

Book Reviews

Donald M. Nicol., *Church and Society in the Last Centuries of Byzantium*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979. pp. 162.

This is an interesting essay, originally given as four lectures, and essentially dealing with the last phase of the culture of the Byzantine empire. This is not to say that aspects of the earlier phase of this culture are not referred to, but they are brought in as illustrations and are, of course, not discussed fully. In a general way what one has in these lectures is a summary of the book on the same subject which the author published a few years ago.

In general, these lectures deal with the institutional and ecclesiastical structure of the empire, but more specifically they have as their subjects: the state and the nature, actual or theoretical, of imperial power; the nature and influence of the monastic establishments; the church, its position and power; and finally the life of the intellect as it evolved during this period. On the last point one may reflect that despite the remarkable recovery of antiquity which the Byzantines achieved in the course of this period, the so called Palaeologean Renaissance, they themselves produced no new ideas which might have served them as stimuli for the future. Even the ideas of Plethon were based largely on the old tradition. In any case they had no sequel.

The general social picture that may be drawn from these lectures on the society of the period is that it was in the process of disintegration. The picture is sad, of course, but it is not without interest. Especially to be noted are the internal upheavals of the fourteenth century, the phases of them in particular which began about 1341 and came to involve virtually every town of the empire, including Thessalonica, where the radical faction known as the "Zealots" seized control. The "Zealots" distinguished themselves by their violence, but also by their reforming zeal. Whether, however, they aimed at a thorough reform of society is still a matter of discussion. The discussion has been based on a discourse of Cabasilas, thought to have been composed when the "Zealots" seized Thessalonica and to have contained the arguments which they used to justify their seizure. According to some scholars, however, since Cabasilas nowhere in his discourse mentions the "Zealots", that discourse must have been composed later than their revolt and as a consequence, it could have no relation to it. Nicol seems to have taken no position on the question. This reviewer, on the other hand, is inclined to accept the old chronology of the discourse. But, however that may be, no reform was ever effected and society sank deeper and deeper into poverty.

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Sotiris Kadas, *Mount Athos: An Illustrated Guide to the Monasteries and their History*, Athens, Ekdotike Athenon, S. A., 1979, pp. 200.

Mount Athos, known locally as *Aghion Oros*, Holy Mountain, takes its name from the marble topped Mt. Athos approximately 6,670 feet, which crowns the Halkidiki peninsula.

The Halkidiki peninsula is located in northern Greece and is situated in the Aegean Sea between the Thermaic and Strimonian gulfs. Mount Athos, some forty miles long and about six miles wide, is the monastic state of the Orthodox Church, where besides Greek there are Bulgarian, Russian, Yugoslavian and Roumanian monasteries. The monastic community was founded by Saint Athanasios in A. D., 963, who is the founder of the first monastery of Great Lavra. The twenty monasteries comprising the community are divided into two classes: The *Koinobitic* monasteries, whose members live together; and the *Idiorrhythmic* monasteries, whose members live in their own way. In addition there are many chapels, hermitages and retreats. Although in the earlier days the monastic community numbered some 40,000 monks, according to recent estimates there are now approximately less than 2,000 monks at Mount Athos. The *Theocratic* republic of Mount Athos is administered by the Holy *Koinotis*, the governing body, which is made up of twenty *monachoi*, monks, chosen from the twenty large monasteries of the community. In accordance with an edict issued by Emperor Constantine IX in A. D., 1060, the peninsula of Mount Athos is not accessible to "any women..." a law which is strictly being observed. Mount Athos has maintained its religious character and status throughout Greek history, from ancient times to the present. Although in theory the monastic community comes under the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, in actual practice Mount Athos is an autonomous monastic state, a citadel of independence and of privacy.

Pilgrims to Mount Athos must first secure a permit from the office of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Athens, then travel to Thessaloniki and from there to Ouranoupolis, the small fishing village that is the port of departure for Mount Athos. In Ouranoupolis you board the Ouranoupolis-to-Dafni boat. The two hour long journey enables you to take a first look at the monasteries set in most phantastic situations—green ridges behind and the blue sea below. Dafni is the peninsula's port of entry where one boards the only bus to Karyes, the peninsula's capital, where you are issued a *Diamonetirion*, permit to visit the monasteries and receive their hospitality, which means room and board. Communication between the monasteries is by dirt road and walk paths.

Mount Athos: An Illustrated Guide to the Monasteries and their History, by Sotiris Kadas, is a marvellous book, well written with excellent colour illustrations and very helpful maps. The author in this volume covers the history of the peninsula from ancient times to present with a record of the history of the monasteries, their most important treasures and their present situation. The bibliography and glossary sections are most helpful additions to the book.

Mount Athos is vividly alive and has in the course of its long history and life, and despite many lootings, natural catastrophes and man caused disasters, acquired a unique status in the world of Christendom as the cultural and religious depository not only of the Great Orthodox Church of Christ but of Hellenism as well. Mount Athos is indeed a storehouse of historic and religious treasures. A world free of the problems of our much troubled age, a peninsula with a mystically inspiring peaceful atmosphere. Although the accommodations and delightful hospitality provided by the monks are modest, yet a visit and a stay at Mount Athos is in every way a culturally and spiritually enriching, a unique opportunity and indeed an exhilarating experience. The well written and richly illustrated book of Mr. Sotiris Kadas is a must for any *man* planning a visit to Mount Athos. A book which provides the pilgrim to the peninsula with the necessary background to better understand and appreciate the mystical and divine world of *Aghion Oros*.