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# The Contemporary Orthodox Church: Challenged and Responding

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## Sharing the Antidoron

Many people, who have undertaken the risk of an ecumenical journey during the twentieth century and have experienced it as a festival without masks,<sup>1</sup> seem to have underestimated the distance between the good will and the hard realities among the Christian families. Reaching the end of the second Christian millennium, some may embrace the tendency to turn back to their self-centered, confessional, self-satisfaction—that is self-isolation. Others may confess mistakes and keep turning back to God and to each other in repentance, joy, and hope! We in the Orthodox Academy of Crete feel blessed to have received, especially on the interpersonal level, such precious gifts as ecumenical learning, understanding, mutual respect, cooperation, and love.

Thanks to that spirit (evidently a fruit of the Holy Spirit), we have since our founding thirty years ago been able to welcome guests from Christian families from almost every country. God has blessed us with a renewal of the good praxis of early times: visiting one another and becoming “mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Rom. 1:12). Indeed, we always ask friends to understand our invitation in the ethos expressed in Acts 15:36: “Come, let us . . . visit the believers . . . and see how they are doing.”

Ecumenical relations, especially with the Orthodox Church, have been of particular interest to Professor Donald J. Bruggink who has honored us by relating Western Theological Seminary to our academy. Many members of the seminary have had the opportunity to participate in our program, “Living Orthodoxy.”

Professor Bruggink and his students will know that in our tradition, at the end of the Divine Liturgy, the celebrant shares with the believers the “Antidoron,” the remains of the small breads prepared by faithful people specifically for the Holy Eucharist. This sharing is done in remembrance of the *agape* of the first Christian communities. Professor Bruggink may accept this text which I am privileged and pleased to contribute in his honor, as such an Antidoron (a gift given back for a gift received). It expresses our gratitude for the excellent relationship which we hope will be continued for years to come! Because of our mutual blessings during the past years, this Antidoron belongs to those treasures which “no thief comes near and no moth destroys” (Luke 12:33). They are “a good foundation for the future” (1 Tim. 6:19) relationship of our institutions as they maintain their global-ecumenical interests and commitments.

## Ecumenism At a Turning Point

We have special need of such foundations today. Contrary to expectations, the end of the century finds the ecumenical movement at a turning point which threatens to invalidate the plans envisioned by its pioneers at the century's beginning.

Recently, that situation has become more serious. After the collapse of their totalitarian systems, the region of Central and Eastern Europe has been considered a *Niemandsland* (no one's land), and therefore as a subject of everybody's "missionary" activities. The majority of Orthodoxy is now suffering a massive invasion by missionaries of some of the traditional Christian families, and even more by activists from the so-called "new heresies" (sects), from "destructive cults," and from non-Christian religions.

### The European Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy

Facing the challenges experienced in the Orthodox area, the European Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (EIAO),<sup>2</sup> in its annual General Assembly, June 28-July 1, 1998, seriously discussed the topic: "Problems created in the countries of the EIAO by the newly appearing heresies (sects) and effective ways for dealing with them." The following text is a synopsis of the keynote address I presented at that assembly to the more than fifty Orthodox deputies from twenty Parliaments, along with other participants. My address was prefaced with this fact: I have dedicated a major part of my life to the ecumenical effort in order to overcome the consequences of heresies and schisms for the life of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, in spite of my work for the unity of Christians, I must now deal with the topic of heresies!

### Faith and Life

The heresies of the first Christian centuries provoked hard struggles for *the truth of the faith* and for *authenticity of life*. These were struggles in which the most powerful thinkers of their time confronted one another over lofty spiritual matters. In contrast, most of the heresies and destructive cults of our time result from darkness, prefer to work in darkness, and lead into darkness. They are creations of unhealthy religiosity and unhealthy civilizations. Their activities render more difficult the already overburdened religious state of the world.

Faced with this new situation, one wonders what the role of religion is supposed to be in the world of the future. From the era of the Enlightenment onward, we have experienced a process of increased secularization. People have attempted to phase religion out of society and restrict it to the area of individual life—it being of no interest to society as a whole. Nevertheless, no scholar doubts that the place of religion remains, and will play a decisive role in the near future. From among the numerous theories associated with this topic, I shall

focus upon two: one older, and one recent, both of which can be factually confirmed.

### **A Synthesis of Religions?**

The older and conciliating theory is from Max Müller (1823-1900):

I hope the time will come when human religion, to the extent that it is still obscure and hidden from us, will become increasingly understandable, and when the study of religion, which we could at present describe as something we want to do, but which is still only a seedling, will lead to fulfillment and to a rich harvest. When this harvest time comes, when the deepest roots of all the world's religions are uncovered and reconstituted—who knows whether it will be these roots, like the Catacombs or the crypts of our cathedrals, which will gather around them the community of those who have been members of one denomination or another, but long for something better, purer, more ancient and true than that which they find in the traditional sacrifices, church services and sermons to which they have been born as witnesses and participants. . . . Each believer could take down into this silent crypt what to him or her is dearest, the pearl of great price—for the Hindu, the inborn readiness to believe in nothing earthly but rather in another world; for the Buddhist, the concept of eternal law, obedience to it, kindness and compassion; for the Muslim, sobriety, if nothing more; for the Jew, inwardly holding fast in good times and bad to the one God whose name is “I am”; for the Christian, the best of all, who no one who has experienced it will doubt: our love of God, under whatever name we choose, the Invisible, Eternal, Father, Highest Self, who is revealed through our love for human beings, the living as well as the departed, through our living and unchanging love.<sup>3</sup>

(In a recent study concerning similar topics, I called this perspective an interreligious “refenes” [potluck]).<sup>4</sup> This optimistic theory could be understood as approving syncretism, a characteristic of some of the newly arising heresies and of our times in general.

### **Interreligious Dialogue?**

The recent theory comes from His All Holiness Bartholomeos, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople: “Humankind is moving towards a new phase of history. As some predict, religion and culture will largely determine the future. This obviously constitutes a positive prospect under the condition that we are not proceeding towards the conflict of religions and cultures but rather

towards the creative dialogue among them. For this a deeper mutual knowledge is required.”<sup>5</sup> The representative of the European Union to the Assembly has also informed us about its special interest in the interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

### **A Clash?**

Unfortunately, a clash between both religions and cultures seems to be the most realistic perspective, especially if we consider several events happening around the world. Remarkable (although dubious for many) are some of the recently published observations of Samuel Huntington.<sup>6</sup> These should not surprise us, since the outstanding theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) has warned us in these knowledgeable words:

An immense struggle is in preparation. Its great moment may not come until humanity arrives at a time of political and social peace. . . . That will be the highest, most solemn moment in human history, when it is no longer political systems, economic or social interest groups, but the religions of humankind which stand up against one another; and when, after the preliminary and mock skirmishes over mythological and dogmatic crusts and wrappings, the accidents of history and one another’s shortcomings, they finally get to the full-scale battle in which there is an encounter of mind with mind, ideal with ideal, experience with experience; where each must say plainly what it has to offer of the most profound and genuine, whatever it has . . . . As always, who could wish or dare to ward off such developments with a premature “Universal religion” or with sensible advice. . . . The “Master” is the one who can conquer masters, and no religion should die without being allowed to speak its last and profound word.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the signs that lead many to fear that we are approaching this critical phase of worldwide history are constantly multiplying. No one can doubt the contribution of the newly arising heresies and para-religious phenomena to the arrival of this threatening tension, because their action provokes reaction as well as social and spiritual confusion.

### **Useful Confusion**

The next question is: If things are like or nearly like this, how do the new heresies and sects act within this interreligious terrain?

Most of them pursue their own profit by taking advantage of what is happening. More specifically: The world of the future is already provoking fundamental changes. It creates the new reality of a society of biotechnology, informatics, globalization, and a “techno-universe.” Arnold Joseph Toynbee’s

“Great Society”<sup>8</sup> is becoming a reality in which the world is changed (to quote Zbigniew Brzezinski) “into a knot of interdependent relationships, strained, unpeaceful and tense.”<sup>9</sup> The time of the opaque, the unpredictable, the unexpected, and the paradox has come. It is the time when humankind abandons not only planet Earth, but, above all, the order and the limits of their own existence.

The heresies make use of precisely this strain, this tension. They simultaneously predict even bigger distress for humankind, and offer ready formulas for the “chosen.” They promise assurance, quietude, (astrological) prediction, and an umbrella of psychological protection. According to the new “prophets,” constant values experienced in religious, social, and political life, follow the fate of the past, together with the existing “main-stream” Christian families. These are some of the reasons why the teachings of new heresies find such a high degree of acceptance. They appear nearly every day and promise everybody a “personal Savior,” as easily and directly as if they were talking about a personal computer!

In the modern market of abundant consumer goods, which the majority of the world’s population can only dream about, new narcotic ideas are added every day in the same abundance, leading to narcotic drugs and narcotic utopias. The propagandists of the new heresies do not need more muddy waters in order to hide the true quality of their decoy. In addition to this, the anguish of the weak and powerless that results from unemployment, poverty, homelessness, illness, uncertainty, and fear due to the effects of globalization creates the ideal climate for heresies and destructive cults.

Within that climate, these propagandists easily become influential by ignoring or crushing weak states, indolent societies, and their state officials. They corrupt conscience, give false information, terrorize with reference to the supposedly apocalyptic signs of the imminent end of the world, and promise paradise within arm’s reach. These activities and the resulting phenomena can be observed everywhere on the planet. Although the methods, the argument, and the decoy may vary, the ambitious goal remains constant: to absorb all the traditional churches before the middle of the twenty-first century, and to expand the field of religions!

### **A Justified Optimism?**

Their optimism about reaching this goal is justified to a certain degree by the dynamics they develop worldwide, by their perfectly developed system of exerting psychological violence, by their well-trained staff members, by the access to an abundance of economic means, and by several financial activities of indiscernible sources beyond control. Using the most modern means and techniques of mass communication, even violating the law in some cases, they encircle many countries. Their optimism is even more justified if we consider the deep crisis (concerning finances, organization, and human resources) which

plagues most of the Orthodox peoples and churches today, along with many of the non-Orthodox Christian families.

The sectarian aggravation of this crisis provokes spasmodic reactions, as well as the unexpected mass appearance of different religions (refugees, asylum-seekers, e.g.) in the traditionally Christian countries of Europe, both East and West. Almost overnight, the West experienced mosques growing like mushrooms, together with pagodas and countless "cultural" centers. The surprise evoked either embarrassed apathy or fearful aggression, accompanied by traces of racism, nationalism, neo-nazism, and an inclination toward exclusion. Thus far, however, aggression seems not to frighten the members of religions who view their arrival in Europe as a mission. Especially, a large number of Muslims are convinced that Allah has predestinated them to "islamize" the West.

To alleviate anxiety over these dangerous developments, even churches and ecumenical bodies are promoting as of superior worth, pluralism, respect for minorities, and tolerance. Although this is absolutely necessary, such response seems to offer limited help. Even in this instance, misuse of those values and other hyperboles most often bring about the opposite result. The heresies exacerbate the points of friction concerning these matters by immediately making the most unimportant issues known to the whole world as a violation of their religious freedom or the deprivation of their societal and human rights.

### **Keep the Inquisitor Away!**

In the light of this situation, the honored members of this Assembly may ask: What are the most effective ways to react to the newly arising heresies and the phenomena connected with them?

Dostoyevski, and my Cretan compatriot Dominikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco), would give the following advice: Keep the *inquisitor*, be he grand or petty, far away from Orthodoxy! Surely, neither fanaticism nor intolerance suits Orthodoxy. Therefore, I believe, given the spirit and the tradition of Orthodoxy, there can be only one answer. The Orthodox Church, within the turbulence of this new Babel of our times, has the right to use only spiritual weapons: her Eucharist prayer, her unity, the teaching of the truth, patience, forgiveness, hope, tolerance, love, and stability in faith. These are also the weapons that support ecumenicity. Although they are not instantly effective, they are neither obsolete nor feeble. They have been tried and have proven to be successful for 2000 years. The only issue is to determine who handles them and how, under what circumstances, and for what purpose.

Moreover, Orthodox peoples need the honesty to recognize their own situation with confidence and repentance. The long-lasting violence of tyrannical atheistic regimes has left many of them with deep wounds and huge spiritual vacuums. And even if we can say that in recent decades the unity of Orthodoxy was strengthened, we cannot ignore tendencies pointing in the opposite direction. Perhaps because we have not adequately applied the old golden rule (Keep the order, and the order will keep you!), confrontations of

members and groups in the one or other Autocephalous Orthodox Church (who, in some cases, are also supported by political powers), have led to anticanonical actions which give a negative image and divide the clergy and the laity. Any inner weakening of the church inevitably makes the work of heresies much easier.

With the initiative of the Church of Greece, a recently developed pan-Orthodox cooperation aims to give a common response to the challenges of the new sects, various movements, non-Christian religions, and destructive cults. This attempt welcomes cooperation with other Christian churches, parents' associations in various countries, and related initiatives. A similar reaction is observed among governments in western European countries and other political institutions (Council of Europe, European Parliament, National Parliaments), who have begun to reflect on the issue and, in some cases, to examine legislative and administrative action.

Underlined in this context is the historical fact that Orthodoxy does not define itself and its mission in the world from an "anti" relationship (for example: anti-heretical fightings), but from the devoted and authentic witness of the gospel in the day-to-day *martyria* (witness) and *diakonia* (service) of its faithful people. A basic conviction and long-lasting experience of Orthodoxy is that the *pleroma* (fullness) of the church, the people, is its strength. Therefore, the moment calls us to do two things with haste: (1) determine together what are the appropriate criteria for Orthodox clergy formation and theological education/research in the twenty-first century, and (2) promote Christian education in all countries under the oversight of both the Orthodox Churches and the respective states. Only a creative response to these main needs will enable Orthodoxy to avoid the temptation to attempt to silence the heresies. Not their silence, but the quality of our own voice and its spiritual power can answer the challenge.

For this reason it is clear that the EIAO's decision to deal with the issue of the sects and the related phenomena in this year's Assembly recognizes the fact that the nature of the problems arising are socio-political as well as ecclesiastical.

### **Normal and Abnormal**

One further reality we Orthodox have to understand is that what continues to be normal for us, appears to be abnormal for others. This is especially true for those who live in a more or less broken society and cannot understand what is common to us: that both our Christian existence and our national existence are founded on the same faith and way of life. This is precisely the foundation which globalization and proselytism are threatening today. Therefore, we dare to say that the most catastrophic "heresy" is perhaps the indifference to what is happening!

Moreover, taking any kind of pluralism as an absolute value does not permit religious homogeneity. The latter is seen as an "anomaly" to be broken. With the same logic, the coherence in family, society, and nation is a serious obstacle



for those (the sects and others) for whom the “vital space” is to be found in the chasms and the disconnections. To that we say: Plurality in nature reveals beauty, plurality in creeds reveals divisions!

### The Ecumenical Crisis

The above makes us more aware of how seriously the present crisis in the ecumenical fellowship is connected with those sectarian aggressions and the entire issue of proselytism.

The frequent condemnation of proselytism by the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Conference of European Churches (CEC), and other ecumenical bodies, seems to remain a verbal one, without result. Therefore, “*the Orthodox member Churches, while engaged in the work and activities of the WCC for fifty years, have found their membership in the WCC becoming more, rather than less, problematic.*”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, proselytism has contributed very much to the erosion of the relationship among Orthodox in particular and the ecumenical fellowship in general. The same has happened in the relation between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church, not least because of the unsolved problem of Uniats. I emphasize only two aspects of the problem:

- (a) For the less informed Orthodox people, it is difficult to distinguish between sectarian activists and members of non-Orthodox denominations. Therefore, there is always the danger of putting them all in the same basket and keeping them at a distance!
- (b) In such an atmosphere, common ecumenical goals and programs appear to be either utopian or disorienting. How, for example, are we to grow into the same *koinonia*? How are we to move together “Towards a Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today” (*common!*, really?)? How are we to “Grow Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry”? How are we to work towards a common mission, remaining unreconciled? The presence and action of sects and similar groups contribute to the main sources of arguments strengthening the position of anti-ecumenical oriented Orthodox.<sup>11</sup>

These two facts played an important role in the decision of the Orthodox Church of Georgia to withdraw from the WCC and the CEC. The Russian Orthodox Church warned:

We are concerned about the growth of proselytism which presents a real danger to the ecumenical movement. Not only sects but some member churches of the WCC are engaged in missionary activities using their financial potential and disregarding traditional local churches. Such activity undermines the authority of the ecumenical movement and is a direct challenge to the World Council of Churches, which stands on a firm position on the matter of proselytism. . . .

Proselytism must not be allowed to destroy the relations which have been formed among member churches over the decades.<sup>12</sup>

Since Harare, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has also left the council, while the Russian Orthodox Church froze its relations with it pending the exploration of new structures of membership and new ways of cooperation.

### Ecumenical Defiance

While president of the Interim Executive Committee of the CEC in 1993, I felt keenly the threatening trends and developments, the new aberrations, hostilities, and the disintegration of the Christian family. At that time I pleaded for ecumenical defiance and called upon the European churches to join us all in applying our energies resolutely and in common so that nothing God the Merciful has given us during this century on the path towards unity might be lost.<sup>13</sup>

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alexandros Papaderos, "Ecumenism as Celebration," in *Faith and Faithfulness. Essays on Contemporary Ecumenical Themes, A Tribute to Philip A. Potter*, ed. Pauline Webb (Geneva: WCC, 1984), 28-39. Cf. also A. Papaderos, "The 'gadfly' on trial: the 'political' commitment of the World Council of Churches," in *Voices of Unity, Essays in honour of Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft*, ed. Ans. J. van der Bent (Geneva: WCC, 1981), 78-91.

<sup>2</sup> The European Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (EIAO) is an interparliamentary body, set up by the initiative of the Greek Parliament during 1993/1994. The members of the EIAO represent the parliaments of the following twenty countries of Europe in which there are Orthodox populations: Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Moldavia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia.

The supreme authority of the EIAO is the General Assembly of its members, in which parliamentary delegations appointed by the parliaments of the above countries participate. The executive authority of the EIAO is its International Secretariat with permanent headquarters in Athens. The General Secretary is always Greek. Among the aims of EIAO are:

... The highlighting of the role of Orthodoxy within the framework of the European Union as a political, cultural and spiritual expression, important and necessary for shaping the reality of the new Europe.

... The contribution of the universal and unifying spirit of Orthodoxy both to the transcendence of extreme nationalistic, confessional, and religious antagonisms, and to the discovery of effective means of protecting national or religious minorities.

... Collaboration with international organizations in promoting respect for the cultural and religious map of Europe and protection from proselytization of any kind, and the discouragement of phenomena of confessional or religious competition, and

of activities whose offenses against social or political morality give rise to religious intolerance and national and racial fanaticism in Europe.

... Support for the role of Orthodox civilization as a unifying force in Eastern Europe and as a bridge for Europe in its relations with other cultures.”

<sup>3</sup>Text translated from the German original in: Friedrich Heiler, *Die Religionen der Menschheit in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Philip Reclam jun., 1962) (2<sup>nd</sup>. ed.), 884.

<sup>4</sup> Alexandros Papaderos, “Religions and Cultures. Convergence, Conflict, Dialogue” in *Orthodoxy and the Unity of All* (Coutloumousion Monastery: Holy Mountain, 1997 [in Greek]). See also: A. Papaderos, *Wie immer geredet wurde, so haben wir auch zu reden!* Pastoralamt der Erzdiözese Wien (ed.), 1997.

<sup>5</sup>Address of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos during his visit to the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Nov. 5, 1996), on the theme: “An Orthodox Response to Contemporary Issues.”

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Heiler, *op. cit.*, 887. Cf. also G. Vicedom, *Die Weltreligionen im Angriff auf die Christenheit* (Muenchen: Kaiser Verlag, 1961)

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Joseph Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford U.P., 1948-61).

<sup>9</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages. America's Role in the Technetronic Era* (New York: Viking, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Leonid Kishkovsky, “The Assembly in Context: The WCC and the Orthodox Churches on the Way to Harare,” in *Turn to God Rejoice in Hope: Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Harare*, ed. Thomas FitzGerald and Peter Bouteneff (Geneva: WCC, 1998), 40.

<sup>11</sup> For the entire problem see, among others, Erich Geldbach, “Kirche und Sekte,” *Oekumenisches Forum*, 18 (1995), 187ff.; Grigorios Larentzakis, “Kirche und Sekten aus der Sicht der Orthodoxen Theologie,” *ibid.*, 207-226. Alexandros Papaderos, *METAKENOSIS Griechenlands kulturelle Herausforderung durch die Aufklärung in der Sicht des Korais und des Oikonomos* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1970), 135-160.

<sup>12</sup> *Turn to God Rejoice in Hope*, 71. In his report to the WCC Central Committee (Sept. 11-19, 1997), its Moderator, His Holiness Aram I., Catholicos of Cilicia, has underlined that “ecumenism and proselytism cannot co-exist,” *ibid.*, 117.

<sup>13</sup> See the “Chairman’s Report” (Alexandros Papaderos), in: Minutes of the Meeting of the CEC Central Committee (in Iserlohn, Germany) (Geneva, 1993), 48-57.