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The Task of Orthodox Theology in Today's Europe¹

Abstract

In this article H.E. Metropolitan Bishop Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. John Zizioulas underlines the meaning of Orthodox Theology in contemporary Europe. Orthodoxy is not foreign to Europe but an integral part of its spiritual identity. Europe's foundations include the Christian East just as much as the Christian West. Orthodox Theology means not a repetition of Tradition but an engagement with the past for a human future and a culture of tolerance and dialogue.

Keywords

Orthodox Theology, Europe, religious pluralism, hermeneutics, culture



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I should like to begin by expressing my profound gratitude for the great honour bestowed on me by this renowned University today. It is indeed a great privilege to receive the prestigious title of *Doctor honoris causa* from the Department of Orthodox Theology of this historic University – an academic distinction which I value and appreciate deeply. My special thanks are due to the President of the Department of Orthodox Theology, Professor Dr. Athanasios Vletsis and his colleagues, and to the authorities of this University for their decision to honour me with this distinction. I am particularly thankful to His Eminence Cardinal Kurt Koch for kindly accepting to present to this distinguished audience my humble person and modest work, as well as to His Eminence Metropolitan Augustinos of the Orthodox Church of Germany for his kind words and for the presence of his clergy here on this solemn occasion. To all of you who honour me with your presence here today I express my gratitude.

Today the Department of Orthodox Theology of this University celebrates the twentieth anniversary since its establishment, and the thirtieth year since the creation of its predecessor, the Institute of Orthodox Theology with Professor Dr. Theodoros Nikolaou as its first Professor. Thirty years of presence and activity of Orthodox Theology in one of the most distinguished Universities of Europe constitute an event of historical significance. On behalf of the Orthodox Church I feel the need to thank the University of Munich for granting to Orthodox Theology the privilege to be taught in this eminent academic institution alongside the Catholic and Protestant Theological Faculties. This is an ecumenical miracle for which we cannot but be thankful.

The presence of Orthodox Theology in a European University raises the question to which I should like to devote some personal reflections on this solemn occasion: what is the task of Orthodox Theology in today's Europe?

Let me first state what this task is *not*. Orthodoxy is often approached by non-Orthodox as an “exotic” sort of religion, foreign to the European identity, a relic of the past which we keep, respect and study like we do with other non-European traditions. Many Orthodox view themselves in the same way. The East-West opposition which was proposed by the Russian Slavophiles of the nineteenth century found its way also in Greece today, and is even used recently for political purposes, cultivating anti-western feelings among the Orthodox. This is accompanied by growing conservative tendencies among the Orthodox against any dialogue with the Christians of the West and the Ecumenical Movement.

This, however, is by no means true to the nature of Orthodox tradition. Orthodoxy is not foreign to Europe but an integral part of its spiritual identity. Europe's foundations include the Christian East just as much as the Christian West. The Greek Fathers were for centuries part of the foundations of Western Christianity alongside with Augustine, Jerome, Hilary, Ambrose and other Latin Fathers. The Church breathed for a thousand years with “two lungs”, the West and the East. The disruption in the field of Theology was not but a tragic product of the Great Schism which led East and West to independent and often opposite paths, but this was not able to shaken their common foundations. East and West never acquired a separate and self-sufficient identity. “Their task of reunion is imposed on both by the inner logic of their history. This is the spring of the *ecumenical idea*” (G. Florovsky).

The first task, therefore, that Orthodox Theology is called to perform in the West is to witness to the common heritage of the undivided Church – not to promote and prolong the confessionalist spirit that resulted from the East-West division of the second millennium. Orthodox theology should not operate as another “Confession”, but as a pointer to the spirit and ethos common to both East and West in the undivided Church.

This means that Orthodox theology must draw from the source of both the Greek and the Latin Fathers. It must also listen to the voice of the Reformation as it points to the faithfulness to the tradition of the early Church including primarily the Holy Scriptures. The Bible and the Fathers of the undivided Church must be the ground on which East and West can restore their unity. This will be a service not only to Christianity but to Europe as well.

But the task of Orthodox theology is not simply to repeat the Tradition; it is also and, I would say, primarily to *interpret* it. And interpretation, as H. – G. Gadamer has taught us with his *hermeneutics*, is to engage the past in dialogue with the present, or even the future. A tradition which is not interpreted in dialogue with the present and the future is dead and cannot offer anything to culture and civilization.

This hermeneutical approach to tradition is not foreign to Orthodox theology. It was applied by the Fathers of the Church and the Ecumenical Councils, and constitutes, in my view, a particular characteristic of Orthodox Theology which stresses more than Western Theology does the importance of *Pneumatology* in Theology. Whereas Christology links the present with history, the role of the Holy Spirit is to bring “the last days”, the future, into the present (cf. Acts 2,18) and thus interpret history in the light of the actual existential concerns of the world. Orthodox Theology must insist on the dialogue between Tradition and the present culture because this is what Patristic theology itself did in its time and what emerges from its emphasis on the pneumatological dimension of the Church.

This brings us back to the question we posed at the beginning: what is the task of Orthodox Theology in today’s Europe? What are the existential concerns of the present European culture with which Theology is called to enter into dialogue?

To some people Europe is primarily, if not exclusively, an economic and political unity. But it is doubtful that this unity can exist solely on the basis of economic interest and institutional stability. For one thing, social coherence is a

prerequisite for unity. Even if the European is totally turned into an *homo economicus* and is made to think of nothing but “bread and spectacles”, he cannot exist as European without a world-view of some kind, i.e. without a sort of spiritual identity. Now, considered from the point of view of its history European identity was shaped by a synthesis of three cultural and spiritual forces. The first came from the *ancient Greeks* with their concern with the nature that lies behind or in everything that exists, what can be described as the *ontological* and the *aesthetical* concern. By accepting Christianity as their religion the Greeks introduced this element into European culture mainly through the Greek Fathers of the Church.

The other spiritual force came from the *Hebrew* culture which was not interested so much in the question of *what* or *how* the world is (its nature or beauty as such) but in that of *who* made it. The Hebrew mind regarded the world as an *act* of someone, as an *event* and emphasized *history* more than ontology and aesthetics. The European mind inherited and developed this again through Christianity with its stress on the Incarnation and the *Heilsgeschichte*.

Finally, a third factor entered into Europe through the contribution of *Rome*. The Roman mind looked at the world primarily as a reality to be *organized* so that it may be *efficient* and produce results. A utilitarian approach to reality developed and led to the remarkable successes of the European mind in matters of law, order and social stability as well as the technological achievements of our time. This again reached Europe *via* Christianity and the Church.

All this, of course, is a schematization that cannot be accepted without qualifications. What remains true in any case, however, is that Athens, Jerusalem and Rome (both Old and New) represent the foundation stones of European identity, and that the historical channel that transmitted this to today's Europe is no other than the Christian Church and its Theology.

All this speaks for a “Christian Europe”. But how can this be understood and make sense today? Can we still speak of a Christian Europe?

In Europe today there are those who take it for granted that Europe *is* Christian and cannot but be Christian. Just as there are those who have made up their minds that in the pluralistic world in which we live today a “Christian Europe” is totally unthinkable. When some years ago an attempt was made to draft a constitution for Europe the suggestion that reference should be made to the Christian roots of European identity was finally rejected. The relation of Europe to Christianity remains unclear in the present. This can affect the role that Christian theology can play in transmitting its message to the European situation. The Theological Faculties in Europe cannot but be affected by this ambiguity.

There are several factors that make up the present ambiguity in Europe’s relation to Christianity. The first has to do with the rise of *secularization*. With the spread of the humanistic ideas of the Enlightenment Christianity was reduced to certain moral values which are regarded as sufficient to express the European spiritual identity without any explicit reference to Christianity. Such values are the respect of the human person, its dignity and freedom, its right to exist and live in different ways provided that these do not interfere with the freedom of others, etc.

All this challenges Christian Theology to enter into a constructive dialogue with modernity in which Orthodox Theology has an important contribution to make. The theology of *personhood* developed by the Greek Fathers has a great deal to say about the uniqueness of the person, the respect of otherness and the freedom to exist in relationship –ideas that come directly from Trinitarian Theology. The anthropological consequences of Trinitarian theology can offer a link in the dialogue between Christianity and the modern humanistic culture. Orthodox Theology must be courageous enough and dare to interpret the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (as well as other Christian doctrines) in *humanistic terms*. The dogmas of

the Church are not rational statements to be repeated; they are guides to our lives and Theology must bring out their existential significance.

The other factor that accounts for the ambiguity in the relation of today's Europe to Christianity is *the challenge of the non – Christian faiths*. Europe used to be in the past a more or less homogeneous entity from the religious point of view. Today's Europe is made up of great numbers of people who do not belong to Christianity, and considering the actual developments in world politics with the flux of immigrants from the Middle East into Europe these days this will be intensified even more in our time. It appears that Europe will have soon to come to terms with *religious pluralism*, and this will constitute a challenge to Christian Theology.

The position of Christian Theology towards other religious ranges from the rejection of all non – Christians faiths as falling outside the realm of salvation, to the view that Christ is in some way present in them, albeit not consciously recognized. An international Commission of the Vatican published some years ago a very open report on the relationship between Christianity and other religions, while books like that of the former Professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, Fr. Jacques Dupuis, suggest an approach to religious pluralism as a phenomenon which forms part of the plan of God for humanity. Orthodox theology has not pronounced itself officially on this matter. There are those who hold rigid views that exclude non – Christians from any hope of salvation. But there have been also more open views. One of them based on Vladimir Lossky's distinction between the "economy" of Christ and the "economy" of the Spirit would claim that the Holy Spirit's work is not limited to the sphere of Christ and the Christians, but extends to all humanity and creation (cf. the views expressed by Metropolitan George Khodr of the Orthodox Church of Antioch). Another view expressed by the late Professor of the University of Athens Ioannis Karmiris enlarges the idea of the Church ("Ecclesia extra Ecclesiam") so as to include all those who seek

salvation in good faith but happen to belong to other religions. There is finally the view that until the Parousia at the eschata any judgment as to who is saved or not should be avoided.

There is no doubt that the only theological position that can lead to a peaceful co-existence of the various faiths in a religiously pluralistic Europe is one that approaches the different religions with respect and love. Europe has suffered in the past from religious conflicts which have taught us that the cultivation of religious hatred can only lead to destruction. As the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios put it in a speech a few years ago, “war in the name of religion is war against religion”. Theology is called to open up its horizons so as to allow for God’s plan of salvation to include all human beings regardless of their religious or cultural differences.

This means in the end that the only way open to Theology in today’s Europe is the way of *dialogue*: dialogue with every situation that the historical circumstances confront us with. Dialogue does not take place in a void of conviction. It does not mean indifference to truth or relativisation of it. It means conviction, yet without stubbornness, fidelity combined with openness to other views. Dialogue is a step further than *tolerance*; it involves the recognition that the “other”, the “different” exists not simply in order to exist – *that* is tolerance – but exists as someone who has something to say to me, which I have to listen to seriously and relate it to my convictions.

Eminences, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The honour bestowed on me by this historic University today surpasses the worth of my modest achievements in theology and Church service. It may perhaps be justified only by one reason: in my whole life I have tried to serve the *Dialogue* in all its forms. And I humbly appeal to those devoted to the study and teaching of Orthodox Theology to open the frontiers of their tradition to the process of dialogue with the existential concerns of our fellow human beings at any given situation. The agenda of Theology is set by history. This was known to the

Fathers of the Church who were in constant dialogue with their time. It was unfortunately forgotten at times by academic Theology.

Of all kinds of Dialogue the foremost and primary in importance for Theology remains the *ecumenical* one. The problems of our time both in Europe and the rest of the world demand a common answer by all those who confess faith in Christ. The ecological crisis, the bioethical issues raised by the rapid advance of science and technology and, above all, the challenge of religious fanaticism which leads to martyrdom Christian believers irrespective of their confessional identity – all these underline the urgency of the promotion of Christian unity. The theological dialogue between the Christians, which does not relativise the truth but opens it up to the views of the “other” is an urgent demand of our time.

We are all grateful to this renowned University for allowing and enabling the three main traditions of Christian Theology, the Orthodox, the Catholic and the Protestant, to be in continuous dialogue and co-operation at the highest academic level. May God bless abundantly this invaluable service to ecumenical dialogue so that it may bear fruit for the unity of the Church and the benefit of humankind.

Thank you.