

## **A Christian Roman Empire? Byzantium Between Imperial Monotheism and Religious Multiplicity**

Johannes Preiser-Kapeller

When Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE first became not only a licit, but even privileged religion and finally the only cult actually supported by the emperors, soon also Christian legitimations for the Roman Empire and its claim on world supremacy were formulated. Almut Höfert (2015, following Garth Fowden 1993) has called the newly emerging form of rule “imperial monotheism”, based on the principles “one God, one emperor as God’s effigy, one empire, one faith”. Yet despite these claims on uniformity, late Roman and Byzantine emperors saw themselves confronted with a multiplicity of religions (various “pagan cults”, Judaism, Manichaeism etc.), and even after the majority of the population had been “Christianised” (maybe by the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE), various denominations (Mono/Miaphysitism, “Nestorianism”, etc.) challenged the very integrity of the “one” Christian Church. Imperial strategies vis-à-vis these challenges alternated between compulsory measures and attempts of accommodation; the later, in turn, often provoked opposition from “orthodox” zealots who even questioned the authority of the emperor in matters concerning the faith. In periods of intensified confrontation as during “Iconoclasm” in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century, when emperors contested the practice of veneration of sacred images, the imperial regime as such was envisioned as “source of heresy” from opponents both within and beyond the empire’s borders. At the same time, the connections to Christian communities outside of the empire (and some also outside of “Byzantine orthodoxy”) enabled emperors to exert wide ranging influence, bolstering claims of supremacy at least within the Christian Oecumene even when the territories under actual control contracted (challenged in turn with the emergence of another Christian Empire in the West with Charlemagne from 800 CE onwards). These often conflicting results of the “Christianisation” of the Imperium Romanum will be discussed, especially with regard to their impact on the cohesion and extent of imperial rule throughout the Byzantine centuries.