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ORTHODOX HANDBOOK ON ECUMENISM
Resources for Theological Education

“That they all may be one” (John 17:21)

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(111) CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF HUMAN BEING AND ORTHODOX ANTHROPOLOGY

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1. The Anthropology of Modernity

Modernity does not consist of simply a sociological, philosophical or political meaning. It is not characterized only by a historical period, but rather complete culture, a way of seeing and evaluating the world. This culture started creeping within the Renaissance, formed mainly by the Enlightenment, the rapid progress of science, the industrial revolution and received almost universal dimensions with the technological boom of the 20th century. Modernity gradually overturned the traditional worldview which was unaltered for centuries, and every metaphysical authority, initiating a new system of values in all fields of human life.

With sound reason and the use of empirical example as the main tools, modernity signaled a new epoch in the relationship between man and nature. The break in the assumed meanings of every mythical and religious sense brought the absolute value of scientific knowledge and domination of man over nature to the epicenter of modernity. Knowledge and use of the natural world through scientific knowledge attempted to demystify the phenomena of nature and replace any metaphysical preoccupation, highlighting the earthly happiness of man against religious metaphysical bliss. The transition from traditional to urban and industrialized society, the unshackling of any transcendent authority, the autonomy of the human subject, the rational criteria for understanding the human past, the secularization of society and the state, the declaration of the rights of the individual as a foundational and primary axiom, constitute some of the key features of modernity. Myth and reality, novelty became the new consciousness of man and spread to all areas of human life and culture. A modern state, secular society, dizzying scientific progress, modernist art, music, painting, morals, ideas and values, modernity has evolved into the dominant ideology of modern man.¹

However, that which makes modernity so radically different from other previous epochs is precisely that the present is now more thoroughly defined by a secularized conception of history. The traditional ‘history of salvation’ of Christianity is replaced by the ‘progress’ of humanity. Time does not carry out God’s plan for the world and man, but is a purely human and worldly process. Historical time is human time par excellence. The world of history, the only intelligible world, is a creation of man. After the end of transcendence, history not only becomes autonomous and the unique world of man, but gradually replaces God.² The declaration of the rejection of the Christian past of Europe was the primary instrument of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Seeking cultural norms beyond the medieval tradition, modernity turned rapidly to classical antiquity and yet paradoxically raised the nostalgia of this as a future realization of a fully anthropological era.

Now that man is the sole source of truth, he can recognize himself as the only God and human history as the only reality. The conquest of the world of history, “the age of the image of the world,” was indeed a founding principle of the new age, but also a new ontology in relations between world and man. The Cartesian version of the thinking subject has turned the world into an object of knowledge. The world is found inside man, who in this way can rightfully become its “lord and master.” The world became the object and man the subject, the universe was split in ‘nature’ and in ‘history’, historical time is being juxtaposed to the natural world, paving the way for the tragic experience of the contrast between nature and spirit. Man, the only protagonist in the

¹ For Modernity cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). For the relationship of Orthodoxy with Modernity cf. P. Kalaitzidis-N. Dontos, (eds.) *Orthodoxy and Modernity*, (Athens: Indiktos, 2007) (in Greek).

² Cf. Kostas Papaioannou, *La Consécration de l’Histoire*, avant-propos d’Alain Pons, (Paris: Éditions Champ libre, 1983).

theater of history, free from any metaphysical obligation, discovers endless possibilities. The deification of man as the purpose of history provides the only possible ontological definition of history. History as a progressive realization of freedom is ultimately the place of the ‘theophany’ of man.

2. Anthropological Aspects of Post-modernity

However, by the last quarter of the 20th century, modernity had already begun to lose its original luster and soteriological halo. The first cracks appeared with the experience of two world wars centralized in Europe. Deadlocks multiplied with the emergence of the ecological crisis, the problems of the third world, the technological revolution in cybernetics and informatics, the consumerism and the need for perpetual euphoria, and finally, the phenomenon of globalization. In the era of ‘late’ modernity or post-modernity,³ the idea of a linear progression of history, the Cartesian pursuit of certain objectives, absolute faith in the imperatives of rationality, the urban culture, the nation-state (ethnic-state), the various ideologies, the visions of general wellbeing, the great narratives of humanity, the human subject, and even history itself and the time of man began to falter and reveal a great impasse and show signs of the ‘end’ of an entire culture, at least in the form that modernity has lent in the last three centuries.

Now scientific knowledge and the imposition of an absolute and objective truth about the world, man and history not only is being challenged, but is considered the same in relation to religious knowledge. Secularism is no longer seen as a development, which will inevitably eliminate the religious phenomenon, which dynamically and diversely reappears on the historical scene. All the fundamental imperatives of modernity, such as omnipotence of reason, the overturning of sanctity, the priority of the thinking subject, and the relationship of man with nature are being placed in an unrelenting criticism. However, a pervasive nihilism and a new fuzzy religiosity in the form of a neo-Gnosticism tend to replace both the Christian faith and the sound-mindedness of modernity. In this new understanding the almost metaphysical faith of man is perpetuated in the endless progress of technology. And while it unrestrainedly dominates the market economy and the consumer happiness of the masses, the practical nihilism shapes the society of indifference and automated man as an extreme individualistic conclusion of the thinking subject of modernity. In the evolving new society indifference is expressed toward any spiritual and cultural heritage of the past, and slowly but surely the new communication technologies transform the culture of reason (speech) toward a global dominance of electronic images.

But what especially characterizes the post-modern man is the anonymity of existence and of life in modern mega-cities. The modern world is a ‘world of foreigners,’⁴ a world in which fluidity dominates and speed and fragmentation act as a catalyst in the depths of man’s being. Precisely this eclipse of the subject leads many to think that the 21st century will prove to be the century of anthropology as a radical reevaluation of the unique and unparalleled value of human existence.⁵ Man’s loneliness is accentuated by the fundamental choices of post-modernity. Indeed, the postmodern thought vehemently denied the possibility of the existence of an anthropology with universal validity for all people and for all times. The characteristic of post-modernity incredulity towards meta-narratives, the proclamation of the death of grand narratives, limit the meaning of human existence to individual cultural and historical references, which are necessarily transitory

³ For a discussion of post-modernity in relation with Orthodox theology cf. Petros Vassiliadis, *Post-Modernity and Church: The Challenge of Orthodoxy*, (Athens: Akritis, 2002) (in Greek). Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, (Brookline, MA: H.C. Press, 2004). Stavros Yangazoglou, “Philosophy of History and Theology of History” in *Orthodoxy and Post-Modernity*, (Patras: Hellenic Open University Press, 2008), 15-80 (in Greek).

⁴ For the anthropological implications of post-modernity cf. Marc Augé, *Non-Places; Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-modernity*, (New York: Vesro Books, 1995), Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁵ Kallistos Ware, “Orthodox theology in the new millennium: what is the most important question?” *Sobornost* 26.2 (2004): 7-23.

and disposable, each with its own dependent truths.⁶ Everything is relative and an interpretation of the era.⁷ Here emerges anew the primordial philosophical problem of the dialectic between the one and the many, the struggle between partial and universal. In the postmodern condition Squires avers that the “death of Man, History and Metaphysics. This implies the rejection of all of essentialism - transcendent understanding of human nature ... man is a social, historical and linguistic structure.”⁸ In such a perspective of degradation there exists no meaning, neither in history nor in the life of man. The point is this “currency,” i.e. a temporary construction of man.

This context includes the uncovering of relational postmodern anthropology and contradictions. The human subject is interpreted inter-subjectively now.⁹ However, his relationship with the other becomes almost impossible, since social structures as a ground for the emergence of relations decomposes continuously and public space has been eclipsed and subsides gradually in favor of private and consumer choices. Modern man seems to vary increasingly energized his private desire: “each is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed” (Jas. 1:14). The narcissism of this man of post-modernity ultimately is defined as a self-referential anthropology of the relations between the subject with his own components.¹⁰ This brings about a regression into extreme individualism. These concepts overtly or discreetly seem to diffuse into the modern conceptions of man in philosophy, psychology, sociology, economy, as well as in biotechnological research and applications, at the same time dulling the very criteria of social justice and ethics. The practical nihilism of man exacerbates social alienation, massively expands the problem of poverty, and is unable to control or even to interpret the evil and violence from man to man or man against the natural environment. In order to simplify a very complex world and the acceleration of market trade, a new way of life made an appearance, changing people’s everyday lives. Human life becomes more simple and effective which, as long as each man thinks only of himself and his interests. Thus, in the era of information capitalism and mass consumption, the man without realizing it has entrusted the organization of his life and soul to the economists. Everything is subordinated to private desire, the aggressive interest of the individual. At the same time, the undefined relationship of identity and otherness in our rapidly changing world propagates several local outbreaks of nationalism and fundamentalism.

3. Toward a dynamic and relational anthropology: the meaning of Orthodox anthropology today

In times of late modernity, when all the grand narratives and traditions are in fact on the sidelines, what critical and existential meaning of life for the world, man and history conveys a debate in anthropology from the standpoint of orthodox theology? Under the new environment of pluralism, Orthodox theology is called upon to articulate a resolution and meaning of life for the world, man and history. In this way, a new interpretive theory to Christian anthropology must be realized, distinguishing what is fundamental and unchanging and what is merely cultural and cosmological verbiage of a given era. In this theological hermeneutics as a re-measuring of pluralism and diversity in the ecumenical dimension, Orthodox theology must highlight the potential meaning of human existence in dialogue with the anxieties and problems of modern man.

For Orthodox theology the human is not to be defined statically. Man is not merely biological or spiritual existence, but a being in relation and en route. The fullness of existence is not its self-referentiality but the

⁶ Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Post-Modern Condition, A Report of Knowledge*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

⁷ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in fragments*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

⁸ Judith Squires, “Introduction,” in Judith Squires (ed.), *Principled Positions. Postmodernism and Rediscovery of Value*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 2.

⁹ Cf. Christos Yannaras, “Psychoanalysis and Orthodox anthropology,” in John T. Chirban (Ed.), *Personhood: Orthodox Christianity and the Connection between Body, Mind and Soul, Bergin and Garvey*, (Westport, CT, 1996) 83-89. Vasileios Thermos, *In Search of the Person: “True” and “False Self” according to Donald Winnicott and St. Gregory Palamas*, (Quebec, Canada: Alexander Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Christopher Lash, *The Culture of Narcissism*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

encounter and communion with the absolute Other, with an existence radically beyond and outside his own. In light of the Christology of the Church this means that man can the opening and communion of his being with the Triune God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. i.e. with the One Being who is *communion* and *otherness* par excellence; becoming by grace that which it is not by nature, becoming a son of God in by way of relation, and gaining a *new way of being* beyond decay and death. Original sin and the problem of evil in the orthodox tradition is not defined by the concept of predestination, but the tragic exercise of human freedom.

The Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas key notes that “the essence of sin is the fear of the Other, a thing which is a part of the rejection of God. If the confirmation of our ‘self’ is made through the rejection rather than acceptance of others – that which Adam has chosen to do freely – then it is only normal and inevitable for the other to become an enemy and a threat. Reconciliation with God is a prerequisite for reconciliation with any ‘other’ ... The fact that the fear of the other is pathologically inherent in our existence leads to fear not only of the other, but *every otherness*.”¹¹ In each case the freedom proves to be a key of anthropology.

The other is a necessary condition of my existence. But this is not for anyone else, but for the eminently Other. This means that the relationship with God and the relationship in Christ with the fellowman and the world becomes the new way of human existence, beyond his conventional and corrupted life. The Church is not just any historical institution, but becomes the eminently anthropological place and way, the eschatological root and substance of true life for humans. Modern Orthodox theology has to present hermeneutically not only the *theological ontology of the person* but also the conscious and free act of man, composing theory and practice, the eschatological glory of man with the ethos of ascesis and Eucharistic communion. Otherwise, such a person-centered anthropology can easily be seen as an excuse for an unhistorical escape.

In the person of Christ, man experiences theosis, transcending the boundaries of creation not only psychologically or “naturally,” but through a person.¹² The link of the communion of the uncreated God and created man expressed “in person,” as a reflection, i.e. personal existence of God toward man as much from the biblical as from the patristic tradition of the “image and likeness.” The anthropological problem of the ontology of the person is found, moreover, in the priority and absoluteness of otherness in relation to the general, i.e. the problem of the relationship of the “one” and the “many.” The solution of this problem has been given, in patristic theology, by the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God, which is moreover an iconological and eschatological reality. The truth of the person as the ultimate truth of existence is an icon of the future in the sense that it is experienced as a dialectical relationship between the eschatological character of a person who enters into story, without being converted into history.

Christ through the Holy Spirit takes on His body, the Church, the many different human faces, and instills whatever constitutes the inseparable relationship with the way of existence of the persons of the Holy Trinity mutually co-indwelling in freedom and love. Thus, the life of every person is weaving together of freedom with love, since the cohesion does not militate against or eliminate the heterogeneity, just as different human faces do not deprive the identity from the individual and finite selves. In the society of His body, the Church, the knowledge of God is possible, which passes only through love towards each other. Without the relationship with the other the self does not exist that knows and loves God. In Christ we find others interpersonally without being alienated, in Christ we cease to exist as enclosed and divided individualities that rush toward decay and demise, in Christ we attain to the ethos of the person, which leads “that unity which possesses teaching the Holy Trinity.”¹³ The non-static direction of the person allows the integration of the *many* in *one* Christ, making the Church the Body of Christ and each of His members becomes himself Christ and Church. This truth of the person which transcends individuality, division and death of being, is not just a conceptual and abstract metaphysical proposition, but a historical and empirical event in the life of the Church, it is the Holy Eucharist.

¹¹ John Zizioulas, “Communion and Otherness,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 38.4 (1994): 348.

¹² Cf. Stavros Yangazoglou, *Communion of Theosis. The synthesis of Christology and Pneumatology in the work of St. Gregory Palamas*, (Athens: Domos, 2001) (in Greek).

¹³ St. Isaac in the Syrian, *Ascetical Orat.* 22, 477.

Therefore, the ethos of the person and the society is not the result of a moral teaching, even the most high, but the ability and experiential achievement within a *community* that has become inside of history the truth of the person as an existential demeanor and attitude towards life. Man is restored as a priest and cosmic minister of Creation and of the ethos of freedom that is realized in the image of divine freedom. For Orthodox anthropology moral responsibility as a practical attitude with respect to history and everyday life is contained in the ethos of the Eucharistic communion and culture of the person.

At this point it is necessary to point out that descriptive anthropology and the human sciences are one thing and the work of theology another, which offers an existential interpretation of the fact of human existence, beyond objective justification. For Orthodox theology both the uncreated God and the created man are perceived as ‘under-principle’ (lit. translation of Greek *ὑπό ἀρχή*). Man is “animal being made God”¹⁴ in the perspective of the dialectical relationship between created and uncreated, as manifested in Patristic Christology. Male and female, body-soul, the whole man is the image of God. He is not immortal, neither in the body nor in soul, he is immortal in the perspective of the life in Christ, when he is open to communion with others and with the eminent Other. If now in history the ontology of the human person in Christ is iconic, “in a mirror, dimly” (*Cor*: 13, 12), to the eschaton of the kingdom will the fullness of the “likeness of God” shall be revealed.

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(translated by Christopher Henson)

¹⁴ St. Gregory the Theologian, *Orat. On Theophania* PG 36, 324, 13.