

## THE STATE AND THE CHURCH IN RUSSIA IN THE EARLY NEW AGE: CUSTOM AND LAW

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### *Abstract*

**Purpose:** The article is devoted to the analysis of the peculiarities of the system of relations that were formed between the Orthodox Church and the authority of the Russian state in the early modern period.

**Methodology:** The authors, based on the most recent research approaches of the characteristics of early modern states, use a number of examples to show the significant role of the church and its hierarchy which had both an effect on the secular authority actions, limited its power and represented the political role of the Russian state and society.

**Result:** The authors point out to the informality, unfounded in any formal legislative acts. This informality allowed the church to respond flexibly to the demands of the moment, but at the same time weakened its position. The authors also point out that that being the only independent Orthodox Church; the Russian church imposed certain limitations on its actions as an independent force of the supreme power, which later served as one of the factors that caused the subordination of the church to the state and its transformation into integral element of the machinery of government.

**Applications:** This research can be used for universities, teachers, and students.

**Novelty/Originality:** In this research, the model of the State and the Church in Russia in the Early New Age: Custom and Law is presented in a comprehensive and complete manner.

**Keywords:** *Early Modern Period, Political Regime, "Composite State", Russian State, Autocracy, Orthodox Church.*

### INTRODUCTION

The period of time between the middle of XV and 40th years of the XVII century is often referred to in the historical literature as the “long XVI century”. This really long century was a time of serious changes in the political, social, economic and cultural-religious life of European society, when the forms of human hostel inherent in the High Middle Ages were gradually supplanted by others, to a greater extent than the previous ones that corresponded to what today is called the early New Age. These changes occurred, as a rule, gradually, in an evolutionary way, slowly germinating through the “old days”, through tradition and custom (however, this evolutionism did not at all exclude short-term leaps, usually associated with violence and destruction of the usual way of life). But it could not be otherwise. The European society of that era, rustic in nature, remained “cold” and extremely conservative. Oriented to the reproduction of the tradition in which it felt quite comfortable, society did not intend to part with the “old” so easily, especially if we take into account that after the brutal crisis of the 2nd half of XIV - 1st half of XV centuries the living conditions have changed for the better in general with the economic and demographic upturn. [Burbank, J. \(2006\)](#)

Pursuing their goals, the authorities could not ignore these sentiments in society. This was due to the fact that during the “long XVI century” (however, long after it), they did not have a significant administrative resource that would allow them, if not ignore at all, then, in any case, not to listen carefully to Vox populi (by which, of course, it is necessary to understand, in relation to this era, first of all, the voice of the “political people”, the elite of society, which had the corresponding influence and power in order to make the authorities listen to themselves). [Burbank, J. \(2006\)](#)

The church (of course, first of all, it's top, the “princes of the church”), a completely traditional and conservative institution, was not at all in favor of rapid and radical transformations that threatened it with the loss of its privileged status won in the Middle Ages. And, since it possessed considerable financial and economic power and, to an even greater degree, ideological influence, which manifested itself primarily in the fact that it was it who continued to dominate in the spiritual sphere of society's life during the “long XVI century”, determining the vector of its development. And the authorities, needing the support of the church, which was capable of acting through the network of parishes, schools, wandering preachers and other similar structures, or assisting or opposing public policy, could not ignore its opinion. As a result, in the early New Age a peculiar symbiosis of church and government was formed, but this symbiosis was different from the interaction that developed between the two branches of government in the middle ages. The authorities in this bundle acted as the lead partner, while the church was the laded one, and the essence of the changing nature of the interaction between the authorities and the church is perfectly characterized by the famous principle “cuius regio eius religio”, which essentially meant that the church “nationalization” process that had begun still in the era of the High Middle Ages, de facto came to an end. The church has become part of the emerging state machine, but part of the integral and important, without which, in a sense, this machine became soulless and meaningless (in the literal sense of the word).

## METHODS

Considering the evolution of the relationship between the state and the church, between secular power and spiritual power, we proceeded from a number of basic ideas. First of all, we abandoned the idea of treating the state of the early New Age as “centralized”. In our opinion, this purely historiographical construct is hopelessly outdated. This obsolescence and archaic nature are primarily related to the fact that historians of former times, comparing the states of the early New Age with its predecessors of the Middle Ages, paid attention primarily to the visible side of the problem, its form, without penetrating deep into the content of backstage happening action. M. Mann proposed to divide two types of power - “despotic” and “infrastructural”, taking as a basis the features of interaction organization between government and society ([Mann, 1984. 180-189](#)). Taking this idea as a basis, we suggest that when considering the peculiarities of the state mechanism's operation in the era of the early New Age, it is assumed that the supreme power appeared before its subjects in two forms. On the one hand, it appears as a declarative power, as it should have been in its own mind, an ideal to strive for. On the other hand, it's like real power, capable of acting and implementing its own plans in practice, in accordance with the specific conditions in which it has to make decisions and implement them. And if in the first case it seeks to show itself with the power of a truly despotic, absolute, acting according to the principle of “L'etat c” est moi”, then in the second case it is forced to conform its desires and aspirations with the most notorious Vox populi and assist or prevent the intentions of the authorities. [Burbank, J. \(2006\)](#)

Another idea is directly connected with this real, “infrastructural” power (on which, in fact, a new approach to the analysis of the essence of early modern states is built). This is the notorious “sinews of power” (J. Brewer) ([Brewer, 1989](#)), the study of which has received increasing attention in recent decades. This “musculature” of power or its “infrastructure”, which is understood primarily as the power frame of the state machine and the drive belts, through which its (o this machine) individual components were launched and synchronized their rotation, is of particular interest, since its study allows forming a more accurate and objective idea of what early-modern states were and were not.

Describing this “musculature” of power, N. Kollmann noted that it included not only “new taxes and bureaucratic institutions to administer territory, collect revenues and mobilize human and material resources”, but also a kind of “superstructure” represented by the corresponding legislative and legitimizing reinforcement represented by “new codifications of the law and new centralized judicial systems”, as well as meeting the requirements of the moment of religious and confessional politics and closely connected with the latest political ideology based on it, having inevitably acquired religious colouring at that time ([Kollmann, 2012. 1-2](#)).

Meanwhile, the creation and development of this infrastructure of power, its “musculature” was not a one-step act, but it took time and a considerable one. While this process was going on, the church continued to play a significant role in the political life of the state and society. On the one hand, as noted by the same N. Kollmann, “in post-Reformation Europe – movements in Catholicism and Protestant denominations to define the faith and discipline members – complemented states’ efforts to consolidate society around state and church” ([Kollmann, 2012. Brewer, 1989](#)). On the other hand, she continued her thought, the church continued to play a significant (if not more, given the role that book printing began to play in shaping public opinion in the early New Age) role in legitimizing power through “the use of ideology and visual symbolism based on dominant religious discourses”. [Brower, D. R., & Lazzarini, E. J. \(1997\)](#)

Naturally, all of this put the church and religious organizations in a special position within the early moderated states, since it depended on them in many ways how legitimate in the eyes of society, the very people would be the power and its actions. And the natural consequence of this was the church's participation in government in a particular form, as indicated, for example, by K. Barki. She stated that “the imperial state does not have complete monopoly of power in the territory under control”, being forced “shares control with a variety of intermediate organizations and with local elites, religious and local governing bodies, and numerous other privileged institutions” ([Barkey, 2008. Filyushkin, 2000](#)). And this remark is true not only in relation to empires, such as the Ottoman Empire but almost to any state of the early New Age.

## RESULTS AND ITS DISCUSSION

All of the above was of immediate importance to early-modern Russia, because in it, like other states of the time, the government gradually “pumped” the notorious “sinews of power”, actively involving the Orthodox Church in this process. According to N. Kollmann, “It was broadcasting its legitimacy through an ideological discourse of autocracy, disseminated in league with the Orthodox Church through imagery, architecture, ritual, proclamations and the formulas of official documents” ([Lipich, 2018](#)). It should be supplemented with a number of important, in our opinion, points showing the significance of the position of the Russian Orthodox Church in various issues of foreign and domestic policy.

First of all, it should be noted that the Russian state was formed as an Orthodox state. And although the Moscow princes of the 2nd half of XV - beginning of XVI century were quite pragmatic about this, using this resource as necessary, but they could not ignore it, as the church itself constantly reminded them of their duty to God, who had given them power and elevated them over the surrounding rulers, pursuing a very definite plan. It was precisely this goal that the “royal” “discourse” developed in the church environment served, imposing significant restrictions on the monarch's power, obliged to meet its requirements if he wanted to receive in return the loyalty of his subjects and their desire to cooperate with him.

The officially declared status of the Russian state as the Orthodox state included the formation of a special relationship to Orthodoxy as a consequence. A. B. Kamensky noted that “Orthodoxy ensured the unity of the Russian people, played a role similar to that played for many centuries by Judaism for the Jews of the diaspora”. And, continuing his thought further, he pointed out that “religious unity was the most important condition and ideological basis for creating a new statehood,” and the role the church played in collecting Russian lands under the authority of Moscow gave it the status of a state institution ([Kamenskij, 1999. 27-28](#)). Naturally, this could not entail consequences significant for the church itself, for the state, and for the society. The church supported the state, entered the role of a kind of core, around which a new political, cultural and, of course, religious identity, the “Russian spirit” lined up (just point out the role played by Patriarch Hermogenes in organizing resistance to the Polish invaders and Russian “thieves” who supported them in the years of the Troubles). [Crews, R. \(2003\)](#)

Obviously, this did not go without a certain influence of the Byzantine tradition, and although it is possible to argue about how great this influence was, there is no doubt that it was. According to G.G. Litavrin “the official state doctrine in Russia, as well as in the empire itself and other “Orthodox” states of the southeast of Europe and the Caucasus, was based on the teachings of the Eastern Christian church... Neophytes could not accept the Byzantine religious doctrine partially or in a modified form. They had to assimilate it entirely” ([Litavrin, 1999. 471](#)).

The most important position of this doctrine was the principle of “symphony”, the cooperation of two authorities, secular and spiritual, and the spiritual power within the framework of this idea was considered as equal to the secular power, moreover, it was even higher than the latter, because spirit dominates inert matter and it is the church that gives meaning to the existence of the state. [Burbank, J. \(2006\)](#)

It is curious, but it seems that the Russian scribes learned the following principle, on which the Byzantine tradition was built in a certain sense: “It is foolish to give up your good and disclose to other peoples the knowledge of being, whom we are proud of and for which we honor the Roman race”. Following this principle, the Russians, following the Byzantines, did not at all strive to share their “knowledge of things” with aliens of different faiths ([Ivanov, 2003. 344](#)), it does not matter whether they were Muslims, Catholics or Protestants. This is the reason for “closeness” of Russian society and the lack of understanding by foreign observers of the peculiarities of the Russian political and social structure since they were not allowed behind the scenes of the Russian political scene. [Brower, D. R., & Lazzarini, E. J. \(1997\)](#)

Let us add to this considerable land and financial resources, which were managed by the hierarchs of the church, and its special status in the society and in the state, it becomes quite natural and understandable. Could a monarchy, in this case, claiming the title of an Orthodox sovereign, violate a custom, though not enshrined in law, but no less effective? Of course, but, because he needed the support of the Orthodox Church. And this need tied his hands because he was forced to reckon with its position on certain issues. For example, Ivan III, the de facto founder of the Russian state, a tough (if not cruel), strong-willed and charismatic ruler, needing to expand the fund of free land plots to distribute estates to his service people did not dare to act and confiscate the necessary land plots from the church like King Henry VIII did a few decades later. Likewise, his successor, Vasily III, did not take such a step, and Ivan IV was only able to somewhat limit the pace of concentration of land ownership in the hands of the church, but not more. And this is despite the fact that, according to S. Herberstein, an imperial diplomat, the Moscow sovereigns were substantially superior to the modern European monarchs by the volume of their power. But, apparently, the Moscow rulers had no other choice, because, after fierce discussions inside the church itself, the supporters of preservation of the real estate of the church prevailed, which, in their opinion, ensured it the ability to fulfill its duties. And the point of view of the Josephite winners was voiced, for example, by the Pskov monk Filofey in his famous message to Basil III about the duties of the Orthodox sovereign and about the Russian state as II Rome ([Sinicyna, 1998. 361-362](#)).

The moral authority of the church, supported by its ideological and material power, also caused its active participation in the “sovereign affair,” which meant issues related to the war, diplomacy, foreign policy, relations with other sovereigns, etc. at that time. Thus, Metropolitan Macarius and his associates (for example, the archbishop of Novgorod Theodosius and the famous proto pop Sylvester, a member of the notorious “Chosen Rada” under Tsar Ivan IV) actively advocated a war with the Tatars, which he considered a real cause for a pious Orthodox king ([Filyushkin, 2000. 327-346](#); [Shaposhnik, 2006. 212-224](#)). And, apparently, it was Makariy being one of the leaders of the “war party” at the Moscow court, which achieved a turn in Russian foreign policy from expansion in the western Lithuanian direction to expansion in the Volga region. We also do not rule out the influence of the Novgorod church party (and the same Macarius and Sylvester came from Novgorod) on the fateful decision of Ivan the Terrible to move their regiments to Livonia and to begin the division of the Livonian inheritance in 1558.

It is worth noting that Metropolitan Macarius generally played an important role in the political life of the Russian state in the 40s - early 60s of the XVI century. He not only actively used the traditional right to petition the sovereign for the disgraced in order to mitigate the punishment imposed on them, but also acted as a poly mentor and teacher of the young sovereign (as was the case during the Moscow riot in June 1547). He also actively participated in foreign policy, speaking repeatedly as an intermediary in relations between the envoys of the Great Lithuanian Prince Sigismund II Augustus with Ivan the Terrible ([Khoroshkevich, 2003. 113-114,158-159](#)). By the way, in this respect, by the way he surpassed his predecessors - the metropolitans Daniel and Joasaph, who played a significant role in Russian political life under Vasily III

and the childhood years of Ivan IV. The same Daniel played an important role in resolving the dynastic crisis caused by the desire of Vasily III to conclude the 2nd marriage with an aim of having a heir, and in eliminating the strategically important border specific Novgorod-Seversky principality).

And since we started talking about the Livonian War of 1558-1583 (which, in our opinion, should still be called a war for the Livonian inheritance, significantly extending its timeframe), it is impossible to forget about the so-called “Zemsky Sobor” of 1566, at which the question of continuing the war with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was decided. The representatives of the Orthodox clergy took an active part in the work of the council and expressed support for the decision to continue the war until Lithuania accepted Russian proposals on truce terms. [Crews, R. \(2003\)](#)

## CONCLUSION

The above examples clearly show that the Russian Orthodox Church occupied significant positions in the political life of the Russian state, and this role was due, on the one hand, to the role it played in shaping the “royal” “discourse” by the strength of its moral authority and spiritual influence legitimizing thereby the supreme power (and limiting its powers and its natural desire to absolutism its powers). On the other hand, its influence rested not only on the spiritual impact on society and on the government itself - this influence was predetermined by the economic and financial power of the church, the largest landowner in the Russian state (we recall that its economy was essentially agrarian and the land was the wealth basis). The church hierarchs easily converted this material welfare into political power, and the supreme power could not fail to take into account the position of the church in solving vital problems in foreign and domestic policy.

At the same time, the influence of the church bore an informal, traditional nature and was reinforced by custom, but not by any “charter of liberties”, which reflected a certain extent the peculiar “unwritten” nature of the Russian society of the late Middle Ages — early New Age. This informality and at the same time “closeness” of Russian society, its desire to withdraw from the close attention of foreigners and Gentiles did not allow the same European observers to take the features of the functioning of a complex system of political relations in the Russian early-modern state (and as a result they adopted official declarations approved, by the way, by the church) at face value. Meanwhile, this was far from reality, in which the sovereign power was rather limited in its powers, and the church played a significant role in this restriction of the emerging Russian autocracy.

At the same time, there was a weak link in the system of relations between the church and the authorities, using which the authorities could eventually subjugate the church. It is the status of the faith defender, which, according to the “royal” discourse, belonged to the sovereign, allowing him to interfere in the affairs of the church if, from the monarch's point of view, the actions of his hierarchs or individual structures threatened Orthodoxy and its canons. Bearing responsibility before God for everything that happens in his state, the Russian Grand Duke, and then the Tsar, had every reason to do so. In addition, the “nationalization” of the church contributed to this - in need of state protection, it was in one way or another forced to make certain, over time, ever-increasing concessions to power. These features of the relationship between the church and the government predetermined the further scenario of events. However, something similar happened in all the early-moderated states of Europe, and Russia was not an exception. [Brower, D. R., & Lazzarini, E. J. \(1997\)](#)

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