

Metropolitan Maximos of Selyvria

The Orthodox Church and Postmodernism

Your Eminences,
Reverend Clergy,

Introduction

I would like to begin by expressing my deep gratitude to the Italian Episcopal conference for inviting me to speak at such an important symposium which promotes the dialogue between the two sister Churches and through which both give a common witness to our contemporary world.

To be in dialogue with people of different traditions and backgrounds is a theological principle common to both Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology. Each time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, we confess our belief in the Holy Trinity, which means that our God is one and, at the same time, a communion of persons in dialogue with one another. The very act of salvation is the result of a dialogue of love within the immanent Trinity. As Peter confessed, Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that means that He is the beloved Son of God the Father. Peter's confession shows the loving relation between the Son and the Father. The Father wills (εὐδοκεῖ) the salvation of the world and the other two persons freely and out of love participate actively in the Father's initiative. The great Eastern Fathers always followed this principle and were actively engaged in dialogue with their cultural environment. Even the renowned Russian theologian Georges Florovsky pointed out the very need for contextual Orthodox theology in terms of a neopatristic synthesis.¹

¹ Μητροπολίτου Περγάμου Ἰωάννης, «Ἡ ἐπικαιρότητα καί διαχρονικότητα τῆς Νεο-Πατερικῆς Συνθέσεως, paper presented to the conference on "Neo-Patristic Synthesis or Post-Patristic Theology: Can Orthodox Theology be Contextual?" held at the Volos Academy for Religious Studies, June 3-6, 2010, pp.6-10.

Vatican II was not only great in its theological achievements, which open the way to a patristic understanding of the Church, but also in its openness to the modern world. Just as Christ, by assuming flesh and body, entered into a human contextual environment in order to save creation, so His Body the Church must follow. As a way of articulating Christian theology within the context of a cultural-philosophical environment, ideas and structures of a particular place and time, contextuality has always been in the Orthodox Church a legitimate and necessary principle rooted in the life of the Church.² It is, in fact, a pastoral principle aimed at answering the existential needs and questions of man, without betraying or changing the basic principles of Orthodox anthropology. Nevertheless, it is not only a pastoral principle; it is also a theological one: the nature of the Church is catholic. It is an inclusive reality open to dialogue with the outside world.

From what we have said, the question arises: Are Orthodox anthropology and Orthodox ecclesiology relevant to our world today? The answer to this, of course, is linked to another question – about how we approach the relationship between the Orthodox Church and culture today – or as some would describe Western postmodern culture.

In the past, several Russian and Greek Orthodox theologians approached the relationship between East and West through antithetical schemes. Specifically, I'm thinking of Alexi Khomiakov (19th century) and John Romanides (20th century). Although their theology was a reaction to the scholastic and juridical understanding of the Church of their day, they themselves were admittedly influenced by Western theology. In particular, John Romanides has been criticised for adopting in his theology a psychological subjectivism

² Γεωργίου Μαρτζέλου, 'Ο ρόλος της «συναφειακής θεολογίας» κατά την 'Ορθόδοξη Παράδοση», http://users.auth.gr/~martzelo/index_files/arthra_n.htm, pp.2-9.

similar to that of Augustine.³ With the use of a polarised scheme – ‘The Western Franks and the Orthodox Romans’ – Romanides’ theology became an ideological shelter for many Orthodox, as well as an example for many young theologians. In Romanides’ theological analysis of Orthodoxy, they saw an alternative to a juridical understanding of the Orthodox Church. Such schemes, if successful, inevitably would have led to the alienation of the Orthodox Church from the world, turning her into a ghetto.

To a certain extent, it seems that the Orthodox suffer from the illness of narcissism, from a type of self-admiration for our Orthodox faith and for our great Eastern Byzantine tradition, which could be dangerous if it becomes self-isolating. On the one hand, some Orthodox theologians simply regurgitate the teaching of the Fathers and others approach them from an exclusively historical point of view without any real engagement or sense of application for our present day and age.⁴ On the other hand, Elder Metropolitan of John (Zizioulas) Pergamon – himself a student of Florovsky, Nicolaos Nissiotis and Christos Yannaras – followed another line of thought and has been engaged in a constructive dialogue with Western philosophical trends – such as, for instance, existentialism and modernism. We should recall in this context that in June 2010, an important conference was held in the city of Volos on this relevant issue: “Neopatristic synthesis or Post-Patristic Theology: Can Orthodox theology be contextual?” At this important conference, certain theologians pointed out the need for an articulation of a patristic contextual theology. Greek Orthodox theologians and Church leaders criticised certain theological ideas expressed at this conference, such as the “neo patristic synthesis.” This criticism itself shows that some Orthodox still fail to read “the signs of the time” and such negative attitudes might lead the Orthodox Church to a form of marginalization. It has been noted that, throughout its recent history, Orthodox Christianity seems to be afraid of modernity and has never engaged in serious and critical dialogue with

³ Νικόλαος Λουδοβίκος, *Ἡ Ἐκκλησιολογία τοῦ Ὁμοουσίου*, p. . . .

⁴ Μητροπολίτου Περγάμου Ἰωάννης, «Ἡ ἐπικαιρότητα καί διαχρονικότητα τῆς Νεο-Πατερικῆς Συνθέσεως, p. 4.

the modern world. However, there are some exceptions to this.⁵ Nevertheless, the accusation that Orthodox Christians never confronted modernity is mainly due to the fact that Orthodoxy lived in a colonial and post-colonial situation.⁶ As far as I know, the issue raised by modernity has begun to be discussed in Greece. The discussion about the relation between Church and State indicates this very clearly. The challenges of postmodernism make it imperative for the Orthodox Church to face the answers to these challenges without denying the fundamental principles of her ancient and sacred Tradition and teaching. Let me first state that the identity of postmodernism is not fully clarified. Postmodernism, as it is commonly described, is a critical stance towards modernity. However, often times, it is also considered to be a new version and continuation of modernity, keeping some elements of modernity as well.⁷ Nevertheless, some of the contours of postmodernism are touched upon hereafter, especially concerning the Orthodox Church.

A. Towards a dialogue of the Orthodox Church with the postmodern world.

What are the main theological-patristic principles with which we can articulate a theology within the context of a postmodern world? I must stress that these theological principles are not ethical and psychological. If Orthodox theology is not able to provide something more than ethic, then I am afraid that Orthodoxy risks being reduced to a worldly institution for helping people or a psychological therapy centre, which could be replaced by a similar state institution. What, then, are the principles that shape the identity of Orthodox theology and render it distinct?

⁵See Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Challenges of Renewal and Reformation facing the Orthodox Church," *Ecumenical Review*, Vol.61, July 2009, pp.160-161.

⁶ Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Orthodoxy, Postmodernity, and Ecumenism: The difference that Divine-Human Communion makes," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 42:4, Fall 2007, pp.527-529.

⁷ See Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Orthodox Theology and the Challenges of a Post-secular Age: Questioning the public Relevance of the current Orthodox Theological 'Paradigm'" in *Proceedings of the International Conference Academic Theology in a post secular age*, Lviv, 2013, p. 12.

Let me refer to these distinct theological principles:

a) The ecclesiology of communion and otherness.

Essentially, the ethos of Orthodoxy is eucharistic. The centre of the entire Orthodox life and spirituality is the Eucharist. As Orthodox, we are grateful to the Russian theologian Nikolai Afanassieff for the rediscovery of a eucharistic ecclesiology, which had been lost in the years of Orthodox captivity to scholasticism. However, Afanassieff's ecclesiology would be incomplete without the contribution of Zizioulas' eucharistic ecclesiology of communion. In my opinion, Afanassieff's inspired ecclesiology exercised its great influence within the strict context of ecumenical – that is, inter-Christian – dialogue, while Zizioulas' broader ecclesiology moves beyond a strictly Christian framework and also engages with contemporary philosophical trends.

One of the fundamental principles of Orthodox ecclesiology is that the Church is communion. The whole event of ecclesial communion originates from the Holy Trinity. The heart of ecclesial communion is the inter-personal life of the Holy Trinity. According to the Cappadocian Fathers, this communion has a hierarchical structure. The Father is the first among the other persons, but this priority does not threaten the equality of the other two persons, as Metropolitan John has expressly indicated in his excellent work *Communion and Otherness*.⁸ Otherness is affirmed in the Holy Trinity. Though Metropolitan's John conception of Trinity has been criticised – primarily because of confessionalistic prejudices and presuppositions – I believe that his view on the Trinity is biblical and patristic, one that meets the challenges of our cultural environment. It is not only a strictly academic or scholarly approach, but its character is deeply existential. What are the implications, then, of such a Trinitarian theology in our era, which many describe today as postmodern?

⁸John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, t&t clark, USA, 2006.

One of the characteristics of postmodernism is its concern with particularity and otherness. Otherness and respect for difference – for different opinions, and for other people regardless of their religion, colour, nationality or language – is a key idea of postmodernism.⁹ Indeed, postmodernism has revived the concept of particularity that in principle has always been central to the Cappadocian’s teaching on the Holy Trinity.

Is the postmodern conception of otherness compatible with the patristic perception of otherness? This is a very crucial question. As Metropolitan John of Pergamon has indicated, for leading postmodern thinkers, the identity of otherness is not definitively affirmed! There is no possibility of embodying reality. According to one postmodern thinker: “As identity approaches, difference withdraws”.¹⁰ Patristic thought, on the other hand, is deeply concerned with the survival of the particular. Though postmodernism declares the death of the self and self-identity, questioning subjectivity, on the other hand, it does not clearly affirm, otherness and particularity. Thus, the particularity of a person disappears from the horizon of existence. For patristic thought, man is an icon of God – a particular and unique person. Zizioulas explains it in this way:

“Man, for the Fathers, is the ‘image of God’. He is not God by nature. since he is *created* , that is he had a beginning, and thus is subject to the limitations of space and time...Nevertheless, he is called to exist in the way God exists...Living according to nature (*kata physin*) would thus amount to individualism, mortality, and so on, since man is not immortal *kata physin*. Living, on the other hand, according to the image of God means living in the way God exists, that is, an image of God’s personhood, and this would amount to ‘to becoming God’. This is what the *theosis* of man means in the thinking of Greek Fathers... The Cappadocians have taught us that the Trinity is not a matter for academic speculation, but for personal relationship. As such, it is truth

⁹ Δημήτρης Μπεκριδάκης, «Μετανεωτερικότητα, Θρησκεία, και Όρθοδοξη Θεολογία-Κριτικές έπισημάνσεις για τή μεταξύ τους σχέση», in *Όρθοδοξία και Νεωτερικότητα*, Ίνδικτος, Αθήναι, 2007, p. 439.

¹⁰ John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 53.

revealed only by participation in the Father-Son relationship through the Spirit which allows us to cry *Abba*, Father (Rom. 8:15;Gal. 4.6). The Trinity is therefore revealed only in the Church, that is the community through which we become children of the Father of Jesus Christ.”¹¹

Eucharistic ecclesiology cannot be understood simply as a loving community of persons. Such a conception of the Church fits more with the Protestant view of the Church. Eucharistic ecclesiology includes the office of the bishop as the head of a local Church. Apart from being a necessary element for the preservation of the unity of the Church, it is also an indispensable – a *sine qua non* – element for the life of the Church. It originates from the life of the Holy Trinity, in whom the Father is the principle of unity, while being in unbreakable communion with the other two persons. Communion is a catholic event and thus is not limited to the local level but is also applied to the universal level. As there is communion on the local level, so there is also communion on the regional and universal levels, namely communion between the local Churches. Given the fact that pressure is exercised within the Orthodox Church for greater democratization, the Orthodox Church should work seriously with an ecclesiology of communion, which would penetrate deeply the institutions of the Orthodox Church.

One of the characteristics of postmodernism is that it questions the established institutions and their authoritative claim to truth. The postmodern ethos rejects any authoritarianism. It wants to annihilate the given order and to support the rights of individuals to any opinion that contradicts the official view.¹² Such a negative attitude, combined with the demand for more democratization, should force the Orthodox Church to leave behind any authoritative view of the Church and develop an ecclesiology of communion. Otherwise, the

¹¹ *Communion and Otherness*, pp.165-166;170.

¹² Δημήτρης Μπεκρινδάκης, «Μετανεωτερικότητα, Θρησκεία, και Όρθοδοξη Θεολογία», p. 439.

Orthodox Church will face the danger of disintegration.¹³ I imagine that our Roman Catholic brothers share my concerns. Thanks to great theologians of the 20th century, such as Henri De Lubac, Yves Congar and Dom Lambert Beauduin, a eucharistic ecclesiology of communion and the notion of episcopal collegiality developed in Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Both of these ideas were adopted by Vatican II, and so the Church was no longer understood as a purely pyramidal organization with the Pope as its head and administrator. Despite Vatican II's insistence on an ecclesiology of communion, its doctrine of papal primacy remains an authoritarian one. From the conclusion of Vatican II to our time, there have been voices in the Roman Catholic Church asking for greater democratization. It seems to me that, in the Roman Catholic Church, communion ecclesiology and the notion of episcopal collegiality, which are both interdependent, are nonetheless still limited! The ongoing dialogue between our two Churches gives us hope and expectations that these issues will be resolved.

The Document of Ravenna (2007) entitled *Ecclesiological and Canonical consequences of the Sacramental nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority* – together with the previous documents of the theological dialogue between our Churches – places the ministry of primacy within the context of conciliarity, which itself is a manifestation of ecclesial communion: “The authority of a synod is based on the nature of the episcopal ministry itself, and manifests the collegial nature of the episcopate at the service of the communion of Churches” (Ravenna 25). It further asserts clearly that primacy and conciliarity are interdependent (Ravenna 43). All the documents produced by the theological dialogue rely upon this communion ecclesiology, which is a key theological perception through which we must read and understand the documents.

¹³See also Μητροπολίτου Περγάμου Ιωάννης, «Η επικαιρότητα καί διαχρονικότητα τῆς Νεο-Πατερικῆς Συνθέσεως», p.18.

b) The eschatological dimension

Another essential component of eucharistic ecclesiology is its eschatological dimension. Despite the fact that the Church lives in this world, she is not of this world. There is, therefore, an antinomy in her life. In the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, each local Church united in her bishop is a foretaste and icon of the gathering of all creation united in Christ, a gathering of God's Kingdom. The Church is eschatological in her nature. By the power and invocation of the Holy Spirit, the event of Christ becomes an eschatological reality. However, we cannot say that the Church is solely oriented towards the Kingdom of Heaven. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church iconically experiences the eschaton, namely, the new earth and the new heaven (Rev. 21:1). Every time we celebrate the Holy Liturgy of St. Basil, we address Jesus Christ as "the pledge of our future inheritance", which means that our life in Christ is a reality that belongs to the future. It is not my intention here to present the Orthodox view on an eschatological ecclesiology. Many Orthodox theologians have extensively written on this issue. What is significant here is that the eschatological consideration of the Church bears a relevance to our postmodern view of reality. For postmodernism, any given and unchangeable reality is considered tyrannical, imposed and totalitarian. An eschatological approach – which regards the final reality as belonging to the future – would be a liberating answer to our postmodern rejection of any given reality and order.¹⁴ What is more important – the Eastern Fathers teach that the Kingdom of God will be a constant movement towards new realities. As St. John of the Ladder puts it: "ἀτέλειστος τελειότης" (never-ending perfection) and not only a static reality. This must be taken seriously by Orthodox theology, as it coincides with the concerns of our postmodern reality. The theological question, then, about whether Christ is an eschatological being or an event

¹⁴ Μητροπολίτου Περγάμου Ἰωάννης, «Ἡ ἐπικαιρότητα καὶ διαχρονικότητα τῆς Νεο-Πατερικῆς Συνθέσεως», p. 17.

perpetuated through history (*Christus prolongatus*) is critical. If Christ is understood as an event coming from the past, perpetuated and prolonged through history, which is also the classical Orthodox view: would such a view have any relevance to postmodern culture?

c) The psychological dimension

In our postmodern epoch, the Orthodox Church faces the danger of being identified with a psychological centre of care – like a hospital – providing the people with individual-spiritual therapy and rest. This is due to the fact that many Orthodox people emphasise the therapeutic dimension of the Church. In this case, the spiritual elder is a kind of psychologist who offers spiritual therapy. I have heard many people saying how relieved they feel after confessing to their spiritual fathers. Nobody can ignore the therapeutic element in the Church. The Church should take care of the whole existence of man and, thus, also his spiritual and material needs. My deep concern comes from the fact that, if the Church is primarily seen as a holy institution that offers a kind of psychological rest and therapy, then how can her unique identity be seen in our postmodern society, where new age spiritualities and eastern religions are predominant and have deeply affected the life of our Orthodox people while also offering a mystical individualistic therapy? As we have pointed out, the true identity of the Church lies in the Eucharist! However, it should be underlined out that many Orthodox people – at least in Greece – view the event of the eucharistic celebration as a means for their individual struggle against their sins or passions and ignore that the Eucharist is the most anti-individualistic act! The eminent Greek scholar Christos Yannaras, in his book entitled *Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event* (2013), has sufficiently indicated how religious individualism has deeply affected Orthodox ecclesial life. Therapy from sin is only completed by our participation in the eucharistic life of the Church, which is in fact the realization of the communal life of the Trinity.

d) The need for interreligious dialogue

The Orthodox Church is today faced with the challenge of globalisation and the extraordinary encounter of peoples, cultures and religions, all of which create a diversity against any homogenous, social and ethnic entities. Some theorists think positively and believe that globalization contributes to the emergence of particular cultures.

Given the fact that the Orthodox Church suffers from the dangerous illness of ethnophyletism – or nationalism – which has been condemned by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the 19th century, globalization should be seen as a opportunity for the Orthodox Church. She should not be exclusively identified with ethnic groups and nationalism which consider or considering globalisation as a threat. Indeed, globalisation presents a view of unity that respects identity and otherness. Nevertheless, a simple respect of individual religious and cultural rights is not sufficient! The Orthodox Church cannot simply speak of tolerance of and coexistence with other religions or cultures in a spirit of mutual understanding and respect. Patristic thought offers a different approach and ethos. It is the kenotic ethos of loving absolutely all of creation, the other being, regardless of religion, race and nation. It is in this context that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has initiated dialogues not only with other non-Orthodox Churches but also with various religions, in particular with Islam and Judaism. Such an ethos derives from the eucharistic life of the Church and embraces all of creation, which is sanctified and affirmed in the Eucharist. At the same time, we experience the sinful exploitation of creation and the environment by contemporary man. This exploitation of the environment is associated with the present global tendency toward over-consumption and capitalism. The prophetic voice of the Ecumenical Patriarchate has warned of the danger of such an exploitation.

B. Conclusion

Ultimately, the Orthodox Church should not isolate itself out of a fear of globalization and postmodernism, considering them a threat. The Orthodox Church has always been a Church of dialogue in accordance with the Holy Fathers, who were deeply engaged in dialogue with their culture. Pluralism, freedom, autonomy and acceptance of the other are the characteristic values of our postmodern society. At the same time, we note a counterbalancing-holistic view, which aims at unification on each level, be it political, economic and religious. In face of such an uncertain situation, the Orthodox Church cannot react with any kind of fundamentalism justified as a patristic or a slavish imitation of Tradition. Nor can it be closed within a form of pre-modernism. Given the fact that postmodernism aims to end any kind of ideology, such fundamentalism would turn the Orthodox Church into an ideology. This is a sectarian approach and betrays the catholicity and the catholic nature of the Orthodox Church. A holistic view that respects both particularity and otherness – a unity in diversity – would be a real answer for our society and time. We cannot simply reject or ignore the world we live in! Just as our Lord assumed flesh for the life of the world in a particular time and place, so too the Church must follow the example of the Lord and incarnate her theology and life in accordance to the existential needs of our contemporary world. My humble paper neither claims any originality with regard to the relation between the Orthodox Church and postmodernism nor covers extensively this immense and significant issue in all its aspects. Instead, it is aimed at sharing with our Roman Catholic brothers my Orthodox concerns in the face of the challenges posed by our contemporary society.

Thank you for your attention!