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Experience with Hermeneutics in Modern Orthodox Theology¹

Abstract

This article deals with a question whether hermeneutical thought can be applied in the modern Orthodox context. Hermeneutics in Orthodox theology has been firstly connected with an orientation towards specific Orthodox elements which were found in patristics and Church Fathers. To explain this approach, the thoughts of Greek Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras with his anti-Western approach, and thoughts of American Orthodox theologian John Breck, who



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¹ This study is supported by two projects: "Transformations of Tradition: Implications for Contemporary Ecumenical Theology", funded by the Czech Science Foundation, and also, by Charles University Research Centre on theological anthropology.

rehabilitates some aspects of patristic heritage, will be presented. In current times a new generation of younger theologians has appeared who are aware of the current situation and who call for openness and dialogue with hermeneutical thinking. From this generation are chosen Greek Orthodox theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis, who calls for a paradigm shift and German Orthodox theologian of Lebanese origin Assaad Elias Kattan, who makes first steps in a dialogue with modern hermeneutics.

Keywords

hermeneutics, contemporary Orthodox theology, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Patristics

1 Introduction

The main theme in this article will be a question whether it is possible to use hermeneutics within an Orthodox context. That question belongs with problematic ones and has a connection with other matters such as the Orthodox identity crisis, the relationship between the Orthodox and the Western theology and relation to the Church Fathers. Moreover, it is connected to the distrust in the so-called Western methodology that led to the turning for specific Orthodox elements, such as those the Orthodoxy was looking for during the patristic period.

This approach will first be explained on the examples of a Greek Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras, who criticised the Western scientific totalitarianism and that of an American Orthodox theologian John Breck who rehabilitated the pre-critical patristic hermeneutics. The change is coming now, with the generation of theologians who realize that paradigms shifted, who are critical to the conclusions of their teachers and who call for a dialog and openness. They realize namely the specificity of a current time and accommodate hermeneutic thinking within their view. The first theologian from this

generation who will be introduced is the Greek Orthodox theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis who criticizes the antecedent return to the past attitude; the next will be the German Orthodox theologian Assad Elias Kattan, whose theology seeks inspiration in some of the Church Fathers while it also explicitly involves modern hermeneutic concepts.

2 The Yannaras' critique of the Western methodology

The question of understanding and interpreting, especially the Scripture and the tradition, is in the Orthodox context primarily determined by dogmatic imperatives. Recently there are recognized two chief approaches to this question; Orthodox theologians either used a methodology and a terminology characteristic to their Western colleagues, or they endeavored to emphasize Orthodox specifics. The reverse in patristic studies at the beginning of the 20th c. re-evaluated the ways that biblical texts are being used in the development of biblical doctrines at the early church. *Georges Florovsky* (1893-1979) who called for a return to the Church Fathers considering them the fundamental hermeneutical principle of the Orthodox theology, was the most notable person of that happening.

Questions important for the Orthodox theology emerged from that: To follow the Western development or to isolate from it? Which critical methods to adopt and to incorporate them in the Orthodox theology? The issue is often presented unilaterally as if the Orthodoxy was *a priori* against rationalism and modernity,² but it is not so black-and-white. Orthodox criticism of modernity focuses exclusively on its negative consequences (such as secularization, unraveling, fragmentation of the human existence), and seeks to resolve them through Orthodox heritage.

² Warns especially Makrides in: V. Makrides, Orthodox Christianity, Rationalization, Modernization: A Reassessment, in: V. Roudometof (ed.), *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global age: Tradition Faces the Twenty-first Century* (Walnut Creek: AlraMira Press, 2005), p. 185.

*Christos Yannaras*³ (b. 1935) is one of the most important contemporary Greek theologians⁴, and his work best describes the theory of the intact continuity of Christian Hellenism. Yannaras points out that modernity represents the rise of one-sided, absolute and all-penetrating rationality that originates in Augustine and culminates in scholasticism. This rationality is contradictory to the rationality of the Byzantine East, which is perceived as much more holistic.

Yannaras' hermeneutics was first formulated in 1972 in his book *Orthodoxy and the West*.⁵ He does not perceive the West and East as ideological counterparts, but solely as a concern embedded in the historical context. His main argument is that Christianity was fully embedded in Greek culture and Greek philology-based terminology and this form of Christianity was referred to as 'Orthodoxy'. In the period from Heraclitus to Neoplatonists, the truth was as an event of common experience, and therefore Yannaras quotes Heraclitus' fragment: "Everything that we share, we know to be true; what we have that is peculiar to us, we know to be false."⁶

Yannaras places this social verification of truth and participation in events in contrast with the individual perception that emerged in the fifth and sixth centuries in a new form of Christianity. The new form of Christianity was represented by people coming from the Western part of the Roman Empire who, in their global scope, had absorbed the

³ Currently a professor emeritus of philosophy at the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens. He was born in 1935, studied in Athens, Thessalonica, Bonn and Paris; holds a PhD in philosophy at the Sorbonne and the Theology of Thessalonica.

⁴ Says about him Andrew Louth in A. Louth, Introduction, in: Ch. Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God*, (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 1.

⁵ Ch. Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006). This book is based in his articles from 1971 and 1972, published as a book in 1972, later revised, expanded and published in Greek in 1992, translation into English is from 2006.

⁶ Ch. Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, (London: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 153.

previous Greek form, even though it was much less advanced in the cultural domain.⁷ Yannaras speaks of "western deviations"⁸ and "spiritual problems that have been created by Western religionizing of the Church."⁹ For him, the new form of Christianity is an individual religion dominated by "private convictions, the acquisition of individual merit, and the institutional control of faith and morals,"¹⁰ and considers it to be a heresy much stronger than early church heresies because it offered a new way of life and thinking.

The first in a line of thinkers who enabled the emergence of a new form of Christianity was *Augustine of Hippo* (354-430), who brought logic and legal thinking to theology; the truth is thus separated from the dynamics of life and identified with concept and argumentation. Augustine himself would only be alone thinker if the Franks did not seek to establish the second Roman Empire apart from the East. This change of Christianity into religion (*religio*) is considered by Yannaras to be the biggest falsification of Christianity.¹¹ In a similar development continued scholasticism, later though questioned by Reformation, but the Reformation made a fundamental mistake - remained faithful to Augustine.

Yannaras believes that Western Christianity has radically betrayed the original Gospel and created a new doctrine. He criticizes Western ideology and traditions, although he explicitly writes that his book should not be perceived as an attack against the West, a reflection on how Greek Orthodoxy identified itself during various periods of history.¹² The characteristics of Western thinking according to Yannaras are: (i) the technology of faith where the religious faith has changed into an ideology with a precise worldview and a compulsory

⁷ Chr. Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, p. vii.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. viii. See also Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, p. 154.

⁹ Chr. Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, p. viii.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 24.

¹¹ Chr. Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, p. 156.

¹² Chr. Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, p. viii.

methodology¹³; (ii) the totalitarianism of the method; (iii) the polarization of life between the intellectual individualism and the authoritative objectivism¹⁴; (iv) the loss of ecclesial life.¹⁵

There are many ways in which Yannaras opposes the West. One of them is the opposition to the immorality and impersonality of Western consumerist society, which he perceives as an inauthentic way of life; then it is the opposition to the direction of the Orthodox Church from the Renaissance and the Reformation to the present and the way the authentic culture of the Greek East was silenced.

Yannaras and Florovsky would call this period the Babylonian captivity of Orthodoxy¹⁶ or a “pseudomorphosis of Eastern theology”¹⁷ The unfortunate consequences of westernization were also visible in the Greek state’s configuration (after the revolution in 1821) based on the example of Western European states or in the founding of universities. The University of Athens was founded by the German model by the Royal Decree in 1837 as the Faculty of Theology within the state university outside of the Orthodox Church. Most of the clergy were unlearned and created a demand for the university; but one of the consequences was the isolation of theology as a science, which undermined the experience of the Gospel and reduced salvation to an objective formula.¹⁸ The second state theological faculty in Greece was founded in Thessalonica in 1925.¹⁹ The

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Chr. Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 23.

¹⁶ G. Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology* (Collected Works 5, Belmont: Nordland, 1979) p. 121.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 37, 72, 84, 121.

¹⁸ Still, the importance of the university must not be underestimated, because in the 19th century the university almost did not exist; until 1904 only once were more than three students in one year. See Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, p. 197.

¹⁹ Functional only since 1941/2. Still, westernization of Greek Orthodox Theology undeniably brought a whole range of critically minded

sixties of the twentieth century in Greece were a period of the unexpected revival movement, characterized by an interest in the Fathers and the Orthodox monastic tradition. The result of this movement was the loss of the domination of academic theology, non-church pietism, and the return of theology back to the Church.

The young theologians²⁰ became aware of the situation and therefore sought a return to patristic roots and expressed interest in the Orthodox monastic spirituality. The leading circles were silent and, for example, Savvas Agourides, professor of the New Testament at the University of Athens, claimed that these new trends were initiated by the Russian immigrant theological diaspora and attributed them the secondary importance.²¹

Professor of patristic and Byzantine studies, Andrew Louth, defends Yannaras and his sharp antipathy towards the West, considered by many to be exaggerated and unfair, claiming that it was not a thoughtless anti-Westernism, but an effort to preserve the essentials of the Greek East and to free from the Western way of thinking. Yannaras is a philosophy-based thinker inspired by Heidegger, from whom he takes his extensive critique of the direction of Western philosophical tradition since the time of Plato.²² In his book *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and Areopagite*²³,

theologians, e.g. N. Damalas, E. Antoniadis, V. Vellas, P. Bratsiotis, V. Ionnidis, S. Agouridis.

²⁰ The first ones were: John Romanides (dissertation from 1957 about sin did not follow any Western juridical model, professors Trembelas and Bratsiotis were against it), Nikos Nissiotis (his dissertation was the first one dealing with the challenges of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Heidegger and Jaspers) and John Zizioulas. For more details see Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, pp. 273-303.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 274.

²² Although Louth points out that Yannaras' opinion on Plato and Aristotle is more positive than Heidegger's. See Louth, Introduction, pp. 5-6.

²³ Ch. Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God*, (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

Yannaras uses Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, and argues that on the West God was reduced only to the best solution, *prima cause*, and the highest value, so the social structures developed in the West would be justified (such as the hierarchy, the Pontifical monarchy, etc.).

Another of Yannaras' advocates is also the American Orthodox theologian and priest *John Anthony McGuckin* (b. 1952) who popularizes Orthodox theology in his works and has an overview of the problems of Western hermeneutics.²⁴ At many points, he would not agree with Yannaras, but he also disputes the possibility of objective historical research and calls it "philosophical acumen, both arrogant and uninformed."²⁵ He points in particular to the accumulation, which is one of the characteristics of modern objective science, and denies the possibility that research would take place in an isolated and impersonal space where objectivity is "scrutinized by an infallible academic voice"²⁶; quite on the contrary, objectivity takes place at a specific time and place, in a determined historical situation and context.

McGuckin hence emphasizes that not only the text as such not exist in the impersonal space, but even the process of understanding always includes the interpretative community; in his case, it is an emphasis on ecclesiastical reading and the community of gathered believers at the liturgy.

²⁴ As it is clear in his article, where he gives an overview of modern hermeneutical trends: biblical theological movement, new romanticism, new historicism, philosophical hermeneutics, Bultmann, new hermeneutics, structuralism, and so on. See J. A. McGuckin, Recent Biblical Hermeneutics in Patristic Perspective: The Tradition of Orthodoxy, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 47 (2002), pp. 295-325.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 308.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

3 Breck's rehabilitation of the patristic method

A systematic rehabilitation of the patristic methodology and the hermeneutics is particularly evident in the work of Father *John Breck* (b. 1939),²⁷ an internationally known Orthodox theologian and a priest who specializes in biblical exegesis and exposition of the Scripture. His work stems from two sources: his involvement in ecumenical dialogue in the 1980s, and discontent with current Orthodox practice. John Breck's main contribution lies in (i) the restoration of early Church practice and the interpretation of the *theoria* in the context of hermeneutics, (ii) the emphasis on liturgical life and the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church. Breck, therefore, emphasizes the relationship between ecclesial categories and historical-critical methods in biblical studies. His interest in biblical hermeneutics has been visible since 1976 when he published his first article, *Theoria and Orthodox Hermeneutics*²⁸. This and similar articles were later collected and published in his books *Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church* (1986)²⁹ and *Scripture and Tradition* (2001)³⁰.

The starting point of Breck's work is the presentation of the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox standpoint on the hermeneutical problem and the question of how to translate the linguistic and cultural context of the Scriptures to today's reader and his or her life situation, that is, the issue of actualization. Breck distinguishes hermeneutics from biblical

²⁷ He converted to Orthodoxy, a professor at the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute (Professor of the New Testament, 1978-1984) and professor at the St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary (Professor of New Testament and Ethics, 1984-1996).

²⁸ J. Breck, *Theoria and Orthodox Hermeneutics*, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 20 (1976), pp. 195-219.

²⁹ J. Breck, *Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986).

³⁰ J. Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

exegesis: while biblical exegesis seeks to grasp text in the original context, hermeneutics seeks to find the meaning of the text for the recipient, i.e., the reader.³¹ Breck calls it *anamnesis*, that is not a reminder of past events, but rather revival and update. The Protestant approach overcomes this problem with a proclaimed word, but Breck considers it individualistic in the sense that it relies on the spiritual enlightenment of the individual in his reading of the Scriptures.³² The spiritual enlightenment of an individual eliminates the sacramental and the ecclesial context and also isolates pneumatology from ecclesiology. The Catholic approach advances otherwise and overcomes this contradiction by emphasizing the magistracy, but it does not address the main hermeneutic question. For this reason, John Breck offers his own, Orthodox answer which is based on the return to patristics³³, but also on the necessary scientific exegesis of the Scriptures.³⁴

Breck seeks to rehabilitate texts as perceived and identified by early Christians and therefore addresses the issues of the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools.³⁵ Breck, on the one hand, warns against templatization and claims that the difference between the one and the other is not that big.

On the other hand, however, he states a clear difference between them, especially between allegory and typology. Both schools believed that the Scripture was inspired by the Spirit of God and both wanted to first establish a literary-historical meaning, and then to come to the text allegorically or typologically – so, both schools wanted to find the deeper meaning. While there were two levels of meaning for the

³¹ J. Breck, *Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church*, pp. 26-30.

³² *Ibid*, p. 35.

³³ Unlike in his book *Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church*, the patristic hermeneutics will not be that much important in his later work.

³⁴ Critical methods may be only necessary tools, but they are still important – that is his position in *Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church*, p. 26.

³⁵ J. Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, pp. 21-31.

Alexandrian school (the literary and the spiritual achieved by allegory), there was only one meaning for the Antiochene school.³⁶ Although the difference between schools is that the Alexandrian School wanted to reveal allegorical symbolism, and the Antiochene school wanted to preserve the historical framework, according to Breck, the typology was normative for both schools from the very beginning.³⁷

Thus, Breck distanced himself from the historical-critical and literary analysis, assuming a typology-based approach and declining allegory³⁸. Breck's answer includes two main elements: typology³⁹ and the Holy Spirit. The involvement of the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutical process shows that interpretation is not only a scientific discipline but is a synergy visible in the Eucharistic liturgy, which becomes a new dimension of the hermeneutic process. It is the Holy Spirit who typologically constructs historical events, re-presents them in the presence and updates them in the liturgical life of the church.⁴⁰ John Breck follows the emphasis of *Bertrand de Margerie* (1923-2003) made on the aspect of prophetic fulfillment in the typological relationship⁴¹ and therefore he

³⁶ Type is already included in antitype, "a perfect match between type and antitype is expected, otherwise it is only an allegory." P. Eugen, The Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Critical Review, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 47 (2002), p. 43. Breck highlights this relationship between type and antitype as the relationship of *mimesis*, the relationship of promise and fulfilment.

³⁷ J. Breck, *Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church*, p. 56.

³⁸ Noble argues that Breck prefers typology but does not challenge allegory. (I. Noble, 'Your Word is a Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path': Critical Work with Pre-critical methods in the Hermeneutics of John Breck, *Communio Viatorum* 53 (2011), p. 56.) But this is not accurate, because Breck clearly says that allegory is not sufficient because it separates history from the sense. See J. Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, p. 23.

³⁹ See J. Breck, *Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church*, pp. 38-41.

⁴⁰ See *Ibid*, p. 104.

⁴¹ See B. de Margerie, *Introduction to the History of Exegesis* (Petersham, Mass.: Saint Bede's Publications, 1994), p. 180.

developed a hermeneutical model where he uses the historical aspect of a typological relationship that is converted into the liturgical life of the interpretative community and at the same time fulfilled in that community. He needs *theoria* to achieve this.

Theoria is a distinction between the spiritual meaning and the biblical event, where the application and fulfillment of the event can be intrabiblical or eschatological. Breck distinguishes between three levels of *theoria*, (i) prophetic vision, (ii) the reception of the text by the new testament author, (iii) and the interpretation of the post-biblical reader.⁴² From these three levels, Breck emphasizes the *theoria* of the late interpreter, which is, in his view, represented by the liturgical life of the church; therefore, Breck does not see *theoria* only as a vision of the biblical prophet, but also as a vision of a later apostolic or post-apostolic interpreter.⁴³

Theoria is always in plural for Breck and functions as the dimension of the Church community; because it is always a Church that has a vision. *Theoria* does not only concern the relationship between the past and the future, but it contains self-updating quality and fulfilment, all this is the task and activity of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who inspired the people of Israel, who inspired the Apostles and the Church Fathers to interpret the Scriptures; even in other generations, it is the Holy Spirit, which inspires people in interpretations and reveals them *theoria*.

The value of *theoria* lies primarily in the five areas: (i) helps to avoid fundamentalism and to perceive Bible theandrically, (ii) recognizes that the basis of the Scripture is historical, (iii) its ecclesiastical and global character is capable of encompassing many biblical methods, (iv) it does not restrict the revelation of Scripture alone, but extends it, (v) and most importantly, *theoria* brings a doxological dimension to the biblical interpretation.

⁴² J. Breck, *Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church*, p. 105.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp. 93-113.

Typology is a two-way movement, from the past to the future and from the future to the past. All historical events must be perceived in a wider context, such as signs, *typoi*, prophecies that reveal antitypes.

A fact that is often forgotten in typology discussions is that the *typos* are not just a sign that points to the future or transcendental reality, but that it is also a historical site where the future is already present. E.g., in the first letter of the Corinthians (chapter 10) Paul presents the interpretation of the body of Christ as the Eucharistic Community of *ekklesia*, and states this by referring to Israel during their journey through the desert - Israel was baptized in the cloud and sea, ate spiritual food and drank the spiritual drink from the rock that was Jesus. It is an image of the spiritual rock from the texts Exodus 17 and Numeri 20, which only mention the rock, not Jesus. What is important is that for the apostle Paul Jesus was already present in the pre-incarnated form among the Israelites. There is a virtual identification of the rock and Jesus, between the prototype and the antitype, with the fact that the eschatological antitype is perceived as present or already existing in a historical prototype; the historical prototype, therefore, participates in the eschatological antitype. The rock in the biblical text is a type in the double meaning: on the one hand it points to the work and life of Jesus, but on the other hand, it serves as a place where the future salvific work of Christ is already present in the history of the Israelites. A double typology analysis is necessary to illustrate that God acts in the context of history and that eschatological reality is present and manifested in history.

John Breck avoids unilateralism and places together the Holy Spirit, tradition and church, and also says that the biblical event can be re-updated only in the community of believers "through the Eucharistic celebration"⁴⁴ - for Scripture is not self-interpreting but is interpreted only within the community of believers. Liturgy is not only a possibility or an alternative; in

⁴⁴ J. Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, p. 12.

Breck's work, there is an obvious urgency that *theoria* is a vision fulfilled in the church and the liturgy, because it is here that the words of the Scripture are fulfilled and the Scripture ends here. Father as an author, Christ as content, Spirit as interpreter, Church as fulfilment, everything has an equal part in the hermeneutic process.

What are the weaknesses of Breck's project? First of all, it is an objection to use and a strong emphasis on the typology and theory of the Antiochian School, justified in the diversity of patristic Fathers, where many have devoted to contextual and grammatical significance, and have not always sought to achieve more profound meaning, either in the form of typology or allegory.⁴⁵ Many texts have even a distinct meaning, and there is no need to seek spiritual one; Breck does not seem to take this into account.

The problem is that *theoria* is a spiritual vision and not an exegetical method, and Breck does not sufficiently take into account the distinction between *theoria* as an exegetical method and *theoria* as an inspired perception. Instead of distinguishing between allegory and *theoria*, Breck is convinced that there is not much difference between them, as both reach behind literally grammatical level.⁴⁶

Another problematic area concerns the relation of the Scripture to the tradition. Breck explains in detail that the Scripture exists only in the tradition, but as if it did not take into account interpretations from other streams of tradition and the differences between different interpretative practices and traditions. Another issue concerns Breck's ignorance of other dimensions of philosophical hermeneutics that could nearer explain the criteria of correct interpretation. For example,

⁴⁵ Cf. T. Stylianopoulos, Book review: John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 48/1 (2004), pp. 151-152.

⁴⁶ Kattan even disputes that the Orthodox Church is guided by typology and asks whether it is really needed, and whether it is possible to have a liturgical-synergistic hermeneutic process without typology. A. Kattan, *Orthodoxe Hermeneutik und moderne Hermeneutik*, *Catholica* 59 (2005), p. 73.

Breck agrees that hermeneutics comes from the Protestant region, but recognizes only one of its meanings, which is to overcome the difference between past and present, its other aspects he conceals.⁴⁷

4 Kalaitzidis' call to shift the paradigm

When we take into account the younger generation of Orthodox theologians, there is a clear shift towards the interaction and dialogue that is the result of the awareness of the new era. For example, Andrew Louth writes that despite the difference of the Western world for their other historical developments (Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment) and the cultural context, it is precisely this world in which Orthodox theology finds itself and must inevitably communicate because another world is not available.⁴⁸ Recognizing the context and situation in which Orthodox theology operates was one of the main topics of the international Orthodox symposium in Lebanon in 2007.⁴⁹

John Behr pointed out that neither a fish cannot live outside of water⁵⁰, nor a theologian can escape from the context in which they grew up, from a context influenced in particular by the Enlightenment with its almost unlimited trust in the neutrality of rationality and seeing the scientific method as the safest way for the humanities.

⁴⁷ See A. Kattan, *Orthodoxe Hermeneutik und moderne Hermeneutik*, p. 69.

⁴⁸ In the prologue to J. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea: The Formation of Christian Theology: Volume 1*, (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001) p. ix.

⁴⁹ Presentations are published in A. Kattan and F. Georgi (eds.), *Thinking Modernity: Towards a Reconfiguration of the Relationship between Orthodox Theology and Modern Culture* (Tripoli: St. John of Damascus Institute of Theology, 2010).

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 21.

Daniel Munteanu adds that no one is going to read the Bible as a *tabula rasa*, because we are “products of cultural and ideological traditions”⁵¹. Moreover, the situation is even complicated when we are aware of the fact that society moves towards a world that loses or already lost the certainty characteristic of modernity. Post-modernism, where there is no longer a *terra ferma* for the truth, seems to be characterized by pluralism, greater movement and change; the more the question of Christian identity becomes a challenge.

In recent decades, the debate with modernity has encouraged the development of various ideas and concepts such as personalism (John Zizioulas), freedom (Christos Yannaras), hermeneutics (John Breck, Theodore Stylianopoulos), the human body (Olivier Clément), or interfaith dialogue (George Khodr, Anastasios Yannoulatos). One of the greatest influence was of the metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas (b. 1931), for whom the role of hermeneutics is described as “the task of re-stating Scripture and Christian doctrine is termed ‘hermeneutics’. All theology is a matter of hermeneutics.”⁵² The

⁵¹ D. Munteanu, Culture of Love and Hermeneutics of Truth: The Relevance of an Ecumenical Anthropology for a Pluralistic Society, in: A. Kattan and F. Georgi (eds.), *Thinking Modernity: Towards a Reconfiguration of the Relationship between Orthodox Theology and Modern Culture* (Tripoli: St. John of Damascus Institute of Theology, 2010), p. 201: Each objectivity is constituted within a certain tradition, as we are rooted in prejudice and conditions by the past or by effective history. Munteanu refers to Georgia Warnke's (*Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason*, Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 3). Illustrative is a sentence from Alfred Whitehead, “if we desire a record of uninterpreted experience, we should ask a stone to record its autobiography”. In order to avoid the fact that all these truths end in relativism and consequently lose the truth, the concept of truth must be inseparable from the principle of authority, similar to the Early Church this lead to the interplay between scripture, creeds and councils and the authority of tradition.

⁵² J. Zizioulas, Doctrine as the Teaching of the Church. In: D. Knight (ed.), *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics John D. Zizioulas* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), p. 3.

Scripture does not utter anything and is silent until it is read and rendered; according to Zizioulas, Christian theology is defined as the interpretation and interpretation of the Scripture. Zizioulas does not only conclude that it is necessary to examine the context in which Christian teaching was first expressed and formulated, but also that the interpretation of Scripture requires from us to interpret our own situation. This second aspect involves that the theologian must be acquainted with the intellectual climate of his time, but Zizioulas goes deeper and says that the theologian must be "truly enquiring mind, a philosopher in the wider sense of being, sensitive to the deepest needs of human beings."⁵³

By referring to Gadamer, he repeated similar thoughts at the symposium in Belgrade (2012), where he said that the task of a systematic theologian who tries to be faithful to patristic thought is to make explicit what is implicit in the expression of the Fathers. This requires not only faithfulness to the words, but also an openness to the questions which the Fathers did not raise. There is an apparent difference between the work of the historian who limits himself only to what has been said. The work of a systematic theologian is not conceivable without hermeneutics, as the understanding of the past is not only reproductive but a productive activity as well.⁵⁴ Similar urge to interpret the past and engage it in dialogue with the present with reference to H.-G. Gadamer has been repeated in this journal (*International Journal of Orthodox Theology*) in 2015.⁵⁵ Pantelis Kalaitzidis is the director of the Theological Orthodox Institute in Volos, Greece, and currently one of the most prominent critics of the theological return to the Fathers, that

⁵³ J. Zizioulas, *Doctrine as the Teaching of the Church*, p. 4.

⁵⁴ See J. Zizioulas. Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor, in: M. Vasiljević (ed.), *St Maximus the Confessor* (Belgrade: Sebastian Press & The Faculty of Orthodox Theology – University of Belgrade, 2013), p. 108, footnote 61.

⁵⁵ J. Zizioulas, *The Task of Orthodox Theology in Today's Europa*, *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 6/3 (2015), pp. 9-17, esp. p. 12.

became the characteristic hallmark of the 20th century and overcame other theological questions and challenges of the present world.⁵⁶ This return to Father dates back to 1936 when Georges Florovsky expressed that it is necessary for the Modern Orthodox theology to be released from the captivity of Western theology not only in the use of terminology but also in the way of thinking and assumptions.⁵⁷ His call was quickly accepted by other theologians of the Russian diaspora, such as Vladimir Lossky, Archimandrite Cyprian Cern, Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, Myra Lot-Borodine, John Meyendorff, and others. A positive response was also found in traditionally Orthodox countries such as Romania (Dumitru Stăniloae), Serbia (Justin Popović), and Greece (the generation of theologians from the 1960s).

Kalaitzidis recognizes that returning to the Father was associated with an attempt to protect Orthodox theology but points out that there were two ways in which the return was made: on the one hand towards openness, but on the other

⁵⁶ See his articles: From the “Return to the Fathers” to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology, *St Vladimir's Theological quarterly*, 54/1 (2010), pp. 5-36; Challenges of Renewal and Reformation Facing the Orthodox Church, *Ecumenical Review* 61/2 (2009), pp. 136-164; Orthodoxy and Hellenism in Contemporary Greece, *St Vladimir's Theological quarterly* 54/3-4 (2010), p. 365-420; Orthodox Theology and the Challenges of a Post-secular Age: Questioning the Public Relevance of the Current Orthodox theological ‘Paradigm’. In: *Proceedings of the International Academic Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (Lviv, 2013), pp. 4-25; New Trends in Greek Orthodox Theology: Challenges in the Movement towards a Genuine Renewal and Christian Unity, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67/2 (2014), pp.127-164.

⁵⁷ The lecture was presented at a conference in German and published as „Westliche Einflüsse in der russischen Theologie“, in H. S. Alivisatos (ed.), *Procès-Verbaux du Premier Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe à Athènes, 29 novembre-6 décembre 1936* (Athens: Pyrsos, 1939), pp. 212-231; English translation „Western Influences in Russian Theology“ in: *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 4: *Aspects of Church History* (Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), pp. 157-182.

hand aiming for introversion and conservatism.⁵⁸ The movement towards introversion Kalaitzidis compares to the fundamentalism typical rather for Protestant churches and speaks of the fundamentalism of the tradition and fundamentalism of the Fathers.

As a result of these directions, a theological interpretation emerged, which gave the impression that Orthodoxy seeks shelter in a recurring past, where the teaching of the Fathers was only a deposit of faith, and it was assumed that the Fathers had already said everything that was necessary, once and for all. Kalaitzidis escalates his arguments and claims that not only did the Church send the wrong impression of Orthodoxy toward outside, but also many of the more important aspects and themes of Orthodox teaching were neglected, e.g., theological holism or spiritual heritage.

It must be said that for Florovsky the return to the Fathers did not mean a return to the past, its repetition, a flight from history or a denial of the present. On the contrary, Florovsky emphasized a creative return to the Fathers and learning of their way of thinking (*ad mentem Patrum*):

“Neo-patristic synthesis should be more than just a collection of patristic sayings and statements: it must be a true synthesis, a creative reassessment of those insights which were granted to the holy man of old. It must be patristic, faithful to the spirit and vision, *ad mentem Patrum*. It also must be neo-patristic, since it is to be addressed to the new age, with its own problems and queries.”⁵⁹

For Florovsky, therefore, it is more characteristic to look *with* the Fathers than to look *to* the Fathers. Return to Fathers is not

⁵⁸ P. Kalaitzidis, From the “Return to the Fathers” to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology, p. 8. See also P. Kalaitzidis, Challenges of Renewal and Reformation Facing the Orthodox Church, p. 153.

⁵⁹ The replica reproduced from Florovsky manuscript, published only in A. Blane (ed.), *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s seminary Press, 1993) p. 154.

a unique Orthodox phenomenon, as pointed out by Kalaitzidis, but it is the starting point of every Church reform, as it was in the Protestant world with dialectical theology, or in Catholicism with biblical and liturgical movements.⁶⁰ Except for the difference that in the Orthodox world the return to the roots did not arise as an attempt to create a dialogue with modernity and its challenges, but emerged as a fortification against modernity.⁶¹

The consequences of the movement that demanded a return to the Fathers are, according to Kalaitzidis, numerous and with inconceivable consequences.⁶² First, there is the neglect and weakening of biblical studies that were considered to be Protestant, unlike patristic studies and Orthodox ascetic tradition, which were considered to be typically Orthodox issues. However, the Orthodox attitude was not at all unique; Kalaitzidis considers that the *sola Scriptura* was simply replaced by a *consensus patrum*, so it was forgotten that all the Fathers of the Church were considered to be great interpreters of the Scripture. There is also a shift in patristic theology, which puts the authority of patristic texts on a higher level than the biblical text, thus exhibiting the features of an ahistorical approach. In this way, the Orthodox Church continues the original dialogue, even though we are not currently experiencing the same world, but the Church encounters the totally different world.

All these consequences and approaches have led to the introversion of Orthodox theology and the absence of Orthodoxy from the theological discussions in the 20th century (from dialectical theology to the ecumenical movement). Kalaitzidis sees the more important negative impact of the patristic revival to lie in the polarisation between the West and

⁶⁰ See P. Kalaitzidis, Challenges of Renewal and Reformation Facing the Orthodox Church, pp. 144-146.

⁶¹ P. Kalaitzidis, From the "Return to the Fathers" to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology, p. 12.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 15.

East, “Orthodoxy’s total rejection of the West, and to the cultivation and consolidation of an anti-western and anti-ecumenical spirit.”⁶³ There is also a hidden paradox here, because Florovsky, who first called for a return to the Fathers and formulated a neo-patristic synthesis, was himself funded in contemporary theology, used Latin Fathers, and polarization was strange to him. However, the decisive factors were the influences and thoughts of Lossky, Stăniloae, and Popović, which prevailed. The perspectives of better East and lower West prevail in the Orthodox world even today.

This brings us to the next point of discussion about the importance of Kalaitzidis for hermeneutical thinking. Even if the Orthodox theology in the past was inspired by the return to the Fathers and subsequent liberation from the capture of academics and scholastic theology, today, in a globalized and post-modern society, “there is a clear and imperative need for a breath of fresh air, for the overcoming of a certain provincialism and complacent introversion within Orthodox theology, for an openness to the ecumenicity of Christianity, to the challenge of religious otherness, and the catholicity of human thought”⁶⁴.

The faithfulness to the patristic tradition cannot mean its continuation, improvement or reinterpretation. Just as the return to the Fathers was regarded as a shift in the paradigm, then Orthodox theology should even today confront a new paradigm shift. Some of the challenges Orthodox theology face in the 21st century is⁶⁵: (i) the mission as a service and not the control over the world; (ii) the acceptance of political liberalism, the principles of democracy and human rights; (iii) involvement in the ecumenical movement and support to pluralism and diversity in the Church and theology. Kalaitzidis

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 19.

⁶⁴ P. Kalaitzidis, From the “Return to the Fathers” to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology, p. 35.

⁶⁵ For a more detailed list see P. Kalaitzidis, Challenges of Renewal and Reformation Facing the Orthodox Church, pp. 158-160.

calls it the need for a new incarnation of the Word.⁶⁶ Taking into account that every text has its context, for patristics it was Greek philosophy and culture, it is clear that theology today faces a different context. "Modernity and post-modernity (or late modernity) and the framework they define constitute the broader historical, social and cultural environment within which the Orthodox Church is called to live and carry out its mission", stressed Kalaitzidis in his lecture in Prague.⁶⁷

Kalaitzidis denies the existence of any historic, monolithic, and timeless tradition, and claims that theology always appears only in a specific cultural and historical context. He, therefore, speaks of contextual theology that applies not only to the way in which the theological project is understood but also to the methodological structure of its effort. If Orthodox theology perceives theology as a prophetic voice and the expression of self-understanding of the Church, it must work about its dual nature. Just as the Church is not from this world, theology must also express the experience of transcendental reality; as the church lives towards the world, theology must also seek dialogue and communicate with the historical presence of every age, taking both the vocabulary and the thinking.⁶⁸ I think that his thoughts would be much stronger if he used the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's essence or the teandrical inspiration of the Scripture.

An unregulated relationship with modernity is not the only problem of Orthodoxy, but neither other churches nor religions have a resolved relationship between globalization and

⁶⁶ So P. Kalaitzidis, From the "Return to the Fathers" to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology, p. 26.

⁶⁷ Lecture "Orthodox Church and (Post)modernity. The Conditions, the Context and the Problems of an Encounter" on an international theological conference "Presence and Absence of the Orthodox Theological Reflection of Modern Ideologies and its Ecumenical Impact" organized by the Evangelical Theological Faculty in February 2012, manuscript, p. 2.

⁶⁸ P. Kalaitzidis, From the "Return to the Fathers" to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology, p. 27.

fundamentalism. Kalaitzidis perceives modernity as a secularized form of Christianity, but much more consistent, because it updates Christianity's neglected insights.⁶⁹ He does not perceive modernity as incompatible with Christianity but presupposes continuity and uses it to justify his call for a dialogue between the modernity and the Orthodox. In particular, historical reasons have prompted the Orthodox Church as if to stop in the pre-modern times and ignore the challenges of globalization. It is in this context which Zigmund Bauman calls "liquid modernity", that Orthodox theology must develop its theology of distinction and identity.

In his lecture in Prague Kalaitzidis mentions Panagiotis Nellas, the theologian and founder of the leading Greek theological magazine *Synaxis*, who in the year 1985 prophesizes that it is impossible to have a real revelation of God without the use of material, which is social, cultural, scientific and other realities.⁷⁰ Nellas draws attention to the impossibility of a theology that would ignore the historical reality. The imperative becomes to explore possibilities for new concepts and new terms that would reflect current needs and challenges. It is not the theology of repetition, but the theology of a creative encounter and serious theological dialogue with its challenges.

It is necessary to note the fundamental difference between the ideas of Yannaras and Kalaitzidis. While Yannaras blames the Western Church for all evil, the Eastern Church is innocent and cannot do anything; Kalaitzidis directs his criticism in particular to his ranks. He blames the level of relationship with his Western colleagues to his own Orthodox Church, where he wants to overcome alibism and achieve greater activity toward the outside.

⁶⁹ See P. Kalaitzidis, Orthodox Church and (Post)modernity. The Conditions, the Context and the Problems of an Encounter, p. 5.

⁷⁰ P. Nellas, The Light of the Word. Theological Perspectives on Overcoming over the Crisis in the Teaching of Religious Teaching, *Synaxis* 14 (1985), p. 101 (in Greek). See P. Kalaitzidis, "Orthodox Church and (Post)modernity. The Conditions, the Context and the Problems of an Encounter, p. 3.

Kalaitzidis' proposal to answer the questions and challenges he formulated finds its justification in eschatology, which "introduces an element of active expectation accompanied by the dimension of the future and the renewing breeze of the Spirit."⁷¹

Contrary to fundamentalism and escape to pre-modernism, which in turn becomes a common answer to globalization and secularization, it is precisely eschatology, which is the active expectation of the Kingdom of God and a dynamic commitment to the present; by confirmation and openness to the future of the expected Kingdom, in which the expectation of the Church will be fulfilled. So, the church does not establish its existence on what it is, but on what happens and what it will be. From the perspective of eschatology, tradition and the Church are given new meaning, because they are no longer identified with ideas, concepts, customs, and customs, but only with the person of Jesus Christ, who comes and reveals the fullness of God's glory.

5 Kattan's dialogue with hermeneutics

As the last of the four most notable figures of hermeneutics (certainly not the least) in contemporary Orthodox theology, the German theologian of Lebanese origin *Assaad Elias Kattan* (b. 1967)⁷² will be presented. His work in various ways answers the fundamental question of whether hermeneutics, as a Protestant discipline, is applicable in the Orthodox context.⁷³ The seemingly provocative question seeks to correct common misconceptions about the notion of hermeneutics and to show how this Protestant discipline can be and is accepted in the

⁷¹ P. Kalaitzidis, From the "Return to the Fathers" to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology, pp. 29-30.

⁷² Currently professor of Orthodox theology at the Centre for Theological Studies at the University of Münster.

⁷³ Paraphrase of the title of his article: A. Kattan, Hermeneutics: A Protestant Discipline for an Orthodox Context?, *Theological Review* 23/1 (2002), pp. 47-57.

Orthodox circles. As crucial Kattan considers the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics. Exegesis is a discipline that aims to adequately understand the text using specific methods; hermeneutics, in contrast to exegesis, is not one of the interpretative methods, nor is it an examination of possible methods of grasping the text, but is a philosophical thinking that allows understanding of an event of understanding, examines the assumptions and structures that affect understanding.⁷⁴

This is the crucial point that opens the door for hermeneutics into Orthodox theology and proves that the rejection of Western methodology does not require concern hermeneutics because hermeneutics is not a method. Similarly, there is a false pretense of denying hermeneutics because it is a Protestant discipline, which is true only in the fact that hermeneutics arose in the Protestant milieu of the 19th and 20th centuries, but indeed is not confessionally influenced.

Kattan does not belong to the stream that returns to the Fathers, but the main inspiration of his work is sought by *Maximus the Confessor* (c. 580-662)⁷⁵ and in his biblical hermeneutics, which he highlights and thus opposes the mainstream of interpreters for whom Maxim's hermeneutics is merely a copy and passive reception of Alexandrian implications.⁷⁶ Although Kattan recognizes that such a reading of Maxima is partly justified, he still speaks of the incarnation of the Logos as a hermeneutical principle that overcomes Origen of Alexandria and integrates the Chalcedonian accent.⁷⁷ Another inspiration he seeks at the theologian who is less

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 48.

⁷⁵ He dealt with the topic in his dissertation theses: *Verleiblichung und Synergie: Grundzüge der Bibelhermeneutik bei Maximus Confessor* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁷⁶ E.g. P. M. Blowers, *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor* (Nortre Dame, 1991).

⁷⁷ See in particular his A. Kattan, The Christological Dimension of Maximum Confessor's Biblical Hermeneutics, in: *Studia Patristica* (vol. XLII, Louvain: Peeters, 2006), pp. 169-174.

known in the West, in particular, a Lebanese theologian and Bishop *George Khodr*, who is interested in the questions of speech and the dictionary used to express the religious narrative.⁷⁸ Khodr assumes that the inspired human speech is a sole 'endeavors'. Although Khodr does not develop his ideas further, Kattan concludes that the words are just an interpretation of the experience that is behind words. This effort to express the irreconcilable divine truth puts great emphasis on the relativity of the human reception and is incompatible with the Orthodox approach that defends verbal inspiration.

In his *Autobiography* (1979), Khodr talks about one Gospel, which becomes many Gospels without losing its integrity, and so with his ideas, he does not differ greatly from the Church Fathers, even though he is much more concentrated on the reader's position. In this sense, he speaks of a meeting between God's Word and different readers. Kattan explains that the Khodr has in mind the fact that one biblical text can be accepted by many readers in different contexts and situations, and this emphasis on the variation of the reader's dimensions is considered to be a new step in Orthodox hermeneutics.⁷⁹

Kattan often reflects hermeneutical efforts within Orthodox theology and considers John Breck, Theodore Stylianopoulos and Konstantin Nikolakopoulos to be the most important contemporary Orthodox hermeneutical thinkers; he evaluates their efforts positively but also points to the open questions that need to be addressed.⁸⁰ He joins the voice of Pantelis Kalaitzidis and talks about a change of paradigm (*Paradigmen-*

⁷⁸ See description in A. Kattan, *Hermeneutics: A Protestant Discipline for an Orthodox Context?*, pp. 49-53.

⁷⁹ Kattan sees the parallel between Khodr and Gadamer, who also perceives understanding as an encounter between the horizon of the text and the reader. See: H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), p. 311. Unfortunately, there is no supporting evidence to confirm this influence.

⁸⁰ A. Kattan, *Orthodoxe Hermeneutik und moderne Hermeneutik* pp. 81-85.

wechsel).⁸¹ Hermeneutics (he mentions F. Schleiermacher, W. Dilthey, and I. Kant) as a discipline in its beginnings was intended to create an extensive theory of understanding that would include all aspects of interpretation process, and as such it was a product of modernity, its optimism and rationality. Optimism and security were quickly challenged by other voices, in particular by Martin Heidegger and his preference for existential perceptions of things; furthermore, by Rudolf Bultmann and his emphasizing that interpretation is always mediated by questions; but especially by the voice of Hans-Georg Gadamer with his perception that the act of understanding is a meeting of the horizon of the interpreter and the text. Through the work of these thinkers, the hermeneutics has abandoned building up an all-encompassing theory of comprehension, and fully reflects the role of the interpreter in the hermeneutic process. Kattan concludes that it cannot be considered a modern phenomenon.⁸²

Several times in previous analyses, the name of *Hans-Georg Gadamer* (1900-2002), the leading thinker of hermeneutics, was mentioned and he lies in the background of Kattan's hermeneutical thoughts.⁸³ This relationship will be explained

⁸¹ A. Kattan, *La théologie orthodoxe interpellée par l'herméneutique moderne: La question d'un critère théologique absolu revisitée*, *Contacts: Revue française de l'orthodoxie* 234 (2011), p. 186. See also English version of this article: A. Kattan, Revisiting the Question About an Absolute Theological Criterion: Orthodox Theology Challenged by Modern Hermeneutics, in: I. Tulcan and C. Ioja (eds.), *Accents and Perspectives of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology as Part of Church Mission in Today's World* (Arad: Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad), 2008, pp. 128-143.

⁸² A. Kattan, „*La théologie orthodoxe interpellée par l'herméneutique moderne*“, pp. 189-190.

⁸³ Like Assad Kattan, the importance of Gadamer's work was also recognized by professor of Patristic and Byzantine studies Andrew Louth in his *Discerning the Mystery* where he says that the heritage of Enlightenment (the claim of the scientific method as the paradigms for all truth) also had its opponents, and it was up to Gadamer, who convincingly challenged the totalitarian claim of science. A. Louth,

on the theory of icons. The main dispute over the worship of icons is whether a person kisses Christ himself or a piece of wood. Traditionally it has been accepted that the veneration of an image is transferred to its archetype.⁸⁴

Kattan argues that this may not be enough and claims that the icon is "endowed with the divine character"⁸⁵. He sees the similarity with the views of Gadamer's concept of the symbol, for whom the symbol does not only refer to symbolized but also achieves its presence. This approach does not have many advocates, and therefore Kattan argues with Maximus the Confessor according to whom Christ was the symbol of himself, the visible part is connected with the invisible and so creates "unbreakable unity"⁸⁶. The symbolized and the symbol are in a reciprocal relationship, meaning that the symbol makes present the symbolized without creating a mixture.

This Christological justification of the symbol, applicable both in iconography and in the Eucharist, forms a parallel to Gadamer's ideas in *Die Aktualität des Schönen*⁸⁷. Gadamer writes there that the piece of art does not point to something that is outside, but rather it represents or impersonates an objective reality. Therefore, the hermeneutical task is not to refer to a reality that is outside, but it is to co-create reality.⁸⁸ Icons and works of art are symbols in the sense that they carry

Discerning the mystery An Essay on the Nature of Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). According to his own words, his book is "a proposal with the intention of provocation" (p. xi).

⁸⁴ E.g. A. Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 209.

⁸⁵ A. Kattan, The Byzantine Icon: A Bridge between Theology and Modern Culture, in: A. Kattan and F. Georgi (eds.), *Thinking Modernity*, p. 171.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 172. See also A. Kattan, *Verleiblichung und Synergie*, pp. 184-191.

⁸⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977).

⁸⁸ Interestingly, Gadamer supports his arguments by a dispute between Luther and Zwingli about the presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper, and so Kattan does not apply to the Orthodox theology only Gadamer's concept of the work of art, but also the Lutheran concept of the Lord's Supper.

the presence of a symbolized object. In support of his argument, Kattan could also use the concept of a religious symbol according to the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, according to whom the symbol overlaps with the sign in that it refers to something, but in particular symbol opens the hidden reality and shares its meaning; in the case of a religious symbol, this is a transcendental reality expressed in symbolic terms.⁸⁹

In his lecture named “Essentialism Reconsidered”⁹⁰ Kattan sees three existing patterns of relationships between hermeneutics and Orthodox theology: (i) one that stresses the insufficiency of hermeneutics, (ii) one that depicts the Holy Spirit as the link between the past and present, (iii) and one that is challenged by Gadamer. He chooses the third possibility. He has especially in mind the challenge of Gadamer’s analysis of the impact of temporal distance and the involvement of an interpreter’s individuality in the act of understanding – both elements have not been satisfactorily analyzed in the Orthodox hermeneutics of tradition.

Gadamer’s concept of temporal distance presupposes that the act of understanding is not possible without fore-structure and that the interpreter belongs to the act of interpretation. Gadamer frees the prejudices from the captivity caused by the Enlightenment and makes prejudices a starting point of rehabilitation of tradition. The popular notion of tradition among the Orthodox sees tradition as a closed and unchangeable entity, and this needs to be challenged, according to Kattan, and to be seen as a dynamic and open testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Tradition in Gadamer’s view seems, on one side, to be conservative, as he returns to the Greek-Roman paradigms, but on the other, he rehabilitates it in a way that shows a reading of the text in the vast horizon of tradition. There is a critical potential in the form of temporal

⁸⁹ See his book *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957).

⁹⁰ Presentation was at the International Conference of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies: ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Post-Patristic Theology: Can Orthodox Theology be contextual?’ June 3-6, 2010. Unpublished.

distance as a *sine qua non* of every understanding. If this is true, then the need to reconfigure how the writings of the Fathers are used emerges; they can no longer be ready recipes for current problems.

Gadamer's insights and Kattan's interpretation invite us to see tradition with new eyes. Gadamer uses a metaphor, fusion of horizons, in order to call attention to an interpreter's involvement in the interpretative act. This fusion happens as an application, which is an integral part of the understanding, and the interpreter's presuppositions are not static entities but must be verified and adjusted.

If we take as the main consequence that subjectivity is elevated to the rank of a hermeneutical principle for real, how legitimate is it then to regard tradition as highly objective, infallible and absolute? Kattan thinks that this sensitivity to the role of the interpreter might contribute to a healthy discussion among the Orthodox over the limits of tradition as an argument of the truth.

6 Conclusion

In this article we have been conducting a dialogue between two areas that do not usually speak to each other; on the one hand, is the hermeneutical thinking originating from the European part of Western civilization and, on the other hand, Orthodox theology, which does not develop only in traditionally Orthodox areas such as Russia and Greece, but the theologians of so-called Western Orthodoxy also contribute to the debate.

The relationship between hermeneutics and Orthodox theology has long been a part of other theological questions such as: the relationship between Eastern spirituality and Western scientific methods, the turn within patristic studies and the return to the Fathers, the search for the original Orthodox heritage and specific Orthodox elements, and the development of biblical and critical thinking in Orthodox church. We asked what the possibilities are of applying modern hermeneutical thinking in modern Orthodox theology and showed that the question of

hermeneutics cannot be isolated from other theological problems and that the complete answer would also bring the answer to the absolute theological criterion in Orthodox theology. The development of the hermeneutic problem is in much the same way with the development of Orthodox theology in the 20th and 21st centuries. We followed two main approaches in the application of hermeneutics in modern Orthodox theology, and in each approach, main pros and cons of their approach have been pointed.

The approach of mistrust in the Western methodology and the return to patristic biblical hermeneutics was first presented by the example of the Christos Yannaras, whose theological work is characterized by the accusation of Western Christianity from the heresy that absorbed the original Orthodox Christian Hellenism. The disadvantage of such thinking is the inclusion of hermeneutics among other Western scientific disciplines and the absence of an initiative for dialogue and rapprochement with the West.

On the other hand, John Breck does not polarize the situation between the West and the East but looks for the answer to fundamental theological questions in a pre-critical period of patristic hermeneutics which he rehabilitates as a unique Orthodox heritage and applies to the life of the present Orthodox Church in today's society. The disadvantage of Breck's project is the inadequate justification of the necessity and the possibility of using pre-critical thinking in critical disorder and the absence of a graspable criterion and authority. The present time allows many theologians from Eastern and Western Orthodoxy to respond to new challenges and to question the Christian identity independently of the conclusions of their teachers.

Pantelis Kalaitzidis is essential for modern Orthodox theology by recognizing the specificity of the present era and by actively engaging in the dialogue between Orthodoxy and modernity (or post-modern). In the framework of the dialogue, he is making extensive criticism of return to the Fathers, a characteristic feature of Orthodox theology in the 20th century, he shows the self-reflection that forms the basis of a new open dialogue with

the West and is announcing the change of paradigm necessary for the expected reformation of the Church. His younger colleague from Münster, Assaad Elias Kattan, joins the challenge of paradigm-shift, but at the same time begins to prepare for a turnaround through direct application of hermeneutical contemporary thinking in the areas of iconography, liturgy, and tradition. He also brings less known thinkers into the center of attention, thus preparing the ground for the application of hermeneutics in the Orthodoxy; builds an independent hermeneutical discipline in the Orthodox theology, independently of questions about the relationship of the Orthodoxy with the modernity, the Protestant West, the biblical studies, or the Church Fathers.

This study does not want to predict the future development of Orthodox theology and Orthodox hermeneutics as its components, but the effort of the Orthodox theology to absorb the impulses of Western theology and to catch up what it missed, is visible. I hope that Western theology will show a similar interest in taking certain impulses from the Orthodox Church. The question of the hermeneutics will be the main point of the dialogue in both cases.