



Mosaic icon of St. Gregory the Theologian. Church of Santa Maria dell' Ammiraglio, Palermo, Italy. Photo © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.

STATE OF AFFAIRS

“To Coin New Names”: The Imperative of Reform and the Danger of Marginalization

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As is known, the Orthodox Church defines itself as the church that preserves the fullness of faith and truth, deeming Christian catholicity and universality as its own characteristics. The Church's tradition is presented by contemporary Orthodox theologians—such as Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, Nikos Nisiotis, and Vladimir Lossky—as what is new, what is novel in history and comes from the depths of the age to come in order to restore everything “once with Christ, and afterward continually with the Holy Spirit through the Church.”¹ However, such a familiar overemphasis on tradition in Orthodoxy, combined with historical factors that signaled the end of Eastern Christianity and its enslavement under the Ottoman yoke for about five centuries, resulted in every change in how we do things being viewed as a betrayal, and

every push for reform or even renewal appearing as problematic or foreign to Orthodox tradition and spirituality, despite the intense spiritual variation that has characterized and continues to characterize Orthodoxy. Thus, if some Protestant churches still suffer today from a certain biblical fundamentalism or literalism, the Orthodox Church for its part finds itself trapped and stuck in a “fundamentalism of tradition,” which makes the Church problematic in practice with regard to both its pneumatology and its charismatic and prophetic dimensions. This situation prevents the Church from participating creatively and actively in today's world, which is changing so rapidly and in which it is visibly in danger of marginalization.

However, in the course of the historical journey of Orthodoxy, there has been

Note: This article was originally published as “Καινοτομείν τὰ ὀνόματα”: Τὸ αἶτημα τῆς ἀνανέωσης καὶ τῆς μεταρρύθμισης καὶ ὁ κίνδυνος ἱστορικῆς περιθωριοποίησης τῆς Ὁρθοδοξίας,” *Νέα Ἐνθῆνη* 15 (Jan-Feb 2013): 50–56. The most likely source for the phrase in the title is Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 39:12 [PG 36.684D], where one reads “καινοτομήσαι περὶ τὰ ὀνόματα.” — *Trans.*

no lack of critical points that signaled changes and further developments, and even serious attempts at reinterpretation and reformation—a history that is at odds with the present immobility and stagnation. These points, in our opinion, must be considered as the natural continuation and extension of the theology of the incarnation and of the Orthodox pneumatological tradition. We should see them in the light of the continuing Pentecost which the Church lives, or even as a result of the Church's presence in the world and in history. Moreover, it is rightly noted that “the call for reform and renewal in the Church is always legitimate, if we believe that the Holy Spirit has not stopped working in the Church.”² It is easy to understand how this particular idea provides the Church's journey in the world with both its historical dimension and its eschatological end goal or *telos*.

¹ Nikos Nisiotis, “Ορθοδοξία: Παράδοσις και Ανακαινίσις. Τò πρόβλημα τῶν μορφωτικῶν σχέσεων Ὁρθοδοξίας καὶ Ἑλληνισμοῦ στὸ μέλλον,” in *Ὁρθοδοξία, Παράδοση, Ανακαινίσις* (Athens: Analogio/Efthyni, 2001), 93–94.

² Lewis J. Patsavos, “Ecclesiastical Reform: At What Cost?” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 40 (1995): 1.

³ Nicholas Afanasiev, “The Canons of the Church: Changeable or Unchangeable?” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 11 (1967): 61–62.

⁴ *Ibid.*; see also Patsavos, 1–2, 4.

According to this pneumatological and eschatological perspective, it is possible to make room for reforms within the Orthodox Church, especially when we bear in mind that the latter do not affect the core of the faith and do not pertain to fundamental doctrines, such as the teachings on the Trinity and on Christ, but rather belong to the realm of the temporal and mainly pertain to issues of a practical, ethical, canonical, or even liturgical nature. As the great Orthodox theologian and canonist Father Nicholas Afanasiev elucidates, the canons of the Church constitute temporal expressions of eternal truths.³ This implies that alongside the fundamental teachings of the Church—which do not admit any change or modification in accordance with time, season, social or cultural relevance, or new philosophical orientations—there also exists in history the temporal expression and application of these

truths, which is subject to changes, modifications, and reforms.⁴ In other words, the reforms often sprang from efforts to formulate and reformulate the “how” of truth while keeping its core intact. Reforms pertain to the comprehension and interpretation of the truth, to its being adapted and applied to a specific time and place, and not to the essence of the truth. Moreover, if we exclude the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas—the core of the Church's faith and experience, which does not admit reform—we see that for what remains, inquiry is permitted and sometimes even required, since all these matters belong to the temporal sphere and not to the central tenets of faith.

Therefore, true traditionalism in the Church does not preclude development. On the contrary, tradition lives and grows. Consequently, being faithful to tradition does not signify an obstinate fidelity to the Church's past, even to the apostolic past. Fidelity to the apostolic tradition is above all fidelity to the apostolic message. This message is a seed that is regarded as authoritative. . . . For, after all, tradition is only a witnessing of the Spirit who continually reveals and renews the message that was in times past deposited in the Church. Thus, tradition is not solely a historical authority imposed from outside on the living members of the Body of Christ. Rather, it is the uninterrupted Word of God himself that is seized by faith; it is not only a witness of the past, but above all, a witness of eternity. . . . Moreover, true fidelity to tradition does not imply only an accord with the past, but also in a certain sense, a freedom with regard to the past understood as an authority that is completely exterior and formal to the catholic experience. In this sense, tradition is not only a principle of

conservatism, but also a principle of living progress, a principle of growth, of regeneration, of reformation. The Church unceasingly reforms itself because she lives in the tradition. True traditionalism is always opposed to the tendencies of servile restoration that consider the past as a formal criterion for the present.

The preceding daring formulations do not proceed from the pen of some Protestant theologian, or from the sick imagination of a “post-patristic” theologian, as the (Greek) Orthodox fundamentalists who clamor and behave outrageously around the world might allege, but from an ecclesiological text of Father Georges Florovsky typical of his style. In fact, they were written as an Orthodox contribution to the inaugural General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948.⁵

In glaring opposition to this theological perspective, Orthodox fundamentalists and traditionalists today, by reason of a supposed fidelity to patristic theology (but actually in full disagreement with and dissension from one of its fundamental and characteristic elements, namely, the continual and fruitful dialogue with the philosophical currents and hermeneutic methods of its time), systematically oppose and array themselves against every change or attempt at renewal, such as the use of contemporary hermeneutic methods with regard to biblical interpretation or a more historical and more critical approach to sacred texts and events in church history. Their approach to and interpretation of patristic theology—a theology that is eminently exegetical and historical—is distinguished by its ahistorical, metaphysical, and almost mythical character, and this ahistoric approach to pa-

tristic theology, despite what is said to the contrary, actually constitutes a betrayal both of the spirit of the Fathers and of the theological vision of the so-called “neo-patristic synthesis” (a term coined by Florovsky). The wider dissemination, popularization, and ostensible compulsoriness of the command to “return to the Fathers” has not only made the Fathers an integral element of a certain Orthodox “fad” and of a kind of prevailing Orthodox “establishment,” but has also come to characterize and ultimately accompany a neoconservative and fundamentalist version of Orthodox theology, thereby contributing decisively to the emergence of a peculiar “patristic fundamentalism,” equivalent to the biblical fundamentalism of extreme Protestant groups.⁶

Thus, it is not only by chance that the Orthodox fundamentalists (or, to use a Greek root, *themeliocrats*), imitating to the letter their Roman Catholic counterparts of like mind, such as the defenders of the exclusive use of Latin for worship, collectively fight against the movement for liturgical renewal with infamous persistence and intensity. They take comfort in stagnation and immobility, which they identify with the very essence and deepest nature of the Church. They find every kind of change and transformation to be unbearable and frightening, equating these with betrayal and a falling away from the authentic ethos and tradition of the Church. This tradition is perceived as being an essentially unchanged reality over time and without modification, having the same form from place to place. For this reason, they also target the task of translation and those who undertake it, since they fear it may open the door to other undesired changes. Thus, they abhor history as well as any critical or comparative approach to the subject, since

⁵ Georges Florovsky, *The Body of the Living Christ*, trans. Robert Arida (Arlington, Mass.: *The Wheel Library*, forthcoming 2017), 38. In his other writings, Florovsky supports the thesis that Eastern and Western Christianity are “Siamese twins” and “the two lungs of the Church,” so that Christian catholicity could not exist with the East or the West alone. See Florovsky, “Ἡ κληρονομία καὶ ὁ σκοπὸς τῆς Ὁρθόδοξης θεολογίας,” *Θεολογία* 81:4 (October–December 2010): 21–29; *idem.*, “Οἱ Δρόμοι τῆς Ῥωσικῆς θεολογίας,” trans. P. Pallis, in *Θέματα Ἐκκλησιαστικῆς Ἱστορίας, Φλωρόφσκυ Ἔργα* 4 (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2003), 233–37; *idem.*, “Some Contributors to 20th Ecumenical Thought,” in: *Ecumenism II. A Historical Approach*, vol. 14 in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1989), 209–210.

⁶ For a lengthier analysis of this thesis, see: P. Kalaitzidis, “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010): 5–36.

according to their logic, one cannot seamlessly connect the two chronological poles that define the development of tradition and span the distance between the furthest annals of the past, the life of the Church today, and the hoped-for and awaited “not yet” of the coming Kingdom. They prefer to approach church history in piecemeal fashion, and usually perceive the current state of things—say, the last two hundred years or so—as being the authentic tradition.

⁷ See especially Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “Ἡ ἀνακάλυψη τῆς ἐλληνικότητος καὶ ὁ θεολογικὸς ἀντιδυτικισμὸς,” in the compilation *Ἀναταράξεις στὴ Μεταπολεμικὴ Θεολογία. Ἡ «θεολογία τοῦ ’60»*, ed. Kalaitzidis, Athanasios N. Papatheanasiou, and Theophilos Abatzidis (Athens: Ἰνδικτος, 2009), 429–514.

Today, as has already been the case for several decades (if not centuries), the traditional Orthodox world has been constrained by immobility, its gaze stuck on the glorious imperial Byzantine past. It understands history more as a *fait accompli*, as a set of events that are all connected to the past and imposed either from without or from above, rather than as a dynamic reality that is always open to the unforeseen and to the free love of God. Furthermore, Orthodoxy, which for primarily historical reasons has been equated with the peoples and nations adhering to it, has failed to break free from the ancient demons of religious phyletism and ethnocentrism, while continuing to feed (with the exception, perhaps, of the diaspora) on the outdated figure of a comparison between East and West and on a political and theological anti-Westernism.⁷ The concepts of renewal, development, and reform continue to cause this world fear and embarrassment. In refusing to consider and discuss the abovementioned necessary changes and reforms, and in closing its eyes to the development of society and to the upheavals—at times violent—that beset its own flock, which is itself the body of Christ, Orthodoxy is in danger of beholding, as a mere spectator, the explosion of a great and uncontrolled reform that will sweep and shock the

entire Orthodox world, a reform that will have catastrophic results for the very unity, structure, and composition of the body of the Church. In rejecting now every change and reform, often in the name of preserving the unity and cohesion of the Orthodox Church, we run the risk in the end of seeing Orthodoxy later become fractured and fragmented, while the danger of not only historical but also theological marginalization is even more readily apparent.

Those who insist on associating the reforms of the Second Vatican Council with the gradual weakening and depopulation of Western churches—even those who, inspired by a kind of Stalinist reasoning (which holds that ultraconservatism and the rejection of development ensure the cohesion and unity of the party, the organization, or in this case the Church), argue against every change and transformation—should study what happened in Francophone Catholic Canada in Quebec. This area was once the most traditional Catholic region of North America, where the dominance of ultraconservative Catholic clergy and anachronistic Catholic values was absolute until the early 1960s. Because it had categorically refused to be reformed and to change, Catholicism there suffered a complete collapse and Quebec became perhaps the most secular and religiously indifferent part of the world. Experts have called this phenomenon the “Quiet Revolution” (*la Révolution tranquille*). Our own church leaders would do well to ponder and reflect on this shocking turn of events, which seems to be quite similar to our own ongoing situation.

Let us not be fooled by appearances and by fleeting impressions or coincidences. The churches that are full

at Christmas, during Holy Week, and on Pascha, as well as the influx of the disadvantaged into our churches due to the dire economic crisis, cannot hide the fact that for the coming generation, the generation of our children—for many and various reasons—the Church in Greece will run the risk of complete failure and historical marginalization. The image of a chicken-hearted hierarchy that insists on electing to episcopal office colorless executives from its own bureaucratic machinery, and which tolerates bishops and members of the hierarchy who hold to anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic, anti-ecumenical, or most recently, racist and pro-Nazi sentiments; the progressive professionalization of the clergy and their complete estrangement (to the point of intellectual squabbling) from theological criteria and sensibilities; the continually diminishing number of catechetical lessons, already almost entirely absent from high school curricula, and the glaring absence of Orthodox catechesis among the supposedly “Orthodox” staff; the depressing (with some exceptions) level of teachers and students at theological schools, the so-called “higher” ecclesiastical academies, and in what remains of ecclesiastical education: these all ring the alarm bells of impending collapse. Orthodoxy

in Greece—and more broadly speaking—is in urgent need of radical cuts and reforms, of a new “coining of names” (καινοτομεῖν τὰ ὀνόματα), to recall the formulation of Saint Gregory the Theologian. Orthodoxy is endangered by stagnation and immobility, by the threat of historical marginalization, not by its own tradition or its creative encounter in the Holy Spirit with what is new. As Vladimir Lossky also points out:

If Tradition is a faculty of judging in the Light of the Holy Spirit, it obliges those who wish to know the truth in the Tradition to make incessant efforts: one does not remain in the Tradition by a certain historical inertia, by keeping, as a “tradition received from the Fathers,” all that which, by force of habit, flatters a certain devout sensibility. On the contrary, it is by substituting such “traditions” for the Tradition of the Holy Spirit living in the Church that one runs the most risk of finding oneself finally outside the body of Christ. It must not be thought that the conservative attitude alone is salutary, nor that heretics are always “innovators.”⁸

Whoever has a mind, let him understand! ✱

⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 155–56.



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