in the Russian church and at the same time was meant as a Russian counterpart to the World Council of Churches. The notion of the Third Rome was mentioned three times in the speeches, twice by the delegations from Bulgaria and Poland and once by a Russian delegate. **Bercken** 1999:167.

⁶² For Moscow in the 20th century, like for Moscow in the 16th century, the symphony was not stable while the ruler had too strong Messianic claims.

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