“In 1261, under the vigorous leadership of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, the Byzantine empire regained its capital, Constantinople, after fifty-seven years of Latin occupation. The city retained only a hint of its former glory and prominence... The Byzantine Orthodox Church, although perhaps the strongest institution in the empire after the reconquesta, was also in a state of turmoil, racked by the persisting schism of the Arsenites and by moral and disciplinary decay - the after effects of the hated Union of Lyons (1274). In spite of what has been characterised as the disastrous reign of Andronikos, the Orthodox Church managed to produce the most aggressively reform-minded patriarch of its history – Athanasios” [Boojamra, 1].

On October 24th (revised Julian calendar) the Holy Orthodox Church commemorates St. Athanasios I, the 139th Patriarch of Constantinople. In this book, Dr. Boojamra examines the nature and extent of Patriarch Athanasios' social reforms and his political involvement during his two tenures on the patriarchal throne of Constantinople. He accurately argues that, for Athanasios, these reforms meant the renewal of the centralized institutions of the empire, and were “rooted in the commitment to Christian baptism, cenobitic mututalism, and Israel's covenant with Yahweh [Ibid].”

In order to critically analyze this text, it was necessary to use various cited resources to explore who St. Athanasios was and what may have led to his thinking. While still in his youth, St. Athanasios, or Alexios as he was then known as, left his home in Andrianopolis and went to Thessalonica, where he was tonsured in one of the monasteries with the name Akakios. He soon withdrew to Mount Athos and entered Esphigmenou monastery, where for three years he served in the trapeza. Akakios left Mt. Athos at first for the holy places in Jerusalem, and then to Mount Patra, where he lived ascetically as a hermit. From there
the ascetic transferred to the Auxention monastery, and then to Mount Galanteia to the monastery of Blessed Lazarus, where he accepted the great angelic schema with the name Athanasios, was ordained a priest and became ecclesiarch (monk in charge of the sacred relics and vessels in the church). Here he was granted a divine revelation: he heard the Voice of the Lord from a crucifix, summoning him to pastoral service [OCA Website, Feasts and Saints; Boojamra, 1-12].

Wishing to strengthen his spirit, Athanasios re-settled on Mount Athos ten years later. However, because of his anti-unionist activities after the reunification decree of the Council of Lyon, he was compelled by Patriarch John XI Bekkos (1275–1282) to seek Palestinian refuge, thus he returned to Mount Galanteia. With the accession of the anti-unionist emperor Andronikos II in 1289, Athanasios was then chosen Patriarch of Constantinople and initiated a sweeping ecclesiastical reform. He imposed strict discipline on the clergy, charged his bishops to live in their own dioceses, and restricted the wanderings of monks. His final discipline imposed on monks by restricting their wanderings is interesting since he himself did the same thing (as noted above) when he was a monk.

Though he was beloved by his people, Athanasios did provoke the discontent of certain priests by his moral strictness. This strictness of conviction roused the dissatisfaction of influential clergy, and in 1293 led to his first resignation from the patriarchal throne. Popular support restored him to his patriarchal office; however, after his expulsion of the Latin Church’s Franciscan monks from Constantinople in 1307, the unionist faction finally succeeded in forcing his retirement early in 1310 to the monastery of Xerolophus in Constantinople. Much of the source material on his reform effort, as well as on Byzantine social and economic conditions of the times, is recorded in a collection of 126 letters.

Dr. Boojamra argues that Athanasios was neither a systematic thinker nor was he a revolutionary; rather, he served as a mediator between emperor Andronikos II and the people of Constantinople. Boojamra notes that he was the first to resort in the search for political reform and justice. Because of the mid-fourteenth century triumph of the monastic practice of hesychasm (ἡσυχασμός) dominating the Church, Athanasios found an opportunity to implement his monastic tradition towards his clergy. As noted earlier, he was not
without his critics. The secular clergy of St. Sophia, for example, complained about his refusal to allow them advancement (i.e. episcopal offices) because they were non-monastics. The manner in which he dealt with clergy and the complaints against him drew heavily on monastic categories and were a significant episode in his reform policy. The nature of Anthanasios’ reforms appear to be rooted in the Pauline notion of the “new creation” [2 Cor. 5:17; Ibid 3], the Christian teaching on Baptism because its first step is the process of regeneration – a new birth, a personal Pascha. Boojamra notes that Anthanasios placed great emphasis on this instructing his bishops to teach this principle to their priests and flock. The objects of these reforms were the Church and the community. These reforms were a call to action and a continual reminder that “word and work (Δογματικὰ καὶ εργα) were inseparable aspects of the Christian life and true repentance” [Ibid, 4].

What Anthanasios sought in terms of social and political reform is viewed in terms of the relationship between the church and the empire. He clearly affirms the traditional Byzantine myth of imperial rule. The unity of the Byzantine commonwealth between Church and state (Ἡροσιμια and Βασιλεία, i.e. the patriarchate and the emperor) were two aspects of one reality. Dr. Boojamra suggests the drive for Christian purity, spiritual maximalism, and social mutuality tied into Anthanasios’ monastic asceticism and the conviction that the military and economic catastrophes of the empire were spiritual problems resulting from a lack moral, social, and theological purity.

In his Synodal letter Anthanasios confirms the holiness of the state and defines the church as the unifying element of society. God, he wrote, crowned the church with (a) the priesthood, and (b) the kingship. When both support the church, they will prosper. Dr. Boojamra makes an interesting comment in that this was a reversal in church-state relations; with the church now being the superior body. Although he appears to grant the emperor a great deal of power over the church, the letter is subtly the opposite; the emperor is established by God for a purpose: to be a new David and to support the Ηιεροσιμια.

Dr. Boojamra proceeds to examine the role of the church in Anthanasios reforms. As the enthusiastic reformer, he claims that Anthanasios was forced to extend the sphere of this patriarchal power and influence
into the political and social life of the empire. Part of this reform was grounded in the need to establish freedom for the church. Athanasios claimed that after the establishment of the church on a “rock” (Matt. 16:18), God “crowned Her with supreme imperial power, so that she might be served in all matters pleasing to God and be supported by [the imperial power]” [Ibid, 41]. Dr. Boojamra notes that, historically, this was incorrect since the empire predated the church, despite the fact that Athanasios assumed the conversion of Constantine to a specifically Christian form was the beginning of Christian society.

Boojamra next discusses how Athanasios sought to establish freedom of the church, which meant that the Church must function in accordance with its canons and traditions. These were brought on by preaching and by force. Athanasios demanded that the church be unencumbered in its internal life and free of any external pressure or exploitation (i.e. from the emperor, tax collectors, or corrupt bishops). When he resumed the patriarchate in June 1303, he demanded a Promissory Letter (Γραμμα Υποσχετικον) from Andronikos which outlined his concern with the freedom of the Church to operate in keeping with its own canonical legislation and with the prohibition of any civil interference not already permitted by ecclesiastical canons. Andronikos promised personal support to the patriarch in his efforts at social, political, and ecclesiastical reforms, and committed himself to send bishops back to their proper dioceses.

One problem Athanasios faced, that Dr. Boojamra clearly identified, was that he involved himself in the political and social affairs of the empire as if it were his spiritual duty as “father” of his people. He made no distinction between his spiritual and social responsibility. His reasoning was that Athanasios tried to protect monasteries, ecclesiastical institutions, and their properties from corrupt secular and ecclesiastical officials who mixed in their affairs and regulated them to serve their own interests. Like provincial bishops, monks too found the luxuries of the city far more attractive than Athanasios’ ascetic discipline and his demands that they live in their monasteries. Aside from his concern about protecting monastics from being exploited, Boojamra fails to mention the reason monastics entered monasteries: to flee the cares of this world.
As soon as he became patriarch, Athanasios attacked everything he regarded as contrary to Christian ethics and good order ($\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\zeta\iota\alpha$). Disorder ($\acute{\alpha}\tau\alpha\zeta\iota\alpha$), he maintained, was the source of the dilemma. At this point of the text it is believed that a comparison to St. John Chrysostom could have been made. St. John Chrysostom, like St. Athanasios, was not only forced to twice abdicate from the patriarchal throne of Constantinople but also attacked gluttony, avarice, and corruption [Talbot, 15]. He was, like St. Athanasios, a social reformer. Their mutual goal appears to have been the moral reformation of the world.

The next item St. Athanasios dealt with were the issues surrounding the clergy. He first called on bishops to forbid all priests from civil and military service because the priesthood was ordained from God, and therefore, superior to civil or military occupations. He further ordered clergy of St. Sophia to take an oath not to betray their ministry. He remained unmoving on purity of churchmen. In his defence, the Gospel clearly states that “no one can serve two masters” [Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13]. Hence, military service for clerics was strictly forbidden. The Fourth Ecumenical Council Canon VII also states:

“We have decreed that those who have once been enrolled among the clergy, or have been made monks, shall accept neither a military charge nor any secular dignity; and if they shall presume to do so and not repent in such wise as to turn again to that which they had first chosen for the love of God, they shall be anathematized” [6th Canon of the Council of Chalcedon 451].

In another correspondence to Andronikos, Athanasios wrote that one of the virtues good “rulership” of the emperor was the consultation of his spiritual father ($\pi\nu\epsilon\omega\mu\alpha\tau\omicron\zeta\pi\alpha\tau\eta\rho$) and he was compelled to follow his advice at all times (as per the monastic vow of obedience). Since he believed himself to also be the spiritual and moral guardian of Byzantine Christian society, he felt responsible for the social and political faults of the empire. Why? It is believed that because the function of a monk was to work for the well-being of God’s people, through prayer and service. Being a monk-Patriarch, the struggle consisted of rebuilding Byzantine society on the monastic ideals of social mutuality of the coenobite community. On this, Athanasios believed that monasticism was not superior to other Christian states; in fact, it was second in dignity to Baptism (which all Orthodox enjoy). He also maintained that the reordering of monastic life was
the beginning of reordering of society. The Church had to reform itself if was to set an example for society (e.g. sacrificing its wealth to the needs of the larger community). Dr. Boojamra however notes that this was not too popular among churchmen. By doing so, St. Athanasios made personal enemies and was denounced. This eventually led to his two resignations as patriarch. Boojamra reminds the reader that St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom both had the same goals as Athanasios in regards to monastics: there was to be a single standard for monks and seculars alike [Ibid, 68; 71; 73].

Athanasiros next dealt with corrupt public officials. His first step was to hold Andronikos responsible for the behavior of public officials. It was his opinion, that the emperor was the “benefactor” and should chastise anyone not doing his duty justly. He attacked the tax collectors and repeatedly condemned court officials who had succumbed to bribes and gifts. However, he did provide the Byzantines with a solution. If they wanted to save themselves, they would have to recognize their own duty towards the community (i.e. getting rid of corrupted public officials). This is very reminiscent of our present society and how it deals with corrupt officials.

Because of the Turkish invasions, there was an influx of refugees into Constantinople. As the empire shrank, Constantinople’s population increased. Because of genuine concern for the refugees, Athanasios was not about to accept anything short of sharing all available goods and requested that all take into their house for the winter as many refugees as possible. Keeping true to his word, ecclesiastics were not exempt. In summer 1305, the large number of refugees and the monopoly of grain supplies strained the capital’s resources. He called on monks and nuns to observe the fast days and periods and to eat only once a day during evening. The money and food conserved would then be distributed to the hungry and needy of the city [Ibid, 114]. His motives appear to be twofold. He not only imposed rigorous discipline upon the monks, but he also attempted to ration food in order to feed the needy.

Boojamra discusses how Athanasios cut across all aspects of Byzantine social life and focused on the abuse of the church and the people of the empire. The key to reforming the abuses was the emperor’s enforcement of the laws of the empire and the pursuit of righteousness, mutuality, and justice. Boojamra
argues that these reforms were rooted in traditional statist controls of essential social services and canonical controls on the behavior of bishops and clergy. Only proper application of canons and laws of the church and empire could ensure the freedom of the church and right order of the Christian empire.

During his second tenure Athanasios was re-commissioned by Andronikos, along with the permanent synod of Constantinople (συνόδος ενδείξια), to hear complaints of injustice to which citizens could bring complaints and alleged cases of injustice. Athanasios, emphasized that abuse of the laws had provoked divine wrath and caused fire, foreign domination, famine, and sickness. The only way to avoid further hardship was to turn away from evil ways, reconciled with one’s neighbour, and perform charitable deeds. According to Boojamra, it was not an unusual role for bishop because he was usually the most stable element in troubled times. As civil officials fled, bishops often took over the administration of justice. In the case of the Byzantines, the Turks recognized local bishops as the officials responsible for the Christian population under Ottoman occupation.

Probably the most significant result of Athanasios’ reforms was the Ζητησις or Neara. This was a series of disciplinary measures issued by the συνόδος ενδείξια in 1304. It covered civil and moral issues, including testation, marriage, rape, adultery, prostitution, murder, monastic discipline, the functioning of taverns and bathhouses, and the observance of fasts. Its aim was to eliminate social injustices and to correct moral infractions. Boojamra points out how his ultimate goal for all reforms is summed up in the closing paragraph of the Neara, which affirmed that all order is from God and must be maintained in God's earthly commonwealth.

To conclude, Dr. Boojamra has done an excellent job in introducing the reform policies of one of Orthodoxy's least known saints, St. Athanasios I. This book is both educational for Orthodox Christians, and also an excellent teaching tool that can be used to assist in recognizing the need for the Church to help society. St. Athanasios’ reforms not only gave birth to a renewal of hesychasm (which was to be continued by St. Gregory Palamas) and the demand for social and political purity, but also attempted to set a standard for administrative accountability and social responsibility of the Church. In order to make sense out of the
political and social realities confronting him, Athanasios maintained a clear objective: freedom of the church and right order in Christian society. Moreover, his first duty was to protect the integrity of the church. Interestingly, Dr. Boojamra points out how many historians dismiss Athanasios’ reforms because they were motivated by ascetic-rigorist tradition. Instead, he accurately states that Athanasios should be judged on the basis of his mimetic intentions, his keen insight into the fundamentally evangelical nature of social and political issues, his faithfulness to Old Testament patterns of reform and renewal, and the urgency of baptismal promises.

Were Athanasios’ reform policies successful? In simple terms, no; they were not. Alice-Mary Talbot makes an interesting comment: “Saintly people, however, are not always the best equipped for the leadership of such a complicated organization as the Greek Orthodox Church.” She suggests that had he resorted to the ecclesiastical principle of accommodation (οικονομία) he would have remained in power longer, accomplished more permanent reforms, and been able to continue his social welfare program to the poor [Talbot, 28]. Athanasios’ reform policies appear to have failed firstly because he alienated powerful people both in church and civil bureaucracy. No politician can be successful without the support of a bureaucracy. Athanasios did not have the support the civil hierarchy because it was these people he attacked. Secondly, his strongly ascetic nature and harsh personality alienated many people by threatening not only their lifestyle but their incomes and investments. If he had been more acquiescent, flexible, and politically astute, he may have had more success. Thirdly, he was succeeded in the patriarchate by weak men. Without the leadership of a committed patriarch, the Church could do little to effect change. Interestingly, it was not until St. Gregory Palamas that the hesychasts continued his policies. Finally, Athanasios did not succeed in building a party of followers or give birth to a movement. His followers were limited and failed to develop a “team” to institutionalize his programs after his death.

Though there is quite a bit of repetition in the book, it appears to be a good idea to invite Orthodox into a study group where excerpts from book can be examined and discussed in relation to our present societal and ecclesiastical needs. Conceivably, this could help strengthen existing local missionary work within our Church.
References


