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RECONCILIATION: THE MAJOR CONFLICT IN POST-MODERNITY AN ORTHODOX CONTRIBUTION TO A MISSIOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

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Diseases such as AIDS today, or leprosy in earlier times, push those suffering from them to the margins of society - or keep them within society, provided there is some guarantee that everyone else will be safe. These diseases are of such nightmarish proportions that this social logic seems well-founded. So of course it sounds like sheer absurdity when we hear the witness of the monasticism of the Egyptian desert (ca. 5th c.). Abba Agathon, we are told, was aflame with such love that he wanted to find a leper and exchange his own body for that of the leper!¹

What sort of perspective, we may ask, can give rise to an attitude such as this? What understanding does it indicate of “oneself” and the “other”, of “disruption” and “co-existence”?

We are living in the midst of a state of world-wide flux described by the ambiguous² term “post-modernity”. On the international stage, it seems that we have the intersection of two antithetical tendencies. On the one hand, certain specific forces of Globalization (such as technology and economics) reinforce monoculture and tend towards turning the world into a homogeneous “global village”.³ On the

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¹ “Sayings of the Desert Fathers”, Agathon, 26, *Patrologia Graeca* 65, 116C; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The alphabetical collection* (Benedicta Ward, tr.), Mowbrays, London 1975, p. 20.

² It is disputed whether the term “post-modernity” indicates a truly new period in history following the demise of modernity and the Enlightenment, or simply the most recent stage of modernity. See Charles Van Engen, “Mission Theology in the Light of Post-Modern Critique”, *International Review of Mission* 343 (1997), pp. 437-461 and Petros Vassiliadis, “The Universal Claims of Orthodoxy and the Particularity of Witness in a Pluralist World”, in: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World. An Ecumenical Conversation* (Emmanuel Clapsis, ed.), WCC Publications / Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Geneva / Brookline 2004, p. 195.

³ Cf. Marshall McLuhan – Bruce P. Powers, *The Global Village. Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*, Oxford University Press 1992. On the “compression of time and space” see David Harvey, *The Condition of*

other hand, however, we see the rise of the conviction that in reality, not only is there not *one* world, but every single local human context forms a water-tight and self-contained world, with its own “truth” which is valid for itself alone;⁴ holistic interpretations of the cosmos (the so-called grand narratives) are rejected as being without foundation⁵.

There are of course a variety of views on these questions; we have mentioned these two extreme views by way of example so as to be able to paint in bold strokes the spectrum within which the Christian faith is called to bear witness. Post-modernity brings to the fore a fundamental truth that has been ridden roughshod over by aggressive missionising and cultural expansionism. This is the truth that human life is not a historical and abstract, but concrete and many-sided. But post-modernity also presents a challenge to Christian theology: to the degree that the various contexts are understood as entirely self-contained, the belief is that their meaning comes from within themselves, from their own constituent elements.

If, however, genuine reality actually does consist of enclosed, self-sufficient clusters, how then is modern man to evaluate realities such as conflict and reconciliation? Is it justified, for example, to accept reconciliation as a *holistic* vision, and correspondingly to condemn hatred as a *holistic* nightmare; or are we obliged to accept both as equally legitimate, as elements of particular clusters which cannot be subject to a holistic critique? To put it another way: can there be a perspective that will not sacrifice the unity of humanity, but will not stifle its discrete particularities in imperialistic fashion either? To be still more concrete: is it possible to give a firm answer to the question of what constitutes “disruption” and “reconciliation”, what is a “wound” and what is “healing”, if that answer is not based on a firm doctrine of the world and the human being?

Existence as a call to reconciliation

In contrast with the beliefs that the world derives meaning from itself or from some divine element that forms a constituent part of it, the Christian faith introduces a radically new perspective, a perspective based on the logic of relationship between genuinely *distinctive* subjects. The world, by its very nature, is subject to decay and death. If by any chance it does exist spontaneously, then it will never get beyond that fate. If, however, God is indeed wholly Other, and if he is indeed as Trinitarian theology claims (in other words, if he really is endless love and unbroken communion), then the world has the monumental possibility of coming to participate in God’s life⁶ - in a new mode of existence, a mode of existence that cannot be provided by any of its own constituent parts.

Postmodernity, Blackwell, Oxford 1989, p. 240 and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1990, p. 14.

4 A presentation of the gradations of the post-modern position and a theological dialogue with them is attempted by Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 7-11.

5 See, for example, Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, London 1992 and Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis”, in: *Converging on Culture. Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Delwin Brown et al., eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 5.

6 The possibility for such participation is a structural datum in human nature. See Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ; Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1987; Elizabeth Theokritoff, “Embodied Word and New Creation: Some Modern Orthodox Insights Concerning the Material World”, in: *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West* (John Behr, Andrew Louth and Dimitri Conomos, eds.), St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1985, pp. 221-238.

This means that sin consists in man affirming his autonomy, enclosing himself in his own essence and, ultimately, in death. Thus death is interwoven with individualism, while life is paired with relationship. The hope of the entire cosmos is based on the *otherness* of God vis-à-vis the world, and salvation is understood as *communion*.

This brings us to a point on which the Eastern Fathers insist, and which has always seemed a paradox to Western thought, at least until modern times.⁷ I am referring to the theology that approaches the mystery of the Holy Trinity by giving priority to the persons rather than the essence. To speak of “priority” here does not, of course, mean that the one is temporally prior to the other. It means that the hypostasis is not defined individually, on the basis of the properties of its essence; it is defined on the basis of the fact that it exists in communion with the other hypostases. In this perspective, I have authentic existence when otherness is not something parallel or opposite to my own identity, but *an element of my identity*. Truth and communion coincide⁸

Here, then, is the meaning of conversion to the Trinitarian mode of existence as revealed by the Trinitarian God. Both this conversion and the invitation to it are something totally different from proselytism or from any “colonization of mind”.⁹ Nor is it a decision that gives one the illusion of having assured salvation. Rather, it is a journey which constantly needs to be reaffirmed, and which never achieves finality within history. We might rather speak of an asceticism of conversion. Our desire to denounce proselytism with all its negative features (aggressive recruitment, narrowly individualistic piety, cultural alienation etc.¹⁰) is altogether legitimate; but if in the process we also denounce conversion, we will be doing an injustice to the Gospel message and impoverishing man. What makes us human is our capacity to question whatever appears as given and self-evident and, consequently, to judge what is meaningful to life, what promotes life and what distorts it. If man is not open to striving after this quest, he degenerates into a mere product of biological, cultural and ethnic randomness. Unless it is accepted as part of our anthropology that the orientation of the human being in all its dimensions (personal, cultural, political etc.) *can* change, repentance and reconciliation make no sense.

Division between human beings is a wound, a trauma. But we can contribute to the healing of division only by experiencing it truly as a trauma, not by closing our eyes to it. It is obvious that imperialism is contemptuous of otherness, since its aim is to impose its own “truth” on others. There is also, however, another attitude that is in reality contemptuous of otherness - one that is supposedly the absolute antithesis of imperialism. This is the belief that all truth claims, all faiths, all traditions and all cultures are basically saying the same thing. This tendency is not imperialistic; it is however paternalistic, and it is likewise a

7 Cf. Willie J. Jennings, “Person (Person and Individualism)”, in: *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Nicholas Lossky et al., eds), WCC Publications, Geneva 2002², pp. 907-908; John Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, “Communion and Otherness”, *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38.4 (1994), pp. 347-361.

8 See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1985, pp. 101-105, 134. Cf. the remarks of Anastasios, archbishop of Tirana, in the plenary address to the San Antonio Conference WME (1989): “The simplistic anthropology that encourages a naive morality by passing our existential tragedy by does not help at all”. Anastasios of Androussa, “Thy Will be Done; Mission in Christ's Way”, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization* (James A. Scherer - Stephen B. Bevans, eds.), Orbis Books, vol. 2, Maryknoll, New York 1994, p. 33.

9 The phrase is taken from Brian Stanley's interesting article “Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of Mind?”, *International Review of Mission* 366 (2003), pp. 315-331.

10 On this question, see for example Petros Vassiliadis, “Mission and proselytism. An Orthodox Understanding”, *International Review of Mission* 337 (1996), pp. 257-175; issue on: “Religious Freedom and Proselytism”, *The Ecumenical Review* 50 (1998); issue on: “Christian Conversion and mission”, *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 28 (2004).

problem because although it does not attack othernesses directly, in reality it bypasses them because it does not acknowledge that they have real content. It does not recognize any true difference; difference is illusory. For this reason, it does not dare to attempt the sort of encounter with others that might be critical, but would provide genuine opportunities for the enrichment of those who partake in it together. The Holy Spirit is connected with communion (2 Cor. 13:13). Do we not fall into a contradiction, however, if we appeal to this truth in theological perspectives that in reality wrench the Holy Spirit out of communion? This can happen whenever Pneumatology, Christology, Ecclesiology and Trinitarian doctrine are divorced from one another¹¹, and the Spirit is presented as all-embracing, presumably encompassing even views that deify individualism or legitimize the sovereignty of death! Thus one of the most generous gestures towards reconciliation may be the humble willingness to engage in dialogue and the pain of brotherly debate.

Conversion to the Kingdom

On the basis of what we said earlier, reconciliation has existential and cosmic dimensions. It is not first and foremost a matter of going back (as the prefix re- might suggest) but of going forward. In other words, it is not a matter of human beings returning to some lost paradise, but rather of the entire universe attaining to that future for which it was created, but which has yet to become a reality. Here I am referring, of course, to the eschatological Kingdom of God. Whereas in general the future is regarded as an effect of the past, for the Church the cause of the past (and of the present) is precisely the future. The Incarnation of the Son did not take place as a result of the (past) Fall of our forefathers, but for the sake of the (future) transformation of creation into the Kingdom. It is of especial importance that the Kingdom should be understood as something meta-historical - as a reality that is not to be identified with a stage in history. What I am talking about is neither a withdrawal to an individualistic model of mission, nor an esoteric eschatology, nor indeed a flight from the vision of justice and peace on earth. I am talking about what that pioneer of the ecumenical movement, the late Fr Georges Florovsky, called “inaugurated eschatology”¹². The Kingdom has already been inaugurated, but not yet fulfilled. Its fulfillment is conceived as a future, post-historical event that inspires and demands historical action and struggle on the side of the victims and the oppressed, but, at the same time, it leaves the history open to the future and to God’s unpredictable initiatives. If a certain phase in history is declared in advance to be final, inevitable and irrevocable - that is, to be the point after which history can supposedly go no further - then this opens the way to oppression or theocracy. The experience of the church and the torments of humankind can well testify to that. Remember the way in which the empires (Eastern and Western alike) saw themselves, or how the identification of the Millennium with certain social models led in many cases to the imperialistic imposition of western values, capitalism and technology¹³. For the same reasons, reconciliation needs to be

11 Cf. Zizioulas’ comments on heresy and schism; “Communion and Otherness”, op.cit., p. 356. We certainly cannot deal with these issues in detail here. Let us simply note, however, that Pneumatology is not subsequent to the Incarnation of the Son; the Incarnation is itself Pneumatologically conditioned. Besides, the Orthodox belief that God’s energies in the cosmos are *uncreated* affirms that the Holy Trinity (while being ontologically / essentially the ultimate *Other*) has always been truly and immediately present and active in the world and in history.

12 Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition* (The Collected Works, 1), Büchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz/Belmont 1987, pp. 35-36 and idem, *The Metaphysical Premises of Utopianism* (The Collected Works, 12), op. cit., 1989, pp. 75-93. See also Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, *Religion, Ideology and Science*, Alexander Press, Montreal 2004, pp. 10-19. The character of the Kingdom is of vital importance, since it is well attested that different types of eschatology have their own profound impact on missionary theory and methods. See Jürgen Moltman, *The Coming of God. Christian Eschatology*, SCM Press, London 1996, pp. 12-22; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis Books, New York 1992, pp. 498-510.

13 Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag. Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Apollos, Leicester 1992, p. 59; David J. Bosch, op.cit., pp. 319-327; Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the*

understood as a continuous and open-ended process of self-criticism and repentance on every level (personal, theological, social, economic etc.).

Transfiguration into the Church

The Orthodox Divine Liturgy begins with an invocation of both the Holy Trinity and the Kingdom at the same time: “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. History is illumined by the light of the Last Times, the eschata. Thus the eschata are imprinted upon the present in such a way as to reveal the relational mode of existence of the Trinity and the communal character of the Kingdom: that is to say, they are imprinted on the present as Church. The Church is neither an association of individuals nor a secular organization. Being the Body of Christ “she is... neither confining the Spirit of God to her institutional organization seen as a sociological unit, nor imprisoning the individual by human authority... There are no limitations to the grace of God, but, within this limitless grace, the Church represents the new action of God in Christ, through the Spirit, as an act of redeeming and of gathering all people into One fellowship”¹⁴. It is indicative that the Greek equivalent to “to forgive” is syn-chorein, which means to “come together”, to “meet the others”.¹⁵ Forgiveness is not a juridical decision, but the restoration of the communion which has been damaged by sin.

The Church is the first fruits of creation's new mode of existence, the anticipation of the Kingdom and the servant of the *Missio Dei*.¹⁶ Ecclesial existence implies what we underlined earlier - conversion to the Trinitarian mode of existence, and an orientation towards God's Kingdom. As a result, the church members betray her authentic self when they lapse into confessionism or power games, or when they slip into the arrogant conviction that they are the proprietors of grace. It is characteristic that Orthodox worship has a profound epicletic character. We see this, for example, in the celebration of the Eucharist, the event in which the vision for cosmic reconciliation is made manifest: here the church community beseeches the Holy Spirit to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ here and now. It is the new action of the Spirit that makes the Church to be Church, not simply the recollection of its action in the past¹⁷. And so, being animated by the Spirit in this way, the Church bears witness to the Resurrection in the face of death in all its forms, without falling into a dichotomy which divides spiritual life from the material side of life. Characteristic is a testimony from the work of St Gregory Palamas (14th. c.), an ascetic bishop and teacher of “deification” (which is often misunderstood as mysticism and a retreat from

Twentieth Century, Cambridge University Press 1994, pp. 75-76, 179; *Das Recht des Menschen auf Eigentum* (Johannes Schwartländer - Dietmar Willoweit, eds.), Kehl am Rhein, Strassburg 1986, p. 2.

14 Cf. N. A. Nissiotis, “An Orthodox View of Modern Trends in Evangelism”, in: *The Ecumenical World of Orthodox Civilization (Russia and Orthodoxy, v. II), Essays in honor of Georges Florovsky* (Andrew Blane, ed.), Mouton, The Hague – Paris 1973, pp. 189-190.

15 H. Liddell – R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996 rev., p. 1669.

16 On the introduction and use of this term, as well as questions connecting it with the church, see Jaques Matthey, “God's Mission Today: Summary and Conclusions”, *International Review of Mission* 367 (2003), p. 582. See also his apt remark in his “Editorial”, *International Review of Mission* 372(2005), p.6.

17 Similarly, the Church experiences Christ's resurrection as the culmination of His action in history and as the sign of the final resurrection, the first fruits of the coming transformation and liberation of the universe from decay (1 Cor. 15, Col. 1:18, Acts 26:23). Thus, the eucharistic gathering does not derive its content solely from remembrance, but also from the anticipation of the final resurrection, as implied by Paul (1 Cor. 11:26) and as explicitly proclaimed in Eastern liturgical anaphoras. See Anton Hänggi – Irmgard Pahl, *Præx Eucharistica. Textus a variis liturgiis antiquioribus selecti*, Editions Universitaires, Friburg 1968, p. 248 (cf. pp. 112, 120).

history). In order to explain the true meaning of fasting, he quotes the prophet Isaiah (58:5-10), who places especial emphasis on healing as solidarity: the kind of fasting I have chosen, says the Lord, is “to loose the chains of injustice, . . .to set the oppressed free and break every yoke. . . Then . . . your healing will quickly appear”¹⁸.

Abba Agathon's wish, to which we referred at the beginning, is nothing other than an indication of the kenotic, ecclesial mode of existence. It is a way of affirming in practice the outpouring of the Trinitarian life and the Incarnation of the Son, who took upon Himself the pain of the world with a love offered without any preconditions (religious, cultural, ideological, ethnic).

Avoiding the simplistic interpretations which see Globalization and post-modernity only as a melting-pot, or, to the contrary, only as an inevitable clash of civilizations, we are called to see the present state of affairs as an occasion for critical creativity. We should think, for example, how far the optimistic modern sociological theories about cultural hybridization¹⁹ converge in a fruitful way with those elements of the Christian experience that are able to build a culture of coexistence and social justice. The challenge here is how to become faithful listeners to the Spirit who blows wherever it pleases; how to learn to be co-workers with a transcendent God who, because he is incarnate in particular human contexts without being confined within those contexts, brings reconciliation to a shattered world and the healing of every form of leprosy.

18 Gregory Palamas, “Sermon 13”, *Patrologia Graeca* 151, 161C-165B. (Scripture taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*, International Bible Society 1984³).

19 Cf. Emmanuel Clapsis, “The Challenge of a Global World”, in: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World*, op.cit., p. 54-59.