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RITUALS AND FOCAL POINTS IN BYZANTIUM UNDER THE EMPEROR JUSTINIAN I

Abstract:

Adoption of rituals within a society results in the reinforcement or the inculcation of shared beliefs and values. Following Schelling (1960), when persons are confronted with coordination problems often seem to do surprisingly well when focal points provide to them a point of convergence for individual expectations. I argue in the present paper that Emperor Justinian I (482 CE - 565 CE) in Byzantium followed a set of carefully chosen strategic decisions essential to promote social coordination, and with the aim to convert the city of Constantinople into a strong focal point of religious rituals. Emperor Justinian I in the spirit taken initially by the founder of the City of Constantinople Emperor Constantine's I (272 CE - 337 CE), and more or less by all of Justinian I predecessors, had to solve a coordination problem among rational players throughout the empire. The rebuilding of the third Church of St Sophia ("Hagia Sophia") in 562 CE following the Nika revolt in 532 CE, the protection of the property rights of the Christian church including its clergy and its monasteries, alongside the exploitation of the administrative organizational structure of the Christian church that existed within the empire, and the emperor's stance that unity of faith is a precondition for the unity of the empire, created a strong focal point of religious rituals away from the Holy Land.

Keywords:

Economics of Religion; Christianity; Church; Focal Points; Rituals; Economic History;

JEL Classification: B11, D70, Z12

Introduction

The building of Christian churches and other sanctuaries in Constantinople under the Emperor Justinian's I seal of approval in the aftermath of the Nika revolt in 532 CE, heralded the rise of a fully - fledged Christian government within the Roman Empire. A ruler governs with the exclusive blessing of a monotheistic religion in a newly rebuilt capital that can work as the focus of religious rituals, a Christian monotheism "attractor" away from the Holy Land and Rome. In the new state of the world the ruler considers himself directly responsible to God for the spiritual health of his subjects, and upholds Christian ecclesiastical unity by ensuring that Christian doctrine and rituals are properly worshiped throughout the empire. In this turning point in history, the old Eastern Roman Empire is transformed into its new identity, the Byzantine Empire where the capital of Constantinople is a *strong focal point* of (Christian) *religious rituals* away from the Holy Land and Rome.

The Emperor Justinian I (482 CE - 565 CE): Rebuilding Christian Sanctuaries in Order to Enhance the State - Church Alignment

The Emperor Justinian I (482 CE - 565 CE) is referred as the "The Last Roman Emperor". Justinian I regarded himself as the new Emperor Constantine I (272 CE - 337 CE), the Emperor who created new sanctuaries in order to enhance the alignment of the Roman State and the Christian Church. Emperor Constantine I created Christian sanctuaries all devoted to God's attributes (a) "The Church of Hagia Eirene" ("The Church of Holy Peace") in the 4th century CE, (b) "The First Church of Hagia Sophia" ("The Church of Holy Wisdom"), completed in 360 CE, and (c) "The Church of Hagia Dynamis" ("The Church of Holy Power"). Constantine's I rationale behind such decisions were largely based upon the Roman "Theology of Victory", an ideological glue between religion and politics in the form of an "Interaction of Faith and Power" within the Roman Empire (Stephenson, 2009). At Constantine's I time the Roman State capitals were Constantinople and Rome, while the Christian Religious Capitals were Constantinople, Rome and Jerusalem.

The Nika revolt during the period January 11 - 19, 532 CE in the Hippodrome of Constantinople, was a civil unrest against Justinian's I policies (the meaning of the word "Nika" can be translated as to "beat / defeat" or to "conquer"). This period of popular outrage resulted in the burning of several imperial and religious buildings, and the list included the "The Second Church of Hagia Sophia" (Constantinople's Cathedral), the "Church of Hagia Eirene", the popular public baths named as the "Baths of Zeuxippus", and the entrance of the Great Imperial Palace called the "Chalke" ("Bronze"). Although Justinian I assumed the title of *Isapostolos* (equal with the Christian Apostles and positioning himself above other ordinary mortals) within the Christian Church, when confronted with the Nika revolt in 532 CE he showed extreme cruelty in the punishment of the rebels, where 30,000 unarmed civilians were killed in the Hippodrome of Constantinople. However, the resulting damage to Constantinople's religious and palatine buildings gave the Emperor an opportunity for large scale rebuilding in the years to follow. One of the most notably known is the rebuilding of the domed "Church of Hagia Sophia", an architectural innovation by any

6th Century CE standard, as its original 4th century CE site was destroyed in the rioting. The “Church of Hagia Sophia”, one of the greatest achievements of Byzantine culture, was erected in less than 6 years, between February 532 CE and December 537 CE, and by doing so Justinian I managed to align further the Roman Imperial State and the Cristian Church.

The rationale behind Justinian’s I decision to rebuild the City of Constantinople was his aim to convert completely the city into a solely Christian monotheism “attractor” away from the Holy Land and Rome. As the capital rapidly builds the infrastructure to be the focal point of religious rituals, Constantinople expands into being a fully - fledged Christian city, and where in the new state of the world the ruler considers himself responsible to God for the spiritual well - being of his subjects. Following MacCulloch (2010), Justinian I managed to create a constant round of sacred ceremonial activities in the service of God around the “Church of Hagia Sophia”, and this made the Emperor the focus of the entire society as a divinely supported autocracy. In addition, legislative and administrative reforms adopted by the emperor transformed the Eastern Roman Empire into the Byzantine one. Justinian I persecuted heterodox Christian views, the Pagans, the Samaritans and the Jews, so clergy and Church became tools of the Emperor’s power. Ekelund and Tollison (2011) also point out that Justinian I followed the footsteps of Constantine I and later emperors in adopting a state - sponsored Christianity. If we are to follow the Ekelund and Tollison (2011) suggestion, part of the explanation is embedded in the fact that Christianity had already managed to homogenize its spiritual product via the exclusion of heretical sects. That is, since Constantine’s I time in the 4th Century CE, the Christian (State) Church was in a position to run effectively as a religious cartel, by assuming control over practice and doctrine throughout the Roman Empire. Justinian I enhanced the State - Church alignment, something also pursued by most of his predecessors, by lowering the State’s cost of internal social control, and channeled public spending to encounter external threats by Germanic tribes and the Persians.

The State - Church - Society Coordination Game: Can Rituals and Focal Points Enhance Social Coordination?

Adoption of rituals within a society results in the reinforcement or the inculcation of shared beliefs and values. Within a rational choice analysis of rituals offered by Coyne and Mathers (2011), rituals are defined as predictable and regular observances of procedures or acts that enhance both individual and group social identity. Following Chwe (2013), successful social coordination of actions requires *common knowledge*. This can be achieved via the existing or newly created institutions that serve the purpose of disseminating the common coordination knowledge needed for all social players involved. Schelling (1960) observed that when persons are confronted with coordination problems often seem to do surprisingly well when focal points provide to them a point of convergence for individual expectations. As Schelling (1960) puts it, focal points provide some clue for coordinating behaviour among individuals, in the sense that a focal point assists each person’s expectation of what the other expects him to expect to be expected to do. Leeson *et al* (2006) examine the ability of focal points to transform situations of potential conflict or “worst case scenarios”, into situations of cooperation or “better case scenarios”.

I argue here that Justinian I as a rational social player enhanced coordination problems via the strengthening of “State - Church Religious Rituals” that resulted into a “Strong Focal Point” of social coordination, the whole process orchestrated by the Emperor himself. I turn now to the task of combining the information gathered so far into a simple game, namely the “State - Church - Society Coordination Game”.

I define a weak focal point as a focal point that provides partial social coordination on a limited number of common expectations about the degree of cooperative behaviour. A weak focal point converts in most cases an outcome of conflict into an outcome of partial cooperation. A strong focal point promotes social welfare enhancing coordination outcomes by transmitting a strong coordination signal, so transaction costs and information asymmetry among social players (citizens) may completely vanish (Bourlakis, 2015).

Figure 1 depicts this argument in the form of the “State - Church - Society Coordination Game” in the presence of state - religious rituals regarded as strong focal points (SFP), alongside the strategic option of using either state or religious rituals considered as weak focal points (WFP).

Figure 1: The State - Church - Society Coordination Game

		Rest of the Citizens	
		State - Religious Rituals (SFP)	Either State or Religious Rituals (WFP)
Citizen 1	State - Religious Rituals (SFP)	λ_1	λ_1
	Either State or Religious Rituals (WFP)	γ_1	γ_1
		λ_r	γ_r
		λ_r	γ_r

I suggest the payoffs within the matrix of Figure 1 as follows: λ = (full reward in the form of social peace / no social anarchy and / or no criminal hostilities among citizens stemming from a strong focal point), γ = (partial social coordination attributed to a commonly accepted weak focal point), where $\lambda > \gamma$. The subscripts 1 and r correspond to citizen 1 (player 1) and to the rest of the citizens (N - 1 players) respectively. If all citizens in the empire follow the strategy of observing messages coming exclusively from weak focal points they have the partial coordination payoff of γ . Religious rituals or state rituals in their own right are not in a position to fully coordinate citizens and to lead to the full eradication of social anarchy and / or criminal hostilities among citizens, as the signal is transmitted from a weak focal point that provides partial social

coordination on a limited number of common expectations about the degree of cooperative behaviour. The players coordinate and trust each other more if they follow the strategic option of observing a strong focal point that promotes social welfare enhancing coordination outcomes by transmitting a strong coordination signal that greatly reduces transaction costs and information asymmetry among social players (citizens), so uncertainty is substantially reduced. The capital of Constantinople acts now as strong focal point of “State - Church Religious Rituals”, and the outcome of the coordination game is a universally beneficial outcome of the highest possible payoff of λ .

Concluding Remarks

The Byzantine Empire in the Justinian I era experienced the full amalgamation of the Roman State and the Cristian Church as the two were indissolubly linked within a single Christian Empire identity. Justinian's I religious policy was based upon his belief that the unity of the Roman Empire presupposed unity of Christian (Orthodox) faith. As a consequence, Justinian I managed to convert and to incorporate to the full Christian Religious Rituals into the Strong Focal Point of the Imperial Cult. The citizens viewed the Emperor as the mirrored terrestrial counterpart of the heavenly polity with Justinian's I wisdom and power coming straight from God. In the same way that Emperor Constantine I did before him, Justinian I harnessed the Christian faith and the Christian Church to his own interests. The re-building of the City of Constantinople was part of the process to convert the capital into a *strong focal point* of (Christian) *religious rituals* away from the Holy Land and Rome.

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