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The Byzantine Rite The Origins and Reasons of a Neologism

STEFANO PARENTI*

What liturgists, for want of a more comprehensive and neutral term, call “the Byzantine Rite,” is the liturgical system that developed in the Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople and was gradually adopted, in the Middle Ages, by the other Chalcedonian Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. This Byzantine synthesis, by far the most widespread Eastern Christian liturgical heritage, is still used by all the Churches that derive from this Orthodox Pentarchy.¹

The text quoted from the late Robert Taft’s *The Byzantine Rite* discreetly alludes, but without further explanation, to a difficulty felt in some areas of liturgical studies vis-à-vis the definition “Byzantine rite,” a neologism that has been employed for a little more than a century. At the dawn of Western interest in Eastern liturgies during the 16th century, authors referred to the texts as those of “the Greek Church,” the “rite of the Greeks” or the Canon (anaphora) of the Greeks.² The same terminology was also used by Jacques Goar, who in 1646 entitled his monumental compilation

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¹ R.F. TAFT, *The Byzantine Rite. A Short History*, The Liturgical Press, Collegetown (MN) 1992, 16.

² For example: *Liturgia S. Basilii Mag. nuper e tenebris eruta, et in lucem nunc primum edita*. Cum Praefatione Georgij Vuicelij, Maguntiae 1546, [f. 7^v]: “Est haec quidem Missa Ecclesia Graecæ”; I. COCHLAEUS, *Speculum antiquae devotionis circa missam, et omnem alium cultum Dei ...*, Maguntiae 1549, 132: “more Graecorum ritus”. The expression “Canon Graecorum” belongs to Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), cfr. M. JOHNSON, «Recent Thoughts on the Roman Anaphora: Sacrifice in the Canon Missae», *Ecclesia orans* 35 (2018) 215-251: 227.

Eύχολόγιον sive Rituale Graecorum,³ but not by Isaac Habert, who in 1643 would rather emphasize the belonging of the liturgical rite to a Church, giving his work the title *Ἀρχιερατικόν. Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Graecae*.⁴ This was the way theologians of central Europe expressed themselves, but south of the Alps the term “Greek rite” dominated, with both liturgical and ecclesiastical significance. For example, the work *Il Rito Greco in Italia* published in Rome in 1758-1763 by Pietro Pompilio Rodotà⁵ is not really a history of the liturgical rite but of the origins and of the successive ecclesiastical affiliations in which the populations that in the South of Italy followed the “Greek rite” found themselves.⁶

The attribution by Western scholars of the adjective “Greek” to the civil and religious institutions of what is now usually referred to as the Byzantine Empire, whose fate was decided on May 29, 1453, was not exclusive to modern times but dated back to the Middle Ages. As Antony Kaldellis recently pointed out, the option for the adjective “Greek” hid the West’s refusal to recognize the Eastern Empire (Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων), its citizens (Ῥωμαῖοι) and the Ecumenical Patriarchate as fully Romans, considering instead as legitimate bearers of *Romanitas* only the Holy [Frankish-] Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church.⁷

As for the use of the adjective “Byzantine” referring to the history and institutions of the Eastern Roman Empire, Kaldellis clarified that the ini-

³ J. GOAR, *Eύχολόγιον sive Rituale Graecorum ...*, Paris 1647; *Editio secunda expurgata & accuratior...*, Venice 1730 (Graz 1960). R. COULON «Goar Jacques», in *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, VI/2, Paris 1925, 1467-1469 and «Goar Jacques», in *Dictionnaire d’Histoire et de Géographie Ecclesiastique*, XXI, Paris 1986, 355.

⁴ I. HABERT, *Ἀρχιερατικόν. Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Graecae*, Paris 1643; On the author, see L. CEYSSENS, «L’antijanséniste Isaac Habert (1598-1668)», *Bulletin de l’Institut Historique Belge de Rome* 42 (1972) 273-305.

⁵ *Dell’origine, progresso e stato presente del rito greco in Italia osservato dai greci, monaci basiliani e albanesi libri tre scritti da Pietro Pompilio Rodotà*, vol. 1: *Dei Greci*, vol. 2: *Dei Monaci Basiliani*, vol. 3: *Degli Albanesi, chiese greche moderne, e Collegio greco in Roma, coll’indice di tutta l’opera*, Roma, per Giovanni Generoso Salomoni, 1758-1763 [ed. anastatica con] studio introduttivo di V. Peri (Biblioteca degli Albanesi d’Italia 3), Cosenza 1986.

⁶ Such a reduction of the Church to a “rite” is illustrated by the title of Vittorio Peri’s monograph, to whom we refer for any possible further information: V. PERI, *Chiesa romana e «rito greco». G. A. Santoro e la Congregazione dei Greci (1566-1596)* (Testi e ricerche di Scienze religiose 9), Paideia, Brescia 1975.

⁷ A. KALDELLIS, «From “Empire of the Greeks” to “Byzantium”. The Politics of a Modern Paradigm Shift», in *The Invention of Byzantium in Early Modern Europe*, edd. N. Aschenbrenner-J. Ransohoff, Washington DC 2022, 349-367.

tiative was not that of the German Hieronymus Wolf (1516-1580) but of the Greek Laonikos Chalkokondyles († 1464) who used “Byzantine” in function of a possible Hellenic national revival.⁸

The passage in Catholic theological writings from the “Greek rite” to the “Byzantine rite” that took place in the early 20th century was in turn the result of the paradigm shift that occurred in academia as a response to specific political demands in the second half of the 19th century. As Kaldellis, to whom I refer for any further insights, has well pointed out, this is the so-called *Question orientale*, a term used to denote the process of dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the emergence of national States in Greece and the Balkans, and the participation or interests in these events of France, England, and Russia. The possible constitution—more imaginary than real—of a resurgent Empire of the Greeks with Constantinople for capital under the Russian aegis, at a time when Russophobia was rampant in Europe, together with other factors, could have determined the shift from “Greek” to “Byzantine”, as being only apparently semantic.⁹

Back to our topic, to the best of my knowledge, the term “Byzantine Rite” appeared for the first time in the 1896 famous and still useful collection *Liturgies Eastern and Western*,¹⁰ and further in a 1906 article by Raymond Janin on the pages of *Échos d'Orient*, the journal of the Assumptionists founded in 1897 in Kadiköy (ancient Chalcedon), which in the years 1943-1945 would take on the name *Études byzantines* and from 1946 on *Revue des études byzantines*. The journal, based in Paris, is one of the most authoritative publications in the field of Byzantine studies.¹¹ Janin wrote:

Le rite qui domine dans l'empire de Russie, les pays du Bas-Danube, la presqu'île des Balkans et le bassin oriental de la Méditerranée est appelé communément rite grec. C'est en réalité le rite byzantin, tel qu'il s'élabora lentement à Constantinople, du IV^e au X^e siècle, sur un fonds venu d'Antioche par la Cappadoce.

⁸ KALDELLIS, «From “Empire of the Greeks”», 352-354.

⁹ KALDELLIS, «From “Empire of the Greeks”», 357-363.

¹⁰ F.E. BRIGHTMAN, *Liturgies Eastern and Western*, vol. 1: *Eastern Liturgies*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1896, lxxx-c, 308.

¹¹ A. FAILLER, «Le centenaire de l'Institut byzantin des Assomptionnistes», *Revue des Études Byzantines* 53 (1995) 5-40.

Le rite byzantin n'avait d'abord qu'une langue, le grec. Plus tard, on ne sait ni quand ni comment, il pénétra chez les Ibériens du Caucase, mais en prenant la langue du pays, c'est-à-dire le géorgien. Au moyen âge, lorsque les missionnaires byzantins convertirent les peuples du Nord, il fut habillé en slave. Il fut traduit en roumain dans les temps modernes ... D'où le rite byzantino-grec, le rite byzantino-géorgien, le rite byzantino-slave et le rite byzantino-roumain.¹²

From the following year, other contributors to the journal regularly used "rite byzantin",¹³ especially Cyrille Charon, alias Karalevsky and then Korolevsky († 1959),¹⁴ who consecrated its use in an essay on the Liturgy of Chrysostom in the Melkite patriarchates,¹⁵ becoming the most convinced propagator and exegete of the neologism¹⁶ and its adoption in the documents of the Roman Magisterium.

In the same years the term was also adopted in the pages of the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* by the Protestant theologian Ernst von Dobschütz, disciple and successor of Caspar René Gregory.¹⁷ The journal, founded in 1892 in Munich by Karl Krumbacher (1856-1909), since 1900 indicates in the bibliographical section the publications of liturgical topics together with dogmatics as a subsection of theology and since 1992, more properly, as a subsection of "Church and Theology" together with hymnology.¹⁸

¹² R. JANIN, «Les groupements chrétiens en Orient», *Échos d'Orient* 9/61 (1906) 330-337. About Janin see D. GALADZA, «The Assumptionists and the Study of Byzantine Liturgy», in *L'apport des Assomptionnistes français aux études byzantines. Une approche critique*, edd. M.-H. Blanchet-I. A. Tudorie (Archives de l'Orient Chrétien 21), Éditions Peeters, Paris 2017, 233-258.

¹³ H. BOUSTANI, «Réglement général des patriarchats melkites», *Échos d'Orient* 10/67 (1907) 357-362: 359 note 1; TH. KHOURY, «Le Séminaire Saint-Anne, à Jérusalem», *ibid.*, 368-371: 369.

¹⁴ C. CHARON, «La fin du patriarcat de Maximos III Mazloum (1851-1855)», *Échos d'Orient* 10/67 (1907) 239-336: 331.

¹⁵ C. CHARON, «Le rite byzantin et la liturgie chrysostomienne dans les patriarchats melkites (Alexandrie - Antioche - Jérusalem)», in *XPYCOCTOMIKA. Studi e ricerche intorno a S. Giovanni Crisostomo a cura del Comitato per il XV° Centenario della sua morte*, Libreria Pustet, Roma 1908, 473-718: 474: "C'est bien à Byzance que le rite ordinairement quoique très improprement appelé grec s'est développé ...".

¹⁶ C. KOROLEVSKIJ, «Ce qu'il faut entendre par rite byzantin ?», *Stoudion* 1 (1923) 7-9; F. GRIVEC, «Unio, Unionismus, Unitas», *Acta Academiae Velehradensis* 12/3-4 (1934) 119-124.

¹⁷ E. VON DOBSCHÜTZ, «Methodios und die Studiten. Strömungen und Gegenströmungen in der Hagiographie des 9. Jahrhunderts», *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 18 (1909) 41-105: 58 note 5.

¹⁸ Cfr. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 9 (1900) 276 (D. Dogmatik. Liturgik usw.); *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83/2 (1990) (D. Dogmatik. Liturgik); 84-85 (1991-1992), 238 (E. Liturgik

Despite its wide use, the consensus on “Byzantine rite” is not unanimous. The Russian *Orthodox Encyclopedia* (Православная Энциклопедия) has devoted a rather critical entry to it. Summarily paraphrasing Robert Taft, it defines Byzantine rite (византийский обряд) as “a term adopted in modern Western scholarship [which] ... is not quite correct [and] ... cannot be considered an adequate definition of the divine worship (богослужения) of the Orthodox Church”¹⁹. Unlike some Greek authors who question the adjective “Byzantine,” here the dissatisfaction is rather with the term “rite” which would recall Catholic proselytizing in East Central Europe in the first decades of the 20th century.²⁰ This, however, is a problem that may be relevant in the Russian Orthodox Church but not in Russian academic Byzantine studies, because the use of one term rather than another depends on the culture and possibilities of the writer’s language. It so happens that *rite / rito* is fine in French and Italian, it may be fine in English (*rite*) and German (*Ritus*), where it is also possible to employ *Worship* and *Gottesdienst*, respectively, but it may sound unfortunate in Russian.

Once the misunderstanding is cleared up, let us see what “rite” means and the reasons for its use. In liturgical studies rite indicates two entities:

1. Each of the local Christian liturgical traditions formed in the East and in the West, either in force or suppressed: Armenian, Byzantine, Coptic, Hagiopolite, Mozarabic, Roman rite ...
2. The text and performance of a particular celebration: rite of baptism, marriage, dedication of a church, etc.

The focus here is obviously on the first meaning. A rite, a liturgical tradition, is never autonomous, but is the expression of the religious culture proper to a Christian Church. However, beginning with the Christological crises of the fifth century, an interesting phenomenon occurs: the Alexandrian and Antiochian rites are practiced in both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches. The same phenomenon will occur at the end of the sixteenth century with the adhesion to the Roman Catholic Church of portions of local Orthodox Churches in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Middle East. Obviously, the liturgical heritage common

und Hymnographie).

¹⁹ «Византийский Обряд», *Православная Энциклопедия* 8 379-380.

²⁰ C. SIMON, *Pro Russia. The Russicum and Catholic Work for Russia* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 283), Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Roma 2009, 270.

to several Christian Churches separated from each other will meet with its own development or contamination with the liturgical culture of the majority. To be studied objectively and fruitfully, such a complex situation requires the use of non-confessional terminology. Today, the Eucharistic formulary that goes by the name of St. John Chrysostom is used by all the Orthodox Churches, most of the Eastern Catholic Churches and even some Churches of the Reformation. Thus, scientifically it is not possible to speak of an “Orthodox liturgy” or of a single Orthodox liturgy because this adjective is also claimed by other Christian Churches with worship different than that of the Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches.

We now come to the adjective “Byzantine” applied to the liturgical rite. If Byzantinists know that “Byzantine” is a conventional term, historians of Christian worship may know it even better because they employ a good number of such terms in their discipline. *Liturgiewissenschaft*, in fact, calls the rite of the Milanese Church Ambrosian, although Ambrose’s role in its birth and development was very relative. Equally it continues to call Hispano-Mozarabic the rite of the city of Toledo and Gallican a rite now disappeared from Western France but long practiced also in Southern Italy.

According to Robert Taft, “for want of a more comprehensive and neutral term,” Byzantine Rite would remain the preferred option.²¹ Intriguingly, Taft’s reasoning closely follows the arguments of Karl Krumbacher in the editorial in the first issue of the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* in 1892. Krumbacher, in fact, also justifies the use of the term “Byzantine” in the absence of an alternative, although in those same years John Bagnell Bury believed that Byzantium was a bad name given to the Empire of the Romans.²²

It is not this writer’s intention to propose an alternative definition such as, for example, “Eastern Roman Rite,” even in view of others’ failures. I think for example of the book on Romanity (Ρωμηοσύνη) by the Greek theologian Ioannis Rhomanidis (1927-2001)²³ which failed to impose itself outside

²¹ TAFT, *The Byzantine Rite. A Short History*, 16.

²² KALDELLIS, «From “Empire of the Greeks”», 364-365.

²³ I. S. RÖMANIDĒS, *Ρωμηοσύνη, Ρωμανία, Ρουμέλη*, Pournaras, Thessalonike 1975. See also I. S. RÖMANIDĒS, *Franks, Romans, Feudalism, and Doctrine: An Interplay between Theology and Society*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline (Mass.) 1981 and the critical remarks

some Orthodox theological circles. In spite of Rho-manidis, in the faculties of theology in Greece the term “Byzantine liturgical rite” (Βυζαντινός λειτουργικός τύπος) has long been in common use²⁴ and eventually even the Russian *Orthodox Encyclopedia* occasionally admitted its use by authors, regardless the reservations expressed in the above-mentioned article.²⁵

Despite criticism or the impossibility—real or alleged—of finding alternatives, I believe that the use of “Byzantine rite” in liturgical studies is possible and justified for a more immediate reason. The historical-philological study of this liturgical tradition pertains more to Byzantine studies than to theology, as shown, for example, by the research carried out for more than a century now on hymnography. Therefore, in the end, the neologism “Byzantine rite” is not just one option among others but the most scientifically correct one, at least as long as a university discipline called Byzantine studies exists.

by P. KALAITZIDIS, «The Image of the West in Contemporary Greek Theology», in *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, edd. G. Demacopoulos-A. Papanikolaou, Fordham University Press, New York 2013, 142-160, 317-324 (notes).

²⁴ Cfr. bit.ly/408Fy39 [qa.auth.gr, accessed 26-01-23] and bit.ly/403Espu [scholar.uoa.gr, accessed 26-01-23].

²⁵ Cfr. bit.ly/3wCX6a1 [pravenc.ru, accessed 26-01-23].