

**The Fourth Dialogue between
the Group of the European People's Party
(Christian Democrats)
and European Democrats
and the Ecumenical Patriarchate**

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A.K.P. - dokimi

Human Rights in present Society

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When I accepted the great honour of an invitation to take part in this gathering, it seemed fair to ask: Why, and for what purpose, is the Church holding a dialogue with representatives of political parties? And why are they holding a dialogue with the Church, these men and women who are actively involved in the political events of our times, and who are shaping the future of Europe – and not only Europe?

Among other ideas and people who came to mind, I thought of the great Swedish visionary Nathan Söderblom, religious scholar, Archbishop of Uppsala, and one of the prime movers in the Ecumenical Movement at the beginning of the last century. In 1911 he came to this city, among others, to gain a better idea of the historic initiatives taken by the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the turn of the century in the cause of worldwide co-operation among Christians towards alleviating human suffering.¹

During his visit to Athens, Nathan Söderblom wrote down some of his interesting thoughts. I have chosen the following extract, with which I would like to express my respect for you and for all those others who bear the political responsibilities in our continent and in every part of the world today. Nathan Söderblom wrote:

“When one stands on the Acropolis and turns towards the waters of the Saronic Gulf, towards the sheer cliff-face of Cape Sounion, and towards the Gulf of Eleusis beyond Salamis, one wonders which was more important for the sovereignty of God and of greater benefit to humanity: Marathon and Salamis, where the Athenians fought for their city, or Eleusis, where they sought consolation for the transience [of life].

“It is possible – no-one can be sure – that a politician may, in certain historical circumstances, gain greater importance for the Kingdom of God than several thousand preachers. A few dreamers and active visionaries may make a greater contribution to God’s plan, outweighing anything achieved... by the over-cautious piety which calls them mad.”²

1 Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical of 1902, in: *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement. Documents and Statements 1902-1975*. Edited by Constantin G. Patelos, World Council of Churches, Geneva 1978, pp 27-33.

2 See the text in Hanna Wolff’s book, “Der lebendige Gott. Nathan Söderbloms Beitrag zur Offenbarungsfrage”, Emsdetten 1936, p. 161. Cf Frederic E. Pamp, “The Nature of Revelation”, Oxford University Press, 1933, pp 140ff.

The Church prays for you, the wielders of political power. Not, perhaps, because it knows you are holding dynamite in your hands and have the power to cause disaster! But rather because, using this dynamite, you can open up roads to the people and minister to them with peace and justice. This is the wish of the Church which honours you and your work.

You have come to the City, as Söderblom did then, and you are continuing an important dialogue now that a new European synthesis is being attempted. A year ago, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Hildesheim, Dr Josef Homeyer, referring to this synthesis, stressed the importance of politics which recognises the other in its otherness ("Politik der Anerkennung des Anderen in seiner Andersheit"). Equally important are the various dimensions of the European situation, especially the relationship between East and West in our continent. The Bishop said, among other things, "The politics of recognition should not hesitate to set out on the road to Constantinople, in other words, towards the sacred traditions of Orthodoxy. The history of reconciliation between Eastern and Western Europe cannot be written without reference to Orthodoxy." "Politik der Anerkennung darf den Weg nach Konstantinopel, also den Weg in die heiligen Traditionen der Orthodoxie, nicht scheuen. Die Versöhnungsgeschichte zwischen Ost- und Westeuropa kann ohne die Orthodoxie nicht geschrieben werden."³ You, the politicians, who are shaping the present and the future of Europe, have not hesitated to come here. In this way you are participating in the writing of this history – this sacred history, I would say – of the reconciliation, the depth and quality of which depends to a large degree on the quality and depth of respect for human rights.

I welcome this dialogue for a further reason: in the history of the Church, the 20th century could be described as the century of great visions and struggles, but also, unfortunately, the century of failure of the vision of Christian unity, which is so essential for the unity of Europe and the world. One of the results of this failure is the view, probably justified in the circumstances, that in order to achieve political or social consensus, for example on matters of human rights, we must push theology to the margin, because theology, being divided, divides rather than unites. This entails a weakening of the potential for constructive participation by the Church in the shaping of Europe's future. To a significant degree this marginalisation deprives political theory and practice of the values of the Gospel. Christians are unable to articulate, collectively, an authoritative statement to serve as a reminder, wherever and whenever necessary, of the Word of God – "THUS SAITH THE LORD"! – and to convince the peoples of Europe that they inherit and partake in values which they can share or, at least, whose endurance they can collectively test under rapidly changing conditions.

3 Grigorios Larentzakis, "Christentum und Politik im neuen Europa. Ein dringlicher Appell aus orthodoxer Perspektive an der Schwelle zum 3. Jahrtausend", in Silvia Hell (Hrsg.), "Die Glaubwürdigkeit christlicher Kirchen. Auf dem Weg ins 3. Jahrtausend", Tyrolia-Verlag, Innsbruck-Wien 2000, page 287. J. Homeyer, Bischof von Hildesheim, "Die zweite gestaltung Europas und die Rolle der Kirche oder Bedenken was trägt", Festrede, Helmstedt 1999, 20f.

Hoping you will forgive this long introduction, I would now like to express the confidence I feel, because I know that the next speaker – a woman who is greatly esteemed and respected in Greece and, I believe, not only in Greece – Mrs Marietta Yiannakou-Koutsikou, will certainly make up for my own omissions on the subject of human rights, which, despite the undoubted progress which has been made, seem to remain an aspiration rather than an achievement of humankind.

I make this comment, bearing in mind, among other things, what Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, said recently in Geneva, in an address to the members of the UN Commission on Human Rights (4 April 2000).⁴ He called upon the international community to close the wide gap between the human rights which are proclaimed, and the human rights situation in reality. “No state,” he said, “whether it is industrialised or a developing country, can claim to have achieved this aim.” I have no great difficulty in admitting that this is a finding which ought to prompt the leadership of the Christian churches, and religious leaders generally, to deeper self-examination on this crucial question.

It would be difficult, I think, to have any objections or reservations about Kofi Annan’s other statement, which I consider self-evident, that no laws of any state can override its international obligations, and these, of course, include its obligations to respect human rights.

Where views and practices undoubtedly clash is on the other principle which he upheld: that attacks on human rights can no longer be regarded as an internal matter for each nation, and that in such cases, the international community has the right and the obligation to intervene on behalf of the victims because, as he said, “human rights are sacred and know no boundaries”. Who can doubt this? Nobody, I imagine. But I am afraid there is still some ambiguity about the term “international community”. If it means the United Nations, it is well known how many times it has been crassly ignored, precisely in cases of the gravest violation of human rights. It is also well known how often human rights are turned into mere tools for the violation of these very rights, or for selectivity in their enforcement!

Those who envisage creating the conditions for rapid and effective intervention by combined European forces to prevent or contain regional crises and conflicts in our continent will, we hope, take serious account of recent as well as earlier experience, and have the wisdom to distinguish between the desirable and the permissible. Whoever says – rightly, I believe – that “no people may be forcibly deprived of freedom, democracy and human rights,”⁵ is also obliged to answer the question, whether it is permissible for freedom, democracy and human rights to be imposed on a people by force, especially when these words, and above all what they

4 “Menschenrechte sind heilig”, epd-Wochenspiegel 15 (13.4.2000) 13.

5 “Freiheit, Demokratie und Menschenrechte dürfen keinem Volk gewaltsam verweigert werden” (speech by the German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder on the occasion of the award of the Charlemagne Prize to US President Bill Clinton, Aachen, June 2000).

represent in practice, are accompanied by a dubious lack of transparency as regards intentions and the means of achieving them.

But I have already strayed far enough into subjects which are outside my domain.

My mission and responsibility is to approach the issue of human rights in modern society in the light of certain principles and experiences drawn from theology and from life in our Orthodox Church; but first I would like to clarify certain concepts.

The first thing I would like to stress is that the Orthodox view of humanity places emphasis on the human being as a person. It does not of course ignore the individuality of the human being, if by the term *individual* we mean “the indivisible”, the human being as a whole. This individual, unique, irreplaceable, has his being – exists, that is, and truly lives – solely as a *person*, i.e. in relation to and in community with other people.

The model and basis for this view of humanity is the Holy Trinity. The Divinity in Three Persons of the Christian faith. The three hypostases (persons) of the Trinity appear as three persons in loving communion with one another.

Confining myself to this brief theological allusion, I shall explain first of all that “the rights of the individual”, as they are called, are respected by the Orthodox Church, because they are recognised to the extent that they operate as frameworks of relations and not as bastions of self-isolation. Furthermore, in the Orthodox view of salvation (in the teachings on the salvation of humanity), the ultimate and highest realisation of life in Christ does not place emphasis on individual salvation. Without in the least belittling individual salvation, it emphasises salvation of the whole world. In other words, we do not follow certain heterodox teachings which promise Christ as a “personal Saviour” (like a “personal computer!”).⁶ We follow, for example, Saint Cosmas of Aetolia, the Neomartyr (1714-1779), who would exhort the peoples of the Balkans in difficult times:

“No Christian, man or woman, should think of personal salvation alone; rather, each should see to it that his brothers do not sin.”⁷

In this sense the Orthodox Church welcomes and supports individual rights, human rights, and any other rights which contribute to the protection, furtherance and full development of the human being and help to improve interpersonal relations at the level of individuals, social groups, and peoples, without discrimination. With the same clarity the Orthodox Church opposes and must oppose constantly and decisively any situation, any exercise of authority, any manifestation of human powers or human failings, which distorts the features of the image of God – that is,

6 Alexandros K. Papaderos, “The Contemporary Orthodox Church: Challenged and Responding”, *REFORMED REVIEW* 52.3 (1999), 229.

7 “Saint Cosmas of Aetolia and his times”, Athens 1972, page 332. Cf. Alexandros Papaderos, *LEITOURGIKI DIAKONIA [FUNCTIONAL MINISTRY]. The social mission of the Church in the Modern World.* Published by the Orthodox Academy of Crete, Chania 1981. Page 45.

of the human being – and becomes an obstacle on his course towards perfection and salvation.

The Church's belief that man was created free and accountable means, among other things, that his dignity is an integral part of his nature and therefore cannot depend on the will of others.

This enduring belief of Orthodoxy, handed down from the Scriptures and the Church Fathers, found its unequivocal expression in the context of the preparations for the Great and Holy Orthodox Synod. The relevant preliminary text, which has been accepted by all the Autocephalous and Autonomous Orthodox Churches, bears the characteristic title:

“Contribution of the Orthodox Churches in various countries to the prevalence of the Christian ideals of peace, justice, freedom, brotherhood and love between peoples, and elimination of racial and other forms of discrimination.”⁸

The fundamental principles, aims and commitments set out in this document concern not only Orthodox believers, but the Church's ministry to every human being.

A fuller understanding of these principles can be gained from the image of the body and the relationship of its parts to each other and to the body as a whole. I remind you of Aristotle's principle whereby a whole is greater than the sum of its constituent parts. In the Christian view of humanity, man is not simply an assembly of parts, chemical compounds and functions. His rights, therefore, are not guaranteed merely by care for physical wellbeing, for example, food, health, the proper functioning of the body, and its dignified committal to the earth after death. The Christian view of the body and its parts is summed up by the Apostle Paul in an admirable sequence of analogies, from which I select one which I consider to have the most direct bearing on our subject. It is in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, and I venture to believe that this text would be an excellent preamble to any legal enactment or declaration of human rights.

The Apostle Paul wrote:

“Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be feeble, are necessary, and those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour... but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked, that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.” (I Corinth. 12, 22-26).

Many people use this image of the body when they talk about the Church. But as we have said before, the Orthodox Church's belief in salvation is universal and all-embracing, because it represents the love of God without bounds. If, then, the

⁸ EPIKSEPSIS [REVIEW] 354 (1986).

human community, as a single body, could truly respect the human rights which have been proclaimed, and could enrich them and truly live by them, in accordance with the Apostle Paul's exhortation, which means giving priority to the weakest members of the community, then there would be no war between the members of the social body.

The cultivation of such a social ethic must remain one of the priorities of the Church. I say "remain", because in our tradition there has been an abiding principle of social ministry by the Church. We are here as guests in a city where the basic components of Byzantine civilisation took shape (an admirable synthesis of the Graeco-Roman heritage and the Christian Gospel – the first Christian Commonwealth on the soil of Europe and Asia). So it is useful to remember that the outstanding characteristic of Byzantium was PHILANTHROPY.⁹ Not merely in the sense of charity or social welfare, although even today many would envy the extent and quality of this. We mean PHILANTHROPY in a much wider sense: as friendship among people based on affirmation of the sacredness of each human being, and as an outlook, an attitude to life, which emphasises community. A philanthropic theory and practice which crystallised, for example, into legislation, public administration, and the behaviour adopted towards the "barbarians" – the restless neighbouring peoples who flowed into the Empire or existed in a state of tension with it.

Of course we do not ignore the shortcomings of those times, or the aberrations, which by today's standards would be described as serious violations of human rights. We maintain simply that such violation would have been much graver and more ruthless if the preventive and therapeutic influence of PHILANTHROPY had not been so powerful and effective.

Today it seems certain that we are seeing, especially in developed countries, a dangerous confusion surrounding the concepts of the GOOD, the TRUE and the BEAUTIFUL, which, according to the Philosophy of Civilisation, are three fundamental values of human existence; the way in which they are experienced and expressed is the basic defining principle of every civilisation. For this reason, a crisis of civilisation exists, above all, where there is a crisis of these values.

So we may quite reasonably feel concerned at the present orientation of civilisation in Europe and beyond. Take, for instance, the development of language, to use just one example.

The language in which the documents, regulations, conventions and declarations on human rights are drawn up is the language – the terminology, the thinking – of legal science, which is perhaps the only form of language internationally accepted.

9 D. J. Constantelos, "Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare", Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick – New Jersey 1968.

Language can shape awareness (Sprache kann Bewusstsein bilden): this was one of the points made recently in l'OSSERVATORE ROMANO (2 June 2000, 9), with reference to a book by the Austrian psychiatrist Alice Ricciardi von Platen¹⁰ on the subject of euthanasia for mental patients.¹¹

The question arises, what realistic prospect can there be for respect for human rights in a society, in a civilisation, in whose everyday vocabulary such key words for human co-existence are missing or have lost their meaning and potency in a social context: philanthropy, in the sense I have just mentioned; respect, justice, voluntary contribution, responsibility, repentance, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, kindness, forbearance, solace, patience, tolerance, hope? Is there really any prospect for human rights in a society in whose daily atmosphere there predominate – as high ideals! – private interest, competitiveness, arrogance, delusion, deception, misinformation, excess, falsehood, fanaticism, hate?

10 Alice Ricciardi von Platen, "Il Nazismo e l'eutanasia dei malati di mente", Firenze 2000 (l'OSSERVATORE ROMANO, 2 June 2000, 9).

11 "Die Tötung Geisteskranker in Deutschland", Psychiatrie-Verlag, Bonn 1993.