Identity Discourse in Postmodern Eastern Orthodoxy

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IDENTITY DISCOURSE IN POSTMODERN EASTERN ORTHODOXY

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Abstract

This text will comment on some of the important aspects of the connection between Eastern Orthodoxy and contemporary civilization, the historical development of which has been designated as post-modernity. Being neither modern, nor postmodern, nor anti-modern (because these predicates are not relevant to it), Orthodoxy has to answer the question as to whether globalization is analogous to the “cosmic liturgy” sought by the Christian religion as a whole, or to the contrary, is moving away from it. The other basic problem of Orthodoxy – especially in what were formerly designated as East European societies – is that it should be identified with nationality. To be Orthodox often means to be a Bulgarian, a Serb, a Russian, a Romanian, etc. Ethnic affiliation and Orthodox affiliation are often interchangeable. Thus, the nationalization of Orthodoxy is becoming a major problem that the Church must resolve.

Keywords: orthodoxy, post-modernity, globalization, ethno-phyletism.

Introduction

Already in the early 1950s, the eminent Orthodox theologian Georgiy Florovsky wrote:

It is quite customary in our times, and hence quite modern, to say that we are now living in a ‘post-Christian world’ (although, what could be the true meaning of this pretentious phrase?), a world that, consciously or unconsciously, is moving away, separating from Christianity. Not only are we at a crossroads, at which the true road seems uncertain, but many of us ask themselves whether any safe road exists at all, any

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possibility to continue forward. Is our civilization not in a tunnel without exit, from which there is no getting out except at the cost of an explosion? (Florovsky 2006, 14)

Thus, we already have a long-standing tradition of scholarly discussions on the post-Christian situation; this text will deal with some of them. We will comment on some of the important aspects of the connection between Eastern Orthodoxy and contemporary civilization, the historical development of which has been designated as post-modernity.

II. The Topical Importance of Orthodoxy

This issue is related to the essential nature of Orthodoxy, its adaptability throughout history, and specifically under contemporary conditions. Orthodoxy does not accommodate itself to the current moment and thus follow history; it could not have carried out an “aggiornamento” like the Catholic Church. This is very precisely expressed by the Russian writer and philosopher Tatyana Goricheva:

...in Orthodoxy, there is no dialectics, no evolution. In Orthodoxy, we cannot talk about ‘renewal’ of the Church, as in the West. In every second of time, the Church is both eternal and new. (Goricheva 1996, 70)

Orthodoxy does not strive to be well liked in order to survive under the conditions of modernist secularization and postmodern religious syncretism; it is not inclined to compromise with “the spirit of the times”. In view of this striving to stand at a distance from historical developments, it would not be appropriate to qualify Orthodoxy under any historical form. Viewed as authentic Christianity, Orthodoxy can be neither modern, nor postmodern, nor anti-modern: these predicates are not relevant to it. We know that Christianity is in the world but not of the world. Living in the world, prevalent in Western Christianity, is overshadowed for Orthodoxy by a moment that comes from beyond, from eternity. Hence, definitions related to historical ages are not applicable to Orthodoxy. Regarding the challenges of the day, it gives all its responses from the side of eternity. As the Bulgarian author Pavel Pavlov points out,
In a certain sense, on the one hand, the Church should not defend or deny either premodernity, or modernity, or postmodernity, simply because it cannot identify itself with any of these phenomena. On the other hand, the Church's vocation is to coexist with, to change, and to give life to, all the manifestations and achievements of the human community in the world in all times and ages. (Pavlov 2005, 90)

I will cite an opinion of the well-known Serbian Orthodox theologian Radovan Bigovic that clearly defines the specificity of the historical path of Orthodoxy:

But it must be had in mind that it is mainly for historical reasons that Orthodoxy does not organically participate in the phenomenon called modernity. It has not tasted of the Renaissance, of the Reformation or the Counter-reformation, of the religious wars and the Enlightenment, of the French Revolution and the industrial revolution, of the triumph of the individual, of human rights and the religiously neutral nation-state. That which modernity recognizes as its basic interest seems to have remained outside Orthodoxy, which has consequently become suspicious of Modernity. This fact certainly helps understand the difficulties Orthodoxy has with communication in the contemporary (post)modern world. (Bigovic 2013, 214)

This type of explanations, usually given by Orthodox thinkers, provide ground for associating Orthodoxy with characteristics like static, frozen, petrified, etc. The difficulty of refuting these reproaches lies in the fact that Orthodoxy must at all times maintain a balance between the two essential principles of the Christian (and more discernibly the Orthodox) Church: it is in the world but not of the world. As John Meyendorff has pointed out with precision,

The Orthodox Church must define itself concurrently both as Tradition, fidelity to the past, and as an adequate response to the present. (Meyendorff 1991, 17)

Every activity in the world must be penetrated by the eternal evangelical spirit so that neither the eternal nor the temporal may get the upper hand. In the former case, it would mean escaping from the world, in the latter, sinking into the world; both are dangerous temptations for Christianity. It is known that, historically, the former was more characteristic of the East, and the latter, of the West.

In seeking to achieve the difficult balance between the eternal and the topical, between a life true to the doctrine and a life responsive to the
realities of the day, some Orthodox thinkers turn to the interpretation of
the holy texts from an existential perspective. This is characteristic, for
instance, of the eminent Orthodox theologian and philosopher, the
Metropolitan of Pergamum John Zizioulas, who believes that

The Power of Orthodoxy is not related to the possession of worldly power. It lies
in its Tradition, dogmatic and liturgical. But this power will be real only if the
interpretation of the Church’s Tradition really corresponds to the existential
issues of man. It is no longer sufficient simply to preserve the Tradition. Our
forefathers did this well. But we cannot make an exotic religion of Orthodoxy, as
many Western Christians perceive it to be. We must interpret it in the light of the
basic existential problems – of today and of tomorrow. (Zizioulas 2002)

As an heir to a rich doctrinal tradition, Orthodoxy’s primary task is
to preserve this tradition intact. As Zizioulas points out, this does not
mean it must be preserved like some archeological relic. To the contrary,
in order for the dogmas to “live”, they must be interpreted in an
existential light. This is also the most effective way to prevent the
transformation of Orthodoxy into an ideology, a risk that is one of the
serious challenges presently facing it. The eminent contemporary philosopher
and theologian Christos Yannaras points out that Orthodoxy “never
responds to man’s metaphysical searches with theory, ideology, or
moral recipes. Its essence consisted in a concrete realization of ties of
communion (as well as public ties) in a sobornost community that transforms
man’s way of existence: it frees existence from the needs of mortal nature
and turns it into the freedom of a relation-tie” (Yannaras 2002, 178).

However, there are significant elements of accord between
Orthodoxy and postmodern spirituality; one such important element is
the attitude to the Other and Otherness. The emphasis on this problem is
one of the specificities of postmodern spirituality, and it accords with
the basic Christian attitude – especially, and foremost, that of
Orthodoxy. For instance, in the context of religious syncretism – of the
search for a “new spirituality” – Christos Yannaras points out
Orthodoxy’s attitude to the Other and Otherness as an advantage it has
over Western Christianity (see Yannaras 2002). Aristotle Papanikolaou
also points out the “closeness between postmodern though and the
contemporary Orthodox theological understanding of difference,
otherness, uniqueness, relationality, and desire” (Papanikolaou 2010, 74). Particularly interesting in this respect is the recent study by the Bulgarian theologian Svilen Tutekov, “The Search for the Other: A Theological Answer to the Postmodern Challenge” (See Tutekov 2010).

III. Orthodoxy and Globalization

For the first time, Orthodoxy – although still the Church of the minority, torn by multiple internal confusions, anxieties, claims and divisions, that are a result of its two-thousand-year long Odyssey through history – finds itself in the ‘global village’, where different nations, in different ways, move towards the way of life that has started to be dominant on the planet. This is liberal, democratic, capitalist, modern (and post-Christian) pluralism. (Hopko 2003, 9)

These words by Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko, a priest of the American Orthodox Church, are part of Orthodoxy’s reflections on globalization and its consequences.

The globalization process characterizing postmodernity is a challenge to Christianity as a whole. Orthodox thinkers in particular have to answer the question as to whether globalization is analogous to the “cosmic liturgy” sought by Orthodoxy, or to the contrary, is moving away from it. They must assess what the correlation is between the global quality of the world and the universal quality of Orthodoxy. They must affirm the consciousness of the Church’s sobornost as being the adequate Orthodox response to globalization.

In his special study on the situation of Orthodoxy in a globalizing world, Anastasios Yannoulatos, archbishop of Tirana and of all Albania, writes,

Globalization is an unfolding process today, and there seems to be no force capable of stopping it. This process opens great possibilities and unexpected perspectives for the human race. But along with this, it provokes a chain of repercussions and shifts. Despite this, without regard to its positive or negative effects, globalization goes on undisturbed by the cries and appeals that can be heard outside the financial world. (...) The global perspective is the blood of Orthodoxy, blood that is constantly purified in the Eucharist through the blood of Christ, the Redeemer of the world. Instead of globalization that transforms the nations and people into a faceless homogenous mass convenient for the economic interests of an anonymous oligarchy, the Orthodox religious experience and
vision offer communion of love, a society of love, and they appeal to people to work with all efforts in this direction. (Yannoulatos 2005, 189-90)

The mission of Orthodox thinkers today is to compare sobornost, as an ideal of Christian coexistence, with the intense processes of globalization, and to distinguish the similarities and essential differences between the two.

An important aspect of globalization – aside from its possible interpretation as a secular version of sobornost – is to maintain the optimal ratio between global and local. As John Zizioulas points out, the problem in the globalizing world is how the Church may preserve its identity while not withdrawing from the world:

Globalization will be the most important problem in the coming century. How to reconcile the ‘one’ with the ‘many’? What must be done so that universal unity might not be achieved at the expense of local diversity? (Zizioulas 2002)

The concern of Orthodox thinkers for preserving the autonomy of individual national cultures is similar to that of scholars from different fields of the humanities who are occupied with the mechanisms for upholding the specificity of separate national cultures that are being engulfed by the emerging planetary civilization.

Another aspect of the polarity between global and local is the need to clarify the role of Orthodoxy as a motor for the formation of a general European spiritual identity. Multiple aspects are intertwined in this issue, including – not least – philosophical-historical and geo-political views. Radovan Bigovic assesses that the inert attitude by which the West considers the Orthodox world (and its geographical location) is gradually being modified through the creation of a united Europe.

Today, the Orthodox Church exists in a new, radically new, world. The so-called ‘Orthodox’ kingdoms and states have disappeared. Until recently, ‘Orthodox world’ designated the Balkans and Eastern Europe. For most people in the West, this world does not belong to Europe but to the Orient. It is equated with ‘despotism’, ‘obscurantism’, ‘conservatism’, ‘tyranny’, and ‘backwardness’… (Bigovic 2013, 91)

Now, there is a radically new, growing interest of Europeans in the Orthodox ecclesiastical tradition, the multiplication of “Orthodox
parishes established by West Europeans, Orthodox monasteries, publications of texts by the Fathers of the Church, the universal Christian use of Orthodox ikons” (Yannaras 2002, 16), as well as “the impressive revival of the Orthodox monastic tradition” (Zizioulas 2002). If the observations of these outstanding Orthodox thinkers are correct, if we are indeed witnessing a certain bloom of Orthodox religiosity (along with the flourishing of all sorts of other beliefs), then Damaskinos Papandreou, Metropolitan of Switzerland and Exarch of Europe, was right when he said the following at the beginning of his lecture in the Aula of Sofia University in 1999:

The Orthodox Church is, as generally acknowledged, an important factor in the formation of the spiritual identity of European civilization. (Papandreou 2000, 17)

Orthodoxy will no longer be synonymous with “obscurantism” and “backwardness”, and Europe will be a natural place of dwelling for it.

IV. Orthodoxy and Nationalism

If the basic challenge facing Western Christianity is that it might sink into the secular world and make impermissible compromises with that world in striving to “accommodate” itself to it, tolerating individualism, liberalism etc., the basic problem of Orthodoxy – especially in what were formerly designated as East European societies – is that it should be confused with, identified with, nationality. To be Orthodox often means to be a Bulgarian, Serb, Russian, Rumanian, etc. Ethnic affiliation and Orthodox affiliation are often interchangeable. John Zizioulas writes,

Nationalism and ethno-phyletism have penetrated the Church – especially among us Orthodox Christians. The idea of autocephaly has turned into autocephalism, that is, into the use of the Church for the service of state or national interests. The situation of the Orthodox diaspora in the 20th century is a direct, outright violation of the principles of Orthodox ecclesiology. Without any doubt, such a situation cannot satisfy us, although regrettably, it is ‘blessed’ at the most official level. (Zizioulas 2002)

Orthodoxy is universal in its conception, as is Christianity in general. It is not anti-national, but while respecting and upholding national differences
as something valuable, it rises above them. This would prevent its being transformed into ethno-phyletism, as has happened in many societies in the range of Orthodox Churches. In this connection, Radovan Bigovic points out:

By nature, the Orthodox Church is neither national, nor un-national, nor even above-national. It has always been supra-national. But historical events in the Balkans have led to a distortion engendering theo-national ideologies which in some places have turned into state ideologies. This leads to self-enclosure of the local Churches. But today, almost everywhere, the conviction is growing in the Churches that there should be a break away from all elements of religious nationalism.  

Thus, the nationalization of Orthodoxy is becoming a major problem that the Church must resolve. The radicalization of nationalism – its growing into chauvinism – often happens, among other factors, due to the feeling that Orthodox identity is particularly important for national identity. Strong nationalist moods and attitudes are also present among the clergy of certain Churches: particularly characteristic cases are Serbia, Greece, Russia, and also Bulgaria, where the equating of Orthodoxy with national identity has strong historical roots:

...the pathos of the Bulgarian Church has forever assumed the brand of the National-Revival outlook, and has never risen (or rather humbled itself) to the deep spiritual aspects of events. In perceiving Orthodoxy entirely in the categories of traditional national values, the political elite that carried out and realized its aspiration for an independent Church has remained blind to the Church’s spiritual content, has turned its back to it, neglected it as something of secondary importance compared with the patriotic ideal. (...) The Bulgarian politician (and the average Bulgarian clergyman, regrettably) never saw Orthodoxy as a value in itself, or the Church as a pillar and support of the Truth – that same Universal Truth from which the religious genius of the Russian or the Greek draws its strength and character. (Sivov 1997, 4)

In seeking to overcome ethno-phyletism, Orthodox thinkers emphasize the initial mission of Christianity/Orthodoxy in the world, which is to save and unite people, not to disunite and separate them according to ethnicity/nationality:  

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The Church does not exist only as a cultural decoration of a person’s life, although it does shape culture. The Church exists in order to guide people and nations to the eschatological kingdom of God, to create a particular attitude towards the world, other people, and God. This could be expressed by means of different kinds of cultures (pluralism) but not by means of various civilization-spiritual models. In this sense, the goal of unity is a common ethos, not a common culture; cultures may be different (contrary to ‘national’ Balkan Churches, where there is spiritual unity only of one language, one culture, one nation). (Pavlov 2006)

V. Conclusion

In responding to the outlined challenges of the new contemporary situation, Orthodoxy upholds its identity in a world marked, on the one hand, by freely competing religions or non-religiousness (a diversity that replaced the once obligatory atheism in East European countries), and on the other hand, by a tense opposition between centrifugal and centripetal trends – globalism and ethno-phyletism. It does so in order to maintain its new/old identity under the new civilizational conditions, and in order to be, as Radovan Bigovic has phrased it,

not only ‘Eastern’; today Orthodoxy is universal both in its nature and content, and in geographical terms. That is why it must suppress its tribal mentality, imposed during the centuries of bondage, and build a sobor-like, all-encompassing, universal human mind, care, feeling, and love. All this is in history, or, if you prefer, in post-history and postmodernity. (Bigovic 2002, 8)

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