Although Byzantium took both political structures and outlook from Rome, it also elaborated on them in new ways. The “big government” of the Byzantine Empire—elaborate imperial ceremonies, huge bureaucracies, heavy-handed state regulation—eventually exceeded anything the late Roman Empire had seen. And the complex, sometimes devious schemes of Byzantine rulers went so far beyond the cautious mind-set of late Roman politics that even today the word “Byzantine” is a synonym for inflexible or complicated political strategies.

**Byzantine Christianity**

Christianity had first taken strong hold in the Eastern Empire, and it remained a dominant force in Byzantium. The patriarch of Constantinople eventually came to head an Eastern Orthodox Church. “Orthodox” in this context means not merely a correct opinion, but an Eastern form of Christianity (which today embraces self-governing branches in Greece, Russia, Serbia, and elsewhere). In the Early Middle Ages, this Orthodox Church came to define both doctrine and authority in different ways from the Catholic Church headed by the pope in Rome. For Byzantines, Christian faith was a compelling identity that defined their very existence. When they fought against Avars, Slavs, and Bulgarians on their northern borders in the sixth century and against Arabs to their south and east from the seventh