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JUSTINIAN AND EASTERN CHRISTENDOM

Report on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1967

JOHN MEYENDORFF

TO devote a Symposium to so central a personality as Justinian invited the risk of falling into banalities, but the specific orientation of the theme toward the East, the importance of recent and quite new studies in this field and, finally, the always useful opportunity given to specialists working in adjacent areas to confront the results of their study made of this Symposium (May 4 to 6) quite a challenging occasion.

As stated by the present author in his introductory lecture ("Justinian, the Empire and the Church"), Justinian's imperial program required political and religious unity of the Roman world from Mesopotamia to Spain. One of the major obstacles was the rejection of the dogma of Chalcedon on the "two natures" of Christ by a vast body of Eastern Christians, while Western Christendom, led by the papacy, was faithful to Chalcedon practically *en bloc*. The Emperor thus faced the impossible task of holding Rome, Constantinople, and the East together religiously. His manner of handling this task—while unsuccessful—is usually considered a pure example of "cesaropapism." However, if cesaropapism was indeed built into the Roman and Hellenistic concept of the State, the Christian faith did not include any element which would force its adherents to concede to the emperor an absolute power to define doctrine. Hence, there occurred in the early Christian world constant doctrinal disputes, which Justinian himself, as he finally recognized, had to solve for their own sake, and not only by imperial decree.

Dr. William S. Thurman's thorough examination of Justinian's legislation on religion ("Justinian as Victor over Heresy") was a necessary follow-up to the general introductory remarks of the chairman. It showed the appalling consequences of the total identification of state legality with religious orthodoxy which Justinian tried to impose, espe-

cially in the case of religious groups less numerous and powerful than the Monophysites.

The other lectures of the Symposium were all devoted to particular issues of Justinian's religious policies in the East. Some of these issues were defined geographically; others dealt with particular problems involving imperial policy in the sixth century. Professor Edward R. Hardy ("Justinian's Egyptian Policy: Ecclesiastical and Civil") analyzed an area of very definite national and social identity, and of major economic importance for the Empire. Justinian's failure to integrate Egypt in the imperial church had lasting and disastrous consequences in the following decades. A parallel lecture by Professor Arthur Vööbus ("Justinian and Christianity in Syria and Mesopotamia") covered the events in the Roman "diocese of the East," with particular stress on the heroic resistance offered by Syrian Monophysites, described in Syriac sources, to imperial administration and an emperor-sponsored Chalcedonian hierarchy. Professor Irfan Shahid's lecture on "Justinian and the Arabs" offered interesting insights into an often neglected area of the Byzantine world where, just before the rise of Islam, Christianity had still a good chance to shape the future of civilization; an area which also played an important role in Justinian's military policy. Quite original Syriac sources for the understanding of Justinian's attitude in Eastern religious affairs were brought forth by Antoine Guillaumont ("Justinien et l'église de Perse"). Since the fifth century, Persia had become the refuge of Nestorian Christians who opposed the imperial religious program on a basis radically opposite to that of the Monophysites, since they accepted the doctrine of the "two natures" but rejected the notion of their "hypostatic union" in Christ. Concern for them shown by the imperial government in

the sixth century gives a new indication of the truly universal dreams of Justinian and may explain at least certain instances where "Nestorian" influences at the court are mentioned by Monophysite authors.

The lecture of Dr. David B. Evans ("Origenism in the Sixth Century: Its Role in the Controversies over Dogma and Spirituality") was of a different character, but of no less interest. On the basis of a quite new interpretation of the writings of Leontius of Byzantium, it provided the possible key for the understanding of the Origenists' involvement in the Christological debates and threw some light upon the possible identity of the "Pseudo-Dionysius."

Due to Professor George H. Forsyth's ill-

ness, his brilliant lecture on "The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: the Church and Fortress of Justinian," was read by Professor Ihor Ševčenko. A case study on a major enterprise of Justinian to secure an imperial presence in the Eastern Mediterranean while also honoring the place where God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, Professor Forsyth's analysis introduced the participants to the final results of his recent studies in the structure and architecture of the Monastery, carried out in the framework of the Princeton-Michigan Project at Sinai.

The Symposium was marked throughout the sessions by lively discussions initiated by participants after each of the lectures.