The Church in Times of Crisis: A Refuge or a Driver for Change?

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The multiple calamities of our time—ecological catastrophe, financial crisis, the coronavirus pandemic—are widening socio-economic inequalities, as the very rich accumulate more wealth and economic power at the expense of the socio-economically disadvantaged. More and more people, particularly those with deteriorating standards of living, are suffering from an intense existential crisis as they are unable to realize the fundamental goal of modern capitalism: to become financially successful individuals. On top of this, daily deaths from Covid-19 have increased anxiety and fear as people have been forced to confront the upsetting reality of their mortal condition, which was previously well hidden beneath the intense rhythms of life and the daily hunt for professional success and productivity. In these circumstances, people are searching for a path out of financial and existential despair. Some give up, turning to suicide or psychotropic drugs. Some chase after conspiracy theories. Others find solace in political activism. Finally, some look to new or traditional forms of religion.

Religion contributes significantly to the endless process of building a meaningful world, for it provides an all-encompassing understanding of the meaning of life.[1] It therefore becomes attractive as a means to cope with the pressure of existential anxiety. People also turn to religious institutions for their urgent material needs, as organized religion plays an active role in social welfare programs. This is particularly important in countries with limited welfare provisions or fragile economies.

There is no doubt that Christian churches mobilize their spiritual and material resources to help those affected by the turbulent events of our era. In doing so, they act in accordance with the Christian belief that all people are created in the image of God, and therefore should not be marginalized or consigned to poverty. From a theological perspective, inequality and injustice violate God's will for humanity. However, from a sociological perspective, churches are powerful worldly institutions with strong links to the existing sociopolitical and economic systems that produce and structure multiple forms of inequality. Moreover, churches maintain and reproduce unequal power relations within their own ranks, a situation that goes against not only the idea of equality that is so central to modern liberal democracies, but also the traditional Christian understanding of equality: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

[1] See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1967).

These contradictions, together with a succession of scandals with regard to everything from financial mismanagement to sexual abuse by priests, have led a growing number of the faithful either to completely reject organized religion (the so-called "dones") or to develop a more activist stance, demanding deep structural changes in the church—for instance, transparency, greater control of power, ordination of women, and sexual diversity. The initiatives Maria 2.0 (which works for gender equality in the Roman Catholic Church in Germany) and #OutInChurch (dedicated to the protection of the LGBTQ+ rights in the same church) are cases in point.

But do these challenges also affect the Orthodox Church and, if so, how? As will become clear, central features of Orthodoxy, such as its otherworldliness, reinforce conservative attitudes toward both the sociopolitical and ecclesiastical order. This is not to suggest that these elements are absent from Western churches. However, they loom larger in Orthodoxy, as they shape its core identity for reasons that have to do with the different sociopolitical and theological developments that took place in Eastern Christianity compared to those in Western Christianity.[2] But since Orthodox Christianity, like any other religion, is not a homogeneous entity, there are contrasting theological currents within the tradition that perceive these elements differently and, in doing so, attempt to make Orthodoxy more compatible with the context of modern liberal democracy.

The Mystical as a Refuge

The Orthodox Church, with its rich Byzantine rituals and profound otherworldly spiritual orientation, retains a strong sense of transcendence—something that has been weakened in Western Christianity, especially in Protestantism. It suffices to observe the interior space of an Orthodox church, where the numerous icons and wall paintings of saints, the iconostasis covered with icons, and the lighted candles create an atmosphere of divine mystery and calmness distinct from the noisy, everyday reality. In such a setting, people shattered by harsh sociopolitical realities can find consolation and hope for real eternal life as compared with the ephemeral mundane one. This is also because they receive theological yet straightforward explanations for personal misfortunes and for the troubles of our complicated world. For instance, suffering in the world is interpreted as a consequence of the fallen state of humanity and personal problems as pedagogical trials for the sake of spiritual growth. Speaking sociologically, they find a solution to the wrenching problem of *theodicy*. The importance of meaning and hope within conditions of pain, uncertainty, and economic despair should not be underestimated, especially if one considers that hopelessness can lead to suicide. The huge increase in the suicide rates in Greece during the financial crisis in the 2010s is an illustrative example in this respect.

However, there are also negative aspects to the mystical and ritual character of Orthodoxy: passivity, irrationalism, and traditionalism. As a rule, the mystical functions as a refuge from the frustrating reality. Believers close themselves off from the outside world, for it causes pain and distracts attention from the most important issue, namely salvation. What matters most here is the change of the inner self (liberation from passions and, ultimately, theosis), which is considered a precondition for the transformation

[2] See Vasilios N. Makrides, "Secularity and Christianity: Comparing Orthodox with Western Perspectives," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 63.3–4 (2018): 49–107

of the external sociopolitical conditions. This change is expected to occur mystically and liturgically, not through human reason or sociopolitical action. The door to irrationalism is thus wide open: "With rational criteria, the prospects are extremely painful. With irrational hope, social awakening remains forever possible," as the well-known Greek Orthodox theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras once put it.[3] The problem with the spirit of irrationalism is that it cannot be controlled, since it defies all criteria of truth and logic. It can thus take various forms, some with fatal consequences. The behavior of many believers and religious actors during the ongoing pandemic crisis is particularly instructive here: they refused to observe health and safety measures (such as the use of masks, and vaccination) and continued to partake of holy communion with a single shared spoon, on the grounds that the true believer is miraculously protected by the divine.

As believers expect everything from the mystical activity of the Holy Spirit, and while they confine themselves to prayer and worship, they remain passive recipients of grace from God through his ministers, the priests. This stance has political implications, for those molded by this ethos—or, to put it sociologically, who share this habitus—carry this mode of thought and behavior with them outside church.[4] Thus, in politics, they search for a charismatic leader to "save" them and their beloved Orthodox nation. Needless to say, the leader is expected to be a true believer. This is fertile ground for the development of religious nationalism, which conflates faith with a specific national identity, a situation known as ethnodoxy.[5] Those who understand themselves as guardians of the "elect nation" denigrate political movements that strive for sociopolitical rights as noisy masses threatening both faith and national unity. In general, democratic processes are perceived as bureaucratic obstacles to the emergence of a powerful and determined leader.

It is not an accident that the bearers of this mode of thought express their admiration for political leaders such as Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. They are perceived as saviors of the nation-state and its traditional values (such as faith, family, and fatherland), who fight against the ungodly processes of globalization and multiculturalism. The nation-state is perceived as the authentic, divinely willed form of sociopolitical organization, whereas globalization is a deceitful work of the devil. The quest for authenticity may play a role here. In Christianity, the source of authenticity is the one God. When this scheme is transferred to the political realm, the source of authenticity cannot be the plurality (the people, democracy) but a singularity (the leader) or at least an enlightened, technocratic oligarchy. In any case, autonomy is lost: responsibility and power are transferred to an external provider, be it a mystical divinity or a charismatic political leader.

All in all, activism is evaluated positively only when it aims at the restoration of the sociopolitical conditions to ostensibly stable principles and values, particularly moral ones. But within the Church, so the argument goes, there is no need for any change, since the latter is the prime locus of the manifestation of the divine itself: the place where miracles, healing, and salvation happen. Why should one change a salvific environment? However, the latter has a specific structure that reproduces unequal

[3] Christos Yannaras, "Ανέφικτη στην Ελλάδα η Δημοκρατία," *Καθημερινή*, June 28, 2009, http://www.kathimerini.gr/715205/opinion/epikairothta/arxeio-monimes-sthles/anefikth-sthn-ellada-h-dhmokratia.

[4] For the concept of habitus, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

[5] Vyacheslav Karpov, Elena Lisovskaya, and David Barry, "Ethnodoxy: How Popular Ideologies Fuse Religious and Ethnic Identities," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51.4 (2012): 638–55.

Consecration of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, Moscow, June 14, 2020.

power relations. This hierarchical structure is legitimized as a manifestation of the divine order clothed in the religious language of *diakonia*. Thus, contemporary demands in the Church for gender equality, equal voting rights for bishops and laypersons, and same-sex marriages are rejected as an adulteration of the Church's charismatic nature, which, the argument goes, transcends historical formations, including liberal democracy. What matters most here is the preservation of the ecclesiastical structure, which is heavily endowed with positive value. As this structure is perceived outside of historical time and change, it becomes inseparable from the "holy" and therefore immutable.

It goes without saying that such an essentialist perception of the Church's structure and tradition, which as a rule goes hand in hand with a mechanistic attachment to an idealized, glorified past (the Byzantine era in particular), gives rise to attitudes of traditionalism or even fundamentalism, when proposed changes are perceived as a threat to an allegedly unchangeable tradition. The anti-systemic rhetoric of such religious circles has a rather conservative orientation, for it aims at defending what they perceive as "traditional" beliefs and practices, while at the same time it reinforces unrealizable expectations for the restoration of premodern forms of political organization (such as empire).

The Mystical as Political

The negative consequences of this way of thinking have not gone unnoticed by theologians and religious actors who seek to bring Orthodox theology

and the Church into a constructive relationship with the multicultural and democratic context of modernity. To achieve this, they conceptualize common religious categories differently, linking them to modern ideas and values such as alterity, freedom of choice, human rights, and politics—the latter in its broadest sense as active engagement with all spheres of life. As far as mysticism is concerned, they give to the Orthodox ideal of theosis or deification a more activist meaning. Rather than being merely a world-rejecting and contemplative attitude that leads to union with God, it becomes, in their theological work, a multifaceted inner-worldly activity that aims to bring the whole world (society and nature) to communion with God. The mystical here does not function as a mere refuge that palliates the pain caused by external reality, but as a kind of religious equivalent to politics that strives for the transformation of society and the world in accordance with Christian values, such as love, equality, justice, and peace. Aristotle Papanikolaou's book *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* is a prime example of such an approach.

Of course, the translation of theological and mystical categories into political ones cannot eliminate the inherent contradiction that exists between religion (love) and politics (violence), described by Max Weber in his famous lecture "Politics as a Vocation." Most important for our purposes is that this theological mode of thinking produces political consequences too, but in a different direction. Rather than passively expecting the coming of the *eschaton*, the believer develops an active attitude that aims at changing the world. This cannot happen by surrendering to irrational hope but by applying human reason and corresponding rational methods (such as science). Tradition is praised, but the adoption of a critical stance leaves open the possibility for revision of certain beliefs and practices of the Church that have provided historical continuity. However, as these theologians want to "think within the tradition" and "as a tradition," they necessarily leave core dogmatic beliefs out of the process of critical examination.[6]

An excellent example of an attempted reconciliation between tradition and modernity is the new social document entitled "For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church," drafted by an international (though mostly US-based) committee of Orthodox theologians and clergymen under the auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.[7] This document reflects the progressive values of members of the Orthodox Church who possess high intellectual capital and mainly operate in international multicultural and multiethnic environments. However, on the issue of gender equality in the Church, even these actors do not move beyond the proposal of the "revitalization" of the historical female order of the deaconesses. The choice of wording in the document ("revitalization," "renewal") vividly reveals the difficulty of introducing a new practice in the Orthodox Church that is not grounded in its time-honored tradition. After all, the term "innovation" usually evokes negative connotations among the Orthodox. Irrespective of whether this is a strategy of gradually introducing changes within the Church that would not provoke fierce fundamentalist reactions, proposals that actually reproduce discussions of previous decades are far behind that which is currently discussed and demanded in other

[6] See Efstathios Kessareas, "An Interview with Prof. Aristotle Papanikolaou", November 24, 2021, https://www.uni-erfurt.de/fileadmin/fakultaet/philosophische/Seminar_Religionswissenschaft/Orthodoxes_Christentum/The_Challenge_of_Worldliness_to_Contemporary_Christianity_Projektseite/Interviews/Interview_with_Prof._Papanikolaou.pdf.

[7] See David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, eds., *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020), also available at https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos.

Christian Churches. In the Orthodox Church there is a lack of bottom-up pressure for widespread reform for many reasons. As far as the issue of gender equality is concerned, even women themselves conform to traditional gender roles, as they have internalized the prevailing scheme of thought that everyone (according to his or her specific God-given charisma) contributes with a specific role to the common life of the Church, as is the case with the different organs of the human body.

Contrary to the proponents of traditional mysticism who tend to support premodern forms of sociopolitical organization or contemporary authoritarian regimes, the proponents of the "mystical-as-political" approach support, albeit critically, the modern liberal democratic state. Their argument is that the latter offers possibilities for the realization of the core religious values—for instance, protection of every human being as an image of God through the legal framework of human rights. But from the standpoint of their opponents, such an approach not only legitimizes the political formation that supports modern capitalism but also accommodates theology and the Church to the spirit of the times. According to this critique, if the Orthodox Church opens more to the world, it will moderate or even lose its distinctive otherworldly character and, as a result, it will experience the same negative consequences that Western churches face, such as secularization, worldliness, militant atheism, or—even worse—religious indifference.

One certain conclusion that can be drawn is that Orthodoxy is not monolithic. There is a deep chasm between those who espouse ethno-religious ideas and those who attempt to open tradition to the context of (post)modernity. Although both employ common categories (such as the mystical), they nevertheless give a different meaning to them according to their own vision about the Church's role in today's world. As regards the influence of the two currents, the first one represents the overwhelming majority, while the second is getting much louder yet is still a minority. Official Church positions tend to favor the former, despite some openings from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. As I have recently stated elsewhere, it is doubtful whether the usage of modern vocabulary by actors of the second current is enough to bring the change they wish to see in the Church.[8] This is because it is the actual social conditions that render various strata of the faithful prone to endorsing the ethno-religious ideas and the specific social and ecclesiastical order as natural, normal, and legitimate. ❋

[8] Efstathios Kessareas, "Inequality: Orthodox Christian Responses and Limitations", *Public Orthodoxy*, January 11, 2022, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/01/11/inequality-orthodox-christian-responses/.

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