

# Connecting Links between Orthodox Christianity and Diplomacy: Interchurch Rivalries and Political Interdependencies

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## ABSTRACT

Orthodox Christianity has faced numerous challenges over the years, sometimes sharpening the situation and sometimes being forced by political factors. This paper aims to explore the interconnection of politics and religion by analyzing some of the cases that played a determinative role in shaping the current ecclesiastical landscape: the newly formed schism between Moscow and Constantinople, the role of the Russian Patriarchate in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the ongoing efforts of the Patriarchate of Alexandria to maintain the balances within the whole African continent and the efforts of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem to preserve its dominance in the Holy Lands.

**Keywords:** Church politics, interchurch rivalry, political interdependence, religious diplomacy.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Christianity is a religion that has had a prominent presence for the course of 2000 years. It has created many organized communities on every continent, attracting many believers from all around the globe (Euthimiou, 2016). Although the Christian society in the first years of its creation was united (Cunningham & Theokritoff, 2008), through its long-term history, it has combatted multiple heresies concerning mainly the nature of Jesus Christ and has known two great schisms: the first one taking place on 1054 AD dividing Christianity into the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Catholicism and the second one separating Protestantism from Catholicism in 1517 AD (Euthimiou, 2016).

In fact, the propagation of Christian teaching by the evangelists, firstly to Syria, Asia Minor, Egypt, and later to Rome, led to different interpretations of the new religion. Each evangelist interpreted the Christian messages in his own way, resulting in the creation of different circles of followers that had perceived a different meaning of the original messages. Additional factors that created divergences in the Christian world were that the main means of spreading Christianity was oral speech, and, as a result, it was necessary to translate the cases of transmitting Christianity to different people. These two factors testify that the practice of variations of the original Christian teaching was far from unexpected. It is also true that by not being in possession of the original Christian manuscripts, the Scripture of Orthodox Christianity is based on “textual witnesses” and presents “textual fluidity” and “pluriformity”, as Pentiu (2022) has argued. Still, various old Christian texts are being found in the eastern deserts and monasteries, complicating the distinction between true and false information (Loosley, 2010). Consequently, the reason behind the emergence of many “Christianities” derives from the fact that after Christ, the sources of his teaching were various and mostly oral (Loosley, 2010).

The Eastern Orthodox Church presents a unique interest. While it started as an illegal community and was chased after by the Roman emperors, it developed into the strongest aspect of Christianity during the period of the separation of the Roman Empire into the Eastern and Western parts in 395 AD, having a great influence on the development of governmental laws and social traditions (Cunningham & Theokritoff, 2008). The imperial authority and the leadership of the eastern church could cooperate to fulfil common interests, during the 1000 years of existence of the Eastern Roman Empire. Thanks to



the emperor Konstantinos, the coding of Christianity was feasible, discriminating against the orthodox dogma of the heresies via the convocation of the 1st Holy Synod in Nikaia of Vithinia. The text of “Creed: The Symbol of Faith” is the longest of any other religion and one of the most elaborate texts in the world. It took 4 Holy Synods to be completed, the last being the Holy Synod in Chalkidona in 451 AD (Euthimiou, 2015). The announcement of an official text of Christianity paved the way towards political stability (Euthimiou, 2015) but also towards the emergence of the first but minor schism from those who did not accept its final form, namely, the Coptic Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Apostolic Armenian, and Tewahedo Ethiopian Churches (Russell, 2021).

Gradually, Christianity develops its priesthood by shaping Episcopates, Metropolises, and Patriarchates. Since the Greek element was vivid in the Eastern Roman Empire, Christianity connected tightly with the Greek world (Euthimiou, 2016). Moreover, the millet system imposed by the Greek influence in Orthodox Christianity was enhanced by the Ottoman Empire. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople had gained autonomy over interchurch affairs through its obligation to cooperate with the Porte in political, economic, and social matters (Roussos, 2004).

Moving forward to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of nationalism, the ecumenical structure of the Orthodox Church was transformed into a national structure (Kobetiak, 2021). This transformation resulted in the development of numerous autonomous ecclesiastical organizations whose relations are regulated by the principle of the prohibition of intervention by one church in the internal affairs of another. Hence, every nation will have an autonomous national church easily controlled and directed by the local government (Papastathis, 2014), whose relations will be based upon the Constitution (Tsatsos, 1993). The autonomy of the churches has not questioned the prestige of the four historical patriarchates of Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch. However, it has limited their power as it has determined the framework of international ecclesiastical alliances and has increased the antagonism between the autonomous churches (Papastathis, 2014). This antagonism is described as the “geopolitics of pilgrimage” by Professor Sotirios Roussos (2005).

This paper will focus on the Eastern Orthodox Church, especially the inter-orthodox church rivalries that the Patriarchates have faced due to the autonomous church regime. In the past, back in the ages of the thriving of the Byzantine Empire, the emperor cooperated with the Orthodox church to shape the orthodox dogma and orthodox organizational management and to maintain the stability of his reign by fighting the heretics (Euthimiou, 2016). How do the Patriarchates function and cooperate with the states in the modern age? What are the challenges opposed regarding inter-orthodox church conflicts? Is the Greek influence over Orthodox Christianity diminishing and threatened to be replaced by the Russian Church in Eastern Europe or the Arab Orthodox in the Middle East? The authors of this paper will try to give tangible responses to these questions through the examination of four main case studies: the Russian Church (Patriarchate of Moscow), the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Patriarchate of Alexandria and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CHURCH CONFLICT

### 2.1. Over the Years

Christian unity has been put to the test multiple times throughout history. However, one of the most challenging eras began with the Collapse of the Soviet Union in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which happened to be at the same time as the election of a new Patriarch for both Moscow and Constantinople in 1990 and 1991, respectively (Fajfer & Rimestad, 2010). This new era generated and brought to discussion many important issues that needed to be settled between the Patriarchates mentioned above.

To better understand the significance of the following events, it is worth clarifying the fundamental principles running the Orthodox Church: Each independent Church (Autocephalous Churches and Patriarchates) is equal, and they all recognize that the Patriarchate of Constantinople has augmented authority and prestige over the others, being the oldest one established, and at the same time, it is also given the titles of Ecumenical Patriarchate, along with “first among equals” (Jazeera, 2018; Papastathis, 2014). In addition, every independent Church has sole sovereignty over its issues, and no other Church can mingle on its matters in any way (Papastathis, 2014).

Moving on, the Collapse of the Soviet Union formed many new independent states, resulting in a possible broadening of scope for the two Patriarchs (Vorobyov, 2022). Professor Papastathis (2014) also notices that “the goal of adapting the ecclesiastical organization according to national or state geography, because of its inherent contradictions, has caused particular problems in relations between the Churches”. In this case, the potential creation of new Churches due to the generation of new states and the review of the current situation regarding Church authority transformed into a crucial factor causing adverse relations between Moscow and Constantinople (Fajfer & Rimestad, 2010). It is true that with the strengthening of the modern principle of “nationality”, the traditional structure of the

Orthodox Church had already transformed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century from “ecumenical” to “national”, but states around Russia, like Ukraine, were, firstly as part of the Russian Empire and then as part of the Soviet Union, interconnected with the Patriarchate of Moscow, without any terminal decision for absolute independence (Hovorun, 2022; Papastathis, 2014).

That special connection the Ukrainian Church had with the Russian Patriarchate was meant to be disturbed by the events regarding the annexation of Crimea, starting in 2014 (Jazeera, 2018). This is a turning point in the ecclesiastical history of the region, as the conflict between these two states ignites discussions concerning the Ukrainian dependence on Russia and ways to reduce it. There has been a wave of concerning voices regarding the future of the Church, which led to the division of the Ukrainian Church as the Patriarchate of Constantinople granted Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, forcing the Churches to choose which one they wished to be affiliated (Denysenko, 2020).

## 2.2. *What is Happening After the Russian Invasion*

The Russian Church is facing augmented challenges regarding the recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine and “is now called to preserve the spiritual unity of the people”, according to the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill (Petrequin, 2022). Religion-wise, the war between these two states is a very complex issue that has occupied major news agencies like the APN, Reuters, and Al Jazeera (e.g., AP News, 2022). To be more specific, there has been great discussion regarding the role of Kirill in this dispute since he is technically the spiritual father of both opposing sides, as both Kirill and Putin claim, due to the common medieval roots of the Ukrainian and Russian people (Smith, 2022b).

Even though Kirill would probably be expected to have a more active role in dissolving the situation, members of the clergy in Ukraine and Russia have started to voice their disapproval of his actions, some of them in more direct ways than others (Vorobyov, 2022). Patriarch Kirill, during a sermon in March 2022, made some serious remarks on the Russian invasion beginning in February, claiming that the invasion aims at “human salvation” as the liberal West has attempted to enforce its unethical values of excess consumption while also putting pressure for conducting gay parades (Smith, 2022a; Vorobyov, 2022). As Papastathis (2014) notes, borrowing the phrase of Althusser, “the Church has historically been an ideological mechanism for the state”. Many voices, including Vorobyov (2022), support the idea that with this kind of public address, Patriarch Kirill provides “a theological underpinning to the war”. These recent events can be identified as a mutual exchange between the Kremlin and the Patriarchate since the Church, on the one hand, attempts to accept and enforce the actions of the political authorities by awarding “metaphysical significance” to the war and attributing the title of “hero” to the Russian soldiers lost in fight, whilst Kremlin on the other, adopts the political language of the Church according to its will (Smith, 2022a; Vorobyov, 2022).

It is not the first time there has seemed to be a vast connection between the Head of the Church and the Head of the state in Russia, as ever since 1945, the Patriarchate has transformed into a quite useful institutional power for the Soviet Union (Seker, 2012). Kirill called Putin’s election victory in 2012 a God’s miracle in more recent events, while the Russian President sees Orthodoxy as a symbol of Russian nationhood (Vorobyov, 2022). Moreover, sanctions originated by the European Union (EU) countries (which did not go through due to the opposition of the Hungarian Prime Minister) and the UK now include the Patriarch as well, linking the religious sector strongly with the governmental actions, with Kirill being part of the list of the individuals accused of a negative contribution to the war (AP News, 2022; Petrequin, 2022).

The complexity of this political and religious division is evident in everyday life in Ukraine. Ukrainian worshipers affiliated with the Moscow-aligned Orthodox Church have been facing increasing scrutiny and even bans from certain sacred sites by Ukrainian authorities following Russia’s invasion. This move has sparked tensions and protests, as many believers feel torn between their religious affiliation and loyalty to Ukraine (Mann, 2023). The situation is complex and results from internal and external pressure (Luchenko, 2023). While the country has a tradition of religious tolerance, the government views Orthodox clergy influenced by Russia as potential threats, leading to raids and prosecutions. However, some believers fear persecution and argue for preserving their faith traditions. Amidst this debate, there is a growing call from certain quarters to ban the Moscow-aligned church entirely, exacerbating divisions within Ukrainian society as it grapples with the complexities of faith and patriotism in times of war. The situation highlights Ukraine’s struggle for religious freedom vs. national security concerns (Mann, 2023).

The ongoing war in Ukraine has raised concerns among other Churches belonging to the former Soviet Union as well. The Lithuanian Orthodox Church has sought a new status for itself, navigating a precarious compromise between canon law and the demands of secular authorities. Metropolitan Innokenty in Lithuania condemned the war in Lithuania and requested autonomy for the Lithuanian eparchy, prompting the ROC Synod to set up a commission to investigate. In Latvia, President Egils Levits introduced a bill granting the Latvian Orthodox Church autocephaly, while in Estonia, the

situation is complex due to the longstanding parallel jurisdiction of the Constantinople Patriarchate (Luchenko, 2023).

### 2.3. *The Role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate*

The influence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict extends beyond the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The Patriarchate's historical significance and claim to being the "first among equals" among the autocephalous Orthodox Churches have made it a central player in the ongoing ecclesiastical and geopolitical disputes. As Makrides and Woloschak (2019) highlight in their work, the Ecumenical Patriarchate's position as a symbol of Eastern Orthodoxy's unity and tradition lends it unique authority. Its role in mediating between various Orthodox Churches, including those in Russia and Ukraine, exemplifies its commitment to maintaining unity while navigating complex political landscapes.

The decision to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2019, often referred to as the Tomos of Autocephaly, was met with mixed reactions. As Hovorun (2022) points out, this move was viewed as a significant assertion of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's authority. It not only strengthened the position of the Ukrainian Church but also marked a departure from the status quo, leading to tensions between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Russian Orthodox Church, which regarded Ukraine as part of its canonical territory.

The involvement of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict reflects a complex interplay between religion, politics, and national identity (Ramet, 2019). The Ukrainian Orthodox Church's quest for autocephaly is not just a religious matter but a manifestation of the broader Ukrainian national identity. By supporting this move, the Ecumenical Patriarchate found itself at the nexus of religious aspirations and national sentiments.

In addition to the historical and political dimensions, the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate also has implications for ecumenical relations. The Patriarchate of Constantinople's actions in the Ukrainian context have raised questions and concerns among other Orthodox Churches, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church. These actions have brought the challenge of balancing the search for unity with regional and national factors in the Orthodox world.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew criticized the Russian Orthodox Church's role in the conflict in Ukraine while expressing readiness to assist in Russia's postwar "spiritual regeneration". In addition, he has accused Russian authorities of using the Church to further their strategic objectives, emphasizing their shared responsibility for the aggression and resulting crimes. Bartholomew's call for resistance against the Moscow Patriarchate's capacity to undermine unity and legitimize criminal behaviour underscores the gravity of the situation within the Orthodox Church. His stance reflects the need for interreligious dialogue to address these issues and foster spiritual regeneration in Russia and Ukraine, emphasizing the common Christian duty to promote shared values and unity. The way that the Ecumenical Patriarch is handling the issue also touches on the historical role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in assisting both Ukraine and Russia and reaffirms its readiness to support its followers in both countries, highlighting the complexities of the conflict and its religious dimensions.

## 3. PATRIARCHATE OF ALEXANDRIA

### 3.1. *History and Mission*

The Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria is situated in Alexandria, Egypt, a historic centre for Christianity and Hellenism founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE. Alexandria was a great city comparable to Rome, and today, it presents an outstanding pneumatic and intellectual heritage influenced by Greek culture (Nicolaidis, 2022). Apart from its Greek elements, Alexandria housed Greeks, Egyptians, Jews, and other people, being a cultural and religious melting pot (Hinge & Krasilnikoff, 2009). In 43 AD, Saint Mark arrived in Alexandria and founded the Alexandrian Church, becoming its first bishop. Egypt was introduced to Christianity (Nicolaidis, 2022).

The Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa is the second in order of the fourteen Orthodox Autocephalous Churches. Its jurisdiction extends from its base in Alexandria, Egypt, over the entire African continent, administering 45 provinces (Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, 2012). This being the case, the current Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria emphasizes the holy Patriarchates' role of protecting and promoting Orthodox Christianity and Hellenism in Alexandria and over Africa. Recalling the words of the Patriarch, the term "Alexandria" in the general title of the Patriarchate refers to the past and history. In contrast, "All Africa" refers to the future of the Patriarchate (Blathras & Biliali, 2019).

More precisely, the Patriarchate has a double mission that has been well received by the current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Firstly, it preserves Greek and Orthodox heritage. The



Patriarchal Archaeological Museum and the Patriarchal Library are the outposts of this heritage and function under the supervision of the Patriarchate (Blathras & Biliali, 2019). The Patriarchate also funds important projects to renovate churches and restore temples on the African continent. Secondly, the Patriarchate does not dwell on the history of the past but focuses on African Orthodox Christians carrying out important missionary work. According to Patriarch Theodore II, “Egypt is the door to Africa” and “Africa is the continent of the future”. Thus, the Patriarchate wishes to support the 7,000,000 Christian Orthodox of Africa and to promote peace, health, and education as, in his words, this is the way of survival for these people. He has established 3,000 medical centres and 2,500 schools. He is trying to address Africans’ water needs by implementing a program to install manual water pumps and wells. Thanks to the friendly relations between Patriarchate Theodore II and the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Patriarchate of Alexandria has ensured flexibility in its activities (Orthodoxia News Agency, 2020).

### 3.2. *Relations with the Christian Coptic Church*

This section focusing on the Patriarchate of Alexandria may be the occasion to include in the analysis of the Christian Coptic Church. This arises because Alexandria is a city that accommodates both the Chalcedonian Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and the non-Chalcedonian Christian Coptic Church of Egypt. After the Holy Synod of Chalcedon, a schism occurred between Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians (Russell, 2021). In other words, between those who accepted the Chalcedonian text of the “two natures” Christology and those who disagreed with delivering the “one nature” (miaphysite) Christology (Bibawy & Ishak, 2016). Those who rejected the Chalcedonian Council were soon isolated by the Chalcedonians (Toroczka, 2016).

The Copts, claiming to be the descendants of the Pharaohs, consider themselves as the indigenous Christians of Egypt. They share the same orthodox tradition with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, which originates from the teaching of Christianity of Saint Mark in Egypt (Kamil, 2002). They also share the same order as the High Fathers, the order of monks who practice a harsh ascetic life in the Egyptian desert (Blathras & Biliali, 2019). However, the Coptic Church was perceived as a member of the “non-Chalcedonian” churches and, in the sixth century, proclaimed its own Patriarchate, declaring its independence from the Eastern Christian Church (Kamil, 2002). Thus, any attempts to reunite the Oriental Orthodox Church with the Eastern Orthodox Church into an imperial church were abandoned from the sixth century until the twentieth century. The re-launch of reunification talks began in the second half of the 20th century and continues through Official Dialogue and Conferences (Russell, 2021).

The Patriarch of Alexandria, Theodore II, is trying to maintain friendly relations with the Coptic Church. When he mentions the Coptic flock in his speeches, he refers to them as brothers (Blathras & Biliali, 2019). He believes they are the same church, declaring that “Our Churches -meaning the Greek Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church- are one Church headed by Jesus Christ” (Patriarchate of Alexandria, 2020). Despite his good intentions, this statement was not left uncommented. The Office of Heresies and Cults of the Metropolis of Piraeus condemned the Patriarchate of Alexandria due to this ecumenism statement (Orthodox Christianity, 2020). Nevertheless, two factors make it urgent to maintain friendly ties between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church.

The first factor is related to the efforts of the Russian Patriarchate to expand into the African continent by downgrading the role of the Greek Patriarchate of Alexandria. More specifically, the Russian Orthodox Church showed strong discontent with Patriarch Theodoros’ decision to formally recognize the autocephaly granted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In November 2019, the Russian Orthodox Church interrupted the Eucharistic communion in honour of Patriarch Theodoros and his fellow bishops of the Church, an act which showed disrespect to the decisions of the venerable Greek Patriarchates (Religious Information Service of Ukraine, 2019). Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church seems to be approaching the Coptic Church through which it is trying to penetrate the African continent. Relations developed between the two churches have led to the granting of the Church of the Great Martyr and Wonderworker Mina and Pope Cyrillos VI in the Gardens of the Pyramids in Giza. The reaction of the Greek Patriarchate of Alexandria was firm, accusing the Patriarchate of Russia of an “unethical invasion” which it has “unannounced”, through which Moscow is attempting to “buy off the native clergy of the Patriarchate of Alexandria” (MyPortal, 2022). Also, the Russian aggressivity towards Ukraine, launched in February 2022, was drawn as a parallel by the Patriarch of Alexandria to the Russian church interventionist attack with the creation of the Russian African Exarchate (Orthodox Times, 2022). This being the case, the Patriarchate of Alexandria tries to maintain its ties and good relations with the Coptic Church and balance its relations with the Russian Church.

The second factor that is taken into consideration concerning the approach of the Patriarchate of Alexandria towards the Coptic Church is associated with the growth of Islamism in Egypt. Both

pilgrims of the Coptic Church and the Patriarchate of Alexandria are low in numbers. The Coptic Church is a minority in Egypt (only 10 to 15% of the total population), while the Orthodox flock of the Patriarchate of Alexandria is decreasing (Njoroge, 2021). The Coptic minority is often confronted with Islamic radicalism (Asproulis & Kalaitzidis, 2016) and are marginalized within Muslim Egypt (Arafat, 2019). In the meantime, the Patriarchate of Alexandria is not left intact from terrorist attacks (Orthodoxia News Agency, 2020). Under these circumstances, it is vital for Christianity to be united and to avoid internal strife and antagonism.

### 3.3. Overview

The Patriarchate of Alexandria plays an important role in the safeguarding and promotion of Hellenism and Orthodoxy on the African continent while paying special attention to the needs of the African people through its missionary work. This is achieved thanks to the receptiveness of the current Egyptian president, a fact that should be highlighted as the flexibility of the Patriarchate's actions is related to its cooperation with the state. Finally, despite Russian and Muslim challenges, Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria always speaks in his public speeches with fraternal words towards them and wishes to preserve the balance among their relations.

## 4. PATRIARCHATE OF JERUSALEM

### 4.1. Gaining Its Status Quo

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem is located in a divided city. Jerusalem is most known for the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict over the dominance of the city (Shlay & Rosen, 2015). However, it is also characterized by many conflicting tendencies regarding religion, race, nationality, and class, transforming it into a centre with spectacular diplomatic interaction (Mazza, 2017). The Old City of Jerusalem, consisting of four neighbourhoods (the Muslim, the Christian, the Armenian, and the Jewish Quarter), is also the pneumatic centre for the three greatest monotheistic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (Shlay & Rosen, 2015).

The Christian communities in Jerusalem stand as some of the oldest in the world. The Israeli state officially recognizes approximately 10 Christian denominations, including Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, and Coptic. Christians, comprising about 2% of the total Israeli population, consist of both Arab and non-Arab individuals. Notably, a significant majority of Christians, approximately 75.5%, are Palestinian Arabs (Marshi & Anabtawi, 2023). Hence, among all the actors of Jerusalem, what is the role of the Greek Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodoxy, which represent an endangered religious minority (Prodromou, 2023)?

Undoubtedly, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem is the principal foundation of Christianity in the Holy Land, having a permanent presence in the historical evolution of the city from the early years of the flourishing of Christianity (Papastathis, 2018). Since the Ottoman rule of the region (1516 AD), the Patriarchate has adopted a monastic character and has held a predominant position over the possession and perseverance of the Christian Holy Shrines, especially the Calvary, the Church of the Nativity, and the Church of Mary. Furthermore, its jurisdiction is spread over Israel, Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula and the Palestinian Authority (Katz & Kark, 2005).

Due to the imposed millet system by the Ottoman authorities, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem gained supreme authority regarding safeguarding the Holy Places, outrunning the corresponding influence of the Catholic and Protestant Churches (Roussos, 2004). Moreover, the Patriarchate managed to exclude the church of Russia from any consideration of claiming the Holy Places by taking advantage of the Russian-Turkish rivalry. Through several Ottoman firmans and international settlements, the Greek Christian Orthodox community profited from the privilege of using the Holy Places and created a robust status quo (Roussos, 2005).

This Christian institution possesses dominant Hellenic elements as Greek clergy structure it and promotes Greek Orthodox Christianity in the Holy Land (Papastathis, 2022). The Fundamental Law of 1875 posed the first official legal framework for the Patriarchates' governance, further enhancing the rights of the Greek hierarchy. The Confraternity of the Holy Sepulcher (Adelfotita) is the body that obtains the governing competencies of the Patriarchate, while the Patriarch is the head of the institution (Papastathis & Kark, 2014). Moreover, the Patriarchate empowered his influence in the region via the purchase of both urban and rural land in Palestine/Israel, availing of the favourable Ottoman waqf system; a waqf is a donation for charitable purposes managed mainly by a religious foundation (Papastathis, 2018). Still, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem constitutes one of the non-governmental organizations of Israel which possesses real estate that covers a large area of dunams (Goodgame, 2023). However, is the status quo of Greek Orthodox Christianity a given?

#### 4.2. *Threats against Patriarchate's Status Quo*

The status quo of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is threatened by the national and identity demands of the Arab Christian Community (Papastathis, 2022). While the Orthodox Confraternity insists on preserving its Greek character in all its activities, the Arab Orthodox congregation, initiated by the Arab national movement, opposes the primacy of the Greek Orthodox order (Goodgame, 2023). Several Christian churches, such as the Catholic, Anglican or Lutheran, have been Arabized mainly by replacing foreign clergy with local Arab clergy (Katz & Kark, 2005). Even the Patriarchate of Antioch has undergone some form of Arabization, a situation which is an example to be avoided for the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (Vatikiotis, 2006).

The modern intercommunal conflict between the Greek Orthodox and Arab Orthodox pilgrims dates back to Patriarch Cyril B's deposition in 1872. It allowed the Arabophone laity to demand the right to participate in the electoral process of the patriarchs, in the episcopate and in the Confraternity of the Holy Sepulcher (Vatikiotis, 2006). Their arguments concerning their demands lay in the fact that they cannot accept that the head of the local church rests under foreign rule instead of the Arab one, especially highlighting the reckless mismanagement of the Patriarchate's property (Katz & Kark, 2005). In particular, during the election of the new Patriarch, the Arab pressure became stronger and hindered the electoral process (Roussos, 2005).

The Arab claims endured throughout the British Mandate (1923–1948) when the British, after the end of Ottoman rule, tried to redefine the policy towards the Christian communities (Papastathis, 2018). Their demands persisted after the Second World War when Arab Christians constituted the majority of the Christian population in the Palestinian region (Roussos, 2005). With the emergence and establishment of states, the conflict between Israel and Palestine intensified, and the demands of the Orthodox Palestinians concerning the Arabization of church hierarchy and land were incorporated into the Palestinian national agenda of their struggle to become a state (Roussos, 2004).

However, the ordinary Patriarchate policy of cooperation with the state could not function to its benefit in the case of Israel as it did under Ottoman rule and the British Mandate. The Greek Orthodox status quo was at stake as more actors and interests could intervene in the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Israel was focused on facilitating the Jewish settlement in Jerusalem and gaining demographic predominance. The Palestinians were negotiating to acquire state status and were involved in negotiating the Patriarchate's land transactions (Roussos, 2005). According to their claims, the Patriarchate that was selling its land aiming to reduce its debt and avoid bankruptcy destined Palestinian land to Israeli companies and Zionist purchasers (Goodgame, 2023). The selling of Palestinian land to Israeli citizens promoted the Israeli perception that “homes for people will determine the identity of the Holy City” in favour of Israel. As a result, the Palestinians claimed that this process was violating the arrangements of the Oslo Peace Process (Roussos, 2005).

Thus, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate was stuck in the conflict. The new Patriarch of Jerusalem elections in 2001 showed that Israel and Palestine were concerned about the outcome. On the one hand, Palestine was more discrete, considering its reduced Christian community compared to the 1920s and divided pilgrims regarding the stance towards the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the unbearable negative turn of the friendly relations with the Greek government. On the other hand, Israel feared three possible outcomes: (1) a probable Arabization of the Patriarchate, (2) a Greek “Pro-Palestinian” Patriarch or (3) a non-Greek influence in the Patriarchate affairs, namely the Russian one (Roussos, 2004).

The Israeli fears led to its intervention in internal church affairs, removing five hierarchs from the list of candidates. This state action signalled a violation of the established church-state order of relations and endangered the unity of the Orthodox Church. Finally, the decision of the Israeli government was withdrawn after the triggering of the reaction of the Synod, the Arab Orthodox community of Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, the Greek Church, and the Greek government and the role of the Greek lobbying. Finally, the elections were held, and Metropolitan Irinaios was elected as the new Patriarch of Jerusalem; his name was one of the five removed candidatures by the Israeli government (Roussos, 2004).

The crisis, though, remained after the election of the new Patriarch. The new Patriarch Irinaios was accused of corruption and mismanagement of the ecclesiastical transaction. Despite his denials and the lack of strong evidence, a wave of opposition to his removal was stirred up: his opponents in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem, the Greek Orthodox community, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, the Orthodox Church in Greece, and the Greek diplomacy (Katz & Kark, 2005). Therefore, the mediation of many actors and forces in the election and removal of patriarchs is observed.

Patriarch Theophilos III, who succeeded Irinaios, has also faced notable controversy. The Orthodox Arab Community frequently voices dissatisfaction with the Patriarch's contentious agreements and utilization of church land. Arab Orthodox Christian protestors explicitly accuse the Greek Orthodox

Patriarch of unilaterally engaging in land leasing deals with Israeli settler organizations to the detriment of the community members. Consequently, ongoing demands from Palestinian Christians persist, focusing on asserting their ownership rights to these lands and advocating for the active presence of Arab Christians within the wider Christian community. These endeavours are aligned with their broader Palestinian cause (Marshi & Anabtawi, 2023). Simultaneously, there has been a sequence of actions undertaken or carried out by radical entities within the Israeli political sphere, encompassing both local and national governments aligning with a cohesive agenda aimed at diminishing the Christian presence. Such initiatives involve court rulings that endorse deceptive methods of land acquisition, the implementation of discriminatory laws, interference by the police and government in religious ceremonies, expansion onto church lands for nationalistic objectives, and toleration of violence perpetrated by Jewish radicals (Koulouris, 2022).

#### 4.3. Overview

In general, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem has dealt with various difficulties and controversies due to Jerusalem's multiculturalism and many contenders. However, it has prevailed in its dominance in the Holy Land (Koulouris, 2022). During Ottoman rule, the Patriarchate had autonomy in arranging its internal affairs and could support its status quo. However, establishing the Israeli state and the Arab-Israeli conflict complicated the relations between the church and the state (Vatikiotis, 2006). The sustainability of the Patriarchate is under substantial threat due to the hostility emanating from authoritarian and hybrid regimes fueled by a determined commitment to homogenizing religion-nationalism (Prodromou, 2023). The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate seems focused on maintaining good relations with Israel and Palestine, preserving Greek Orthodoxy, maintaining its rights of use and management of the Holy Shrines and preventing a possible schism. The question is whether the Patriarchate has the power to achieve this or if it will be empowered by the interference of Greek diplomacy and lobbying. Further questioning can lead to wondering if the modern Greek state can fulfil the role of the protector of the Patriarchate and how the Greek government can act without perplexing the situation in Jerusalem (Vatikiotis, 2006).

### 5. CONCLUSION

One of the main conclusions of this paper is the complexity of the relations between politics and religion, which is defined by blurred lines. Orthodox Christianity's foundations may lay on the concepts of unity and fraternity; however, the demands of contemporary political reality cannot leave it unmarked.

The ongoing dispute between the Patriarchate of Moscow and Constantinople regarding the Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church has led to the foundations for a more broadened schism due to the recent invasion of Ukrainian territory, and this is not something that seems to be resolving soon. The augmentation of the members of the Ukrainian clergy that have decided to distance themselves and their flock from the Russian Patriarchate is a crucial issue, the consequences of which are yet to be seen. We cannot make any sure guesses on what is going to happen on the battlefield; simply expect that if the Russian forces prevail, this will have an immediate impact not only on the members of the Ukrainian clergy that have shown their disapproval of Kirill's actions but also to the Orthodox Christianity as a whole, since the rest of the Churches will be forced to choose a stand. No matter what the outcome, though, the signs of ideological division are here, and how the situation will be handled will play a significant role in the future of Orthodoxy.

Russian interventionism is also experienced in Africa, which is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Despite the Russian efforts, the Patriarchate Theodore II perpetuates the leading role of the Greek Patriarchate for Orthodox Christianity on the African continent by establishing friendly relations with the Egyptian State, which allows him to realize its vision.

In the case of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the threat to its status quo stems from Jerusalem's multiculturalism and the antagonistic tendencies that dominate the city because of the multitude of actors it hosts. Nevertheless, the importance of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem to proceed to the development of diplomatic relations, not only with Israel but also with the Palestinians, Greece, and other religious and economic institutions, is highlighted.

Thus, the tendency of the politicisation of the Orthodox Church is still evident and the Patriarchates are demanded to obtain the know how to manage diplomatic relations as rapidly evolving actors in the global political scene.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.



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