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## Modern Encounters with Islam and the Impact on Orthodox Thought, Identity, and Action<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In many parts of the Orthodox world, Orthodox Christians and Muslims have been neighbors for centuries and, in light of the unprecedented globalization and movement of peoples over the past century in both the „old country“ and the diaspora, Orthodox Christians and Muslims find themselves living in close proximity to each other, increasingly at odds or in competition for scarce resources. This has happened at the same time that the Church has gone through a number of internal challenges and changes in its external



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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented on 12 March 2012 at the University of St. Andrews at a conference on ‘Orthodox Ecclesiology and Modernity,’ sponsored by the Centre for Russian, Soviet, Central and Eastern European Studies.

circumstances that have profoundly impacted what it means to be an Orthodox Christian in today's society. During the same period and up to the present day many Muslims also find themselves dealing with a similar type of individual and communal identity crisis. In recent years, some Orthodox Christians have taken a fresh look at how their relationship with Muslims (and Islam in a general sense) is an essential aspect of their historical past, present identity, and future aspirations. This paper examines the key points of the theological discourse on or about Islam and Muslim-Christian relations within the Orthodox Church. It also summarizes some recent encounters with Islam, including Orthodox participation in dialogue and common work with Muslims and, through an analysis of various statements and texts, discusses the impact on Orthodox theology, identity, and action.

## Keywords

Islam, Identity, Orthodox Theology, Dialogue

## 1 Introduction

From the last quarter of the twentieth century, when newly formed states in traditionally Muslim lands were continuing to define themselves, there were many examples of *both* peaceful encounters *and* civil strife, even violence, between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. The most striking examples of the latter, which have had negative consequences for relations between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, are the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (1974) and the resulting „Cyprus dispute,“ the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990), and the ethno-religious conflicts in the former Yugoslavia (the „Yugoslav Wars“, 1991-2001). Religious leaders among Orthodox Christians and

Muslims were in many ways enmeshed in these conflicts, but were also often the voice of reason and sanity in the face of the senseless violence and brutality pervading their societies. It was during such times of trial that there were a number of peaceful encounters as well. A number of religious leaders, including many Orthodox Christians, established important relationships and availed themselves of opportunities for positive inter-religious dialogue. It was also during this same period that the World Council of Churches (WCC) multiplied its ecumenical activities and began branching out into the sphere of inter-religious dialogue. Since the Orthodox (and Oriental Orthodox) churches have played such a key role in the Council over the years,<sup>2</sup> not to mention the fact that Eastern Christians and Muslims have lived as neighbors for centuries, it is no surprise that Islam featured prominently in discussions among the member churches about the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions and the various inter-religious dialogues sponsored by the WCC.

The beginning of this century, with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States and 7/7 in England, brought a new dimension to the encounter in that it brought Islam into view in a more prominent and direct way. These events created fear and concern among many Orthodox Christians, to be sure, especially those living in Muslim majority countries. At the same time, they inspired among some Orthodox theologians and leaders a greater emphasis on and awareness of the

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Florovsky, Archbishop Iakovos (Coucousis), Ion Bria, John Meyendorff, John Romanides, and others have held positions on the governing bodies of the WCC. Nikos Nissiotis was the director for a time of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, now headed by another Orthodox Christian, Fr. Dr. Ioan Sauca. Others, such as Georges Lemopoulos and Tarek Mitri, have served in important WCC staff positions. For a general list (though only up to 1992) of contributors to programs, projects, or publications of the WCC see G. Limouris (ed.), *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism* (Geneva: World Council of Churches 1994), pp. 278-283.

dangers of religious fundamentalism, not only outside of their own tradition (such as the thought and acts of Islamists and extremists from any of the great world religions), but also among their fellow Orthodox Christians. One can detect, in the years following the 9/11 attacks, an increasingly self-critical tone in the comments of these Orthodox theologians who spoke of any tendency toward religious extremism within their church.

In short, Orthodox Christian engagement with Islam and Muslims has taken numerous forms over the past several decades from general theological reflection about the religions, to participation in conferences, dialogues, and working groups on issues of shared concern. For many Orthodox Christians who have lived side-by-side with Muslims for centuries, the modern encounters have been organic and personal. Others, who have had less direct or meaningful contact with Muslims, have nonetheless increasingly encountered Islam as a theological system which, whether they like it or not, they have found to be bound up with their own in important ways as they have endeavored to apply their tradition authentically in the modern world and find their place within it. What is the significance, therefore, of all of this engagement with Islam, be it indirect through theological discourse on or about Islam or Muslim-Christian relations *or* direct through Orthodox participation in dialogue and common work with Muslims? To what extent has it had an impact on Orthodox theology, identity, and action? These questions have been at the forefront of my own scholarship, so what follows will be a selection of what I assess to be the most important developments in these areas.

## **2 Theological Reflection on Islam and other Religions**

The “modern technical age” has posed significant challenges to the Church and the identity of Orthodox Christians worldwide. As Orthodox theologians endeavored to rediscover the sources

of their faith in order to be authentically „Orthodox“ in the modern world,<sup>3</sup> part of what they found were very open attitudes to other religions among the great theologians of the early centuries of the Church. The open attitudes toward non-Christian or pre-Christian religions demonstrated in the writings of figures such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Eusebius of Caesarea – have given today’s theologians the footing they need to engage Islam and participate in dialogue with their Muslim neighbors. These same theologians have also been able to justify this within the context of the dogmatic principles of the age of the Ecumenical Councils. Though space does not allow for a thorough treatment here, a brief look at some of the examples drawn from patristic literature and themes developed from Orthodox Trinitarian theology will make the point.<sup>4</sup>

Two names that often appear in relation to the topic of Orthodox Christian-Muslim relations are Archbishop Anastasios of Albania and Metropolitan Georges of Lebanon. They have written extensively on this topic and have been actively engaged in ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. Because of their personal encounters with Muslims over their lifetimes, it should be no surprise that they both have said their engagement with Islam specifically inspired them to reflect on the question of inter-religious relations. In doing so, they have relied heavily on patristic sources to make the case that there is support within the tradition for open and positive engagement with Islam, and other religions generally. For example, they – as

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<sup>3</sup> The patristic, ecclesiological, and liturgical revival in the Orthodox Church over about the last half century has been led by figures such as Nicolas Afanasiev, Sergius Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Alexander Schmemmann, Dimitru Staniloae, and John Zizioulas, to name just a few.

<sup>4</sup> For a more thorough treatment on this and several of the themes developed in this article, see A. Sharp, *Orthodox Christians and Islam in the Postmodern Age* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2012).

well as others such as Olivier Clément, Nicholas Arseniev, and John Garvey – have found Justin Martyr’s use of the concept of *logos spermatikos* to be of great significance for inter-religious relations today. Concerning the Greek philosophers, poets, and historians Justin would say things like:

“For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word [*logos spermatikos*], seeing what was related to it. (...) Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians.... For all writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them.”<sup>5</sup>

Building on the Stoic understanding of *logos* as „reason“ or „universal law“ inherent in all things and all persons, he spoke about the „seminal reason“, *logos spermatikos*, or rather, the „seeds of the word“ being present in every righteous person, regardless of their religious background. Of course, Christians very early on appropriated the term *logos* to help explain the significance of Christ, whom John the Theologian would frame as the Divine Word. Justin explained that all those looking for truth and living honestly could in some sense be considered followers of Christ. He went so far as to name some of them when he said that:

“those who lived reasonably [*meta logou*] are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Ananias, and Azarias, and Misaël, and Elias, and many others whose actions and names we now decline to recount, because we know it would be tedious.”<sup>6</sup>

Orthodox theologians in recent years have taken this openness seen in Justin to make the case that Orthodox Christians today

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<sup>5</sup> Justin, *Second Apology* 13, PG 6, 468A; English translation taken from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* [ANF], Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), I, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Justin, *First Apology* 46, PG 6, 39BC (trans. ANF, vol. I, p. 178).

should consider those of other religions, and especially Islam that affirms Jesus' role in bringing man to God, as followers of Christ and the good, the truth, the light. One can find similar notions in Clement of Alexandria who spoke of „scintillations' or glimmers „of the Divine Word“ among the Greeks and others and in Eusebius of Caesarea who talked about a universal, innate knowledge of the Son of God. Using these and some other patristic figures, and their message that affirmed so much that is of God within religions other than Christianity, modern Orthodox theologians have concluded that there is a basis for contemplating on the universality of God's revelation across language, religion, culture, and time itself.

Many of these same theologians have found further ground of support in the dogmas that emerged from the age of the Ecumenical Councils about Christ and the Holy Spirit. While maintaining continuity with the foundational truths established at that time, they have expanded the scope of the saving work of Christ and the active presence of the Holy Spirit to include Islam and their Muslim neighbors. I would first like to briefly outline some aspects of how noted Orthodox figures have made a case for engagement with Islam through a distinctive approach of the Eastern Church's Christology. Returning again to Metropolitan Georges of Lebanon, we see a call for a more balanced Christology that should evaluate all of human history from the point of view of the incarnation of Christ and His future return in the *parousia*. What we see in his thought is a profound critique of our particularly modern and predominantly linear conception of history and the impact this has had both for ecclesiology and Christian anthropology. In a ground breaking address to an ecumenical audience in 1971, he said:

“Too much emphasis has been placed on the succession of salvation events. (...) [T]his linear view of history is bound up with a monolithic ecclesiological approach which (...) turns its back on the idea of an eternity transcending history and based on a conception of the Church in which Christ is

seen 'not merely chronologically but also and above all ontologically.'<sup>7</sup>

In other words, he suggested that Christians have too often missed their calling of being witnesses to the life-changing potential as a result of Christ's coming in the flesh because our linear conception of salvation history reduces the „economy of Christ“ to its „historical manifestation“. Proposing that Christians move beyond this antiquated conception of history, he argues the authoritative Eastern Orthodox position, results in a very different outcome for inter-religious relations. He says that:

“[G]od can raise up prophets outside the sociological confines of the New Israel just as he raised them up outside the confines of Old Israel.<sup>8</sup> (...) The supreme task [of the Christian community] is to identify all the Christic values in other religions.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Metropolitan Georges, Christ is at work in many of the world religions and, therefore, Christians have the opportunity to grow closer to Him through dialogue and expanding their understanding of both their own religious tradition and those of others.

One can find a very similar logic in the writings of Archbishop Anastasios when he makes the case for a positive evaluation of Islam (and other religions generally) based on an authentic Orthodox Christology. He too is quite critical of what he call a „Christology of exclusivity“ and suggests the eschatological nature of Orthodox theology, when properly applied, could serve as an opening to those of other religions. He does this in one instance by comparing the differences of emphasis between theologians of the West and the East:

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<sup>7</sup> Georges Khodr, 'Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit,' *Sobornost*, 6 (1971), pp. 143-174, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 174.

“[M]any Western theologians tend to focus their attention on Christ’s earthly life, from his birth until the Resurrection. (...) In the East, however, emphasis is placed on the risen Christ, on Christ ascended, on Christ who will come again, on the Lord and *Logos* of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

Anastasios Yannoulatos is making the point that, though the Orthodox would agree that salvation is only found in Christ, the understanding of how this salvation is worked out is more fluid for them than it is in much of Western theology.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, according to Archbishop Anastasios, Orthodox Christians are much more willing to contemplate the saving work of the *Logos* at all times and places – past, present, and future. In the often repeated words of St. Athanasius, „The Word was made man in order that we might be made divine“,<sup>12</sup> which in essence is the Orthodox concept of *theōsis*, there is an implicit openness to seeing Christ wherever he might be found. For Orthodox Christians, who have so passionately endeavored to rediscover their Trinitarian theology and apply it in the present age, one cannot speak of the *economy of the Son* without also emphasizing in the same measure the *economy of*

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<sup>10</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003), p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> For a succinct presentation of the Orthodox understanding of salvation, see Theodore Bobosh, *Am I Saved? Scriptural Thoughts on Salvation* (Minneapolis, MD: Light and Life Publishing, 1984). Bobosh points out that the Eastern Christian thinks of salvation as a continuum and might say, ‘I am saved (from Christ’s incarnation), I am being saved (theosis), and I will be saved (from the recapitulation of things in Christ at his second coming)’.

<sup>12</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 54.3. This translation is from H. Bettenson, ed. and tr., *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 293. The same idea is found throughout the writings of the Eastern Fathers of the Church, including Clement of Alexandria, Maximos the Confessor, Symeon the New Theologian, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Gregory Palamas.

*the Spirit*. It should therefore be no surprise that in the writings of the two figures we have been discussing, Metropolitan Georges and Archbishop Anastasios, pneumatology is equally important when considering inter-religious relations. The involvement of these two men, along with countless other Orthodox Christians, in the ecumenical movement has been useful in clarifying and articulating an Orthodox position. For example, in speaking to a mixed audience in which he was comparing typical approaches in the West and the East, Anastasios argued that one cannot discover a full view of the Christian perspective on the basis solely of Christology. As he put it:

“The debate in the West on how to evaluate other religions theologically has always centered on christological issues. (...) In Orthodox tradition, however, theological problems related to this subject – especially with regard to Christian anthropology (...) have always been viewed in the light of our theology of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>13</sup>

For him, not only is it important to move beyond a „Christology of exclusivity“, but also to ponder the role of the Holy Spirit within world religions. He noted „Orthodox thought sees the activity of the Holy Spirit very broadly“ and that this allows for many possibilities in terms of the presence of the Divine in all men and all religions. Using the imagery of the „Heavenly King“ prayer, which together with the Trisagion („Thrice Holy“) Prayer is recited before nearly all Orthodox services,<sup>14</sup> the archbishop illustrates the Orthodox conviction that the

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<sup>13</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World*, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> The “Heavenly King” prayer goes as follows: “O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things, treasury of blessing and giver of life, come and abide in us and cleanse us from every impurity and save our souls, O Thou who art good and lovest mankind.” For a description and analysis of this prayer, see Olivier Clément, *Three Prayers: Our Father, O Heavenly King, and The Prayer of St. Ephrem*, tr. Michael Breck (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 42-64.

activities of the Spirit are found throughout the entire cosmos. He states that, „wherever we find love, goodness, peace, and the Spirit’s other *fruits* (Gal. 5:22), there we discern the signs of its activity’ and implies that surely there must be numerous ways in which the Holy Spirit plays a role outside of the visible Church.

Metropolitan Georges speaks in very similar terms with regard to the role of the Holy Spirit in world religions. Likewise, often finding himself in the position of having to clarify an Orthodox position on Islam and other religions to an ecumenical audience, he tends to articulate his views by way of comparing trends in the East with those in the West. For example, in one address he brings up one of the essential issues of contention between the Christian East and the West, the *filioque*.<sup>15</sup> However, he seems to do this not to dwell on a long-standing point of theological disagreement, but rather to identify one of the ways in which the role and actions of the Holy Spirit have often been overlooked. He says, referring to Acts 2:17 and 10:45, as well as Irenaeus’ presentation of the *Logos* and the Spirit [as] the „two hands of the Father“,<sup>16</sup> that:

“The Spirit is present everywhere and fills everything by virtue of an economy distinct from that of the Son. (...) Between the two economies there is a reciprocity and a mutual service. (...) The Spirit operates and applies his energies in accordance with his own economy and we could, from this angle, regard the non-Christian religions as points where his inspiration is at work.”<sup>17</sup>

His basic point is that the kind of Trinitarian theology that makes the Holy Spirit subservient to the Son obscures the work

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<sup>15</sup> See Boris Bobrinskoy’s chapter on the *filioque* controversy in his *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition*, tr. Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), pp. 279-294.

<sup>16</sup> Georges Khodr, ‘Christianity in a Pluralistic World,’ p. 172.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

of the Holy Spirit both inside and outside of the visible Church. In fact, Metropolitan Georges takes this a step further by suggesting there is a mystical communion of saints that will only be fully revealed and understood at Christ's second coming:

All who are visited by the Spirit are the people of God. The Church represents the first-fruits of the whole of mankind called to salvation. "In Christ all will be brought to life" (I Cor. 15:22) because of this communion which is the Church. At the present moment the Church is the sacrament of this future unity, the unity of both "those whom the church will have baptized and those whom the Church's bridegroom will have baptized".<sup>18</sup>

Though few have gone as far as Metropolitan Georges in affirming that the Holy Spirit *must* be independently at work on other religions (which form some type of "universal religious community"<sup>19</sup>), there are many Orthodox theologians who would agree that it is established within the tradition that the Spirit *may* well be at work both in and through those of other faiths.

One further particular contribution of note from Archbishop Anastasios has more to do with expressly Trinitarian theology than with either Christology or pneumatology. The basic premise will sound familiar to those who are aware of general renewal within the Orthodox Church and efforts to rearticulate its theology in modern times and define its place and purpose in the world. What Archbishop Anastasios does is to extend it specifically to the question of interaction between Christians

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 173.

<sup>19</sup> Though Metropolitan Georges does not mention 'Sophiology' at any point in the article, it is interesting to note the similarities between his concept of a 'universal religious community' and Sergius Bulgakov's notion of the 'Church outside the churches' (*ecclesia extra ecclesias*). See Michael Plekon's discussion on this in 'Still by Jacob's Well: Sergius Bulgakov's Vision of the Church,' *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 49, no. 1-2 (2005), pp. 125-144(138-139).

and non-Christians. He does this through a term and concept he calls „*koinōnia agapēs*“.<sup>20</sup> *Koinōnia* means „communion, association, partnership, and/or fellowship” in Greek and *agapē* means „love”. Archbishop Anastasios uses *koinōnia agapēs*, then, as a reference to the mutual, self-giving love found first and foremost between the three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – of the Trinity. It is also a reference to the opportunity given to humankind, particularly after the incarnation of Christ, to share in this communion of love – expressed perfectly in the Godhead – and subsequently to spread it throughout the cosmos and into the heart of every person on earth.<sup>21</sup>

This aspect of Archbishop Anastasios’ notion of the *koinōnia agapēs* has been around for centuries in the Orthodox tradition, as for example in the thought of Maximos the Confessor.<sup>22</sup> It forms the anthropological aspect of the doctrine and practices associated with *theōsis*, because it identifies the intended meaning and purpose of earthly life. What Archbishop Anastasios does, however, is to speak of the *koinōnia agapēs* in terms of how it relates to those of other religions and of how it should serve as a motivation for inter-religious dialogue. If for

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<sup>20</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, ‘Towards a *koinonia agapes*’ in *Towards World Community, The Colombo Papers*, S.J. Samarth, ed., (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1975), 47-63.

<sup>21</sup> Petros Vassiliadis has similarly applied Orthodox Trinitarian theology to mission. In an important article a few years ago, he talked about the ‘pneumatologically conditioned christological foundation of mission, focusing on reconciliation’, which he argued necessarily includes an important dimension of interfaith dialogue. See Vassiliadis, ‘Reconciliation as a Pneumatological Mission Paradigm: Some Preliminary Reflections by an Orthodox’, *International Review of Mission*, v. 94: 372 (2005), 30-42 and on-line at: [http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/vassiliadis\\_reconciliation\\_1.html](http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/vassiliadis_reconciliation_1.html) (accessed 13 March 2012).

<sup>22</sup> See Lars Thunberg’s discussion of this idea in Maximus in *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 51-76. Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 81.

no other reason, Christians and those of other religions should engage in dialogue and work together for the common good in a „fellowship of love“. He says, for example, that „a faithful Christian has to become a neighbor to each and every man, regardless of race, religion, language, guilt, especially in time of crisis“.<sup>23</sup> With all of the challenges confronting religious people of any sort in the modern world, this is an important message to consider and apply. It is clear in much of his other writings and speeches that he feels that Orthodox Christians should turn their attention first and foremost to Muslims, because of their deep cultural and historic connections to Islam.<sup>24</sup>

There is the notion that in some way Orthodox Christians and Muslims are on the same road, facing many similar challenges, in the modern period. There is also a sense in which their experience and perspectives give them collectively a certain and essential mission to fulfill in the world today.

### **3 Modern encounters with Islam and the Quest for Orthodox Christian Identity**

The sentiment expressed by Archbishop Anastasios can be seen increasingly across the spectrum of the Orthodox world in recent years. Orthodox Christians have been noting the similarities between their experiences and those of Muslims in the face of modernization. They have repeatedly raised concerns about the destructive aspects of modernization and the ways in which it has depleted their resources – spiritual and

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<sup>23</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, „Towards a *koinonia agapes*,“ p. 62. Also quoted and analyzed in Sperber, *Christians and Muslims: The Dialogue Activities of the World Council of Churches and Their Theological Foundation* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), p. 273.

<sup>24</sup> See Anastasios Yannoulatos, ‘Byzantine and Contemporary Greek Orthodox Approaches to Islam.’ 522-524 and the foreword to his book, *Islam: Threskeiologike episkopesis* (Athens: Poreuthentes, 1975), p. 9.

human, as well as natural. It seems the more Orthodox Christians engage in dialogue with Muslims, the more they realize the degree to which their shared experiences over the last two hundred or so years have led to the creation of distorted images of themselves, their communities, and each other. Numerous respected Orthodox theologians and hierarchs are shifting their thinking and orientation toward Islam so that they, together with their Muslim neighbors, may feel empowered to present new and more positive models for future generations. They seem to be concerned that, unless they make this happen, Orthodox Christians and Muslims will continue to be stuck, re-circulating their distorted identities both of themselves and of each other. Space does not allow for a full treatment of the topic here and, as with any interpretation of events and pronouncements, context is key to understanding the meaning and significance of the various thoughts put forward and actions taken by Orthodox Christians with regard to Islam. However, just a sampling of this material should be sufficient to make the basic point that the modern encounter with Islam is making a mark upon Orthodox efforts toward understanding themselves, both as individuals and as a Church, and their role in the world at this juncture in history.

Perhaps the foremost example of a figure who has taken a leading role in this effort is Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. He, like the previously mentioned Archbishop Anastasios and Metropolitan Georges, has on numerous occasions pointed out the similarities between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in their quest to re-discover an identity. For example, in a speech about Orthodox identity, he talked about the, “similar treatment [in the modern period] accorded our Muslim neighbors (...) [who] have seen their faith dissected and their history disfigured” and called Orthodox Christians to work with Muslims toward “the best of humankind (...) especially in light

of [their] 540 years of coexistence in a predominantly Muslim milieu”,<sup>25</sup>

Professor Astérios Argyriou has made a similar claim. He argues that Orthodox Christians and Muslims should work together in light of their shared experiences of modernity, because they collectively, „feel as strangers in the contemporary technological civilization, in the construction of modern societies, and in the values that govern our so-called Western world“.<sup>26</sup> Noting they did not „participate in the construction of this new world that began to commence at the time of the Renaissance“, he claims they share a common sentiment:

“[T]his world was constructed at our expense by the exploitation, colonial or otherwise, of our human and natural resources. Also, we share the tendency to distrust the West (in the best case) or even to reject it completely (in the worst case) (...). [We mutually] endeavor to return to our sources, to revive and to reactualize our (generally idealized) past.”<sup>27</sup>

Argyriou’s comments point to the generally contradictory and often self-deceptive attitudes shared by both Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the world today. While on the one hand they rightly identify a number of things that emerged from the West that led to and continue to be the source of their internal crises, their attempts to rediscover their identities have often fallen short because they have not honestly confronted their past or present. Argyriou goes on to point out in the same

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<sup>25</sup> Bartholomew I, ‘Mnemosyne and the Children of Memory’ in , *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*. John Chryssavgis, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 94-97 (96).

<sup>26</sup> Astérios Argyriou, ‘La situation du dialogue islamo-chrétien dans le monde orthodoxe et en Grèce’ in *Islam and Christianity: Mutual Perceptions Since the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Jacques Waardenburg, ed. (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), pp. 97-105 (98-99).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

article that, because of this dysfunctional relationship with modernity, too often Orthodox Christians and Muslims have succumbed to the temptation of fundamentalism and, despite their common history and parallels, have aggressively attacked each other (both in words and in literal bloodshed). However, he also gives examples of a better way – in which Muslims and Orthodox Christians have worked together constructively through dialogue and shared witness to God’s truth and salvation for the world.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the discussions and debates on ecclesiology that have taken place in the Orthodox Church over at least the past half century a very common theme has been the question of nationalism. A variety of Orthodox writers, from any number of perspectives, have condemned nationalism as a source of division, faction, and even heresy within the Church. Too often, however, it has been acceptable to place the blame for the rise of nationalism, at least in part, upon Islam (or at least the historical encroachment of Islamicate civilization into Christian lands) instead of on the acceptance by the Orthodox themselves of Western concepts and related modern forms of political organization. Many speak of the establishment of their modern nation-states in idealized terms, as that which brought an end to their „Ottoman captivity“. However, there has often been a disconnect for Orthodox Christians with Islam and Muslims. In many ways, it is a prejudice that has been carried over from generation to generation, since the Orthodox first began to feel inspired and challenged by the modern notions of nationalism, individualism, and secularism.

This point was eloquently addressed by Tarek Mitri in a speech he gave in the late 1990s, while on staff at the WCC.<sup>29</sup> Breaking

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<sup>28</sup> Argyriou mentions the work in this area of Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch, Metropolitan Georges (Khodr), Tarek Mitri, Georges Nahas, Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), Gregorios Ziakas, Nikos Zacharopoulos, and others.

<sup>29</sup> Dr. Mitri is now the Minister of Information of Lebanon.

with the status quo, he challenged Orthodox Christians (as well as Muslims) to take a critical look at themselves and their attitudes in order to discover their genesis. He asked them to think carefully about what had informed communal memory and challenged them to be more faithful to themselves and their true heritage:

“Ancestral hatred is, more often than not, fabricated rather than inherited. It is in many ways a creation of modernity, and much less an expression of a continued history. (...) If the past does not meet the needs of the present, another one can always be invented. (...) [T]here are conflicts between communities that have a religious past, but the religious content is of no or little relevance.”<sup>30</sup>

With these words, which were part of his introductory remarks at a Muslim-Christian dialogue, Mitri sums up the challenges many Orthodox Christians and Muslims alike have faced as they have struggled to come to terms with their identity in the modern and postmodern periods. Unknowingly, they have allowed themselves to be influenced by notions foreign to their traditions and sometimes even deliberately misleading information about their shared past. His conclusion is that the animosity often found between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, particularly in their traditional homelands, began in large part as the product of foreign invention – though Orthodox Christians and Muslims themselves in their respective communities have since perpetuated it.

Mitri’s notion of a fabricated ancestral history, introduced in the modern period to portray the relations between Orthodox Christians and Muslims as generally antagonistic, raises some interesting questions. For example, why have so many Orthodox Christians been willing to accept this distortion of

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<sup>30</sup> Tarek Mitri, ‘Religious plurality in the context of Globalization: Introductory Reflections,’ *Current Dialogue*, 33 (July 1999), pp. 25-29, p. 25 and on-line at: <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd33-09.html> (accessed 13 March 2011).

their history? Though Mitri's comments are admittedly particularly germane for Arab Christians, they are also relevant for Orthodox Christians of Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Serbian, and Albanian descent, among others. One also has to wonder why Islam is such a stumbling block for so many Orthodox Christians today. Could it be that it is not so much because they have difficulty accepting the fact that their ancestors lived for centuries under the dominion of Islam, but rather because they have had difficulty accepting the fall of their glorious Byzantine civilization? As John Meyendorff and others pointed out so eloquently<sup>31</sup>, Byzantium symbolizes much for the Orthodox, particularly in light of the fact that they are surrounded in their worship by Byzantine style (or at least Byzantine inspired) architecture, iconography, music, and even physical movements and gestures.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps part of their difficulty in moving on is coming to terms with their deep sense of loss and confusion in the modern period over the eclipse of their Byzantine civilization, which had in many ways remained intact during the Ottoman period. Despite the fact that Orthodox countries have attempted to graft a Byzantine model onto an essentially Western inspired concept of the nation-state, these political models have had varying degrees of success and it is debatable just how „Byzantine“ they may in fact be.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982).

<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, William Dalrymple noted the similarities between the prostrations of Eastern Christians during certain prayers with those of Muslims during their five daily prayers. See *From the Holy Mountain A Journey among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1998), p. 304.

<sup>33</sup> See related discussions in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Pedro Ramet, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988) and Papanikolaou, Aristotle. 'Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Democracy,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2003), pp. 75-98.

There is a certain finality about the effect of the modern world upon the Church that may be causing Orthodox Christians to question God in a new way, one very similar to the questioning of many Muslims in the face of modernity. However, instead of causing them to be more introspective in order to resolve a kind of spiritual crisis, some have been reactive, looking for something and someone upon which to place blame. The result has been a certain amount of finger pointing at Muslims, making Islam the scapegoat for past and present problems of Eastern Christianity.<sup>34</sup> Some say, after all it was the Muslim Turks who conquered Constantinople in the fifteenth century, ushering in the age of „Ottoman captivity“. They imagine that things would have been so much better had this not happened or, looking to the future, that the golden „Byzantine age“ can, and indeed, must be revived again in the present generation. Though the Orthodox are known, especially in ecumenical circles, for their emphasis on the role and work of the Holy Spirit in the world, they have unfortunately not always applied this to their own history. Few, or at least not enough, Orthodox theologians in the modern period have discussed whether the very existence of Islam and its impact on Orthodoxy over the centuries may have been for a reason, and could perhaps be understood as part of the divine economy through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it is no coincidence that Muslims and

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<sup>34</sup> Probably the most egregious example of this is, interestingly enough, by a Jewish author who publishes under the name Bat Ye'or. Though not an Orthodox Christian, her major work, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), has found some measure of acceptance in certain Orthodox circles. Its popularity stems from the fact that it tells people what they want to hear by judging the history of Islam through a modern filter and an anti-Islamic bias.

<sup>35</sup> Metropolitan Georges (Khodr), Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), and John Meyendorff are notable exceptions. See their respective key articles: 'Christianity in a Pluralistic World; 'Emerging Perspectives on the Relationships of Christians to People of Others Faith – an Eastern Orthodox Contribution,' *International Review of Mission* 77 (1988), pp.

Orthodox Christians have found themselves to be neighbors and friends for so many centuries. If the Byzantine civilization was challenged by Islamic civilization and both, in the broadest sense, have now been challenged by Western civilization, what does it all mean? The basic question is a mysterious one: How has the Holy Spirit been at work over time?<sup>36</sup> Related to this is the practical question: What should be the response of Christians (especially Orthodox Christians whose dogma underlines the significance of the Holy Spirit in the world) to all of this as they work synergistically with the Holy Spirit to bring about the will of God?

One scholar who has attempted to look at the potential of Orthodox Christians and Muslims to face their own collective challenges, as well as propose an alternative to further modernization for humanity and the planet is Konstantinos Romanos. In an article written the in year before prior to the 9/11 tragedy, Romanos criticized the conservatism of thought in Byzantine culture, which in his view never lived up to the potential it inherited from Hellenic culture. He then went on to praise Islam by noting that:

“[It] preaches the ‘middle course’ lying between the non-worldly transcendence (‘My kingdom is not of this world’ – Jesus) and its opposite, the unbounded, materialistic

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332-346; and ‘Ecclesiastical Regionalism: Structures of Communion or Cover for Separatism’ in *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982), pp. 217-234.

<sup>36</sup> The modern linear conception of history is quite different from the much more circular understanding of time and salvation history of the patristic age. For example – as John Behr has noted in his *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 57-85. Irenaeus of Lyons evaluated all of human history from the point of view of the incarnation of Christ. Theologically this has significant ramifications for how one understands salvation history, as we have seen already in Metropolitan Georges’ discussion on the ‘economy of the Son’ and the ‘economy of the Spirit’.

secularism. (...) The development of science during Islam's 'golden age' is linked through a powerful realism to the assertion of the physical world as a positive expression of the spiritual reality."<sup>37</sup>

For Romanos, Islamicate civilization, prior to its ultimate breakdown with modernization, presented a particularly appealing model, because it supported the implementation of the highest Hellenic ideals in a much fuller way than did either the Byzantine or Modern civilizations. He went on to say:

"[T]heoretical Islam is considered by many researchers as the last glorious chapter of science of the Hellenistic world...which it developed in a creative way. If one day (...) there is a fruitful dialogue between Orthodoxy and the Islam for peace and universality (...) the vehicle of this dialogue cannot be other than the Hellenic Philosophical Culture."<sup>38</sup>

Romanos suggests that it is essential that Orthodox Christians continue to be in dialogue with Muslims and to learn about Islam in order for them to find their true identity in the „Hellenic Philosophical Culture“, a legacy shared by both Eastern Christianity and Islam. It seems that what Romanos has in mind here is not the modern concept of Greek nationalism that harkens back to Ancient Greece while often completely ignoring Hellenized and Byzantine Christianity. Rather, he is suggesting something similar to what the Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky used to refer to as „Christian Hellenism“ and the „patristic mind“. This is the tendency of early Eastern Christians to fully appropriate the best of Greek philosophy into the traditions embedded in Christian scripture and practice. In line with Florovsky's concept of being in dialogue with the patristic period of Orthodox history in order to creatively address the issues and problems of today, Romanos encourages Orthodox Christians to be in dialogue with Muslims and have an

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<sup>37</sup> Konstantinos Romanos, 'Hellenic Culture – Orthodoxy – Islam,' *Graeco-Arabica*, 7-8 (2000), pp. 451-465 (pp. 463-464).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464.

awareness of past relations between the two religions in order for both Muslims and Christians to better face the challenges of life in the postmodern world.

#### **4 Encountering Islam: Orthodox Thought and Action in the twenty-first Century**

In an address given in Kiev, Ukraine in the fall of 2003 and again in Volos, Greece the spring of 2004, Bishop Kallistos Ware (since elevated to Metropolitan) suggested that in the twenty-first century there would be “a shift in the central focus of [Orthodox] theological inquiry from ecclesiology to anthropology”.<sup>39</sup> Calling all Orthodox Christians to „a courageous and imaginative revitalization of our human personhood“,<sup>40</sup> he suggested four pressing challenges facing not only the Church, but all human persons in the new century: the ever-advancing urbanization and globalization; dehumanizing trends in an age “increasingly dominated by machines”; ethical challenges stemming from genetic engineering, the breakdown of marriage, and the growing rejection of traditional sexual morality; and the disastrous ecological crisis. In his address, he pointed out that „human nature is inescapably relational“<sup>41</sup> and “perfect love is sacrificial love. *Offer the world back to God in thanksgiving means offer your own life in sacrifice to God, for the sake of your fellow-humans*”.<sup>42</sup> In short, he was suggesting that Orthodox Christians need to be less inwardly focused on their church and establishing its place in society, while at the same time being more concerned and confident about their

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<sup>39</sup> Kallistos Ware, ‘Orthodox theology in the new millennium: What is the most important question?’ *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review*, 26:2 (2004), p. 12 (pp. 7-23).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

responsibilities to humanity to which the Church is here to serve.

When it comes to Orthodox encounters with Islam in this century (and, in fact, beginning toward the end of the last century), many Orthodox Christians have already shifted their focus from ecclesiology to anthropology. Affirming, as Metropolitan Kallistos does, that it is in their nature to be relational, they have reached out in love toward their Muslim neighbors and in so doing have begun to address together with them all the areas of concern mentioned by Kallistos in his address, as well as numerous other shared concerns. This commitment to joining together with Muslims to work toward better understanding and addressing the world's pressing problems is perhaps best demonstrated through the sustained series of dialogues sponsored jointly by the Orthodox Center for the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute. This was a profound attempt to engage in dialogue over about two decades, but it started in large part because of a friendship between the late Metropolitan Damaskinos Papandreou of Switzerland (on the Christian side) and His Royal Highness Crown Prince El-Hassan bin Talal of Jordan (on the Muslim side).<sup>43</sup> These dialogues took place every year or two in various locations, including Switzerland, Jordan, Turkey, and Greece. Orthodox Christian and Muslim scholars presented research and analysis on diverse topics and there was a particular emphasis on engaging young people to instill in the next generation the values of understanding and cooperation between the two religions.

Taking these series of dialogues as an example of how Orthodox Christians and Muslims have addressed pressing, global challenges, we see in their fourth session that they looked at the question of how in the modern technical culture individuals try,

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<sup>43</sup> The project would have continued on this path had Metropolitan Damaskinos not suffered a brain hemorrhage in 1999 that caused him to greatly reduce his efforts. He passed away in November 2011.

but fail to find lasting happiness through a frenetic hoarding of the latest gadgets, machines, and fashion trends. Setting the tone through the opening address to the participants, Metropolitan Damaskinos put it this way:

“[T]his rapprochement will make us capable (...) [of realizing] the danger of our era is found less in the conflict between the Gospel and the Qur’an but rather in the harmful idolatry of materialism, which in our day represents the major menace in both the East and the West.”<sup>44</sup>

Here Damaskinos identifies a common value *and* (conversely) a common enemy for both Muslims and Christians. He points out that materialism, and the spiritual void caused by modernity should be fought by Muslims and Christians alike. He proposes that both religions must collectively serve their calling by providing an antidote to materialism, which is presented as a kind of malignancy that feeds on a person’s soul.

This same type of presentation of Orthodox Christians and Muslims being mutually confronted by forces that threaten the two religions and assault „human personhood“ (to use Metropolitan Kallistos’ term) across the globe can be found in another sustained dialogue effort. Highly ranking representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and counterparts in the Islamic Republic of Iran’s religious establishment have been meeting on a regular basis since 1997, it has been called the „Joint Russian-Iranian Theological Commission on Islam-Orthodox Dialogue“. In its seventh and most recent meeting the commission took up the question of „the role of religion in the life of the individual and society“ and directly addressed some of the ethical problems stemming from modernization. In his message at the start of the meeting, Patriarch Kirill (of Moscow and All Russia) had this to say:

“[W]e see today religious and moral relativism spreading rapidly throughout the world. (...) Economy, becoming

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<sup>44</sup> Damaskinos (Papandreou), Metropolitan (ed.), ‘La 6ème Consultation entre chrétiens et musulmans,’ *Episkepsis*, 426 (1989), pp. 4-11, p. 9.

dominant in social development, has imposed on people a race for material wealth and carnal pleasures. (...) As a result, the age-old traditions of peoples, the traditions of family and community are being destroyed thus distorting the very human personality.”<sup>45</sup>

Kirill asks participants in the meeting not only to think about the widespread ramifications of consumerist culture, but also the significant role religion can play to diffuse the consequences by strengthening the moral health of society. Kirill’s statements about materialism very much parallel those found in the previously mentioned dialogues sponsored by the Orthodox Center for the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Royal Aal-Bayt Institute. They also mirror a statement from the second meeting of the Joint Russian-Iranian commission at the turn of the century in which it was stated that:

“[We] flatly denounced the globalism project in terms of its imposing on other nations one standard of world outlook, culture and policy shared by an insignificant percentage of the world’s population (...). [A] serious attitude towards morals and spirituality can reduce the impact of these vices and install stability, protection of family values, children’s, teenagers’ and young people’s rights, and their religious and moral upbringing.”<sup>46</sup>

Though in this example and in some of the language from this and other sessions one can, perhaps, perceive a more pronounced moral conservatism than one might find in other gatherings of Orthodox Christians and Muslims in recent years, the desire to come together against the forces of modernization is clearly an often repeated and increasingly common theme, especially in the post 9/11 period. Participants in sessions such

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Patriarch Kirill’s message to the 7th meeting of Joint Russian-Iranian Theological Commission for Islam-Orthodoxy Dialogue.’ <http://www.mospat.ru/en/2010/10/06/news27455> (accessed 6 December 2013).

<sup>46</sup> ‘The 4th Session of the Russian-Iranian Commission.’ <http://en.mirros.ru/religion/iran/> (accessed 15 February 2009).

as these are consistently saying that, through dialogue at the national, regional and international level, Orthodox Christians and Muslims together have the ability to change the bleak outlook for the future because their combined efforts can foster mutual understanding, peace, friendship, and justice throughout the world.

In terms of how Orthodox Christians are participating in common work with Muslims (and those of other religious traditions as well) to address the current environmental crisis, one need not look any further than the model and leadership of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Bartholomew, who for his many efforts has affectionately been called the “Green Patriarch”, has for years combined his commitment to the environment and to Muslim-Christian relations, two of his most pressing priorities since he was crowned patriarch in 1991. Though he has both participated and sponsored many initiatives in these two areas, perhaps the one through which we see them converge to the greatest degree is through the symposia on Religion, Science and Environment (RSE) sponsored by the Patriarchate. The RSE has included high ranking Muslims on its committees and invited others to speak as experts and participate at its various the symposia. For example, His Highness Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro the Grand Mufti of the Arab Syrian Republic, and Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, and His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan have all presented speeches and/or been involved in the movement in some capacity.<sup>47</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew himself is well-known for his statement in 1995 declaring that “crime

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<sup>47</sup> See <http://www.rsesymposia.org/index.php> (accessed 2 March 2012) for details about the eight symposia that have taken place thus far and plans for the ninth, which is to be titled ‘Flows of Life: The Delta of the Nile and Africa’ and will take place primarily on the Nile River.

against the natural world is a sin"<sup>48</sup> and this echoes the sentiment of noted Orthodox theologians and Muslim scholars on nature and the environment.<sup>49</sup> All evidence seems to suggest that in their dialogues and common work in the coming years Orthodox Christians and Muslims will continue to focus their attention on environmental concerns.

There are numerous examples in recent years of Orthodox Christians and Muslims engaging in efforts to foster peace and political cooperation within nations and in particular regions. Often these activities will involve leaders from other religious traditions as well. An excellent example of this type of interfaith effort is the "Statement of Shared Moral Commitment" of the Muslim community in Albania, the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, the Catholic Church, and the Bektashi community in Albania, signed in 2005. It is quite astonishing that, just several years following the almost 50 years of total prohibition of religious faith, practice, and assembly under the oppressive Communist regime (arguably the most openly hostile to religion of any in the world in the twentieth century), religious life in Albania could be so strong. What is even more inspiring is that, in their weakness, these religious communities had enough courage and confidence to reach out to each other to address their shared concerns in Albania and in the region. Celebrating what God had brought them through, recognizing the sacrifices of those who had kept faith alive through the country's darkest hour, the cosignatories proclaimed, "the period of repression is behind us and religious life can once again blossom in Albania in its various forms and retake its

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<sup>48</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2040567.stm> (accessed 2 March 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the most notable example among the Orthodox would be Philip Sherrard and among Muslims Seyyed Hossein Nasr, both of whom have written profoundly on the relationship between man and nature, as well as the spiritual crisis underlying modern environmental degradation.

hereditary place in a democratic society”.<sup>50</sup> They also committed themselves to “[promoting] a climate of peace (...) [educating on their] different faith traditions (...) [carrying] out common [civil and social] activities (...) [and promoting] inter-religious understanding in Albania and in the region”.<sup>51</sup> In short, Albanian religious leaders pledged to ensure that the values of cooperation and pluralism were a standard feature all levels of society in Albania. This pledge has been borne out at least in the work of the Orthodox signatory, Archbishop Anastasios, whose educational, health, and social services programs have been praised as a living example of interfaith cooperation for the benefit of all in Albania and beyond.<sup>52</sup>

There have been a number of signs indicating that Orthodox Christians have renewed their efforts to dialogue with Muslims over the past few years. However, there was a watershed moment within the Orthodox Church in 2008 in terms of its commitment to interreligious dialogue and common action with those of other faiths. On 9 October of that year, Patriarch Bartholomew convened a four-day meeting at the Ecumenical Patriarchate with 14 Orthodox primates and their representatives from around the world to discuss a number of pressing issues, re-establish a common set of principles and goals for the twenty-first century, and promote greater unity within the Church and between the Church and the outside world. This event, which was the fifth time such a Synaxis had taken place since 1990, was an opportunity for Orthodox leaders to show their unity as a Church, and was part of the efforts over the course of many years leading to a forthcoming Holy and Great

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Statement of Shared Moral Commitment’ 18 March 2005. <http://www.orthodoxalbania.org/English/News%20and%20Publications/commitment.htm> (accessed 2 March 2012).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> For a description of this work, see Nicholas Gage, ‘He Gave His Country Hope: The Story of Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos,’ *Parade Magazine*, 27 July 2003.

Council of the Orthodox Church. Among the issues discussed at this Synaxis of Orthodox primates was their agreement on the need “to strengthen by means of further theological support the decisions taken on a Pan-Orthodox level regarding participation of the Orthodox Church in theological dialogues with the non-Orthodox [i.e. with other Christian confessions and those of other religions]”.<sup>53</sup> Interreligious dialogue – and relations generally – between Orthodox Christians and those of other religions were, therefore, identified as justifications, among other things, for the 2008 Synaxis itself.

In his opening remarks, Patriarch Bartholomew called his brother bishops to “first understand other people and discern their deeper concerns”, adding that “Inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue is the very least of our obligations; and it is one that we must surely fulfill”.<sup>54</sup> After several days of discussion on all the matters before them, in their final statement from the event, the patriarch came to this conclusion:

“[W]e re-affirm (...) our desire to continue, despite any difficulties, the theological dialogues with other Christians, as well as the interreligious dialogues, especially with Judaism and Islam, given that dialogue constitutes the only way of solving differences among people.”<sup>55</sup>

Reaffirming the importance of theological dialogues with those of other religions, particularly Judaism and Islam, they encouraged all Orthodox Christians not to give in to those forces within their „autocephalous churches“ that might keep

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<sup>53</sup> An excerpt from the message of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew delivered at the Phanar on 10 October 2008 at the Synaxis of the Heads of All Orthodox Churches. Published under the title, ‘Ecumenical Patriarch’s Address to the Synaxis of Hierarchs,’ *Orthodox Observer*, 73, no. 1243 (October 2008), pp. 4-6, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> John Chryssavgis, ‘A Powerful Symbol of Unity,’ *Orthodox Observer*, 73, no. 1244 (November 2008), pp. 13-14, p. 19, [http://issuu.com/orthodoxmarketplace/docs/2008nov\\_synaxis\\_special](http://issuu.com/orthodoxmarketplace/docs/2008nov_synaxis_special) (accessed 13 March 2012).

them from interfaith dialogue, particularly in an age when peace, unity, and religion itself (i.e. all world religions) are being threatened. This sentiment was expressed again in September 2011 when Patriarch Bartholomew convened a smaller synaxis of just the „Ancient Patriarchates“ (Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch) and the Church of Cyprus to specifically study the situation in the Middle East. The patriarchs affirmed that „[T]he Ancient Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus should support and assist more effectively the current inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogues with the other two monotheistic religions [Judaism and Islam]“ and called for a gathering of religious leaders to establish a „Mediterranean Charter“ for peace between religions and common action to protect the natural environment.<sup>56</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

The fact that Orthodox Christians have been increasingly discussing what their tradition says about relations with other faiths and have participated in sustained dialogue and common work with Muslims on global concerns, attests to the fact that Orthodox theologians and leaders are looking beyond the dominant theme of Orthodox theology in the twentieth century: ecclesiology. This activity also lends support to Metropolitan Kallistos' prediction, which since it had been going on already

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<sup>56</sup> 'Announcement Synaxis of their Beatitudes the heads of the Ancient Orthodox Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus' <http://www.patriarchate.org/documents/announcement-synaxis-of-their-beatitudes-the-heads-of-the-ancient-orthodox-patriarchates-and-the-church-of-cyprus> (accessed 11 March 2012). In addition an ecological ('Mediterranean Charter') the September 2011 synaxis spoke of building a hospital in Jerusalem (for the benefit of Muslims, Christians, and Jews there) and supportive health programs on the African continent.

for some time could be considered an observation, that there has been a shift in emphasis in Orthodox thought and action toward anthropology. Modern encounter with Islam has presented an unparalleled opportunity for Orthodox Christians to understand what their relationship with the religion was, is, and may become. This current juncture in history, sometimes referred to as the postmodern or late modern age, presents an opportunity to transcend the pitfalls, fallacies, and errors, of the modern period, so that Orthodox Christians and Muslims can rediscover and build upon the high points of their shared past in order to imagine a better future for themselves and all mankind. In fact, together they may even be able to present some useful perspectives to the West, which seems to be increasingly dominated by the polarizing extremes of „non-worldly transcendence“ (on the rise in many Christian circles) and „unbounded, materialistic secularism“<sup>57</sup> (as evidenced in the current popularity of atheist writers such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris). Because of their shared history in the pre-modern period and similar experiences and responses to modernization as it encroached into their homelands, Orthodox Christians and Muslims have been in a somewhat unique position and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Together, through dialogue and collaboration, they have the potential to, in the words of Patriarch Bartholomew, „overcome modernity *from the inside*“ to present a new paradigm of secularism that respects both God *and* man and does a better job of ensuring justice, freedom, and pluralism around the world.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Terms taken from Romanos' 'Hellenic Culture.'

<sup>58</sup> Olivier Clément, *Conversations with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I*, Paul Meyendorff, tr. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), p. 210.