Crusades, Colonialism, and the Future Possibility Christian Unity

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Why does interpreting the Fourth Crusade as a colonial encounter usefully recalibrate our understanding of the rapid escalation of Orthodox/Catholic animus that occurred during the thirteenth century and what are the ecumenical implications of this reorientation? Scholars have long since identified the Fourth Crusade as a pivotal moment in the history of Orthodox/Catholic estrangement so, why, one might ask, do we need to view the crusades as colonialism per se in order to chart the history of Orthodox/Catholic estrangement? And why do we need the theoretical resources of postcolonial critique to explain something we already know?

In a recent book, *Colonizing Christianity: Greek and Latin Religious Identity in the Era of the Fourth Crusade* (Fordham, 2019), I argued that the religious polemics, both Greek and Latin, that emerged in the context of the Fourth Crusade should be interpreted as having been produced in a colonial setting and, as such, reveal the political, economic, and cultural uncertainty of communities in conflict; they do not offer theological insight.[1] Given that it was in the context of the Fourth Crusade—and not the so-called Photian Schism of the ninth century, the so-called Great Schism of 1054, or any other period of ecclesiastical controversy—that Greek and Latin apologists developed the most elaborate condemnations of one another, I argued, it behooves historians, theologians, and Church leaders alike to reconsider the conditions that give rise to the most deliberate efforts to forbid Greek and Latin sacramental unity in the Middle Ages and to ask whether those arguments are theologically revealing or whether they simply convey animosity in the guise of theological disputation. This essay begins with a summary of these historical conditions and then develops a more constructive theological argument regarding the ecumenical implications of that historical work.

I began the book by asking the reader to consider with me how treating the Fourth Crusade as a colonial encounter might alter our interpretation of Orthodox/Catholic hostility, which first took its mature form in that context. Four of the

[1] George Demacopoulos, *Colonizing Christianity: Greek and Latin Religious Identity in the Era of the Fourth Crusade* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

book's six chapters examine Western texts that supported the Crusade in one way or another.[2] Rather than pursue a traditional historical account, I interrogated those texts for ways in which they reveal a colonial 'discourse': For example, I asked how these texts authorized the subjugation of Byzantium and subsequent rule over Greek East? I sought to understand the ways in which they presented the 'Greek Christian' as someone so 'other' that his or her standing as a fellow Christian could be ignored. I asked whether and how these texts understood 'religious difference' to provide authorization for colonial violence, settlement, or resource extraction. Similarly, I tried to understand how the vicissitudes of Latin power in Byzantium for the generations after 1204 might have changed the presentation of Greek Christians and then led to new authorizations for violence against them. Finally, I asked how the prolonged exposure to Greek Christianity might have transformed for Western authors the narration of their own identity over time.

I also, of course, examined Eastern Christian texts from the same period and similarly interpreted those texts through the lens of a colonial encounter. Two of my six chapters examined Greek authors writing to other Greek Christians about Latin Christians.[3] Importantly, these chapters also look carefully at the way these authors spoke about other Greek Christians who held favorable views of Latins in order to understand the ways in which the experience of colonial subjugation at the hands of Western armies not only led to new condemnations of Latin Christians but also introduced sharp fractures within the Greek community. I observed that it was in this context that some Greek Christians first began to exclude other Greek Christians from the sacramental community on the basis of their political, economic, or liturgical association with Latin Christians. But I also noted that the effort to impose sacramental restrictions among Greeks was more aspirational than enforceable and that the desire to impose these restrictions was just one of many Greek responses to Latin Christians in Byzantium.

In addition to setting an interpretive gaze upon the Fourth Crusade from the vantage point of a colonial encounter, my book proposes that some of the theoretical insights of the scholarly apparatus known as postcolonial critique illuminate key aspects of this period and, therefore, are also applicable to understanding the broader transformations of Orthodox/Catholic identity formation, which derived from it. For example, following the lead of Edward Said, I argue that Latin Christian statements about Greek Christianity and Greek Christians functioned largely as a construct of the Western Christian imagination.[4] Those statement might offer intriguing insights into a thirteenth-century Western Christian *mentalité* but they do

[2] These include Robert de Clari's first-hand account, Gunther of Pairis' hagiography of 'sacred pillage', the letters of Pope Innocent III, and the *Chronicle of the Morea* (Chapters, 1, 2, 3, and 6 respectively).

[3] Chapter 4 examines the canonical rulings of Demetrios Chomatianos and Chapter 5 analyzes the chronicle of George Akropolites.

[4] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (reprinted New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

not offer a reliable account of who Eastern Christians were, what they thought, or what they did. Also following Said, I explored the connection between colonialism and sexuality, not only in terms of the ways in which Western authors used examples of sexual domination and homoerotic innuendo to narrate their ascendency over Eastern Christians but also with respect to the ways in which multiple authors were forced to deal with the reality of Frankish/Greek marriage and the production of mixed-race children in the wake of the colonization of Byzantium.[5] Indeed, Greek authors especially articulated sharply different responses to the production of hybrid children. This, in fact, offers one of the best examples of the extent to which Frankish settlement in the East produced community-dividing responses between Greek Christians.

In a pair of chapters, I offered extended engagements with some of the more complex insights of postcolonial scholarship in an effort to understand the unique dimensions of the transformations of religious identity in this period. In Chapter Three, I turned to Homi Bhabba's notion of 'ambivalence', which emphasizes an inherent reality/desire split in colonial discourse, to explain the dissonances in papal correspondence, particularly as they relate to the assertions of papal authority vis-à-vis Greek Christians.[6] In Chapter Six, I engaged the postcolonial concept of 'hybridity' to analyze the ways in which Greek terms, customs, and even religious practices were gradually appropriated by the Frankish aristocracy that ruled the Peloponnese.[7] Bhabha's application of 'hybridity' is an especially pertinent analytic framework because it helps us to understand both the slippages and desires that are often encoded within colonial writing, thus revealing the subtle ways in which the colonizing community is itself transformed by the encounter with the colonized.

Perhaps one of the most surprising things that we learn from the texts of this period is that the boundaries between the Greek and Latin sacramental communities were extremely porous in the lead up to 1204, despite the Schism of 1054. In the months before the siege, Frankish soldiers communed in the churches of Constantinople and many of monasteries of Mt. Athos still had Western monks who worshipped alongside their Eastern counterparts. Even after 1204, some areas of Latin colonial activity enjoyed remarkable co-existence and mutual influence—the Frankish controlled Peloponnese offering the best example. Of course, the boundary between the Greek and Latin sacramental communities did begin to harden in the wake of 1204, prompting several calls for the cessation of communion between the two. Nevertheless, the efforts to exclude the Greek or Latin from the sacramental community never reflected a universal position and were most often directed po-

[5] On this score, the work of Robert Young is also significant. See Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[6] See Homi Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817', in *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 145–74.

[7] For a summary of the origins of hybridity in postcolonial critique, see Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), esp. 337–59.

lemically against internal, not external, audiences who failed to see the threat posed by the Christian other.

Why 'Colonialism' Matters

So why does interpreting the Fourth Crusade as a colonial encounter usefully recalibrate our understanding of the rapid escalation of Orthodox/Catholic animus that occurred during the thirteenth century and what are the ecumenical implications of this reorientation? Scholars have long since identified the Fourth Crusade as a pivotal moment in the history of Orthodox/Catholic estrangement so, why, one might ask, do we need to view the crusades as colonialism per se in order to chart the history of Orthodox/Catholic estrangement? And why do we need the theoretical resources of postcolonial critique to explain something we already know?

To answer these questions, I begin with the historian's first principle: context matters. The Fourth Crusade was not simply an episode of medieval warfare, it was not simply an event of political opportunism, nor was it simply an example of conquest and plunder. To be sure, it was all of these things; but from the perspective of Christian history, it was also much more. And it is precisely, this 'more' that we need to interrogate if we wish to interpret adequately the texts that were produced to narrate, justify, and/or condemn actions and responses connecting the Fourth Crusade to religious superiority.

Let us begin, for example, with the fact that siege of Constantinople and the formation of the Latin Empire of Byzantium, which followed from it, completely transformed the way that the papacy and many elite Western churchmen engaged the possibility of Greek/Latin unity. In the wake of 1204, Innocent III and subsequent Popes abandoned all efforts at reconciliation through councils or theological arguments. To their mind the possibility of reunion was no longer a disjointed argument over papal privilege or the legitimacy of the *filioque*. From a Western Christian perspective, from the thirteenth century until the modern era, the pursuit of Christian unity was both understood and pursued through the political and economic subordination of Eastern Christians.

For example, when the initial efforts to force ecclesiastical reunion on papal terms proved unsuccessful in the months after the capture of Constantinople, neither Pope Innocent III nor his successors made any effort to return to pre-1204 mechanisms for Christian reconciliation. Instead, the Roman Church doubled-down on the colonial occupation of Byzantium by calling for more troops and non-military settlers in the East and—critically—by escalating the rhetorical justification for the subjection of Greek Christians to Latin hegemony. It was precisely this colonial context in which we find the first sustained papal accusations that all Greeks are heretics.[8] Thus, by

[8] See Demacopoulos, Chapter 3, 'Innocent's Ambivalence' in *Colonizing Christianity*.

situating the Latin Empire of Byzantium within the context of pre-modern colonialism, we better understand the interplay between the vicissitudes of political power on the one hand and the transformations of religious policy on the other.

Viewing the Fourth Crusade as colonialism does more than help us to understand the link between geopolitical forces and papal policy, it also helps us to understand the recalibration of religious identities. Indeed, the discourse of Latin/Greek difference underwent a profound (if uneven) transformation in the wake of the 1204. Texts like Robert de Clari's *Conquest of Constantinople* or Gunther of Pairis' *History of Constantinople* do more than narrate medieval war and pillage; they employ paradigms of cultural and moral superiority to authorize the conquest, settlement, and resource extraction of Christian Byzantium. Like Western European colonial texts of a later period, these texts encode a variety of 'orientalisms' to make their narratives more enticing, justifiable, and fantastic. And like colonial literature of a later era, they employ sexual conquest and sexual innuendo (including homoerotic taboo) to convey the superiority of Latin power and to fantasize about the conquest of Greek bodies.

By situating these texts within a colonial context, we not only gain a fuller understanding of these dimensions of their narrative, but we also gain a fuller appreciation for the internal slippages, dissonances, and ambivalences that these texts contain. Indeed, it is precisely because of their colonial context that we understand that passages that might otherwise appear as internal contradictions are, in fact, efforts to offer ideological consistency in a context where the very ground of cultural identity is shifting.

I would like to propose, however, that the more important contextual payoff for investigating the Fourth Crusade/Latin Empire as an episode of colonialism concerns the analysis of Greek texts produced in the thirteenth century. It is only when we situate texts like the canonical verdicts of Demetrios Chomatianos or the historical chronicle of George Akropolites within the context of a colonial encounter that we see the profound ways in which these texts not only function as a response to that encounter but evince deep fractures within Greek Christianity as a result of it. Indeed, Chomatianos and Akropolites represent alternative elite voices searching in their own way to narrate what it means to be Byzantine and Christian in the wake of the devastation of the Fourth Crusade. This devastation is not merely an example of medieval warfare, not merely an example of temporary political chaos, but represents a cleavage in the ideological underpinnings of their cultural and theological world-view. The Latin occupation of Byzantium was so destabilizing to the Eastern Christian epistemic outlook that it became virtually impossible for Eastern Christians in the centuries that followed to narrate Christian identity or teaching in a way that did not account for the hegemonic Latin Christian.[9]

[9] For the ways in which these conditions continue to dominate Orthodox discourse in the twenty-first century, see Demacopoulos, '"Traditional Orthodoxy" as a Postcolonial Movement', *Journal of Religion* 97

While historians of Christianity have, for generations, chronicled and analyzed the growing hostility between Greek and Latin Christians in the Middle Ages, there has been no effort to situate or analyze Greek anti-Latin polemic as de-colonial or postcolonial discourse. But doing so not only helps us to contextualize and understand the erosion of East/West Christian unity, it also enables us to interpret with more clarity the corresponding chasm within Byzantine ecclesiastical literature between pro-union/anti-union campaigns. Indeed, by attending to the colonial and de-colonial forces at play, we understand that this inter-ecclesiastical polemic, in fact, maps directly onto the political fracturing of the Greek aristocratic community between those who were and those who were not willing to work within the structures of Latin power in the East.[10] It is only then that we come to understand the profound ways in which the militaristic, political, and economic consequences of the Fourth Crusade directly transformed theological and cultural discourse. In the wake of 1204, the very definition of what it meant to be an Orthodox Christian—to be a member of the sacramental community—was now increasingly defined in terms of one's attitudes toward Latin Christians living in the East. If we want to understand modern Orthodox Christianity, we need to begin with the fact that Orthodox Christians from the thirteenth century to the present have responded in different ways to the question of whether or not the Latin Christian is a Christian. What is more, for many Orthodox Christians, the principle enemy has not been the Latins themselves but other Orthodox Christian who answers this question differently.

One of the most important insights of this study, I believe, is that there was no monolithic Greek Christian view of Latins, nor a single Latin Christian view of Greeks. A French knight like Robert de Clari may have been perfectly happy to authorize the seizure and looting of Constantinople on the basis of Greek treachery and effeminacy, but he had virtually nothing negative to say about the content of Greek theological teaching or practice.[11] This, of course, contrasts sharply with a German monk like Gunther of Pairis, who authorized the looting of religious treasure almost exclusively on the basis of Greek theological error.[12] A figure like Pope Innocent is, perhaps, even more interesting. Even though he repeatedly warned the Crusaders in the months before the siege of the city that they should not interfere in the affairs of the Greeks, precisely because they were fellow Christians, in subsequent years, when the Latin Empire began to falter, the pontiff explicitly called for violence against Greeks and for the expansion of Latin settlement of Byzantium on

(2017): 475–99.

[10] Although she does not connect it to inter-ecclesiastical dispute or to the theoretical resources of post-colonial critique, see Teresa Shawcross's examination of the fracturing of the Greek aristocratic class in the Peloponnese. Shawcross, *The Chronicle of the Morea: Historiography in Crusader Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[11] Robert de Clari, *Conquest of Constantinople* trans. by Edgar Holmes McNeal (New York: Columbia University Press, reprinted 2005).

[12] Gunther of Pairis, *Hystoria Constantinopolitana* trans. by Afred Andrea (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

the basis of Greek heresy. Indeed, Innocent was the first pope to extend the blanket remission of sins for Crusaders to non-soldiers who would be willing to move to the East as colonists.[13]

Clearly, it is not just the Greeks who held radically opposing views of the proximate religious other—Latin attitudes towards Greeks during could be just as mixed. And it is precisely because these attitudes are so mixed that we should understand anti-Greek invectives like those contained in Gunther and Innocent as both evincing internal Latin debates and constituting a sharp ideological position in those debates. Indeed, much of the religious polemic in the wake of the Fourth Crusade was directed at internal audiences (Latin to Latin; Greek to Greek) as a means of justifying broader ecclesiological and cultural interactions/restrictions between Greek and Latin Christians.

The Ecumenical Implications

Upon closer inspection, we discover that the erection of a sacramental boundary between Greeks and Latins in the wake of 1204 had little to do with theology. There was no new theological insight; there was no new rejection of a prior orthodoxy. There is very little that is theologically innovative about any of the sources that seek to exclude Greek or Latin from the sacraments. In fact, none of the theologically polemical authors in the era of the Fourth Crusade offers any fresh theological criticism in their condemnations of the religious other that had not been articulated by previous polemicists. Even Pope Innocent, whose accusations of theological error grew more hostile over time, simply appropriates anti-Greek invectives that pre-date him. In short, the hardening of the religious boundary between Greeks and Latins between the Orthodox and the Catholics that occurred in some circles in the wake of the Latin conquest of Byzantium was the result of a colonial encounter rather than the result of new ecclesiastical factionalism.

Like other colonial encounters, the trauma for Greek Christians was not merely one of political or economic loss but, more importantly, in the rupture of ideological assumptions. After 1204, elite Greek Christians could no longer define what it meant to be a Christian, or even a loyal Byzantine, without some recourse to a hegemonic Latin Church. Eastern Christian theology had not changed, nor had its Western counter-part. But the political, economic, and cultural conditions in Byzantium had changed radically and in ways that profoundly reshaped how Eastern Christians understood what it meant to be a Christian. While they may not have responded to this new situation with a single voice, there is no doubt that they were all forced to respond. And the discourse of Orthodox Christian theology has been profoundly transformed ever since.

[13] Innocent, *Register* 8.70.

For the Christian who cares about the cause of Orthodox/Catholic unity, there is much in the preceding discussion that is depressing. But I would like to propose three reasons why I believe that a careful examination of the Greek/Latin encounter of the thirteenth century might actually offer some cause for ecumenical hope. First, as we have just reviewed, Greek and Latin Christians were not nearly as divided prior to 1204 as is generally assumed. Indeed, it is clear that antagonism between the Roman and Constantinopolitan sees—even centuries of smoldering polemical accusations—had not prevented sacramental intermingling between Greek and Latin Christians. In fact, there are a multitude of examples to suggest that Greeks and Latins inter-communed and married one another despite the Schism of 1054, and this evidence forces us to differentiate between what the consequences of the Schism were in the Middle Ages versus what many today falsely assume those consequences to have been. Even though the Fourth Crusade played an instrumental role in the ultimate sacramental separation between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic communions, it did not do so immediately and—as my book demonstrates—there were authors and communities who resisted the call for sacramental isolation for centuries. In fact, there is evidence of sacramental co-mingling between Greeks and Latins well into the seventeenth century.[14]

Second, because the rupture between Orthodox and Catholics that did occur as a consequence of the Fourth Crusade was primarily the result of political, economic, and cultural alienation, rather than the result of new theological developments, the possibility for a theological common ground remains a viable possibility. In the eyes of most medieval Christians, there was nothing theologically insurmountable about East/West theological difference. Even in those settings, like the colonization of Byzantium, where political and cultural conflict gave rise to theological polemic and increasing calls for sacramental isolation, both elite and ordinary Christians continued to cross the Greek/Latin boundary to commune, baptize, and marry with one another. My sense is that this occurred precisely because those who were advocating for sacramental isolation failed to develop theological justifications for that isolation that could satisfy those who believed otherwise.

Finally, let me return once again to something I mentioned only briefly in my first section, which is concerns the extended encounter between Franks and Greeks in the Peloponnese during the thirteenth century. What is so remarkable about the Frankish dynasty in Southern Greece during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is that we find an experience of Catholic/Orthodox religious cohabitation, appreciation, and appropriation, even if the two Christian communities remained largely independent of one another. Historically, this coexistence occurred because both the Frankish lords and their Greek aristocratic subjects refused to use religious identity as a means of subordination or resistance. And, what is perhaps most unique in this

[14] Ware, *Eustratios Argenti: A Study of the Greek Church Under Turkish Rule* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1964).

respect was the extent to which the Frankish and Greek rulers in the Peloponnese largely sought to set their own policies with respect to the Christian other, rather than adhere to the instructions issued in Rome or Constantinople or elsewhere. While the experiment of a Frankish/Greek Peloponnese may be something of a historical anomaly (somewhat like the situation today on the Greek island Syros), it does challenge a number of our assumptions about Orthodox/Catholic difference and the possibilities for fruitful coexistence in the wake of 1204.[15] Perhaps, the next experience of an authentic Orthodox/Catholic mutual dependence will first occur in a similar setting, where local leaders prioritize the realities and sacramental needs of the local community in all of its messiness rather than adhere to a set of boundaries that exist more in the imagination than in real experience. I am told that this intercommunion is already occurring in certain settings in the Middle East, where the future of Christianity is so grim. I suspect that it will also increasingly occur quietly in parishes across the United States, where the demographics of intermarriage—like those of the Peloponnese in the thirteenth century—are simply too large for the institutional church to control.

[15] The Greek island of Syros came under Venetian control during the Fourth Crusade but unlike nearly every other region of Greek culture in the Eastern Mediterranean, it never passed to the control of the Turks. As a consequence of Western Christian political influence that lasted until the twentieth century, Syros' population remains to this day majority Roman Catholic.