

Orthodox Theology and Modern Challenges

The Ethical Issues

Georges N. NAHAS
University of Balamand
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The Problematical Issue

In normal circumstances, the Church is alive in the world within a tensed climate due to the fact that the Church “exists in this world without belonging to it” according to the Christ own words. In the twentieth Century, the Church was deeply challenged by many historical, political and cultural facts. The Orthodox Church experienced extensive pressures that reached persecution and massive exodus that necessitated sometimes a review of its hundred years old canonic structures. The Orthodox Church also faced more universal challenges at the philosophical and social levels when the believer started wondering about many traditional issues. These facts legitimate questions like:

- Is there any contradiction between the Orthodox Theology and Modernity?
- Is there any twinge between Tradition and Modern Thinking?
- How will the Orthodox Church deal with the new challenges mainly in ethical issues?

I will hereby try to put the problem in its context, than stress what I consider are the three Orthodox Tradition pillars that will help elaborating on the response to give to modern ethical challenges.

The Background

The Orthodox Theology

The word “Theology” from the Greek “*theologia*” refers etymologically to “*talking about God*”; this is why Orthodoxy is keen in considering that “*the*

theologian is the one who prays". But it is equally important to try to define the word in a way that counters the problematical issue of this presentation. We may propose adopting the following "dynamic" definition: *the Orthodox theology is the way the Salvation Message is reflected in Prayer for and through serving the World, using the Language that is adequate to the witness of the time and the place.*

One of the major difficulties that believers have to face in their reception of the Message of Salvation is the recurrent confusion between the Message itself (as the ultimate goal of the "*theologia*") and the messengers who deliver the Message. In its essence the Message is constant and we need to preserve its limpidity. The dynamism of the "*theologia*" resides in the dissemination of the same Message within different historical, geographic and cultural contexts, through messengers who have to be like "reporters" limited by the context of their humanity, but faithful to the Message. This is why the confusion between the Message and its messengers traps us easily and results in the following loopholes:

- It gives an absolute value to what it is not in fact, i.e. the person of the messenger;
- It takes for an integral part of the Message what may be just a temporary and/or personal understanding of its content;
- It replaces the essence by the forms making the latter an integrant part of the Message.

The Church as the community of the believers through History has to make a distinction between these two complementary (because the messengers are indispensable to have the Message delivered) but not valuably equal aspects.

Modernity, History and Thought

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that modernity is a concept that depends from three complementary components:

- The historical dimension, because what used to be Modern once, will not stay like this for ever;

- The conceptual dimension, because the ideas are received differently according to the educational, maturity and intercultural exchange levels;
- The social level that tells to what extent the scientific and philosophical changing and evolutions are accepted.

The basic issue resides in the role of the human thought within the evolution of Humanity. This is why the attempts to diabolize Modernity and/or the critical way of thinking in general are anachronistic and without any grounding in the Orthodox Theology. In fact, Modernity is independent from the Church and the latter cannot disregard it because the Modern Word forms the background of its witness. This does not mean that the Church is called to accept everything in block but it cannot also go to the other extreme and diabolize all what is related to Modernity.

Three interdependent issues are thus to be raised:

- Do we have to undermine the role of human Thought taking the Revelation as a pretext?
- Within which guidelines Theology has to be critical toward the new emerging ideas?
- Is a dialogue between the moving and evolving human Thought and Theology possible from an Orthodox point of view?

Answers to such questions may only result from a deep understanding of both: i) the specificity of Orthodox Theology and ii) the knowledge of Modernity questioning basis. Any reductive attempt could have negative consequences on the Christian witness. Consequently, what are the starting points that allow the Orthodox Theology to reveal the love of God to the World and the imminence of His presence?

Inherent Components of the Orthodox Theology

It would be simplistic to pretend that few words could tell what the main guidelines of Orthodox Theology are. But I think it is appropriate to mention

some aspects of what makes the specificity of this theology within the Christian World and drives the Orthodox Tradition visibility in the World.

Orthodox Theology and the Life in Christ

Theology in Orthodoxy is constitutively inherent to the way the persons and the community grow in Christ. The Baptism hymn is very revealing in this regard because it calls each believer to “bare the Christ”, meaning to carry Him. The Baptism thus is not calling for just a luxury add-on but for an ontological change. The role of the “*theologia*” is to help both the believers and the Church assume the fact that they are and will have to stay “*christophores*”.

Accordingly, EACH person who was baptized is potentially called to grow in Christ while assuming his life and its evolving conditions. The life in Christ loses its meaning if it is a life to which only some “elected persons” are called. This will contradict the “salvation” principle as defended by the Orthodox Tradition. Such a stand explains why the Christians (individually and as a community) cannot withdraw themselves from the World and thus cannot escape modernity; quite the opposite, this is a sphere of witness, a chance to live ones faith and a horizon to value the presence of God in the World.

The Orthodox Theology and the Community Dimension

Another fundamental aspect of the Orthodox Theology is its Community dimension. The Orthodox Theology is based on the interaction between the persons and the Community in a spirit of communion. The image that Denis the Areopagite gives of the life of the Church *gathered around* the Lamb is a basic one. The continuity of this image as lived in the Sacraments and especially in the Eucharist makes the concept of the “*Conscious of the Church*” the guaranty of the everlasting Presence of God in the World. This dynamic image creates a constant dialectic specific to Orthodoxy, and which results in the following: on one hand, individuals keep their specificity and engage the community to a better fulfillment of its responsibilities; on the other hand, the Community, through its judgment and wisdom, will still be the guaranty that its members do respect the

essence of the Faith and of the Tradition. This is why the synodal notion of “*Sobornost*” is inherent to the Orthodox Praxis.

Christians are living and witnessing today in a secularized space but are not necessarily in an adversity position. Individualism that is defended by modern philosophical theories (sometimes based on occidental theological approaches) is standing right opposite to this Orthodox vision. But the dialectical relation between the individuals and the Community gives Orthodox theologians and thinkers today the possibility to be the messengers of the Good News that the World badly needs.

Orthodox Theology and Witness

Another dimension that could be mentioned as a corollary is the witness to the Redemption inherent to the Orthodox theology. Orthodox believers cannot consider Redemption as just a historical event. This is a dogma of faith, thus of life: do not witness means do not believe, and this is the profound meaning of Faith in Orthodoxy: the believers have to link their life to their faith and be able to claim it by their doing and their discourse; the Community has also to witness through its deeds, while being the conscience of its members in their praxis.

Unfortunately, some Orthodox circles consider the Church witness as being reduced to the liturgical life. But, the life of the Church, while being deeply liturgical, is also very much inherent to its biblical and dogmatic lively dimensions. Accordingly, the life of the church must translate today, now and within the ongoing conditions of the World and Manhood, the evangelic message and the content of the faith. The Orthodox Theology is unique as to defending the Trinitarian Unity, not at the level of ideas - that will make our approach philosophical and even ideological - but at the level of the Church vision of the Incarnation immanence in the life of the Community and of its members. The Church is called to live this integrity so that its visible life as the Body of Christ reveals the power inherent to the presence of the Holy Spirit in its midst and through Whom it recognizes the Father as being the Source of whatever is good in the World.

To conclude this point I will say: (1) the Church is responsible for the World, and this responsibility is a divine duty; the Church as “community of believers” cannot but translate this responsibility in its life and that of its members. (2) The Orthodox Church owns in its theology the necessary bases to be a valuable counterpart of Modernity. Re-discovering this specificity inherent to its nature is an urgent duty because the World needs this message of Hope held by our Church. (3) The Church as “enunciator” must go TO the World in order to deliver this message of life. It is big time for the Orthodox Church to adopt a policy of opening that would not be just “reactive” but will proactively get involved in finding the adequate solutions that will preserve the good of Humanity according to the requirements of Salvation.

Common Denominators of Modern Issues

Since the Age of Enlightenment and the famous “*I think therefore I exist*” of Descartes, an excessive individualism was set up in the modern thinking, quite close to the development of the Protestant theological approach that comes as a reaction to one developed by the Latin theology since the Middle Age. Moreover, even the “*magister dixit*” of the Latin theology is at stake especially after the French Revolution which proclaimed in the Human Rights a new register of “commandments”. In parallel to these developments in the Western World, the Church in Orient, who had to live under pressure for different reasons, was not able, and so through centuries, to reveal its specificity and to make people aware of the existence of a different Christian theological stand. This explains why many philosophical currents that appeared along the twentieth century only refer to the Christian theological thought of the Western spheres on social, political and ecclesial levels.

On the other hand, the secularized world witnessed important changes, and many macro phenomenons can be mentioned that created new social paradigms at the beginning of the new century:

1. Indeed, the beginning of the twentieth century was very fertile regarding the ideas that influenced the development of Social Sciences in relation with the Human Sciences and Fine Arts. The ideas that started arising at the beginning of the nineteenth century had with time a tremendous impact on the political, social and familial relations, and changed drastically the vision that the World adopted for centuries regarding the relations that paved the societal structure.
2. Besides, the development of exact and applied sciences, since the middle of the twentieth century, resulted in reviewing many ethical basics. For example:
 - a. Questions related to Life are not anymore approached according to the religious moral axioms, but this is done on the basis of the Human Rights concepts, and an individualistic understanding of the human being.
 - b. The problems related to poverty in the world are not anymore discussed based on the standards of equity but through the consuming society interests ruled by the absolute dimension of the *economic right*.
 - c. A theory of power is ruling the world by claiming indirectly the right of the most powerful to set up his norms on the expense of others habits and customs by forcing people to adopt his definition of the social welfare.
3. Meanwhile, this period of development of sciences was a period where *communication* between the modernizing World and the Churches was quite missing. Both the secularized World and the Churches were not able to develop a forum of communication which could have allowed deepening the ideas in order to find focal points to accept criticism and prepare a common future perspective from the acquired experiences. With time the gap increased and a real antagonism seems to take place.
4. Finally, the end of the last century witnessed the emerging extensive use of the Computer and the multimedia as new means of communication. Human being was hence granted a planetary stature

that in a way goes far beyond the inherited notions of time and space. This technological revolution does not confine to the introduction of technical gadgets; the World entered a phase of potential positive transparency but with the possibility of falsifying any objective given data and sending very quick wrong messages to the whole world. With all these changes, the Churches find themselves confronted to new facts regarding the way they have to dialogue with a new world.

The Churches' discourse (especially that of the Orthodox Church) did not evolve accordingly. When it did, it was as a reaction to – and not in harmony with - the evolution of the modern world. This is why all the current problematic issues of Modernism have the following conceptual elements in common:

- The philosophical confusion between *person* and *individual*, takes the individual as an end in himself regardless of his environment, the community to which he belongs, and the changes in the world. But the Orthodox approach would rather see in the man or woman a “person”, i.e. an *individual in communication*.
- Precedence is given to all that is *quantifiable* (visible and measurable) over what is *qualitative* (related to the nature of things and their value). Without underestimating the importance of what is quantifiable, the Christian approach - especially the Orthodox one – considers that the human person cannot be reduced to his physical components, and that the integrity of his complementary components is the guarantee of his evolution and the fulfillment of his potentials.
- The Occident gives merely a relative importance to the religious discourse and always confines it to what is strictly inherent to religion. In parallel, what was called “*the return of the sacred*”, is not necessarily oriented towards this internal integration of the person so dear to the Orthodox theology, but often adopts esoteric or pietistic forms as a reaction to the rigidity of the religious Christian establishments throughout the centuries. This is the case of some legalistic discourses

or positions that finally lead to fundamentalism, which is the antipodes of the Orthodox approach that is based on openness and on *economia*.

Some cases to reflect on in the Orthodox milieus

Based on what was said before, it is tremendously important to adopt in the Orthodox World an approach to ethical issues that relates the decisions to take to this theological background. Such ethical issues are of three different categories that complement one the other and looking to them as an unit will give the social praxis of the Church a strong foundation.

Person & society

The juridical concept of “Law” appeared in the world since Antiquities. The Ten Commandments and the Code of Hammurabi are clear examples. But with the American and French revolutions, the concept of “rights of individuals” began to appear more clearly. In the 20th Century, a series of bills regarding the rights of groups and individuals were published. Despite the importance of these texts, we cannot but mention the priority given to the *rights* over the concepts of *duty and responsibility*. Moreover, the French motto *Liberty-Equality-Fraternity* has its inherent problematic issue that makes it fragile at the societal level. Here are some questions as examples: (1) which liberty the individual has at the societal level and how is this liberty linked to the concept of responsibility? (2) Which equality is to be preached in a world where multicultural societies exist without an intrinsic harmony? (3) Which fraternity exists in a world divided by poverty, struggle among social classes, and the absence of human criteria of responsibility? These kinds of questions are rarely raised in a world driven by political interests, and governed mainly by economic interests. We encounter a two faced problem:

- On one hand, the individual who considers that his identity is asserted “in opposition” to the other; this is why he insists on his rights and minimizes the importance of his responsibilities

- On the other hand, society that is adopting an individualistic stand toward itself vis-à-vis the other societies, and a normative view vis-à-vis its members. This explains its external and internal antagonisms.

The Orthodox theology defends the concept of the person in a unique anthropologic approach that is unfortunately quite unknown and less lived. This is why the impact of the Orthodox approach on the modern problematic issues is quite absent. Still, this Orthodox specificity proposes de facto a substitute motto based on the principle of Incarnation. This does not go against the content of the motto of the French Revolution, but suggests complementary action principles: (1) Liberty is not valuable outside the Responsibility which creates its limits (2) Equality is not valuable outside the Love which accepts this equality and makes it effective in life (3) Fraternity is not valuable outside the Service which materializes it on a daily basis. From an Orthodox point of view, persons and societies are called to give this same importance to two mottos: [*Liberty-Equality-Fraternity*] and [*Responsibility-Love-Service*]. If the Church adopts the latter trio for her, and makes it a plan of life as a corollary of its faith in Incarnation, its discourse will become more coherent and close to what the modern world expects.

While this relation between the Person and the Society may be looked upon as being a strictly social one, it is in fact an ethical issue because it relates to the equilibrium we have to establish between the Liberty of the Person and the welfare of the Society. As an example, let us to look at the value of the Tolerance in a social context. Is the tolerance always ethical or it can become none ethical when it asks to accept what is against established principles: can we tolerate bigamy par exemple in a Christian environment? Such questions may be solved only if the relation between the Person and the Society is cleared defined.

Ethics and morals

Another fundamental problem that is barely revealed in the modern and religious thoughts is the issue of Ethics in relation to the social norms and values

and their influence on the life of persons. This problem leads to many questions for example: Is Ethics a synonym to Morality? Do norms replace values? Is there any absolute to defend in the discourse on Ethics? What is the relation between Ethics and Tolerance? Is there a unique referential which can be considered as a base for a social debate on the problem?

In the name of liberty of individuals, Modernism favors the relativity of the ethical approach. The social aspect is valorized in order to create a judicial framework rather than launching an answering process. Accordingly, some concepts are revealed more than others, or at the detriment of others without any obvious valid reason. Many cases related to modern thought cannot be discussed outside this opposition among a multiplicity of currents belonging to different registers. For example:

- The opposition between what is *just* and what is *legal* leads to an opposition between Ethics and Morals
- The concept of Democracy vis-à-vis the concept of *Rightness* (what is good and correct)
- The concept of Property when facing the concept of Poverty in general and the *poverty* in God
- The concept of wellbeing when facing the concept of common Good.

The problem strictly resides in the fact that Ethics became a synonym of the prevailing Morals due to the individualism of the thought and because the social norms are replaced by the values due to the prevailing materialism. Ethics is rather a more global concept and especially richer from human and religious point of views.

Schematically, the religious thought in the Occident has two very antagonist stands, the Latin theology and the Protestant one. But the Orthodox theology clearly opts for a flexibility based approach vis-à-vis the existing situations and considerations, and fights for the specificity of the person and communities within concise guidelines. Does this position indicate a weakness in the Orthodox theology? Yes and no.

This is a weak position when this *economia* has no criteria; i.e. if the guidelines are not clear and are not reviewed according to the cultural and social changes

that might occur through the years. This gives the impression (as is happening today) that the Orthodox Church has nothing to say to the world today and has not developed a dialogue process with modernism, and that it is just a pietistic Church where the praxis is in contradiction with its teaching on Incarnation.

But at the same time, it is a strong position if two complementary conditions are taken into consideration: from one side, it requires that the Orthodox Church develop a permanent reflection process of the ethical problems regarding the world today; on the other side, it requires developing a framework for practices that reveal the reality of how the Church is following up the interests of persons and societies. Unfortunately, the Orthodox Church couldn't find an *ecclesial* structure that allows it to merge the reflections of the local Churches, the experiences of the believers as well as the scientific and social data of modernism's champions. The Orthodox theology carries in itself the potential to face positively this big challenge of Modernism, but it is not able to find the means to put this potential into action.

This fundamental aspect is to be taken into consideration because it will help us to overcome problems that are driven by social or cultural stands. All the bioethical debate today has to be approached through such a methodology in order to avoid positions dictated by not appropriate backgrounds.

Body, Flesh and Being

Another basic problem in the modern World is the discourse about the Body. We live in a time where the Body is considered as a *thing*. The relation to the Body is underestimated and this is being accepted as a normal situation. I think that this is a direct result of the vision that the modern world has towards Mankind in general and the individual in particular. Accordingly, when the modern world speaks about the corporal aspect of the human being, it does so: i) using the prevailing morals dictated by the norms developed in the society, and that are very much influenced by the existing social changes, ii) or it does it using the *fallback ethics attitudes* of the society resulting from

the accumulated social experiences acquired through the years, iii) or it does it using some scientific data in order to eliminate any biological or physiological misuse.

The Christian approach is at the opposite end of that of the modern world, because it refuses to consider the Body as a *thing*, or to underestimate the relation to it. The Christian approach insists on respecting the body and its potential expressions as an integral part of the human specificity. And because it refuses any deviation in the name of Science; therefore Christian ethics is involved in the worldwide reflection on Bioethics. The Orthodox discourse is not clear enough and is not adapted to a dialogue with the world of today. Yet the Orthodox Theology is able to deliver an innovating discourse through presenting its anthropological view that defends the unity of the human being: i) recapitulating the difference between Body and Flesh, ii) allying its ethical approach to its conception of the human person called to *being*, iii) supporting the social dimension without becoming its slave, iv) and finally through considering life in community as a sine qua none condition of the pedagogy of the Church.

In fact, and till now, we have not reviewed our ambiguous discourse on the Body in which we create confusion between *Flesh* and *Body* (which has to be considered as the Temple of the Holy Spirit, according to the Apostle Paul teaching). On the other hand, our parish pedagogical system is still poor in resources, and has not developed any outstanding and avant-garde guiding lines. Finally, we are not making from Ethics a Pan-Orthodox issue in our theological reflection.

Conclusion

To summarize I will say in conclusion that:

- a. Orthodox Theology is potentially able to have a dialogue with Modernism. It has a specificity that allows it to have an innovating discourse while keeping its conformity with Tradition. But this potential has to be developed and put into action as a common effort of the Orthodox Church, United and Catholic.
- b. The Orthodox Church has to create forums of discussion among pastors, scientists, men and women of goodwill, young generation, as well as sociologists and pedagogues, in order to elaborate a continuous process for

future actions. Forums like these are luckily an opportunity to discover and introduce a common discourse oriented toward the future, and heavily based on past experiences. These forums will also be an opportunity for the Church to proclaim its testimony to the youth exposed to all kinds of antagonistic messages.

- c. Faith, Holy Scriptures and Living Tradition govern the life of the Orthodox Church. In the name of openness through which our Theology was able to harmonize these different components in its message, we are called upon today to engage in a dialogue with Modernity.