

## Toward an Orthodox Ethos of Freedom

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“We call upon all clergy, theologians, teachers, and lay persons within the Orthodox Church in America never to contradict these teachings by preaching or teaching against the Church’s clear moral position; by publishing books, magazines, and articles which do the same; or producing or publishing similar content online. . . .

Any clergy, theologian, teacher, or lay person who contravenes our directive thus undermines the authority of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America by disregarding the Holy Synod’s consistent and unwavering teaching on these matters. We call on any such persons to cease their disruptive activities, which threaten the peace and tranquility of the Orthodox Church in America, cause scandal and uncertainty, and tempt those who struggle against their disordered passions to stumble. . . .

Those who refuse correction open themselves to ecclesiastical discipline.”<sup>1</sup>

In response to this policy promulgated of late by the Orthodox Church in America, I advance two related arguments. First, this policy intolerably violates the individual freedom of anyone subject to it. And second, Orthodox Christians should embrace an ethos of freedom as far as possible, because this ethos is a natural consequence of

Orthodox theological anthropology. After advancing these two arguments, I will offer some reflections on why these points have special significance for Orthodox living in the United States.

By the phrase “Orthodox ethos of freedom,” I mean a theological and social ethos that recognizes the autonomy and capacity for choice inherent in each human being as constituent of the image of God within us, and therefore deserving of respect by others—most especially clergy and hierarchs—as far as possible. My two tasks in this essay are therefore to show, first, that such an ethos of freedom is not merely compatible with Orthodox theological anthropology but implied by it and, second, that the reasons why the OCA and others reject such an ethos are not properly theological, but political and historical. The political and historical reasons for a persistent rejection of the inherent value of individual autonomy in modern Orthodox thought have to do with the reflexive polemical rejection of values associated with “Western” Enlightenment philosophy, a rejection we might fairly describe as the first modern Orthodox “culture war.”

The policy of the OCA epitomizes a persistent deficiency in modern Orthodox thought: the failure to detect genuine theological insight due to the assessment of a theological proposition merely on the basis of its cultural origin, and not its actual truth value. Identity affirmation as theological

<sup>1</sup> “Statement on Same-Sex Relationships and Sexual Identity,” Orthodox Church in America, July 21, 2022.

method is one of the signature flaws of the most dominant paradigm of modern Orthodox thought, neopatristic theology. Paul Gavriilyuk frames this challenge perfectly in his analysis of Georges Florovsky: “Florovsky’s persistent conflation of the criterion of truth with the criterion of identity has bedeviled Orthodox theology ever since.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Florovsky’s key argument is that Orthodox thought since the eighteenth century has undergone a “pseudomorphosis” by being exposed to foreign “Western” influence that must be reversed by a return to pre-Enlightenment texts produced in the Orthodox world. The production of perhaps the most influential text in the whole of the Eastern Orthodox world in the past two centuries—the *Philokalia*—was motivated in large part by a desire to counter Enlightenment influence gaining momentum in eighteenth-century Greece and Russia.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the Philokalic revival and the neopatristic paradigm were reactions against earlier attempts to combine Orthodox thought with Enlightenment principles, such as the Neo-Hellenic Enlightenment. Paschalis Kitromilides convincingly demonstrates why this movement, despite its dynamism and promise, ultimately collapsed: the rise of nationalism. In Greece, Enlightenment thought gained influence in the movement to liberate Greece from the Ottoman Empire, and the urgency of this liberation project took precedence over the demands of general political liberalism. In order to appeal to conservative political sentiment, and thereby secure the necessary broad support for the Greek national liberation movement, “the critical spirit and the moral temper of individual liberty” were sacrificed in favor of a Romantic notion of homogeneous national identity. In other words, “the Enlightenment was submerged by the major force it germinated and

helped provide with political expression: nationalism.”<sup>4</sup> Many important contemporary Orthodox theological projects, however, are engaged in constructive dialogue with some key elements of Enlightenment thought, such as the compatibility between Orthodox theological anthropology and political freedom.<sup>5</sup>

But I would suggest that one of the most important insights of Enlightenment philosophy—that each human being possesses an irreducibly individual autonomy that must be respected so far as possible—is still reflexively rejected by most contemporary Orthodox thinkers (and for reasons having more to do with historical identity than actual theological incompatibility). Indeed, rejection of this insight is at the heart of any rejection of individual freedom of conscience, such as that implied in the OCA policy described above. My first argument is therefore that an ethos of freedom is not merely compatible with Orthodox theology but in fact implicit within it, though such a potential has yet to be fully appreciated by modern Orthodoxy. Orthodox theology affirms the presence of a genuinely free will in each human individual as part of the image of God in us. As John of Damascus puts it, God endowed human nature with “a rational and intelligent soul by his own inbreathing, which is what we call the divine image. For the expression ‘according to the image’ indicates what belongs to the intellect and to free will.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Orthodox theology insists that we exert our utmost to respect the dignity of human individuals precisely because they bear the image of God. Therefore, Orthodox should affirm that human autonomy is inherently sacrosanct, and thus should be respected as far as possible.

Put simply: if Orthodox theology affirms that free will is rooted in the

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gavriilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 269.

<sup>3</sup> Paul M. Collins, “Theosis, Texts, and Identity: The *Philokalia* (1782)—a Case Study,” in Vladimir Kharlamov, ed., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 185.

<sup>4</sup> Paschalis Kitromilides, “The Enlightenment East and West: A Comparative Perspective on the Ideological Origins of the Balkan Political Traditions,” *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 10.1 (1983): 65.

<sup>5</sup> Recent important examples include Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (2012); Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (2012); and Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (2018).

<sup>6</sup> St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, ed. and trans. by Norman Russell (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2002), §26.

St. John of Damascus. Greece, possibly Crete, 16th c. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.



John Locke. Portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller, 1697. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



image of God in us, and further affirms that it is because of this image that we should respect other individuals, then Orthodox must respect individual freedom—or, more precisely stated, *individual autonomy*—as far as possible, as a matter of theological principle. What does it mean to believe that God endowed us with free will as part of his image in us if we do not respect this free will in others as far as possible? Do we or do we not honor the particular dignity with which our nature is endowed?

Arguments for the freedom of conscience stemming from the Enlightenment, such as those advanced by John Locke, are rooted in this same theological-anthropological affirmation. In essence, they form a social and political elaboration of the theological anthropology developed in the Greek patristic tradition. Locke declares the “principle Consideration” of his arguments in this regard to be the following: “No way whatsoever that I shall walk in, against the Dictates of my Conscience, will ever bring me to the Mansions of the Blessed. . . . In a word. Whatsoever may be doubtful in Religion, yet this at least is certain, that no Religion, which I believe not to be true, can be either true, or profitable to me.”<sup>7</sup> What Locke uncovers here is in fact the concrete ethic implied by the

theological affirmation of God-given free will. If we are indeed free individuals, then our belief in the truth must be dignified by our own freedom to choose it, for why would matters of such distinctly divine importance be disconnected from the very workings of the image of God within us?

Secondly, the fact that the fullest historical recognition of the sanctity of individual freedom developed from philosophical anthropology of the Enlightenment does nothing to detract from its truth, though modern Orthodox polemics against “the West” have strenuously made this claim. The fact that non-Orthodox thinkers discovered such an insight does not render it invalid. On the contrary, if human beings do indeed possess the kind of freedom described by John of Damascus as a universal human endowment, then we should in fact *expect* the emergence of Orthodox theological insights in persons who are not Orthodox, because all human beings possess an intellect that is free, meaning that it is always capable of uncovering new insights. If we believe this about human nature, then we must acknowledge that it was inevitable that non-Orthodox would be able to teach us something vital about our own tradition that we as Orthodox have historically overlooked.

<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James H. Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 38.

Put another way: if Orthodoxy is the truth, and if all human beings are endowed with a faculty of reason that is capable of understanding the truth, then not only is Orthodoxy compatible with a concept of universal reason, but it is possible to discover authentically Orthodox theological insights *historically* residing outside Orthodox tradition while nevertheless *implicitly* residing in Orthodox theological principles. Thus, the dignity of not only freedom in general, but intellectual freedom in particular, is implicit in Orthodox theological anthropology.

In fact, this understanding of Orthodox theology as universal truth accessible to anyone using reasoned reflection has precedent in Orthodox tradition, though it has largely been forgotten. One of the first theologians in the Eastern Orthodox tradition who wrote in Arabic, Theodore Abu Qurra, famously constructed an entire theological vision devoted to the assertion that the central tenets of the Orthodox faith could be deduced from reason alone. He exhorted his fellow Orthodox to train themselves to “put the books of scripture to one side, and ask the intellect” how rational reflection alone can lead one to the truth.<sup>8</sup> Theodore lived in the medieval Muslim Abbasid Empire, where Chalcedonian Orthodoxy was treated as one faith among many in a highly diverse society, thus requiring him and other religious thinkers to experiment with ways to understand and communicate their faith in terms of universal human reason. Interestingly, his approach was widely celebrated by his Orthodox contemporaries, so much so that his biography was passed down as the core of the hagiography of “Theodore of Edessa.”<sup>9</sup> This vita is still commemorated today, even though it has been forgotten that it celebrates the intellectual contributions of an Eastern Orthodox rationalist.

I would therefore argue that for many modern Orthodox thinkers, the reflexive rejection of the Enlightenment’s notion of individual human autonomy as an inherent good is rooted less in theological principle than in sectarian polemic. In most modern Orthodox thought, the simple truth that individual autonomy is inherently good, and indeed sacred, is rejected merely due to the fact that Western Enlightenment thinkers arrived more fully at this insight than Orthodox thinkers had at that point in history. The irreducible value of specifically individual rational autonomy was famously attacked by Alexei Khomiakov, who characterized the whole of the Western Christian tradition as marred by “the same spirit of utilitarian rationalism.”<sup>10</sup> By contrast, he argued, the “teaching of the Ecumenical Orthodox Church” must by definition be entirely devoid of the corrupting “seeds of rationalism.”<sup>11</sup> Such an attitude absolved Khomiakov and many after him from having to consider the simple merits of key Western philosophical insights, such as the inherent dignity of individual autonomy, let alone the possibility that these insights might be able to teach Orthodoxy something about its own potential.

This polemical framework has prevented many modern Orthodox thinkers and leaders from seeing that many philosophical arguments made by non-Orthodox are not merely compatible with Orthodoxy, but may even be natural consequences of it. In the case examined here, John Locke and John of Damascus in fact share a common assumption of theological anthropology: that human beings are endowed by their Creator with free will. Locke takes this principle further by applying it to freedom of conscience, famously arguing that the state is bound to respect the political right of religious

<sup>8</sup> Philip Dorroll, “Enjoyers of the Divine Nature: *Theosis* According to Theodore Abū Qurra,” *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 5.1 (2022): 57.

<sup>9</sup> Christian Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 109.

<sup>10</sup> Alexei Khomiakov, “On the Western Confessions of Faith,” tr. Asheleigh E. Moorehouse, in *Ultimate Questions: An Anthology of Modern Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Alexander Schmemmann (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

dissent. I of course am taking Locke's principle yet further by arguing that such dignification of individual freedom of conscience should manifest as a social ethos as well—an ethos of freedom—that, while not absolute, should be prioritized whenever possible, including in an ecclesiological setting. And if I am correct, the freedom with which I have been endowed empowers me to argue for this process of thought. It does not guarantee that I am correct, but it does mean that such processes (or even progress) is possible, and should not be dismissed out of hand.

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Consideration of the contemporary social context of the OCA's statement makes the imperative of an Orthodox ethos of freedom all the more urgent. The policy put forward by the OCA betrays an anxiety on the part of its leadership that their arguments cannot be won on their merits but instead demand recourse to coercion and enforcement. As they put it, theological arguments for the affirmation of same-sex love "threaten the peace and tranquility of the Orthodox Church in America." Yet another of Locke's insights applies here: "But there is one only thing which gathers People into Seditious Commotions, and that is Oppression."<sup>12</sup> The OCA's repression of the intellectual freedom of its members is far more damaging to Orthodoxy than those members' exercise of that freedom. Church hierarchs

do indeed possess the right to elaborate their conception of Orthodox doctrine, but this does not entail the right to oppress the faithful; though it is easy to see how they might think that it does, if they assume that acknowledging the inherent dignity of individual autonomy and choice is nothing more than "Western" deviance.

Finally, I find it supremely ironic that it is the Orthodox Church of America that is attempting to restrict the freedom of its members in this way. It is in fact precisely because non-Orthodox in America, as a matter of law and ethics, respect an ethos of freedom that Orthodoxy in America can exist at all. Every Orthodox Christian in this country is a direct beneficiary of this ethos. The absolute legal right to convert away from a majority faith to a minority faith, or to practice one's minority faith without any legal impediment, are a direct result of Enlightenment thinking that led to the enshrining of individual religious liberty in the U.S. constitution. Orthodoxy as we know it in this country is impossible without this legacy and its continued cultivation. To the extent that we as Orthodox Christians undermine the ethos of freedom, we undermine the principle that ensures our own religious liberty, not to mention the God-protected liberty of others. Orthodoxy in America thrives on an ethos of freedom that it has long taken for granted. Let it now embrace and defend it. ✱

<sup>12</sup> Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 52.



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