

# Orthodoxy and Reflective Thinking: a Steep but Feasible Theological Venture

By Charalambos Ventis\*

I would like to begin my paper with a preliminary clarification: as an Orthodox theologian, I have always had as my compass certain prerequisites: one of them is that theology is not a luxury for faith but one of its vital lungs, in the absence of which faith atrophies and slides into becoming its fundamentalist caricature. It is, of course, an ecclesial theology, not merely academic in the sterile and dehydrated sense of the word; a theology that partakes of the Blessed Sacrament, unceasingly nourished by it. Yet, because today theology is being displaced to an extremely dangerous –if not already disastrous– degree due to an extreme spike of “experience” and devotion, sometimes even at the expense of truth, one feels the need to defend theology anew and robustly, just as we are now obliged, perhaps for the first time since the end of the Second World War, to defend reason in the face of an almost universal conspiratorial challenge to it. A second prerequisite, by which I operate as a theologian, is that the purpose of theology is not to “regurgitate”, to mechanistically reproduce biblical and patristic passages, out of their wider context, without interpreting and connecting them with our contemporary needs. In its way, the phobic renunciation of the laborious and inspired doctrinal interpretation also contributes to our spiritual death, to the extent that it subordinates human thought to automatisms akin to the suffocating heteronomy of extreme Protestant sects and Islam. It also promotes the naturalization of the truth about God, since

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the work of aphoristically quoting “odd refrains” is nowadays carried out most efficiently not only from encyclopedias but also the internet search engines together with the “sophisticated” ChatGPT systems. In addition to the above, I believe that the purpose of theology is not to embellish the various social ills that afflict the church, but to point them out as toxic weeds that are “priestly” parasitizing in the flesh of church life and to denounce them as the spiritual spawn of the Pharisees.

Nowadays, in the aftermath of a remarkable theological production of decades which, to be honest, has gone unnoticed not only by Greek society but also by the Church itself, we must remind ourselves once again that theology, when it is truly Christian and inspired by the Holy Spirit, always functions prophetically: it reads the signs of the times in the Eschatological light (where the full truth about creation and man lies) and opens up new paths, bearing in mind that the living God is always ahead of human thought and our preconceptions -religious ones non-excluded. Unlike idols, which are always static and are heteronomically locking us into a dead past, God invites us to follow Him, as Abraham and then the Hebrews did in Egypt: into an unknown, unpredictable, and undefined future, sometimes provocatively disregarding our endurance and tolerance.

Theology’s respect for Tradition is indeed imperative, but under the strict condition, however, that Tradition is not understood as a terminal point, i.e. as a static and integrated body, as something that is now offered for passive consumption and nothing more. Under the prism of this eschatological hermeneutic, our Tradition is a statutorily incomplete project, open to its continuous enrichment by the renewing ear of the Paraclete, who subtly introduces Eschatology into History and gradually opens up new possibilities, in response to new problems unknown in the past. Yet, this also means that Christian theology intends to be open to the unexpected and the unanticipated, to unforeseen knowledge and discoveries that suddenly (and therefore painfully) invade the horizon of our existence and force us to see anew our erroneous beliefs about the world and man. In short, the openness to subversions –sometimes radical ones– of the established hierarchies and the various “self-evident” truths promised by the Gospel (according to “Thou shalt be the first

and the first to be the first”: «Οὕτως ἔσονται οἱ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι καὶ οἱ πρῶτοι ἔσχατοι»<sup>1)</sup>), means that theology can and should be receptive to reflection; it must have the courage and honesty to demolish the various idols, which, as an extension of the Pharisaic understanding of the Sabbath holiday, insist on unhindered promotion of inhumanity in the name of faith, even though they have been proven wrong over time by the experience and new knowledge about the universe and man that we have long since acquired.

Is there really a room for reflection in the Orthodox Christian faith? The question usually receives a reflexive negative answer, for the following, predictable, reasons: Reflections regarding the faith hide dangers, in the sense that they potentially open a giant can of violent worms, introducing newfangled –and dangerous– ideas smacking of “Protestantism”. In reality, Protestant, even unrecognizably internalized, is the over-simplistic –therefore highly saleable– obsession with absolute stagnation and lust for the past, which thrives in certain ecclesiastical circles, canceling from the outset any serious theological reflection on the big challenges that human beings are nowadays facing-challenges which cannot be solved by resorting to the sweet warmth of the traditional piety, the pretentious and futile “solution” promoted as a psychological painkiller to our painful contemporary impasses, which are not at all imaginary and which push for courageous transgressions beyond the preconceived answers.

At the risk of being unpleasant, I will say that for some decades now, reflection has been systematically, even increasingly, devalued by a wide range of zealots ignorant of theology, for whom Orthodoxy is only a solemn experience, while complex thinking is nothing more than the futile work of idle “culturalists”. The problem, of course, is not the “experience” per se, but the overblown one, which, together with the pursuit of devotion and the imposing, atmospheric decorum, pushes aside contemplation –in fact, theology itself–, as an unnecessary garrulity. The supporters of this populist, anti-intellectualist caricature of the Orthodox faith share a set of complementary novelties (at the very moment when they themselves, as they loudly proclaim, oppose novelties!): the focus on the letter rather

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1. *Matth.* 20, 16.

than the spirit of the patristic texts and the “fetishization” of patristic literature by copying the Protestants’ attribution of complete autonomy to the Bible. This mentality, completely alien to the Orthodox Tradition, is complemented by the certainty –easily digestible but theologically unjustified– that only the saints (as “bearers of presumptive God’s beholders”) are entitled to speak about the things of faith, acting as God’s infallible “mouthpieces” – one wonders, of course, who consider themselves to be saints by default, so as to take the initiative to speak and write on behalf of Orthodoxy. Indeed, as it is usually pointed out with great ease as a disarming obstacle to every spiritual concern, what new could possibly be added to what the divine fathers have already said? In order to respond briefly to this massive boulder that has been strangling ecclesiastical life and theology for years, we will make the following brief remarks, which are, of course, open to refutation:

1. The re-thinking which we are attempting to defend theologically never concerns the purely theological doctrines, i.e. those referring to Christology and Trinitarianism, the theology of sacred images and Gregory Palamas’s distinction between substance and energies (which summarizes and completes the patristic Tradition regarding God’s transcendence and the realistic possibility of our participation in God’s life – the human communion in the uncreated divine energies). We do not touch these doctrines; we can delve into them over time and work out their existential implications for human beings of all the ages, but without engaging in the slightest revisionism. Nevertheless, this sort of reflection is theologically legitimate, feasible and desirable in the realm of cosmology and anthropology: There, not only can we, but must we evolve and reflect, because the degree of our willingness to listen to and integrate the scientific milestones of Copernicus and Darwin, among many other related discoveries, shows to what extend our witness is credible and serious. For some time now we have been called upon to indoctrinate a world in which children in the first grades of high school are already well informed about fundamental scientific achievements, having grown up in an environment of accumulated knowledge unimaginable in the age of the great patristic compositions.

That being said, young people nowadays ask very difficult and hard questions to theologians and catechists and they do not compromise, as most educated adults do, even believers, with preconceived answers that come out of a long ago “expired can”. Readiness for reflection lends accountability to faith, alertness and readiness for self-criticism – alas for a faith that is indifferent to self-criticism, since, in the long run, its irresponsibility and toxicity are a given.

2. The attribution of completeness, staticity and finality to the Orthodox Tradition is a serious fallacy; as we have already mentioned, it is held in check by the Church’s eschatological identity. Our strictly eschatological orientation, combined with apophaticism, presupposes the radical asymmetry between the acquired knowledge of the ecclesiastical body during its historical course and the complete truth about man and creation – a truth that is destined to be revealed in the Last Days. What we know today about our being and that of the universe is to a large extent still pending and subject to possible correction: it is like a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces still missing. Some of them will be completed in time, others at the end of History, when the final curtain falls. Then, and only then, can the ship of Church drop the anchor of knowledge, not while still moving in the High Seas, as it unfortunately likes to do sometimes, by arbitrarily deifying supposedly insurmountable socio-political structures, achievements and attitudes of the past – a past which is thus elevated to an idol that competes with and cancels the Last Days’ plenitude.

3. The simplistic formulas and the various pious pretexts, with which we have been avoiding for years a sincere and honest encounter with the world, do nothing but lead to intellectual atrophy and feed fundamentalism, which, apart from being toxic, can also be lethal. Orthodoxy, in partial if not complete contrast to the other two major monotheistic religions, is primarily neither an entirely practical discourse, as in Islam’s case, nor a stitching together of historical narratives, as in Judaism’s case. Although it combines both of these two elements, it also possesses (contrary to them) a rich, astonishing and wisely structured

metaphysics, the depth and breadth of which invite us not only to prayer but also to elaborate, self-critical reflection. The problem is that this intellectual property with its huge range, which we Orthodox are called upon not only to manage but also to augment, requires an equally colossal mastery in its appreciation and utilization – an endeavor that, without bold original thought and responsible risk-taking ends up to be stillborn.

Nevertheless, timidity, combined with the humanly understandable but in this case pernicious longing for certainty and security, has long ago instilled in the Orthodox flock the psychological reflexes of the slave found in the well-known Sunday parable from *Matthew* 25, 18: the worker who, lessened by a sense of laziness and self-sufficiency, buried his master's talent in the earth in order to save it from the insecurity of being exposed to the market (in our case, the “stock exchange” of ideas and the public confrontation of our certainties with the relentless barrage of unexpected scientific discoveries). In confronting the difficult and the controversial issues, we have therefore piously –on paper– preferred the practice of the ostrich, wearing as our armor the ideologized Orthodoxy. How did we manage to do this? By denying, in principle, the historicity and evolution of both Scripture and doctrine, that is, by collectively neglecting the human mediation in their formation. This tactic has resulted in the transformation of dogma and Tradition into a museum exhibit, unfit for the elucidation of the human existence's unknown aspects and our existential needs<sup>2</sup>.

Milan Kundera once wrote that a novel that does not reveal unknown aspects of life and man is an immoral novel. Our testimony is in danger of slipping into this very level of self-referential indulgence. Instead of functioning as a magnifying glass that sharpens the vision or becoming an open window to the world, the Orthodox word has become a mirror. What is worse, our witness has hopelessly lost its referentiality to its Founder –who properly hierarchized man and the Sabbath– and has become detached from the human adventure. He was reduced to the

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2. The serious reader of our paper most certainly realizes that, by highlighting the human contribution to their formation, we do not question the Bible's or our doctrine's divine inspiration.

standards of a human type theologically uneducated and vulnerable to populism, someone who is both unwilling and unable to think beyond the obvious, a character who rests in listening to chewed-up and harmless platitudes, to receive the reassurance that his ancestral sanctuary has no loose ends and to go to sleep in peace, preferably with the Greek flag on his head. Any hint or suspicion of a bubble, a crack or an evolution in his artificially rounded religious ideology causes unbearable psychological turmoil. It has been rightly said that man may well live without God, but never without idols. By its very nature, however, Orthodoxy is neither narcissistic nor allows to be instrumentalized as a cane of ethno-racial and psychological overcompensation, unlike its popular replica, which has been lurking in its flesh for many years now.

Orthodoxy's diminution into becoming an ethno-racial caricature and provider of simplistic, soothing truths could be called "Orthodoxism". It is worth focusing more deeply on the specifications and purposes of this particular ideology<sup>3</sup>. "Orthodoxists'" most endearing aspect is the apotheosis of religious formulas at the expense of substance and, above all, the obsessive demand for a simplistic dependence on the sources of Orthodoxy, where it is clearly demonstrated that the Orthodox faith is, apart from a dizzying risk, a multi-layered and extremely complex narrative, which is not molded and afraid of a calculated opening to the unknown, the new and the different.

The second tendency concerns the attribution of finality and self-sufficiency in the patristic literature, in the way that Protestants attribute them to the Bible. Just as the latter consider Bible as representing the absolute summit of afflatus and authentic Christian thought, so do the "orthodoxists" consider that Gregory Palamas's theology has closed once and for all the barrel of enlightened theological thought. Thus, Christian worldview and Church's development came to a closure; consequently,

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3. We hope you will forgive us for quoting a relevant passage from this point onwards, taken from our study: *Φιλελεύθερη Δημοκρατία καὶ χριστιανικὴ πίστη: Προτάσεις γιὰ τὴ χειραρχέτηση τῆς Ὁρθοδοξίας ἀπὸ τὴ νέα «βαβυλώνια» αἰχμαλωσίᾳ τῆς*, (= *Liberal Democracy and Christian Faith: proposals for the emancipation of Orthodoxy from its new "Babylonian" captivity*), Harmos Publications, Athens 2023, pp. 190-195 (which is absent from our oral presentation, as it was delivered at the Conference).

the agonizing contact of theological discourse with novel questions and the prophetic detection of signs of our own times, which do not appear in previous eras, ceases to exist.

The widespread view of the Fathers as quasi “supernatural beings” and direct channels of the divine will, endowed *ex proemio* with infallible judgment plays an important role for the creation of this huge misunderstanding.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, we hasten to note that we do not deny their divine inspiration; it would nevertheless be just as wrong to consider their writings as directly dictated by the Holy Spirit, as it would be to accept that the Bible fell into our hands from Heavens, devoid of human mediation and historicity. It is worth noting that the Church Fathers never claimed the “Vatican” [infallible] pedestal on which, out of pure negligence, we retrospectively placed them. Let us pay attention to Gregory of Nyssa’s confessional discourse: «Πῶς οὖν ὁ ἀνθρώπος τὸ θηγτὸν τοῦτο καὶ ἐμπαθὲς καὶ ὡκύμορον, τῆς ἀκηράτου καὶ καθαρᾶς καὶ ἀεὶ οὖσης φύσεώς ἔστιν εἰκών; Ἀλλὰ τὸν μὲν ἀληθῆ περὶ τούτου λόγον μόνη ἀν εἰδείη σαφῶς ἡ ὄντως Ἀλήθεια. Ἡμεῖς δὲ καθ’ ὅσον χωροῦμεν, στοχασμοῖς τισι καὶ ὑπονοίαις τὸ ἀληθὲς ἀνιχνεύοντες, ταῦτα περὶ τῶν ζητουμένων ὑπολαμβάνομεν»<sup>4</sup>.

Following in the footsteps of the first Protestants, our “orthodoxists” fetishize the patristic literature by misinterpreting both its nature and its mission. They dwell exclusively on the letter of the patristic texts, and only on the surface, completely and defiantly ignoring their deep and real spirit, disregarding the many points on which the Fathers differ from each other. At the same time, they baptize as infallible elders a brood of self-appointed monks who have taken on the role of guru/mentors, emphasizing the kitschy religious folklore, which unfortunately proves to be quite saleable, without saying anything at all that would make people understand and honestly discuss the difficult challenges facing the world today. The irony of the whole situation is that the heretics were predominantly the conservatives of the patristic era. They

4. Gregory of Nyssa, *Περὶ κατασκευῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* [=On the Making of Man], chap. 16, PG 44, 108C.

accused the Fathers of being insufferable modernists, vituperating them of introducing devilish innovations into the faith, and complaining that the Fathers did not rest on the certainty of the Bible, which supposedly had already said everything *ab initio*, but insisted on digging into things in a manner most suspicious. A reading of the book of *Acts* disproves the infallibility not only of the saints but even the biblical figures of the Apostles. The Apostles have certainly been God's visioners, but the conflict between Peter and Paul over a number of serious spiritual issues (i.e., not doctrinal ones), even after the Holy Spirit's descent on the day of Pentecost, demonstrates that one of the two was wrong – fortunately enough, the “line” that was finally established it was Paul's one; otherwise, Christianity would probably be today an indifferent Jewish sect, without even a trace of ecumenicity. Orthodoxy did not grow or shine as an experience and devotion, which it clearly contains, but became mighty primarily as thought and reflection. With these very weapons the march of heresies was arrested. Theology naturally contains spirituality, but the opposite is not necessarily true. spirituality may well be totally alien and inimical to theology, even to Christ. Christ did not say that He is our religious piety, but that He is truth and life (concepts that are identical in Christ's person)<sup>5</sup>. If we want to be entirely honest, we should stress that the Lord did not hesitate, when he deemed it necessary, to mercilessly decry religious piety, as the fruit of the Pharisees, those who crucified Christ because, according to them, he violated the holy and God-given law of the Sabbath. Therefore, if we want to be disciples of Christ and not of the Pharisees, we must follow the truth wherever it leads us, however unexpected and unpleasant it might be. Otherwise, we will be fighting futile rearguard battles and the world will be justifiably indifferent to our testimony, for the same reason that it tramples indifferently on the salt that was thrown into the street as being unpalatable.

Nowadays, great prospects and opportunities exist for the dynamic development of theology, since it has long since become clear that we cannot be complacently content with the patristic texts, in order to draw

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5. *John* 14, 6.

from them answers to contemporary questions. This realization should not discourage us. As long as the Holy Spirit is still active within history, will it not bring forth today new fathers and mothers of the Church, i.e. pioneering and profound ecclesiastical writers, capable of shedding new light on the enigma of “man”? Jesus Christ is “the same yesterday and today and forever” («*χθὲς καὶ σήμερον ὁ αὐτὸς καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας*»)<sup>6</sup>; yet, the present philosophical-scientific-cultural context is not the Byzantine one. The Orthodox Church today is called upon to bear witness to an age shaped by the epistemological milestones of Copernicus and Darwin, taking into account the problems of exobiology, the evolutionary origin of species, artificial intelligence and the spectral nature of sex – in other words, within the contemporary scientific and cultural context, the data and –consequently– the constantly arising questions are often different, sometimes radically alien to the problems of the time of the great patristic compositions, just as the questions to which the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church were called upon to answer were to a great extent different from those posed by the Bible.

One is nevertheless tempted to ask: So, why such a fuss? Why not restoring the socio-political and cultural worldview of the time of the Fathers and adapting our own needs and concerns to the mentality and perceptions of a glorious theological period? Apart from being convenient, such a move seems particularly attractive to those that feel nostalgia for an imaginary, embellished past – although it is good to remember that we know it not experientially, but through rounded descriptions of it. Be that as it may, the answer is that we are not entitled to cram contemporary problems, questions and (new) needs into the narrow confines of the metaphysical and political-social beliefs of a past worldview. As much as our memory and the psychological need for warmth and security provided by our roots and ancestral soil are dictated by the romanticized reminiscence of previous social structures, our theological criteria cannot provide any legitimization to it. According to them, our real identity (antinomically structured between the earthly cradle and the end of time) and along with it many of our perceptions

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6. *Hebrews* 13, 8.

about man and the world, will remain in a state of constant formation, sometimes subject to revision, until the arrival of the Last Days, where our real roots lie<sup>7</sup>. It is even more urgent to make it clear that the Judeo-Christian God precedes His conceptual approaches by man, i.e. the set of doctrines, ideas, morals and rules, which we jealously raise in His name.

The passive fixation on the patristic texts as terminal milestones, their fetishistic apotheosis and the general attribution of *definitive and final completeness* to the patristic period, makes us unwittingly less Orthodox and more Byzantine Christians. An explanation is needed here: Byzantine Christians were clearly Orthodox, but Orthodoxy is not limited to its Byzantine manifestation: Orthodoxy means continuous opening in space and time, without resting and pausing. As the theologian Athanasios Kottidakis, a colleague of mine, pointed out so eloquently years ago, Orthodoxy is not a video tape on Byzantium, suitable for every era. It is precisely as Orthodox, in the name of our maximalist doctrine, that we must leave room for the unexpected and the unforeseeable, for evolution and innovation, instead of discounting every aspect of reality to the letter of the biblical and patristic texts, thus strangling existence in the narrow confines of our ideological or religious preconceptions. Life is full of the unexpected and our willingness to honestly and sincerely engage with them puts at stake the health and vigor, and ultimately the credibility, of the faith we cherish.

Behind the reflexive reaction to any grounded attempt to exploiting patristic literature's spirit and not its letter, there often lurks a reckless anti-intellectualism (taking the form of the "devout experience's" adulation at the expense of contemplation), which fosters religious populism and is essentially equivalent to the *fear of theology* – i.e. the anxiety of taking on the responsibilities, the risks and the mental effort involved in the constant unfolding of the existential and social implications of the Incarnation of the Word in perpetuum. Being Orthodox, it is precisely this fear from which we are suffering today with our marginalization in the Greek and global community. Certainly, we can always be content,

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7. For a more comprehensive approach to this topic, see the late John D. Zizioulas's, Metropolitan of Pergamon, innovative (and swan song) book: *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschato-logical Ontology*, St. Sebastian Orthodox Press, Alhambra, CA 2023.

as we indeed are, with the fictitious completeness of a supposedly finished and ready-to-consume Tradition (the familiar pretext by which we have for years now been dutifully avoiding to directly encounter with the world) and redeem our ostrichism and aphasia as virtues. It is well known that the psychological and ideological conditions for such a line of travel do exist, and it seems that they exert a broad appeal even among the old vanguard of the theological field that once created a revolution, venturing impressive ruptures with the familiar dead schemes of the past.

If this is what we, as Orthodox, are really interested in, then we can feel justified; our traditionalist navel-gazing seems to have finally paid off. More and more of the heterodox converts to Orthodoxy are motivated to join not by the maximalist doctrines and sacramental life of the Eastern Church but by *the sense of static and complete immobility* that the latter emits – the real pole of attraction for them (the lure of Orthodoxy) is nothing more than a religious-type residual refuge against all social change and development, against any subversion of traditional roles and the black and white way of seeing the world, which soothes the anxiety created by the new and the unknown. In the eyes of most new converts, Orthodoxy appears as nothing more than the last (yet quite atmospheric) bulwark against liberalism and modernity; in our turn, we reproduce this distorted image with excessive zeal and generously offer it to them. Are we satisfied, though, with the popularity of such a caricature of our faith, which is, despite appearances, the *worst, most insidious form of secularism?*

Secularism is not only the reckless acceptance of novelties and capitulation to any marketable utilitarianism (the absorption of the theological into the social), as many believe, but equally the exact opposite: the quasi-Pharisaic uncritical sanctification of appearances and the particular contextual element of the Christian Tradition; it is the reduction of the human empathy and social prejudices which have at times infiltrated the ecclesiastical body to an organic part of the Christian spirit; it is also the temptation that lures many Christians to permanently settle in a supposedly insurmountable historical period, in a manner reminiscent of the reaction of the Christ's three disciples (Peter, James and John) before the Transfiguration of the Lord on Mount Tabor: "Lord,

it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah” («Κύριε, καλόν ἐστιν ἡμᾶς ὅδε εἶναι εἰ θέλεις, ποιήσωμεν ὅδε τρεῖς σκηνάς, σοὶ μίαν καὶ Μωϋσεῖ μίαν καὶ Ἡλίᾳ μίαν»), was Peter’s answer<sup>8</sup>, archetypically illustrating the Christian’s constant temptation to “finalize”, most preferably by attributing an unsurpassed completeness to theological milestones of the past.

What else but secularism is the monomaniacal dependence on the ideology of the superiority of the past, a mentality that insists not only on embodying *but on absorbing and trapping* the Gospel in history, in order to make it an appendage of national, theocratic or cultural agendas, thus ending up neutralizing it in a pseudo-pious way? As Ludwig Wittgenstein once very aptly pointed out, in order to be able to walk we need the friction provided by the rough ground (meaning in this case the common ground of the public linguistic idiom which, through the “roughness” of its rules, allows for verbal understanding), the best antidote to the permanent temptation of finality would perhaps be a new browsing of the pages of Scripture and the patristic texts, this time though, with bare feet, without the idealized soles of the ahistorical infallibility attributed to the Bible and the patristic literature, as well as to the “elders”, who alone are considered capable and worthy of ruling on theological and spiritual matters, as God’s beholders (in and out of quotation marks) and therefore as exclusive interpreters of the divine will and “pure” Orthodoxy in its oversimplified form.

These are, in general terms, the typical features of “orthodoxism”, which are again worth summarizing: in its usual form, the schema is distinguished by a combination of a penchant for nationalism and authoritarian regimes; a populist aversion to the intellectuals (both secular and theological); consequently, for the apotheosis of devotion and “experience” at the expense of theological reflection and against the search for existential meaning in dogmas; for the hasty suspension of the tradition’s evolution and the annulment of reflection; the redemption of incomprehensibility as a virtue; and, as a culmination of the above, the qualification of “folklore” as Orthodoxy’s fundamental element – which, in its turn, becomes an insurmountable cultural summit of world civilization, especially

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8. *Matth.* 17, 4.

in its Byzantine manifestation, and is instrumentalized as a counter-proposal to the infirm (individualistic and supposedly heartless) West. This simplistic and easily digestible schema reproduces an ideologized and narcissistic caricature of the Orthodox faith, which is marketed as “Orthodoxy”, while in reality it is nothing else than its exotic wrapping.

Nowadays, more than ever, we must urgently ask ourselves: is Orthodoxy, our ancestral sanctuary, able to offer solutions to the problems and deadlocks of people in the 21st century AD?

In spite of an acquired anticlericalism, which easily (and just as recklessly and dogmatically) devalues the spiritual legacy of a two thousand year old tradition by simply erasing it, we would give a cautiously affirmative answer, but with many asterisks and requirements; primary among them, would be the theological willingness and readiness to put evangelical principles and Christian ontology at the service of life and humanity: to understand the dogmas as what they really are, i.e., as apophatic in terms of theory of knowledge –as starting points of the quest instead of terminal points– and as life-affirming, revealing, instead of obscuring and concealing, the complexity and depth of existence; to be understood not as closed gates putting a barrier to thought, i.e. as a spiritual prison, but as open windows that maximize and sharpen the vision beyond the partiality and conventionality of the obvious, allowing a view of wider horizons, opened up by the concept of biblical eschatology, as it insists, in an emancipatory way, on the cognitive asymmetry between History and Eschatology, thus relativizing and deconstructing every historical period, national pride and cultural or other accomplishment, reminding us of the radical reversals promised by the Gospel and leaving the future undefined and open to radical surprise. This is because, insofar as the Ship of Church is still at sea and not at the end of history, it must, as we have already mentioned, be attentive to history and creation’s renewal carried out by the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete who constantly renovates the universe by creating new and unexpected biological and social realities, as well as new forms of divine grace.

By way of conclusion, let me be allowed to repeat, that, unlike the idols, the Christian vision is eschatological, that is, it has its eyes fixed on the future, on a vision of a “new heaven and a new earth”, and not on the past; after all, as St. Isaac the Syrian beautifully reminds us, God looks at

the future and not at the past<sup>9</sup>. From as early as the Old Testament era, clinging to the past is, theologically at least, a grave error; Abraham is called by Yahweh to leave his ancestral home (the comfort of the familiar and the known) and to open himself to the unknown future of seeking a new homeland, i.e. to indeterminacy. The same is true of Lot's wife, who was punished for looking back and not ahead, even more so with the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt and their forty-year wandering in the desert, which, despite the suffering, freed them from being static and confined due to their status as slaves in a given land. The same applies to the New Testament, where Christ sternly urged us to let the dead<sup>10</sup> [the dead ideologies and the death-smelling past] bury their own dead and follow him into an uncertain future, or to the Book of Revelation, where the vision of a new heaven and a new earth is projected. Unfortunately, neither the Jewish nor the Christian clergy have avoided the temptation to dwell on the past; perhaps God (as Marios Begzos once beautifully pointed out) allows the “unthinkable” to happen at every turn of history: the fall of the Holy City (Jerusalem, Constantinople, etc. etc.), so that it becomes clear that no human historical achievement constitutes the establishment of God's dominion on earth. For all earthly kingdoms, without exception, are at best incomplete, become insensitive and turn into idols that must fall, to free man from that which keeps him attached to an idealized past or present (we should recall here the inspired remarks of the late Fr. Florovsky: “God's Greatness is *not confined to the past*”, that “theology is always *in the process of formation*”; and, even more, “the eschata of revelation *have not yet been accomplished*”?)<sup>11</sup>. As the late Professor Savvas Agourides acutely observes, “the God of the Bible creates new opportunities and possibilities in history for the individual and the human community”<sup>12</sup>. If the Church wants to remain faithful to its prophetic mission, it should remember that the Old Testament prophet, like the Greek tragedian, as

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9. Isaac the Syrian, *Ἄσκητικά* [Ascetic Works], vol. B3, Λόγοι ΙΒ'-ΜΑ', transl. from Syrian into Greek by N. Kavvadas, ed. V. Tsakiris, Thesvites Publications, Thera 2005, p. 153.

10. *Matth.* 8, 22.

11. f. G. Florovsky, *Θέματα Ὀρθοδόξου Θεολογίας*, Artos Zois Publications, Athens 1989, pp. 52-53 [the emphasis is ours].

12. S. Agourides, *Ἐρμηνευτικὴ τῶν Ἱερῶν Κειμένων: Προβλήματα – Μέθοδοι Ἐργασίας στήν Ἐρμηνεία τῶν Γραφῶν*, Artos Zois Publications, Athens 2000, p. 378.

well as the saint, to make use of an apt description by Edith Hamilton, is “a poet [...] who is not content with the ancient sacred customs, a poet with a soul so great that *it can bear the new and unbearable truth*”<sup>13</sup>.

## Epilogue

Dogmas, like Bible itself, possess human mediation (1) historicity, i.e. evolution (2), and most definitely thought (3), i.e. dependance upon human perspective. Being born human, the Logos was decisively associated with the human mind, upgrading it to an unprecedented degree, not just for the better but also qualitatively, as is demonstrated by the condemnation of Apollinarianism. For this reason, we are entitled to claim that Christological Orthodoxy, combined with its pneumatology (valuably individualizing faith), constitutes a form of humanism, more precisely a Christian humanism, which treats man –every man– in the affirmative and in his uniqueness, because it fully brings out the God-manhood, the eschatological Adam, victor of the powers and authorities of the present world.

Thought is too precious a human privilege for Christians to cede it entirely to secularized intellectual discourse and atheism. Christianity became universal, cosmopolitan, extrovert and accountable, it acquired theology and metaphysics as a consequence of its intersection with the Greek philosophical categories of thought, which lavishly enriched it, detaching it to a considerable extent from its confinement within its Semitic birthplace – a most fortunate event! Apart from anything else, metaphysics and theology constitute the only possibilities for a faith to be self-critical. And, as the bitter recent history of extreme Islam teaches us, woe betide a faith that remains incapable of self-criticism.

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13. Edith Hamilton, ‘Ο Έλληνικός Τρόπος, transl. (Greek) Eirini Razi, Stavroula Metaxa, Ioanna Gaglia, Anatolikos Publications, Athens 2004, p. 203 [the emphasis is ours].