Orthodoxy and Public Discourse: Critical Reflections

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Recently the Orthodox world has been abuzz with excitement in anticipation of the upcoming Holy and Great Pan-Orthodox Council. While the announcement of such a landmark event may justify some enthusiasm among our faith's adherents, given Orthodoxy's characteristic resistance to the idea of change and growth and the Church's habitual tendency to withdraw from historical affairs, the prospective event also causes concern among the more sober-minded. Doubtlessly the Council will reaffirm the metaphysical and doctrinal statements of the seven Ecumenical Councils regarding the person of Jesus Christ as God Incarnate, and of the Trinity. This is all fine and good. But things are likely to become less clear-cut as soon as the attention shifts from God to the world and to humankind in particular. "Getting it right" with regard to the divinity (to use a term of Richard Rorty) may be, curiously enough, easier than coming up with a fair and accurate assessment of human beings and the cosmos, given the ceaseless amassment of knowledge about both that has occurred in the centuries since a council of this magnitude has occurred. This new knowledge, painstakingly attained by trial and error, simply wasn't available in previous ages—certainly not at the time of the Great Church Councils nor in the age of the emergence of our Patristic literature.

Writing soon after the turn of the new millennium, Met. Kallistos Ware aptly speculated that the twenty-first century would be the time for the Church to begin exploring anthropology and cosmology, following the doctrinal sorting out of theology and ecclesiology that occurred over the course of the preceding millennia. This task is more challenging than first meets the eye, and must be handled with humility, open-mindedness, and caution—above all, in honest dialogue with the respective sciences that deal with the two universes: the external one and the one within us. Is the Orthodox Church aware, and willing to realize, that our current worldview is not in the least similar to that of the Patristic age? Responses to this unsettling question often reiterate (especially when they come from more traditionalist quarters) that the Church simply cannot compromise its normative beliefs so as to accommodate passing trends of a consumerist nature. There

Mars Hill in Athens, the ancient site of public debate.

is truth in this statement, but overall, it constitutes a glib answer to a genuinely large and complex problem concerning the Church's openness to reality at large.

Here I am focusing not on the content of Christianity's tacit or explicit anthropological affirmations that may themselves be in need of an update; rather, I am calling attention to the proper attitude and mentality that the institutional Church must assume before attempting to demand a say in the on-going public dialogue nowadays on a range of issues pertinent to Christians as human beings. The development of this attitude is crucial because Christian ontology is not simply neutral or descriptive: there are always moral implications and demands that flow from them, and a skewed ontology, coupled with a wrong attitude characteristic of the blurring of the lines between democracy and theocracy, will push Orthodoxy further into irrelevance. Here are a few personal thoughts that might prove useful to those involved in the upcoming Council's preparation, should they seriously intend the event to serve as a meaningful witness to the world.

Nowadays more than ever, the institutional Church should keep in mind that in our modern, secular, and pluralistic cultural context, sharp reproaches of heteronomy and legalism are still levelled as a permanent stigma against religious morality and still undermine its claims, as is shown, for example, by two important monographs recently published in Greece, *Stalinism: the Fourth Monotheistic Religion and Religion Against Art*. The common denominator of both books is the thesis that religious normativity (especially of the monotheistic sort), with all the intolerance it often displays toward alternative value systems, is imperialist and allergic to reconsidering its own motives. In view of this problem, it is proposed by the liberal intelligentsia that citizens, truly free people, not bother to concern themselves with scriptures and holy texts when en-

gaging in ethical issues, but rather to deal exclusively with constitutions. That is because constitutions are, at least potentially, subject to revision, in line with social developments and the newly emerging needs of each era. Sacred texts, on the other hand, seen as non-falsifiable revealed truth "dropped from heaven," are considered inherently insusceptible to questioning and revision, and so are in principle shielded from contact with empirical reality and the prospect of falsifiability (the breakwater which crashes the obsessions and hardline expectancies of those who persistently ignore that the whole of reality and infinity—the moral sphere included—can be neither codified nor squared). To the extent, therefore, that they resist any attempt at reconsideration, both the sacred texts themselves and their normative moral mandates are still targeted as terminal points barring open-minded inquiries, and as fostering passivity and mental underdevelopment—for each holy text, the cycle of revealed Truth is closed, and what remains is merely a compliance with received wisdom and order, without room for deviation or innovation.

This view gains extra momentum coming as it does at a time when morality and ethics, as mentioned above, are inextricably bound up with fallible deliberation and revision, and are almost exclusively justified on the basis of continuous dialogue and public consultation ("apart from everyone else, my mind is hopelessly one-sided," Aeschylus taught). With this in mind, Christians who confidently believe that public life can be enriched by and profit from religious moral principles must seriously ponder the adequacy of the institutional churches to meet the new challenge with due responsibility. The impulsive and reckless ecclesiastical interventions on major trending ethical controversies could well turn out to be the Waterloo of the Christian world if they continue to add cause to the firm conviction that institutional Christianity does not intend to participate in public discourse as an equal partner but as an immovable catechist; this is all the more so when Christian leaders appear sanguinely indifferent to the modern distinction between the wider society and their flock. Recent socio-political developments in Russia and the cooperative role of the Russian Church in the curtailment of fundamental civil rights do not leave much room for optimism. For not only are they flagrantly indicative of parroting cheap, historically worn out preconceptions that they present as "spirituality"; worse than that, they mirror in perhaps the grossest possible manner the institutional corrosion of national churches, like those of Greece and Russia: embracing Caesar and using the resulting privileges they enjoy to impose their views on society and to criminalize anything of which they do not approve.

In view of all these circumstances, I would suggest that the only way for an evangelical morality to recaptivate the world in the post-Christian era we live in is by consistently upholding the most valuable theological landmarks of Orthodox thought, ancient and modern, that are capable of speaking to the mind and heart of the thinking secular citizens today. Among these, one could men-

tion (among many others), the neo-Patristic concept of the person and the irreducible diversity of personal otherness—Divine and human—as communion exercised in freedom; the recent repositioning of eschatology at the heart of the Christian worldview, which breaks with historical determinism, leaving the future uncircumscribed and open to fascinating surprises and reversals; and the increasing recent theological attempts toward an urgent (and largely still pending) meeting of Orthodoxy with modernity, an important precursor of which we think was the Gospel itself. None of the above, however, would contribute to the undoing of religious legalism and barrenness as would the ecclesiastical embracing of the poor and downtrodden members of society, indeed of all social outcasts, as being ontologically identical with Christ and his altar, in an extension of the Liturgy before and after its celebration— in which the sacrament of the Eucharist is celebrated by the community in the most inclusive manner, affirmative of all races, nationalities, genders, social classes, ages, and sexual orientations. Crucial for the authenticity of the Christian witness remains, finally, the consistent defense of love without footnotes or preconditions (Luke 6: 32–34) just as the Lord commanded, and the recognition of the priority of human beings and their deepest, innermost needs over against the various versions of the "Sabbath"—in the most open-minded, charitable and personalized manner possible.

Here a right understanding of Tradition, complete with an understanding of its background metaphysics, can aid the cause of offering an existentially meaningful and socially responsible Orthodox witness to the world, provided that Tradition is sufficiently imbued with eschatology. The interpenetration of ontology and eschatology should count as self-evident, for, after all, Christian metaphysics is eschatological throughout: its vision is forward-looking and future-oriented, founded on the resurrection of the second. Adam and based on the promise of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). By sheer virtue of its openness to a largely undetermined, uncircumscribed future (a future fashioned as a gift and not as the inevitable outcome of historical forces), Tradition is appositely endowed to make room for the new and unanticipated. It can thus make fresh and original contributions to anthropology, while still falling back on its own cumulative wisdom, carefully updating it where necessary.

Unfortunately, however, as even a cursory look at some of the recently published Orthodox literature indicates, it is not only ultra-conservatives who are keen on bracing our Tradition against even the possibility of growth and revision, but mainstream Orthodox writers as well. In the name of doctrinal and confessional purity, they seem bent on emulating and reviving Protestantism's old view of Scripture as a self-contained, finished, and unerring body of revelation, now applied to Church Tradition and to the Patristic corpus. Protestantism's self-restriction to the narrow confines of a sacred text has been recycled and imported into Orthodoxy where it provides a safe reliance on accepted truth. As

a result of this practice, Orthodox Christianity has largely lost (forfeited, actually) its prophetic capacity to read the signs of the times and has dwindled into a voice from the past, devoid of the capacity to contribute anything of real substance to the public dialogue beyond making more and more irrelevant and embarrassing noise. Given the popularity of this mindset, one may reasonably expect this predilection for the "dead letter" of Tradition to inform and influence the proceedings and final statements of the upcoming Pan-Orthodox Synod.

This is regrettable, not only because the shallow witness that results from this view will likely be presented as Orthodox Christianity's latest and supposedly most complete statement, but particularly because the true magnitude and depth of Our church's Tradition will inevitably be obscured and, worse, hidden from the eyes of a world mired in nihilism and thirsty for existential meaning. Platitudes and prefabricated answers are no substitute for the Gospel's enduring message, nor are they indicative of an honest engagement with inquiring people of every age and place, an engagement that doesn't sweep tough questions under the rug. Hence, it is my suggestion that on the eve of the upcoming Synod, the institutional Church awaken to the dynamic nature of its Tradition and see it in terms of an evolving, on-going body of living Truth instead of the way it is often presented now: as a static, completed product intended for passive consumption. In order for this awakening to occur, institutional Orthodoxy must first realize that its vessel is still afloat and has not yet reached the shores of the Eschata. Understanding that to be the case, the Church must again open up to the unforeseen ways of the Holy Spirit, who ceaselessly refreshes creation by creating new biological and social realities as well as unanticipated and even startling forms of grace—all in line with Christ's promise that his Kingdom will entail staggering reversals of what we currently (and with pious complacency) assume to be normal and respectable (Matt. 19:30). ✠

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