

Introduction:

John Dickson:

I've often felt that the Byzantine Empire is perhaps the best-kept secret of world history. Why is it a secret?

Avril Cameron:

Well, because it, for instance, it's not taught in schools or in our schools anyway, in the West.

JD: Why is that?

AC: Well, because I mean, nowadays classics are hardly taught. The Roman Empire is hardly taught. So, they do very, very little medieval history. So they certainly don't do Byzantine or Eastern Roman history. If they do know anything, they think of it as bureaucratic. You know, because the word byzantine is used all the time in the press, in the media by all sorts of people to mean bureaucratic and convoluted and complicated and unnecessarily complicated.

JD: It has its own entry in the dictionary and everything!

John Dickson:

That's Professor Dame Averil Cameron, one of the world's most distinguished historians of late antiquity and what we've come to call the Byzantine Empire.

She was made a Dame in 2006 in recognition of her services to classical studies.

Before she retired, Dame Averil was Warden of Keble College at Oxford University and Professor of Late Antique and Byzantine History at King's College London. She was also chair of the Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research for ten years and remains the current President of the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies. She's written several books including *Byzantine Matters* and *Byzantine Christianity: A Very Brief History*.

And while I'm here, let me read you one of those Byzantine entries in my Oxford English Dictionary app: "excessively complicated ... characterised by deviousness or underhanded procedure" ... unfair.

Avril Cameron:

What can we do? I try to say that it, of course, was bureaucratic in the sense that it had a functioning civil service and a functioning state apparatus. But, you know, it wasn't bureaucratic in that sense. It wasn't any more bureaucratic than other states.

John Dickson:

Here are a few examples of the way you might hear 'byzantine' used in modern language:

"The contest for the Republican nomination will follow the usual path, a Byzantine series of state-by-state caucuses and primary elections in which Republican voters will send delegates to a national convention to select the nominee."

"His Byzantine behaviour has reduced the commission to a useless and toothless tool," Cassola hit out.

"Coe's heart still belongs to the sport. And, despite a politick refusal to publicly countenance the future, it is a reasonable bet that it lies in the Byzantine world of sports governance."

"The Byzantine appointments procedure has involved secret interviews with MPs and peers in London as well as question sessions in Paris and Strasbourg."

Those news clips - from places like Bloomberg News and the UK Guardian - use 'byzantine' to describe complicated red tape with a hint of deviousness.

If that's what you think of when you hear me say the Byzantine Empire, then I'm afraid you've been misled.

It was Montesquieu, a political philosopher of the Enlightenment, who popularised the use of the term 'byzantine' to mean complexity, intrigue and corruption. He wrote that the complicated politics of the Empire were "nothing but a tissue of rebellions, sedition and treachery".

Other Enlightenment thinkers were equally scathing. From Voltaire to Edward Gibbon, the Byzantine Empire was dismissed as so fundamentally religious and therefore backward that it wasn't worth thinking about.

As Peter Sarris writes in his excellent Oxford 'Very Short Introduction to Byzantium', "Holy Byzantium was represented as a prison of the intellect and the soul."

But the reputation was undeserved (to say the least).

The Byzantine capital, Constantinople, was famously fortified with an impenetrable three-wall network, which preserved it from foreign conquest for centuries. But the Byzantine Empire doesn't have to be impenetrable to us, today.

And by knocking down some of the walls of modern prejudice, we may discover that the Byzantine Empire - the thousand-year Christian empire - held some of the best-kept secrets of world history.

Part 1:

JD: *How do you pronounce Byzantine? Cause I keep people saying Byzantine, and I'm thinking No. Have I been saying it wrong all my life?*

AC: I say Byzantine (same as John) Americans say ByzanTINE. I've been to the States a lot, so I sometimes say ByzanTINE as well, which is very confusing.

John Dickson:

Phew. I've been saying it right!

Byzantine - with due respect to my American friends.

Dame Averil Cameron was kind enough to welcome me into her home in Oxford earlier this year.

I don't know if you can tell ... but I was a little nervous meeting her. She's a dame – that sounds very posh. And she's a professor at the top of a field I've admired for years.

But she was so down-to-earth and friendly. And it turns out, we have some mutual academic friends ...

After the interview Dame Averil tells me she has just been chatting online with my friend Professor Alanna Nobbs of Macquarie University, my alma mater. You may remember her from our episode on Constantine. So, I got a selfie with Averil and sent it straight to Alanna.

The thing is: the Byzantine Empire was not *called* the Byzantine Empire until long *after* it had fallen. Those within it just thought of themselves as Roman.

It's one of the odd things we have to get our heads around.

We often hear that the Roman Empire fell in the 400s AD - to Visigoths and Ostrogoths.

But that would come as a huge surprise to the millions of people living in the eastern part of the Roman Empire right up through the middle ages ... for almost another millennium.

It is an entirely western European perspective to think of the fall of western parts of the Roman Empire as the collapse of the Roman Empire per se.

Many go further into 'silly', and describe that period - from, say, AD 500 - the "dark ages", which allegedly persisted right up until the clever people of the Renaissance saved the world in the 13 and 1400s.

But that completely misses the reality.

Way back in Emperor Constantine's day, AD 313-337, the capital of the Roman Empire had already moved from the city of Rome to an ancient Greek city known as Byzantium, in the northwest tip of what today we call Turkey. This was a much more strategic location from which to govern such a vast empire.

Constantine rebuilt the city of Byzantium on a massive scale and then renamed it ... after himself: Constantinople (or modern-day Istanbul).

The effect of all this – long before the city of Rome fell to the goths - was to shift the centre of gravity in the Roman Empire to the East, to what we call Greece, Turkey, Syria, Israel, and Egypt.

Well before the collapse of the western regions, this eastern region was by far the more intellectually, culturally, and financially rich part of the Roman Empire.

When the western parts fell, it was of course considered a tragedy in the east, but not for a moment did the millions of eastern Roman citizens - now largely *Christian* Roman citizens - think that the empire itself had fallen. They carried on for centuries, with emperors, armies, trade, art and architecture, universities, religion, hospitals, and much more.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Back to Dame Averil.

JD: *What do we mean by the Byzantine Empire? Can you just, as briefly as you'd like, give something of the chronology and geography of this thing?*

AC: There Byzantine Empire lasted for 1100 years. It was unbelievable. So, if you think it began when Emperor Constantine founded Constantinople - that is now Istanbul - it went on for a hundred years until conquered by the Ottomans in 1453. So, really? And it was for a long period, a long time in that, that 1100 years, the most important empire in the world.

JD: *They didn't think of themselves as living in the Byzantine Empire, did they?*

AC: They always called themselves Romans. They (also) sometimes, later on, call themselves Greeks.

JD: *So that is one key historical point to get across to people who don't know about this. They really not just claimed to be part of the Roman Empire. They were in fact, the continuation of the Roman Empire.*

AC: Yes, they were. Because, for example, Gibbons's wonderful '*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*' ends with the end of Byzantium. But then in the west, western Europe, you have Charlamagne setting up as an emperor and calling himself the Roman emperor. So it's deeply confusing and not surprised that people are confused.

John Dickson:

After the fall of the *Western* Roman Empire, the West looked like a patchwork of shifting barbarian 'kingdoms'.

JD: *How did the people in this Eastern Roman Empire view the decline of Rome and of course the breakdown of Rome and systems in the west?*

AC: I think they were not terribly conscious of it, but they started having to deal with different people. So, there wasn't an emperor in Rome anymore after the fifth century, but there were new, there were Barbarian Kings, and they still ruled in Ravenna, for example. They had interests in Italy. So I think they still thought of themselves as continuators.

John Dickson:

In the 6th century, the Byzantine emperor - I should really just say *Roman* emperor - Justinian liberated Italy and North Africa from the barbarians and had hopes of restoring the western parts of the Empire.

Justinian was viewed as a "second Constantine", not just because of his important military victories and almost 40-year reign (from 527 to 565), but also because he was a staunch supporter of the Christian Church, perhaps even more so than Constantine.

Justinian is credited with transforming the Roman Empire into a thoroughly Christianised society.

JD: *I want to talk about Justinian then. Tell us something about him, because, from the little I've read, he seems an extraordinary figure. How do we not know about him?*

AC: Well, you know, there are these wonderful mosaics in Ravenna of Justinian and his wife Theodora. So that's always something we think of. Well, now a lot of historians are very hostile to Justinian. But he was also seen as he brought Roman law. He codified Roman law. He did incredible things. He built cities and churches all over North Africa, for example, as well as Italy and other parts of what was the Roman Empire. So he's a kind of Janus figure. You can't, you can't put him down. You can't pigeonhole him. So he was both a Roman emperor and the first of the Byzantine Eastern Roman emperors. And that was pretty difficult.

John Dickson:

Justinian does indeed have mixed historical reviews, and we'll get to the criticisms soon.

But he was incredibly diligent, earning himself the nicknames “the sleepless one” (a bit like Winston Churchill) and the “many-eyed emperor” – because he made sure he was across ... everything!

One of Justinian’s first great acts as emperor was to codify Roman law.

He commissioned archivists and lawyers to collate the valid decrees and laws of emperors from the second century up to his own day. He wanted to standardize and harmonize Roman law. On my bookshelf, the Codex of Justinian extends to three large volumes, each of about 800 pages. The Code influenced later “canon law” (church law), which in turn influenced the wider western legal system.

One of the interesting laws ratified in the Codex of Justinian confirms churches as “places of refuge” for runaway slaves, victims of revenge, or refugees fleeing danger.

The idea originally came from the Jewish Scriptures or Old Testament, as is so often the case. The book of Joshua speaks of “cities of refuge” to which people could flee if they were accused of manslaughter and liable to become victims of revenge (Joshua 20:1-6). In any case, centuries later, Justinian formalised the practice, so that anyone fleeing danger would be protected—with the full force of Roman law—if they could make it to the precinct of a church.

This ‘sanctuary law’, as it’s called, was in effect for centuries. In fact, the common law of England maintained the status of churches as places of refuge right up until the 17th century for criminal cases and the late 18th century for civil cases.

Individual churches continue the practice even today. It doesn’t have a legal effect, but authorities are usually pretty hesitant to raid churches looking for illegal immigrants. It’s a pretty controversial topic here in America, so let’s get back to Justinian and his intellectual interests ...

JD: Am I right that he was also quite philosophically minded, theologically minded?

AC: Oh, yeah, sure. Well, I wrote a book about Procopius, who was the main historian, and he says that he hated Justinian, and he says that

Justinian never slept, but also that he is to go round in the palace at night without a head. He was a demon in other words. So, he was pretty biased.

John Dickson:

Procopius, by the way, was a contemporary of Justinian. He was an administrative official – from Caesarea over on the coast of Israel, or Palestine, as it was called. He wrote a long book about the emperor's military exploits. But after Justinian died, he also wrote a '*Secret History*' which purports to be a tell-all account of Justinian and his wife Theodora. Averil has written a whole book on Procopius if you're interested!

JD: *Procopius hated Theodora too, right?*

AC: She's an interesting figure. According to Procopius, she started out as a sex worker, not to put too fine a point on it. She was in Egypt and she was performing in the theatres in Egypt and she did all sorts of pretty awful, you know, rude things in the theatres of Egypt but Justinian somehow met her and fell in love with her, and they had to change the law to get married. So, he had to persuade his uncle, who was the emperor at the time, to change the law so that he could marry an actress.

JD: *So Procopius's account - thought biased - is based in fact?*

AC: Oh, I think most people recognize it. Yes. They don't, like, they don't necessarily believe the details. But Gibbon, of course, loved the details. But then Theodora became very religious, like Justinian, they both became very religious, and they supported monks and, and churches, built churches, et cetera, et cetera. And she built a convent for reformed prostitutes.

JD: Some people say, and I guess it's from this tradition that dislikes Justinian that he basically created a theocracy.

AC: Well, yes, he did. It was a theocracy. I don't think there was anything new about that. I'm not sure that he created it either. I think it was already in existence. So, then you have to ask what does theocracy mean? And that's a difficult word. I mean, the church did not, of course, officially rule the empire, but the church from about the end of the fourth, and fifth centuries onwards, was very, very important. And it kept on being important.

John Dickson:

Justinian, and his successors in the east, used the law to shape a Christian society ... as they saw it. Not only did he introduce legislation against blasphemy and gambling (both of which showed up in later western law), he effectively banned non-Christian religion. Pagans and Jews were subjected to official persecution and they were coerced into Christian society.

One Byzantine law declares;

Those who have not yet been deemed worthy of worshipful baptism must make themselves known, whether they live in this Imperial City or in the provinces, and go with their wives and children and their whole household to the holiest churches to be taught the true Christian faith so that thus instructed and having cast off their former error, they may be found worthy of saving actors; or if they despise these things, they shall know that they shall have no part in our Empire, nor shall they be permitted to be owners of movable or immovable property, but they shall be deprived of everything and left in poverty.

Another law around the same time (AD 529) closed down the famous philosophical academy of Athens, which had centuries earlier been the most venerable school in the ancient world.

Some see this as a move against classical learning itself - an act you'd expect in the so-called 'Dark Ages'. But that overlooks the fact that this particular academy, under the leadership of a certain pagan academic, had been practising divination and other occult rituals. Julian shut it down. But at the time, it was seen as unremarkable, partly because there were much bigger and better schools of classical learning which Justinian's empire fully supported. The one in Alexandria, in northern Egypt, was arguably the greatest centre of learning in the world at the time.

More significant by far, in my view, was a law of Justinian that aimed to end the influence of pagan professors forever.

A century and a half before him, the pagan emperor Julian had expelled Christian professors from the great classical schools (and there were a lot of them). Get rid of the intellectuals and you sideline the movement—that was Julian's idea.

Well, I'm sad to say, Justinian returned the favour. He didn't want pagan professors infecting the youth, so he sacked and expelled them.

Education wars and cancel culture are nothing new.

JD: I've read a book called '*Byzantine Hospitals*' and was quite taken aback because it's precisely in this period, isn't it? Justinian started to build hospitals in Constantinople and elsewhere. Can you tell me something about that?

AC: It was the tradition of Christian charity and welfare. Justinian and other emperors built hospitals and old people's homes, and places where orphans could go to orphanages. That carried on all the way through the empire as well. So they did good things. They weren't hospitals with very good medication, I suspect.

JD: *But they were trying to blend that ancient Greek tradition with Christian charity. Would that be a fair assessment?*

AC: They were, yes.

John Dickson:

This is where I get to tell you about one of the great Fathers of the Church, who's part of this Byzantine era.

Basil of Caesarea, also known as Saint Basil the Great, was the bishop of Caesarea in the 4th century AD.

He oversaw the creation of history's first dedicated welfare centre and public hospital.

Roman armies, of course, enjoyed hospital services.

The rich could always employ doctors.

And the temples of the healing god Asclepius allowed people to sleep at their shrines and receive prayers and attention from the priests, in return for donations and public acclamations of Asclepius' greatness.

But there was no such thing as free public medical services before Basil.

Basil's idea, what he called his Ptocheion or "Poorhouse", initially grew out of a famine-relief program he led in AD 368, but it quickly expanded into a large complex for broader welfare and medical care.

It employed live-in medical staff who cared for the sick, drawing on the best traditions of secular Greek medicine. His "healthcare centre" included six separate departments: one for the poor, another for the homeless and strangers, a house for orphans and foundlings (cos the Church was still collecting abandoned infants), a separate section for lepers, rooms for the aged and infirm, and a hospital proper for the sick.

Basil died in 379. His friend Bishop Gregory Nazianzus - another of the great Church Fathers from the east - gave the funeral oration (which has survived). In it, he described Basil as the great mayor of an even greater city - he's just talking about this welfare complex.

"Others had their cooks and rich tables and enchanting refinements of cuisine, and elegant carriages, and soft flowing garments," Gregory says. "Basil had his sick, and the dressing of their wounds, and the imitation of Christ, cleansing leprosy not by word but in deed."

The thing is: Charity was a huge part of the story of the Byzantine Empire, especially medical charity.

Justinian, for all of his bigotry against other religions, worked to enhance and professionalise the charitable healthcare institutions that were popping up all over the place after Basil the Great. Justinian wanted everyone to be able to access medical care.

Both official church law and Justinian's imperial legislation made it clear that local bishops were now duty-bound to maintain facilities and staff to care for strangers, the poor, and especially the sick, "in all provinces of our empire", Justinian declared.

And charity wasn't the half of it. The Byzantine Empire was an intellectual powerhouse that ended up influencing the great Islamic intellectual tradition and, later, the western tradition, as well.

JD: The intellectual and creative life of Byzantium. Peter Brown, the famous Princeton historian said something to the effect of "they never needed a Renaissance because they had never lost any of the classical learning". Do you agree with that assessment?

AC: I absolutely agree with that, because they went on reading the classics and writing, making new manuscripts of them, all the way through. I think there was a time after Justinian when not very many people did actually read the classics, but they'd never lost it. Aristotle was very important, as well as Plato. And then later on, we get, we don't get a Renaissance, but we get a sort of wonderful cultural revival around the 11th century. And there are real scholars and textual critics doing extra editions of classical texts, which is pretty extraordinary. And, don't forget, they didn't have Greek in Western Europe at that time. They got Greek from the Byzantines.

John Dickson:

During the reign of Justinian, one of the greatest intellects of the late Roman world arose - John Philoponus. It's a name rarely heard today outside of the obscure fields of Byzantine history and the history of science.

In addition to treatises on Christian subjects like the Trinity, Philoponus produced detailed commentaries on Aristotle and wrote the first full-blown critique of Aristotle's concept of an eternal cosmos.

His argument was not that the Bible said so ("In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth", Genesis 1:1). Philoponus made his case for a time-bound, contingent universe—created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing)—on purely philosophical and logical grounds. His work touching on physics and metaphysics influenced early western scientists like Galileo.

And it is not well enough known that these great Byzantine Christian intellectuals were the ones who gifted classical Greek learning to the growing Muslim communities. It was even Christians who put it into Arabic, and from there Islamic society developed its own powerful intellectual tradition, which would later come back to the West.

Byzantine intellectual tradition continued into the following centuries.

Princeton's Peter Brown points out that (and I'm quoting) "Most of our finest manuscripts of the classics were produced in medieval Constantinople. Indeed, if it were not for Byzantine courtiers and bishops of the ninth and tenth centuries onwards, we should know nothing—except fragments in papyrus—of Plato, Euclid, Sophocles, and Thucydides."

In the west, classical works existed in Latin translations. But it was the Byzantines - these Christian Romans of the east - that preserved the works of the Greeks in their original form.

The library of Constantinople at the time of Justinian housed 120,000 works. Think about that.

Oxford University's famous Bodleian Library only got to 120,000 works in the 18th century - six centuries after the founding of the university.

Another impressive Byzantine figure who stands out to me is Photius I, the Patriarch of Constantinople in the 9th century. The patriarch is the head of the eastern churches, by the way - sort of a pope, sort of. Anyway, Photius left us some notes about his own recommended reading in a document known as the *Bibliotheca*. Photius summarizes and reviews 380 books that he recommends people read. How many of us could recommend even 50 books nowadays!!?

Photius' list includes many theological books, of course - about 233 actually, including Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, and others. But a further 147 of them are pagan or secular works, including Herodotus, Arrian, Plutarch, and the like. He frequently notes his disagreement with an author (whether pagan or Christian). But he still suggests that people should read each and every one.

Avril Cameron:

He knows more classical authors than we do. Because he knows about the ones who are lost to us now. Photius became the patriarch of Constantinople in the ninth century. In fact, he had a rather colourful career because he was thrown out, and then he was brought back. There was a lot of that. But he wrote this work called *The Bibliotheca*, which just means "the library", and he's supposed to have written it for his brother. I don't know if he did. It was little notes about all the authors that he'd read, and they were classical authors, so he had access to all these texts. He must have had a wonderful library.

JD: *But he's so free in it. I mean, even though he's a devout Christian believer. He can simultaneously say, "Oh, so and so has horrible pagan beliefs, but gosh, he's writing is beautiful and that sort of thing". It's so, it's generous as well.*

AC: Yes, I think it is. It is. And then, a century or so later, there was a Lexicon that did something rather similar. It's called the Pseuda. So they tell us how educated the Byzantines were in classical works, even when we think that they'd forgotten about them.

John Dickson:

A quick sidebar about what was going on in the West at this time.

It's interesting to me that Christianity continued to grow in both the wealthy, powerful east and in the fractious deteriorating west.

In the uncertain times of the 5th century, just after the fall of Rome, people in the western parts of the Roman Empire now lived under the rule of various barbarian kings. In this context, it seems people increasingly looked to the Church - and especially the bishop of Rome (the Pope) - as a source of social authority, legitimacy, and stability.

Minor kingdoms in Gaul (or what we call the Franks and later the French) started to convert to Christianity.

One King of the Franks, Clovis, declared his allegiance to Christianity around the year 500 and was baptised.

The most famous king of the Franks was Charlemagne in the 700s. He extended the territory held by the Franks, so that it encompassed present-day France, Germany, and northern Italy, bringing the Franks closer to lands heavily influenced by the Pope.

The Roman Catholic (or western) Church's ties with the Byzantines in the East were strained, and in AD 800 Pope Leo III named Charlemagne the first emperor of the 'Holy Roman Empire'.

The claim that Charlemagne was the "Emperor" of a new (Holy) "Roman Empire" in the west raised eyebrows in the east among the Byzantine emperors. For the easterners, the actual Roman Empire never ended. The ancient ideal of *Roma Aeterna* ("eternal Rome") still seemed entirely plausible.

Charlemagne's empire - the Carolingian Empire - deserves an entire episode. It was stunningly good ... and bad!

But this is not that episode.

Let's head back east to some extraordinary accomplishments - and the eventual downfall - of the Byzantine Empire... after the break.

Part 2:

John Dickson:

There's a clip on YouTube filmed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, which houses one of the most comprehensive collections of Byzantine art in the world.

For many, religious images - or 'icons' - are what most obviously distinguishes eastern Orthodox Christianity practice from the western tradition. And the emergence of this practice in Byzantine Christianity was a tumultuous one.

JD: Obviously a distinctive element of Byzantine Christianity is the use of icons. It's beautiful art. I find it mesmerizing personally, even though as a Protestant I'm not meant to. Can you give us a sense of the significance of icons in the Byzantine mindset?

AC: They became immensely important, but not until, around about the end of the 6th century or 7th century and eighth century. But they were also important in the West. You know, the earliest icons that we still have come from Rome, they come from the Roman sixth century. So there are several still surviving, whereas in Constantinople, nothing, nothing survives from that period. But I think, I think also, lots of Western people, if they know anything about Byzantium, they think, "Oh, that wonderful art", but they don't understand what it meant, which is very, very sad. We've had these huge, wonderful exhibitions in the major cities of London and Paris and New York. I've been around those exhibitions with people who are not presenting this, and they just think, "Oh, that's wonderful". But they have no idea what it means.

JD: What does it mean? What do Icons mean beyond the art?

AC: Well, they came to mean, they carried a lot of meaning. They were restricted in their content, and, they told the Byzantines about the history of Christianity. But we need, we need somebody to explain it to us before we can understand it before we can appreciate it. So, art history is very, very important for understanding Byzantium. I'm not an art historian, but you can't be a Byzantine historian without knowing about Byzantine art.

JD: *Did they see icons as a window to the eternal dimension?*

AC: They wouldn't have called it art. There's a book I'm thinking of about; *'Images Before the Era of Art'*. So with art, what we think we mean by art is something very different. We think about creative artists, but the makers of icons were not supposed to be creative. They followed lines that were more or less laid down. They were depicting the same versions or variations on the same subjects. And they thought they were acting, literally as the vessels of God. And actually, I was at a conference once about icons, and a lady in the audience said; "Well, I'm an icon painter, and you've got to realize that we think we are inspired by God. We're not artists".

John Dickson:

Around the 8th century, the Byzantine world was thrown into a century-long controversy that centred on the appropriate use of icons in religious worship.

The Old Testament prohibits the worship of 'graven images' (you'll find it in Exodus 20:4 - it's the second of the ten commandments), yet icons or 'sacred images' were becoming increasingly popular. We have written evidence that stories were beginning to circulate about the 'miraculous properties' of icons.

Anxiety began to spread about whether images like this were acceptable in Christianity. It culminated in 'iconoclasm' – which literally means "image breaking". We have archaeological evidence that, in some regions of Byzantium, icons were destroyed or plastered over. The cross of Christ was promoted as the most acceptable decorative form for Byzantine churches, and a (sometimes violent) campaign was waged against those who persisted in the use of icons.

According to Dame Averil, the reasons for this anxiety among the Byzantines at this particular time remain unclear.

It may have been a type of reform movement from within – people perhaps looked at the rise of Islam and thought it was God’s punishment on Christians for this controversial practice of using icons.

Whatever the reasons for this iconoclasm period in Byzantine history, it didn’t last. Icons grew once again in popularity and eventually it was wholly approved by the Byzantine religious elite. That’s why it’s still encouraged in the Orthodox church.

The restoration of images shaped the Byzantine Church for centuries to come says Dame Averil, and in many ways reinforced the shift away from the Roman Church in the west, which had long disapproved of icons.

From my western, protestant Christian viewpoint, the Orthodox Church of today can seem foreign and ‘other’. And icons, at least for me, have a lot to do with that. I am mesmerized by the aesthetics of icons, but I can’t get into them as windows to the spiritual realm, as the Orthodox see them, and as reminders of God’s own bodily incarnation in the person of Jesus, which is the other way the Orthodox explain icons.

But it would be plain wrong to think of icons as the defining aspect of Orthodox, or Byzantine, Christianity. The fact is, the most unifying statement of Christian belief ever produced was, in large part, the product of Byzantine theological brilliance. I am talking about the Nicene Creed, or what is more accurately called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, that is, the creed initially formed in 325 in Nicaea (during the time of Constantine) and brought to final form in the council of Constantinople in 381.

It is the only statement of Christian belief accepted and proclaimed by Catholics, Orthodox, and mainstream Protestants – Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and so on.

We sometimes forget that it was the great eastern or Byzantine theologians (like Gregory of Nazianzus) who finessed the wording in very precise and succinct language, describing Jesus, for example, as (to quote from the Creed) “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten,

not made, of one being with the Father. Through him, all things were made”.

One day we have to do an episode on the Council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed. There are so many silly myths about it.

But for now, all I want to point out is that the exacting language “begotten not made, of one being with the Father”, or of the Holy Spirit, “(he is) the Lord, the giver of life ... who with the father and the son is worshipped and glorified” is a perfect summary of the New Testament teaching about the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity. And it was the Byzantine Christians who gifted this to us.

Avril Cameron:

Byzantine Christianity is our Christianity. It started out as a single Christianity. And you then have to ask when and why did it separate? So we think of the East and the West as very separate and different traditions, but they were not for centuries and centuries. It was the history, simply the history of Christianity.

All these great figures like St. Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom and Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa, they're all late fourth century and they're revered in the West just as much as they are in the East. (They ere) fundamental writers about theology.

John Dickson:

The Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil the Great, are best known today (in theological circles) for their defence of the doctrine of the Trinity.

But, as I already pointed out with Basil the Great, all three were also passionate defenders of the poor and sick. They were theologically conservative, rigorous, and uncompromising (that's how I reckon it should be) but ... socially ... I reckon some conservatives today would dismiss these Byzantine thinkers as “social justice warriors”.

Gregory of Nazianzus' Oration 14, '*On Love for the Poor*', is the most systematic explanation of the centrality of charity I have ever seen.

It is 10,000 words of biblical, theological, and logical argumentation driving home the point that “love for the poor” is the supreme fruit of true Christian faith.

There is a lovely rhetorical build-up through successive paragraphs. “Faith, hope, and love are a fine thing”, he begins, before offering a sentence or two on that topic.

“Hospitality is a fine thing”, he adds, with a sentence or two more. “Zeal is a fine thing ...”, “Humility is a fine thing ...”. You get the idea.

A thousand or so words into the oration, he reaches his point;

“We must regard charity as the first and greatest of the commandments since it is the very sum of the Law and the Prophets”, and “its most vital part I find is the love of the poor along with compassion and sympathy for our fellow human being. We must, then, open our hearts to all the poor and to all those who are victims of disasters from whatever cause.”

From this paragraph, Gregory launches a barrage of arguments designed to leave his hearers, especially the wealthy, with nowhere to hide.

Gregory’s argumentation on behalf of the poor, just like Basil’s invention of the public hospital massively influenced the western church, which itself became the great champion of the destitute and founded literally thousands of hospitals throughout Europe in the following centuries.

As Dame Cameron says, the eastern fathers were (and are!) revered in the west, just as much as in the east.

And here is why Green Bay Community Church, Wisconsin, wanted to sponsor this episode. Under the leadership of my good mate Pastor Troy Murphy, these guys are trying to do something ‘Byzantine’, in the best sense of the word. They don’t want to just be a worship centre. They want to be a community centre - a locus of all kinds of good things in the city of Green Bay. They run leadership programs for locals. They have a large Giving Tree Food Pantry for people in need. They have garden plots on their campus so neighbours who need to can grow stuff and support their families. They run disabilities events. And they’re a member of the Green Bay Chamber of Commerce. I wouldn’t be surprised if one day they have a

free healthcare clinic for residents. Basil the Great would be chuffed. Check them out ... gbcommunitychurch.com

Thanks, guys, for bankrolling this episode.

Well, back to antiquity ... it's fair to say. Things weren't just sweetness and light in the Byzantine world. There were brewing tensions between the eastern and western churches. It ended up with a great parting of ways.

Excerpt - news transcript from 1964

“The beginning of a pilgrimage into history. Pope Paul VI leaves Rome airport on his precedent-shattering trip to the Holy Land. Even as he boards the plane, he creates a series of historical firsts. He is the first Pope to fly; the first Pope to leave Rome since 1809 and the first to visit the Holy Land in nearly 2000 years.”

John Dickson

There's historical newsreel footage from 1964 of the first meeting between the Roman Catholic Pope and the Eastern Orthodox Patriarch since what is known as the 'Great Schism'.

In 1054, the Patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerularius was excommunicated from the Catholic Church in Rome. And in return, the Pope was excommunicated from the Eastern Church. It was the culmination of a complex mix of disagreements about things like two words in the Nicene Creed, whether clerics should remain celibate, and particulars of the sacrament of communion.

The disagreements weren't trivial. For hundreds of years, we have the records of councils where church leaders met to discuss and try to resolve their differences, as they did at the Council of Nicaea in 325, the Council of Constantinople in 381, and the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

But Dame Averil believes that the 'Great Schism' of 1054 was not really as 'great' as it is often made out to be.

In fact, she reckons it was the Crusades (decades later) that forged the greater chasm between the eastern and western churches.

Remember, the Crusades started with the Byzantine Christian Emperor Alexius I begging the western pope Urban II for help to stop Muslim armies from conquering Constantinople. The West came to the rescue. It looked good for a while, but then not so much.

Avril Cameron:

Well, the problem really started with the Crusades. And when Venice, for example, started to want to go to the holy land and seize territory, First of all, Byzantines thought they could work with them, and then they realized they couldn't. And so things became very difficult then and they started hurling insults at each other. But actually, there wasn't really a split In 1054, there was a row, but there wasn't really a split until even later than that. There were quarrels but it didn't really end the unity of the church.

John Dickson:

It is easy to oversimplify the Crusades, so if you're looking for more in-depth listening, you should check out our two-part series on it - episodes 41 and 42, God's War.

But all we need to know for now is that the terrific success of Islam took everyone in the ancient Near East by surprise. Only a few years after Muhammad's death, his armies defeated the eastern Roman/Byzantine army on the Golan Heights near the border of modern Israel and Syria. They moved south, taking Jerusalem and Palestine in 637, and all of Egypt in 642. And on it went.

JD: Let's go from the seventh century right through to 1453. I mean, what happened prior? So in Justinian's period, and shortly after, the Byzantine Empire is massive. Hard to, hard to fathom. And then Islam comes along.

AC: Well, there was something in between, because what happened in between in that period, the Far East, was really the territory of ancient Peria, the Persian Empire, Iran. Byzantium and Sasanian Perian fought a massive war at the end of the sixth and beginning of the 10th century. And that really, war was on, turns out. And nobody knew. Nobody knew that a

new religion was going to emerge. Nobody knew. But that's what happened. Persia was defeated, by the way, and the first Arabs started raiding in Bezant what had been Byzantine territory in the Holy Land, for example.

This is six thirties. And by that time, the Byzantine Emperor and the Army were just exhausted. They couldn't deal with it. And anyway, they didn't know what was coming, so they just retreated and left it. And then we know what happened. It was overcome by the Arabs. And the Arabs were amazing, really, because they were able to, take over large chunks of the Byzantine Empire.

JD: So, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa and beyond - was this viewed as a catastrophe in the empire?

AC: Yes, it was ... Of course, it was. It took them a while to realize what was going on. Well, of course, it didn't happen overnight. The population of Constantinople shrank, and they had a very, very bad period for about a hundred years. But they recovered themselves, and they didn't exactly learn to live with Islam, but they, they recognized it as a feature of world history now, and they found ways of dealing with it. But they were, they were much smaller. Much smaller.

JD: What happened in places like Alexandria, which, you know, was a flourishing intellectual centre in the Byzantine period - well, obviously in the previous Byzantine period - but some of those great scholars, John Philoponus and so on, from Alexandria. What happened to them when these became Islamic cities? Were all schools shut down or ...?

AC: In the first place in Egypt where the Arabs set up their own capital. They didn't try to rule from Alexandria, so they didn't really, as it were, conquer Alexandria and turf everybody out at all. It just happened gradually. Then when they moved their capital a bit later, it was to what we now call Tunis. Alexandria became a backwater. I've been there. And my word, it still is a backwater. It's tragic.

JD: So the Islamic empires obviously could hold the Byzantine Empire. But did the Islamic Empire receive anything from the Byzantines?

AC: Well, they used to trade with each other. And the slave trade was very important in both directions. But yes. in the first place, a wonderful thing that the Arabs did in a very short time because they'd arrived in Syria. They

hadn't got any sea power. They built a fleet, and, they defeated the Byzantines and Sea battles and the Mediterranean within a decade. That was really extraordinary. It must have been a terrible shock.

John Dickson:

By the 1050s, Islamic forces had captured much of the old Byzantine empire.

That's what provoked the First Crusade, which in 1099 won back the Holy Lands into Christian hands.

But that didn't last for long.

Muslim forces pushed back, successfully. So there was a second and third Crusade, both western military failures.

Then comes the fourth Crusade, which wasn't so much a failure as a Christian catastrophe!

The Crusaders struck a military-financing deal with Venice. And together they attacked Constantinople itself. They felt these eastern Christians hadn't done enough to support the crusader project. So the Crusaders took the very city from the very people who had begged them for help against the Muslims in the first place.

JD: You mentioned the Crusades, which bizarrely ... the fourth crusade took Constantinople?

AC: That was a very low point. They weren't all wonderful religious high-minded people, the Crusaders, and nor were the Byzantines. So the Venetians in particular were blamed for this and they realized that they could just, you know, take Constantinople. They hadn't set out to do that. But in fact, that's what they did. So for 50 years or so the Byzantine rulers were driven out, and there was, what we call a Latin Empire. So there was even a, I mean, it was called Romania. There were Westerners or Latins, as they are often called, uh, actually ruling in Constantinople. But then the Byzantines got back again. 1261. They got back.

The thing had really petered out, and the Westerners couldn't really maintain it, not forever. It was impossible. And so the Byzantines had moved across to, in the intervening period, they'd moved across to Western

Turkey. Then they got back. And then the very final period, which in many ways is the most culturally flourishing period of Byzantium, was that time after they recovered the city from 1261 until 1453.

John Dickson:

In her book, *'Byzantine Christianity'*, Dame Averil writes that the Byzantine experience of the sack of Constantinople by the crusaders in 1204 led to "intense bitterness against the Latins, which became an intensifying factor in the hostile attitudes to the western church". Fair enough really!!

The whole thing was bizarre. For 57 years, there was a Latin Empire in Constantinople, the seat of the Greek-speaking eastern Roman Empire. But in 1261, the Byzantines regained the city and began the last, flourishing era of Christian Byzantine history. But it was a very different world.

The Ottomans (named after the great Islamic dynasty of Osman I) soon crossed into Europe in the 14th century and began their conquest to become another of the world's most powerful empires - one that would last until the 20th century (though even then, the Ottoman Empire lasted about *half* the time that the Byzantine Empire did!).

Avril Cameron:

Well, what I say is that of course by then the Byzantine Empire was very, very small. They had shrunk, but it wasn't because they, in my opinion, it wasn't because they declined. It was because the world changed around them. And the world in the 15th century was very different from what it had been in the fourth century. So just as they hadn't really understood or realized what was happening with the rise of Islam in the seventh century, so they didn't really realize that the Turks were going to be so important, and the Ottomans were in the meantime growing and developing their own rule. That was the reason, really. But, my word, they tried hard to hold on. So the story of the last days of Constantinople and the siege is quite inspiring in many ways. But they were relying on Venice. They were, they were relying on ships coming from Venice to help, and they never arrived.

JD: *Why was that?*

AC: Oh, because the Venetians were a tr treacherous. They were only interested in money.

John Dickson:

At the turn of the 15th century, Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologus made a desperate visit to the west to ask for help to beat back the Ottomans, who had surrounded his lands.

He visited Paris, and he even dined with King Henry IV of England, where one courtier wrote of the meeting;

"I reflected how grievous it was that this great Christian prince should be driven by the Saracens (Muslims) from the furthest east to these furthest Western islands ... O God, what dost thou now, ancient glory of Rome?"

But the west, of course, demanded that the Byzantine church accept the authority of the western Pope. Manuel couldn't do that.

Manuel's successor John VIII attempted to accept those terms, but the eastern bishops said no way.

So they all started looking north to Russia, the only state still ruled by an Orthodox (that is, Byzantine Christian) monarch. Maybe they would protect the Orthodox world.

Constantinople did soon fall to the Ottomans in 1453. Even Russia couldn't stop this final collapse of the Byzantine Empire.

But here's the weird thing.

Russia came to see itself as the protector of the Orthodox or Byzantine culture and religion. And so, just as Constantinople had been considered the "second Rome", so now Russian writers began to speak of Moscow as "the third Rome".

Ivan the Great, the Grand Prince of Moscow, married the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor, Constantine XI, in 1472. And Ivan assumed the double-headed eagle of the Roman and Byzantine Empires as the symbol of the Russian Empire.

Russian leaders began to call themselves Tsars, T. S. A R. - which comes directly from the Latin 'Caesar'.

I know it's complicated (there could be episodes within episodes here) but the thing is: the Byzantine influence is everywhere. Whether valid or not, there is a stream of contemporary Russian thinking that sees itself as the continuation of the Byzantine Empire, and, therefore, the continuation of the Roman Empire.

JD: *Can we probe what you would regard as the legacy of the Byzantine Empire?*

AC: Oh, yes. Well, it's very important to know something about it because, I've tried to emphasize that they stayed together, East and West stayed together for a very long term. But of course, Eastern Christianity is now very, very widespread in the form of orthodoxy. And you can't really understand Middle Eastern politics, or what's going on in the world today, or indeed Russia, or Ukraine or any of those countries unless you know something about Orthodox churches.

There are very, very many Orthodox churches in the world now, different ones. And the structure of that church is very different from Roman Catholics, for example, or indeed Protestants. But I think people need to know something about it. And I've been very struck in the reporting about Ukraine that hardly any mention has ever been given to the religious element. And yet Putin ... it's very important for Putin because Christianity came to Russia from the Ukraine. The Prince of Vladimir was the Prince of Kiev, known as Kyiv now. And, he became a Christian through the influence of Byzantium in the 10th century. And after that, I mean, Moscow hadn't been founded for several centuries, but it became, it became Christian because it followed the example of Eastern Christianity in Ukraine. They didn't call it Ukraine, of course.

JD: *So you're saying that there is this religious element that, that Putin's Russia sees Kyiv as its birthplace or birthright?*

AC: Well, Putin himself certainly does. I don't know what he believes and what he doesn't believe, but he's very close to the Church of Moscow and the patriarch of Moscow, who takes a very hard line as well. You can bet your life that that was a powerful influence for Putin, but it's hardly ever mentioned.

John Dickson:

We'll put a few links in the show notes for you to explore the Byzantine history of Russian President Vladimir Putin's desire for a Russian Empire. Of course, nothing is simple. But there is something in the idea that Byzantine history underpins the current Ukraine/Russian conflict.

History matters.

And popular history has completely messed things up along the way.

You'll often hear that the Byzantine Empire was a dark, ignorant and oppressive blotch on history's page, bookended by the light of the Roman Empire before it, and the enlightened West on the other.

That's just nuts.

Byzantium was amazing ... and a mess! It was mixed - like us, really.

Peter Sarris, who wrote the *'Oxford Very Short Introduction to the Byzantine Empire'*, makes an interesting comment;

"Byzantium was a Christian society in which monks and churchmen, as well as Christian laymen, preserved the fruits of classical Greek (and pagan) philosophy, literature, and learning. Because of this, it would always generate individuals who, through their reading, would come to prefer Homer to Christ, or Plato to St Paul."

Byzantium was often a combination of pagan and Christian: violent and charitable, learned and bigoted.

But we should never forget that the intellectual founders of the Byzantine Empire - Basil, Gregory, Photius, and so on, achieved massive intellectual and practical good – from the Nicene Creed to hospitals, from charity to the poor to the Western legal tradition itself. These people read both Homer and Christ, both Plato and Paul, and they found a way to love both and reshape society in Christ's name, sometimes for the ill, often for lasting good.

It's history, so it's not simple!

Avril Cameron:

You can't have a simple legacy from an 1100 year Empire. What I try to emphasize is how it changed. It changed during that immensely long

period. Some aspects stayed, there was always an emperor. But many aspects changed, and the world in which it operated and functioned as an empire changed as well. We don't think other states were always the same. They weren't. Nor was Byzantium.

