The History and Legacy of Photios I, Patriarch of Constantinople

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Photios I, Patriarch of Constantinople, is a prime example of how opposed the minds of Western and Eastern Christians can be on the same man. "Saint and hero in the eyes of the Christian East, he is branded by the Christian West as the man who unbolted the safeguards of unity and let loose the disruptive forces of dissent and schism."[1] The West describes him as "worldly, crafty, ambitious and unscrupulous" and as a "proud intruder," while the East declares him "the Church's unshaken pillar and firm foundation and rock, hallowed spring of doctrine filing all with truth, exact rule of holy faith…man of excellence, bright with splendor most glorious…," among many like epithets.[2] The two viewpoints are so opposed that even the details of his history are contested. This paper aims to, after a review of the ecclesial atmosphere of Byzantium in Photios' time, present a correct summary of his history, followed by a brief examination of his lasting legacy on the Church. With this blueprint in mind, the first task is to describe the aftermath of iconoclasm.

Iconoclasm began with a decree of Emperor Leo III in 725 or 726, and, though it was theologically defeated in 787 at the Seventh Ecumenical Council, Nicaea II, under Patriarch St. Tarasios of Constantinople and Empress Irene, widow of iconoclastic Emperor Leo IV, it was not stamped out completely in the East until the "Restoration of Orthodoxy" in 843 under Patriarch St. Methodius (not the Apostle to the Slavs) and Empress Theodora.[3] Yet remnants of the iconoclast controversy continued to plague the East in the form of two dueling parties. Beginning with the Old Roman Circus parties of the Blues and the Greens, factions plagued the Roman Empire after its move to Byzantium.[4] The iconoclasm controversy gave rise to two

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[1] Francis Dvornik, *The Photian Schism: History and Legend* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 1.
[2] John Laux, *Church History: A Complete History Of The Catholic Church To The Present Day* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1989), 294-295; Asterios Gerostergios. *St. Photios the Great* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1980), 99.
[3] Henry Chadwick, *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church: From Apostolic Times Until the Council of Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 72, 80-82, 119-120; Dvornik 12-13.
[4] Dvornik, 6-7.

parties: the Extremists, or *Zealotes*, and the Moderates.[5] Both were iconophile parties, but they had different interpretations of how to deal with the iconoclasts. The Extremists, supported primarily by the monks of the famous Monastery of Studion, "did not want to deviate the least from the canons of the Church," which meant severe punishment on heretics such as the iconoclasts, with no "oikonomia" (economy, or lessening of the law in particular instances) being given at all; in addition, the Extremists hated the "renaissance of secular learning" that was occurring in Byzantium at that time.[6] The Moderates, many of whom were repentant iconoclasts, wished to have mercy on those who returned from heresy, allowing them to retain their prior functions; they also support secular learning.[7] These parties emerged at the time of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and they continued into the time of Photios, providing much of the conflict in Byzantium during this period.[8]

With the background of the two parties outlined, an exploration of Photios himself can begin. Photios was born around 820 in Constantinople to Sergios and Irene.[9] His parents are saints, commemorated as Confessors on May 13th in the Byzantine Rite, due to their resistance to iconoclasm and the sufferings that caused them, eventually ending in martyrdom.[10] Irene was of Armenian blood, and her brother Sergios married Irene, sister of Empress Theodora.[11] Through his father Sergios, Photios was connected to Patriarch Tarasios, who presided over the Seventh Ecumenical Council.[12] From his letters, we know that Photios had at least four brothers:

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[5] Dvornik, 9; Despina Stratoudaki-White, "Patriarch Photios and the Conclusion of Iconoclasm," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44, no. 1-4 (March 1999): 342-3.
[6] Gerostergios, 30-31.
[7] Chadwick, 120; Dvornik, 8-9.
[8] Dvornik, 8-18, covers the period from Nicaea II until the election of Ignatios.
[9] Despina Stratoudaki White, *Patriarch Photios of Constantinople: His Life, Scholarly Contributions, and Correspondence Together with a Translation of Fifty-two of His Letters* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1981), 15-16.
[10] Gerostergios, 15-16; White, "Iconoclasm," 344-345.
[11] Dvornik, 164; Gerostergios, 15.
[12] White, *Patriarch Photios*, 15.

Tarasios (to whom he dedicated his famous *Bibliotheca* or *Myrobiblion*), Theodoros, Constantine, and Sergios.[13] From his youth, Photios loved to study, and he became an expert in his native Greek language, which he loved to such an extent that he never bothered to learn Hebrew or Latin.[14] His scholarship was so great that at a young age he became a professor of philosophy and dialectics at the university located at the Magnaura Palace in Constantinople; of his many students was Constantine the Philosopher, better known as St. Cyril, Apostle to the Slavs, who became Photios' "amicus fortissimus," best friend.[15] From his post as a professor, Photios was chosen as a high government official, and from there he was elected patriarch.

In explaining Photios' election to the patriarchal throne, politics shows itself for the first time of many in this history. In 842, the Emperor Theophilos died, and his son Michael III became emperor; however, being just a boy, the Empire was at first ruled by a regency council consisting of his mother Theodora, the *logothete of the drome* (a chief advisor, particularly on foreign affairs) Theoktistos, Theodora's brother Bardas, and her uncle Emmanuel the Armenian.[16] The former patriarch, John the Grammarian, an iconoclast, was succeeded by the moderate St. Methodios (not the Apostle to the Slavs) in 843.[17] As the reign progressed, Theoktistos began to have the most power among the regency council, and he named Photios to the position of *protoasecretis* (director of the imperial chancellery) around 851 (or possibly 843).[18] In that role, he helped initiate a large-scale educational program.

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[13] White, op. cit., 81.
[14] Gerostergios, 19.
[15] White, op. cit., 17; Constantine Cavarnos, *St. Photios the Great: Philosopher and Theologian* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1998), 16; Dvornik, 52.
[16] Ibid., 18-19.
[17] Dvornik, 12, 98.
[18] White, op. cit., 19.

In 847, Methodius died, and he was succeeded by the monk St. Ignatios, a friend of the Extremists.[19] Importantly, Ignatios was appointed by Empress Theodora rather than elected by a synod, going against the canonical procedures.[20] In an infamous incident at his enthronement, Ignatios ordered Gregory Asbestas, Bishop of Syracuse, a moderate, to leave the Hagia Sophia because he was in the process of being investigated for the charge of uncanonically ordaining a bishop; Gregory angrily responded by flinging down a candle and exclaiming "that instead of being blessed with a pastor, the Church had been handed over to a wolf."[21] The rift between Ignatios and Gregory is key to later events.

On March 13, 856, Michael III came of age, and he supported his uncle Bardas, a moderate, over Theoktistos, the reactionary. Thus, he promoted Bardas to the rank of *Caesar*, and allowed him to murder Theoktistos. Theodora and her daughters were eventually forced into a convent.[22] Ignatios harshly disapproved of these actions; thus he refused to bless the veils of Theodora and her daughters, accused Bardas of "having illicit relations with the young wife of his dead son," and refused to give communion to Bardas on Theophany for this same reason.[23] Bardas was not a man without power, though, and he accused Ignatios of high treason for supporting a monk who had instigated a plot against him. Ignatios was pressured by the emperor's regime and, in 858, resigned "to forestall worse complications."[24] A synod was then held where Photios was elected, after being recommended by Michael and Bardas; to gain the allegiance of the Extremists, Photios accepted a compromise in which he would treat Ignatios as the legitimate former patriarch.[25] Following the election, Photios was consecrated patriarch *per*

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[19] Loc. cit.
[20] Dvornik, 18; Chadwick, 124.
[21] Dvornik, 19; cf. 18-21.
[22] White, op. cit., 21.
[23] White, "Iconoclasm," 346.
[24] Dvornik, 48; cf. White, *Patriarch Photios*, 22; Chadwick, 124-5.
[25] Dvornik, 49, 53-55.

saltum, that is, receiving each stage of ordination on a subsequent day (as he began as a layman), ended with his consecration as patriarch by Gregory Asbestas and two Extremists on December 25, 898.[26]

The compromise with the Extremists did not last long, as they claimed the compromise stated Photios must follow Ignatios' extremist policies; in February 859, a group of Extremist bishops (without the input or participation of Ignatios himself) held a synod in the Church of St. Irene in which they declared Ignatios to be the rightful patriarch.[27] Photios called a council at the Church of the Holy Apostles soon afterwards which proclaimed him legitimate patriarch; in response, the Extremists revolted, and Bardas suppressed the revolt with ferocity.; once the revolution was crushed, another synod was called that year to impose sanctions on the revolutionaries.[28] The issue was not solved, however, as Pope Nicholas I expressed concern over the case of Photios and Ignatios, and thus he order a retrial of Ignatios.[29] Though the Byzantines considered the case closed, they allowed a retrial to be held, which occurred in 861, in the Church of Our Lady of Blachernae, and it agreed with the 859 synods: Ignatios was condemned.[30] In addition to allowing the Pope to call the retrial, the Byzantines also bowed to his wishes when he contested Photios' ordination *per saltum*; the council of 861 voted a canon banning such practice in the East (the Council of Sardica in the West had previously banned it).[31] However, Pope Nicholas was not entirely pleased, as he had not obtained jurisdiction over East Illyricum, which he had wished his legates to obtain.[32]

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[26] White, "Iconoclasm," 347; Dvornik, 51.
[27] Dvornik, 55, 62; Gerostergios, 41-2; Chadwick, 133.
[28] Dvornik 62; Gerostergios, 43-45.
[29] Dvornik, 76.
[30] Gerostergios, 43, 48.
[31] Dvornik, 92.
[32] Ibid., 91.

The issue of East Illyricum and Bulgaria must now be discussed, as it is commonly considered to be a driving force behind many of the events in this era. The area of Bulgaria was a key political region due to its being between the Frankish Empire and the Roman Empire in Byzantium. Bulgaria was part of the province of Thrace, which was always under Byzantine jurisdiction; however, it was close to the region of East Illyricum and was often considered part of that region, which was one transferred by Emperor Leo the Wise from its original Roman jurisdiction to Byzantine jurisdiction.[33] The popes wished to have their rightful regions returned to them, and they also wanted Bulgaria, though it was not theirs; the regions became confused, and the popes thus began to ask Constantinople for jurisdiction over Bulgaria, which they had never had. A rivalry thus began over Bulgaria. The Roman Empire in Byzantium conquered Bulgaria in 864, and Khan Boris was baptized by Patriarch Photios, taking the name Michael after his godfather, Emperor Michael III.[34] Boris sent a letter to Photios asking for answers to practical questions regarding Christian life; the patriarch's reply contained Church history, high theology, and tropes regarding being a good Christian prince, but no practical answers.[35] Boris then turned to Rome, and Pope Nicholas I gave the practical answers the khan wanted.[36] Boris then accepted Roman missionaries into Bulgaria, expelling the Byzantine missionaries; in addition, the Roman missionaries often critiqued or ridiculed Byzantine traditions, thus straining the relationship between the East and West.[37] However, Rome did not give Bulgaria what it truly wanted (an independent church), so it turned back to Byzantium, and finally Boris' son Simeon erected the independent Bulgarian patriarchate in 918, which was recognized by the

[33] Philip Zymaris, "Neoplatonism, the Filioque and Photios' Mystagogy," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44, no. 3/4 (Winter 2001): 350-1.
[34] Tamás Nótári, "De Conversione Bulgarorum – On the Legal Background of the Conflict Between Rome and Byzantium," *Proceedings of the Novi Sad Faculty of Law* 43, no. 1 (March 2009): 446.
[35] Ibid., 446-51.
[36] Ibid., 451-457.
[37] Chadwick, 111.

Byzantines in 927.[38] Throughout the events of Photios' era, Constantinople wanted to keep Bulgaria, and Rome wished to regain it, and this battle drove many of the decisions, especially of the popes; eventually, though, Bulgaria became an autocephalous church in the Slavic Byzantine tradition.

Though the Roman legates at the council of 861 accepted communion with Photios, Pope Nicholas did not agree with their decision; with influence from the Extremist Theognostos and his comrades, who relayed skewed information from Constantinople to Rome, the pope called his own synod in the Lateran in 863, and there he condemned both Gregory Asbestas and Photios, declaring all his ordinations void.[39] The Byzantines did not accept this, of course, due to the fact that this case had already been tried twice and that even the papal legates accepted Photios as the legitimate patriarch. Thus a council was called in Constantinople in the summer of 867, which "excommunicated Nicholas I, and condemned the Roman ecclesiastical customs and Rome's new teaching about the Holy Spirit introduced in Bulgaria" (though some sources say only the first of these was discussed).[40] Pope Nicholas, however, died on November 13, 867, without hearing the council's condemnation; this was instead received by his successor, Hadrian II.[41] Rome was not the only place with a change of leadership in 867, though; on September 23 or 24, 867, Emperor Michael was killed by his co-emperor Basil, who became Emperor Basil I.[42] Basil wished to court the Extremist party, as he had murdered the Moderate emperor, so he invited Photios to resign; the patriarch acceded, probably resigning the day after the coup, and Ignatios was reinstalled as patriarch on November 3, 867.[43] Pope Hadrian eventually received the news of the

[38] Nótári, 460; Dvornik, 214.
[39] Dvornik, 96-98
[40] Gerostergios, 64; cf. White, *Patriarch Photios*, 32-3; Dvornik, 120-1.
[41] White, op. cit., 33.
[42] Loc. Cit.; Dvornik, 132.
[43] Dvornik, 137; Chadwick, 173.

council of 867 and, after negotiations with the Emperor, yet another council was called in Constantinople to try the case; before that meeting, though, the pope held his own synod in Rome in June 869, which once again condemned Gregory and Photios, along with the signatories of the council of 867, the acts of which were to be burned, per the council's decree.[44] Pope Hadrian then sent his legates to Constantinople with the verdict and ordered them to force all in attendance to accept his decision. After much turmoil, the legates' orders were followed, and the final results of the council of 869-870 (deemed the Eighth Ecumenical Council by the West, but not by the East) once again condemned Photios and upheld Ignatios, supported Roman supremacy, and had the acts of the council of 867 burned; a surprise visit from the Bulgarians, though, gave the Byzantines a gift, as they received the disputed territory under their jurisdiction.[45] Photios was sent into exile, but he returned soon enough, as, in 873, Emperor Basil called him to be his sons' tutor, and he eventually resumed his teaching position at the University of Magnaura as well.[46] Photios' rapport with the emperor grew as well as his friendship with Ignatios.[47] Upon Ignatios' death on October 26, 877, Photios was again installed as Patriarch of Constantinople; in the meantime, Pope Hadrian had died in 872 and been succeeded by John VIII.[48]

Basil invited John VIII to send legates to Constantinople for a final pacification of the schism between Moderates and Extremists; eventually a final council took place in 879-880, beginning on November 14, 879.[49] This council upheld Photios as legitimate without condemning Ignatios, annulled the council of 869-870 (even the representatives from the other

[44] Dvornik, 141-3.
[45] Dvornik, 145-158.
[46] White, op. cit., 35-36.
[47] Gerostergios, 70; Dvornik, 167-170.
[48] White, op. cit., 36.
[49] Dvornik, 170; Chadwick, 175.

patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria who had been at that council were declared to have been frauds), bestowed the title of Seventh Ecumenical Council on Nicaea II, affirmed Bulgaria was under Byzantine jurisdiction, and forbade any additions or alterations to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.[50] Pope John accepted the council's decisions, except for the one regarding Bulgaria.[51] Peace was thus restored between East and West, though Extremists continued to trouble Constantinople.[52]

Photios, now recognized as legitimate by all, reigned for years until Basil was replaced by his son Leo VI (Leo the Wise), Photios' former pupil after his return from exile; in 886, upon taking power, Leo forced Photios to resign, and the patriarch was sent into exile again, dying after some years, probably on February 6, his feast day.[53]

After the recounting of all this tumultuous history comes a brief examination of Photios' role in history. One author summarizes his effects in three categories: Photios' "triple capacity as theologian, politician, and literary figure."[54] Photios' theological works include his hefty *Amphilochia*, a series of answers to questions put forth by his friend Amphilochios, his letters and sermons, and his *Mystagogia*, regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit (although one textual critic believes Photios only wrote sections of what is now known as the *Mystagogia*).[55] The area of theology Photios is most famous (or infamous) for is in regards to the procession of the Holy Spirit. While he was probably not the first to bring up the issue of the *Filioque* (St. Methodius, Apostle to the Slavs, is regarded as one of the earliest), the treatment in his epistles "To the Eastern Patriarchs" and "To the Archbishop of Aquileia" and in his *Mystagogia* are early

[50] Dvornik, 189-196.
[51] Gerostergios, 77; Dvornik, 210.
[52] Dvornik, 240.
[53] White, op. cit., 36-37; Gerostergios, 81.
[54] White, op. cit., 68.
[55] Tia M. Kolbaba, *Inventing Latin Heretics: Byzantines and the Filioque in the Ninth Century* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), 87-92.

examples of many of the classic arguments used by the East in combatting this doctrine.[56] Though his writings are rarely cited in this regard until many centuries after his death, Photios did help the issue of the *Filioque* to become more prominent. As a politician, Photios strove for peace (particularly within Byzantium itself) while also being firm about orthodoxy and defense of Byzantine traditions. He resigned when it was necessary for the peace, he spoke against Bardas' cruelty, and he did not fight against the Extremists except inasmuch as peace was required. The issue of Bulgaria, of course, shows his loyalty to Byzantium and its traditions over Rome, which led to frequent conflict when the Romans tried to have their way in the East. As a literary figure, Photios was a tremendous scholar and a devoted one, often lamenting that the worst punishment during his exiles was his loss of books. His *Bibliotheca*, or *Myriobiblion*, summarizes 279 books he had read, both secular and sacred, and many of these summaries show us works we would otherwise know nothing about. His *Lexicon Synagoge* provides a dictionary of Greek terms that were becoming archaic in his day, a great help to future scholars. In addition to all this, Photios supported missionary efforts, helping to evangelize the Rus (predecessors of the Russians), the Khazars (a Turkish people), the Bulgarians, and the Moravians (through Sts. Cyril and Methodius).[57]

In conclusion, Photios, a devoted scholar, was introduced into the government through his scholarship and family connections. To assist in calming Constantinople in its debates between the Moderates and Extremists (remnants of the iconoclasm controversy), he was elected patriarch; however, the virulence of the Extremist party combined with the tension between Byzantine and Roman styles of Christianity, along with ongoing rivalry over Bulgaria, led to a tumultuous life. Though he had conflicts with Rome, especially Pope Nicholas I, by the time

[56] Kolbaba, 91-92; cf. also Chapters 4 and 6.
[57] White, op. cit., 24-30.

Photios died, he had reconciled with Pope John VIII, and there was peace between East and West for a time. Unfortunately, the havoc of the time and the growing influence of the issues that came up in his time, such as the *Filioque* and the debate over differing traditions, have overshadowed in the public eye his scholarship and his work for peace. In the end, Photios was not perfect, and his rhetoric at times took on a virulent anti-Western tone, but at his life's end he had achieved peace; unfortunately, it was the seeds he planted that eventually bore fruit as the Great Schism.

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