

DIMITRIOS KERAMIDAS – NIKOLAOS KOUREMENOS (eds.)

NATIONALISM AND ECUMENICAL ORTHODOXY

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NATIONAL AND ECUMENICAL ORTHODOXY

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Introduction

Byzantine, National and Ecumenical Orthodoxy

Dimitrios Keramidas – Nikos Kouremenos

As a religious body with ancient origins, the Orthodox Church never ceased to reflect, during her two-thousand-years-old historical life, the ideological inquiries and the cultural concepts of the people of every age, from the Late Antiquity to Middle Ages, and up to Modernity. Though Orthodoxy is not, in the strict sense of the term, a political organization, she did not remain unaffected by the arise empires and states that came into existence in her wider surroundings. In this sense one may speak, for example, of “byzantine theology”, of “byzantine liturgy”, and of the “Byzantium after Byzantium”; these terms refer specifically to the political entity “Byzantium,” namely the Christianized Roman Empire, which strongly – and, for many, irrevocably – determined the awareness not only of the Orthodox themselves but of all those who refer to the Orthodox Christendom. Therefore, when one talks about the “Byzantine Church,” he conventionally means Orthodoxy and vice-versa.

An example of such identification between Byzantium and Orthodoxy is represented curiously by Nicholas Glubokovsky (1863-1937), professor of Church History and advocate, if not emblematic exponent, of the Slavophil movement. This Russian scholar suggested, at the beginning of the last century, that, albeit Orthodoxy expresses herself, at least in the modern period, in the form of “national Churches” – variably as Russian, Greek, Romanian, etc. – the causes of this phenomenon are purely of historical and conventional order. This assertion implies that the models, forms or patterns suggested in different historical circumstances and under the influence of nationalistic criteria could not, at any rate, affect upon the inner essence of Orthodoxy. That is because Orthodoxy, in her deeper nature, is superior to all external patterns that, as Glubokovsky notes, can be eliminated or even re-transformed spiritually.

However, one should bear in mind that the Church *in principio* is not an institutional entity. She rather manifests herself in history as a reality of

interpersonal relations, as a communion of people. This observation has some relevant effects:

a) Firstly, the very notion of communion is related to – and presupposes – the principle of universality. The Church is embodied in a specific place, but concurrently she carries her consciousness of being a reality (in theological terms: a “new creation”) extended to the extremities of the *ecumene*. In other words, there is an ontological identification between the “local” and the “universal” dimension of the Church that implies the interconnection between a Church of a given territory with the concerns of the Church catholic¹.

b) Secondly, each local Church has the awareness of being a community of people who sufficiently profess Christ and celebrate Eucharist in a given place under the guidance of a pastor. No local Eucharistic community lacks something, as she has all the elements that give life and sanctify the assembly of the gathered people. Yet no degree of autonomy can be given to a local Church unless she comprehends herself within the overall Church tradition, composed of – and enriched by – the particular traditions of all local communities throughout the Christian world. Thus, administrative autonomy is not self-accomplishment; it rather entails on the one hand a constant and laborious work of evangelization which extends the local community beyond her particular boundaries, and on the other hand it incorporates autonomy to the whole Christian community. So quite paradoxically autonomy in the Church means full interdependence with one another. Yet, there are cases in which the recognition of the autonomy of a particular Church may be indirect, to the extent that two ecclesial communities that are not in reciprocal direct communion come indirectly into that through their communion with a third Church. One could confirm, thereby, the maxim repeated by many Orthodox theologians, that within the Orthodox tradition *lex orandi* is prior to *lex credendi*.

In this regard, Orthodox ecclesiology does not reject, at least in principle, the national Churches. The two categories that usually designate Orthodoxy, the byzantine and the national, are neither constituent elements of the Christian faith nor belong to the Church’s *esse*. However, they can affect the outward witness of the Church and thus can become a legitimate

¹ Contemporary scholarly research has evidenced the biblical – mainly Pauline – and early patristic roots of the concept of local Church as a manifestation of the “whole” Church of Christ.

part of Orthodoxy's historical baggage. That being said, the terms "Byzantium" and "nation" express, basically, two distinguished realities: Byzantium refers to the civil and cultural entity of the Eastern Roman Empire, whereas the term "nation" to the specific existence of a given population, who is self-determined within a defined territorial area. In addition, by the term "byzantine" it is considered whatever was formulated within a historical framework, from the 4th to the 15th century (i.e., from the "Constantinian synthesis" between Imperium and Church to the failed union in the Council of Ferrara-Florence and the fall of Constantinople) that shaped the spirituality, theology and cult of the Orthodox altogether, that is: the dogmatic formulations of the seven Ecumenical Councils, the doctrine of the Church Fathers (from the Cappadocians to Gregory Palamas), the spiritual heritage of the Eastern ascetic tradition, the canonical *corpus* of the Orthodox Church, etc. The same can be said for Orthodoxy's liturgical rite, which after being firstly formulated in different centers of the Christian East (Syria, Palestine, Egypt), took its definite form in Constantinople, under the noble prestige of the "Typikon of the Great Church of Christ", and as such was received by the Slavic world. In other words, whatever Orthodoxy professes, worships, and experiences spiritually was shaped, at least in its major suggestions, within Byzantium.

On the other hand, as has been already pointed out, the common Byzantine tradition has taken on particular ethnocultural features, which were expressed as local ecclesial identities, often vesting centrifugal tendencies against the multinational nature of the Byzantine Empire. These tendencies appeared in the 13th century, after the displacement of the Byzantine imperial leadership from Constantinople which favored the granting of ecclesiastical Autocephaly to the Serbian Church; they were then continued in the 15th century with the emergence of a new large Russian political center, Moscow, and ended in the 19th and 20th century with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the emancipation of the Orthodox Churches of the Balkan peninsula and the Eastern Europe².

Such processes did not, however, influence nor alter the doctrine, the faith and the worship of the Orthodox Church nor they changed the most significant elements of Orthodox spirituality (monasticism, apophatic

² The case of the granting of autocephaly to the Churches of Georgia (1990) and Ukraine (2019) are part of the same chain-process, that is, the transition from the supranational USSR to the post-Soviet ethnocentric republics.

theology, honor to the holy icons, etc.). In other words, the autocephalies did not attempt to express the Orthodox faith in different forms or to revise the existing theological patterns of the Christian East. Ethno-ecclesiastical reforms in fact did not concern the essence of the Orthodox dogma and worship, but the projection of the mission and pastoral activity of a Church onto a given statehood space or to the “outside world” (see, for example, the Constitutional Charters of the Autocephalous Churches or synods or conferences, such as that of Moscow of 1948)³.

The questions, therefore, that are mainly raised by the emergence of national autocephalies were the following:

a) How do the Autocephalous Churches function in ensuring the unity of Orthodoxy as a whole?

b) How the unified voice of the Orthodox can be secured vis-à-vis the contemporary challenges and theological issues?

As is well known, the concept of autocephaly is not a novelty in the life of the Church. It can be argued, and perhaps not without exaggeration, that the institution of autocephaly is a fundamental norm in the Orthodox Church, an ecclesiological principle that distinguishes her from the other Christian traditions. Canon Law professor Athanasios Eutaxias (1849-1931) had sustained that, contrary to both ecclesiological centralism, as it is expressed by the prerogatives and the figure of the Roman Pontiff in the Roman Catholic Church, and the total absence of an hierarchical structure in many Protestant Confessions, the institution of autocephaly is an inherent feature of the Orthodox Church without which the later could not even exist. At any rate, the independence of a particular Church is affirmed in the canonical practice of the first Christian centuries: firstly, by the introduction of the metropolitan system by the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and later on by the foundation of the five “ecumenical” patriarchates by the Council of Chalcedon (425 AD). The Church of Cyprus was the first particular Church to which autocephaly was granted (in the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD).

Hence, national autocephalies did not introduce *ex nihilo* a new ecclesial structure, as has been at times suggested mainly by some deputies of ecclesial centralism. Indeed, to limit ourselves to some characteristic

³ We can consider the “Hellenization” of Christianity (or according to others the Christianization of Hellenism) as of a different nature, as it did not concern the conversion of a national group of people to the Church, but the reception of the Greek philosophical thought and terminology by the Christian authors.

examples, according to Jesuit theologian Michel d'Herbigny (1880-1957) the multiplication of the autocephalous Churches in the modern era is due of their confrontation with new national-based boundaries. In this way, Christian communities found themselves partners of the interests of the one or another nation. A similar position was expressed by the German Catholic professor of Church History, Georg Pfeilschifter (1870-1936), who in 1923 argued that the absence of an administrative center in the Orthodox Church lead dramatically to her fragmentation, i.e. to the supremacy of the States over the Christian communities. Despite this severe, and perhaps unjust and one-sided judgment, one should remind that the concession of a Tomos of Autocephaly is in accordance with the canonical tradition of the Orthodox Church and with the pastoral need to adapt the Church administration to external circumstances, on the condition that historical convenience make such an adaptation necessary and does not affect the dogmas or Church unity.

Regarding unity, the accord of the local Churches in the faith, sacraments, and juridical norms has been diachronically expressed in the synodical system, that is, in the gathering of all the particular Churches “in the same place” (Acts 2:1), a practice as ancient as the Church herself – if we consider as prototype of conciliarity the so-called “Apostolic Council” of 48-49 AD. Synodality has always been considered as the most appropriate mean of highest moral authority by which the Orthodox Church expresses her teaching on either internal and external matters. Not without reason, since the beginnings of the 20th century, at the Ecumenical Patriarchate's initiatives, Pan-Orthodox assemblies and conferences were convened to encourage the visible unity of the global Orthodoxy. The inter-orthodox assemblies of the 1960s and the preconiliar conferences of the last decades produced a theological work of great importance; Orthodoxy's common voice was registered on issues such as the relations with the heterodox, the Orthodox mission in the contemporary world, the Orthodox diaspora, etc. The Holy and Great Council of 2016 sealed this work and its fruits are now a treasure of all the Orthodox, who are called to receive and integrate them in their lives.

Thus, one could argue that *ab initio* the horizontal canonical communion among the Orthodox was not disturbed by the new ecclesiastic geography emerged by the genesis of national Churches. On the contrary, the local Orthodox Churches – through their Primate or their

representatives – have issued Declarations and Messages of high theological prestige and ecumenical importance. These documents, fruits of pastoral concern and spiritual reflection from the entire spectrum of the Orthodox world, capture Orthodoxy's witness and concern on modern societies. Undoubtedly, the contribution of the Orthodox diaspora was in fact precious. She proved to be a pioneer of the revival of Orthodoxy and of the return to the most genuine monuments of the biblical, patristic and liturgical tradition of the Christian East.

Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to claim that there are no hindrances in the synodical process of modern Orthodoxy. As the absence of some Churches from the Holy and Great Synod and the different perceptions on Autocephaly have shown, there is no agreement on how Autocephaly must be granted and on which organ has the supreme authority in the Church. One can also see a discordance in the painful issue of inter-Christian dialogue, where opinions among the Orthodox differ; many Churches are firmly engaged to the goal of Christian unity, while some of them reject even the... ecclesiality of the heterodox! It is obvious that such a variety of perceptions goes beyond the legitimate principle of "unity in diversity" and that the criterion of synodical *consensus* cannot at any rate justify such incongruences.

It seems so that the byzantine legacy, as much as pan-orthodox, is not sufficient per se to form a common attitude on contemporary cutting-edge issues. Are perhaps the structural limits of synodality that make Orthodox unity such an obsolete reality? Or do specific particular and micro-ecclesiastical traditions – each with its own narration and understanding of Church's mission priorities – have the force to intervene between the common and "ecumenical" byzantine tradition and the local ethno-cultural identities, favoring the later against the former? If this is the case, one could genuinely ask whether ecclesial autonomies are simply limited to only administrative independence or do they have become sources of particular "theologies", and, consequently, of parallel "Orthodoxies".

All these questions disclose a quite problematic aspect of modern Orthodoxy which affects substantially the issue of pan-orthodox (and pan-Christian) unity. A serious reflection in this regard seems altogether necessary, as the question of unity is related to the very essence of Church's mission, which is fundamentally the re-union of the divided and the reconciliation of all humankind. Of course, the ways the Church has

employed to promote the task of reconciliation may entail a variety of methods and practices. As Yves Congar wrote, diversity is something inherent in the Church: the different dates of Easter in the East and the West; the use of pastoral *economy* in the East and of the *Communicatio* in the West; the existence of a variety of liturgical rites; the development of polycentric ecclesiastical structures in East and more circumstanced around Rome's prestige in the West. All the above did not prevent the Greek and Latin Churches from sharing sacramental communion for not less than a millennium. Besides, one should assert that the very existence of different "theologies" is not per se a problem for Christian unity: Paul and Peter had different views on the acceptance of the Gentiles; the Churches of Egypt and Syria developed a Christological doctrine that morphologically was not "Greek" – in fact it caused a schism between the Byzantines and the non-Chalcedonians. But theological dialogue between Orthodox and non-Chalcedonians proved that different dogmatic formulas do not necessarily mean different faiths.

If, therefore, theological differences are not themselves an obstacle to Church unity, we should search the reasons of Orthodoxy's difficulty to formulate a common witness in the following, *inter alia*, factors:

- a. In the absence of intra-ecclesial *Communication idiomatum*;
- b. In the lack of a common idea over which structure function better as a mean of agreement and accord for global Orthodoxy.

Regarding point "a", it should be mentioned that the more inter-confessional diversities remain unexplored, that is, the more the Churches do not share with each other their ecumenical experience, the more the different micro-ecclesial identities function as a dividing element that perpetuates the coexistence of many – and, to some extent, asymptomatic – "Orthodoxies". In other words, as long as those Churches that have acquired a firm experience of inter-Christian cooperation and are engaged in the cause of inter-confessional conciliation do not transmit the outcomes of their effort to the Churches that have not yet developed a friendship with the heterodox, there will be as many "opinions" as the local Churches.

Nevertheless, to achieve unity within Orthodoxy and among the Christians, it should be supported the mission of those Churches that have vested the mind and memory of the unified and "universal" Christianity, along with those Orthodox communities that in the diaspora or elsewhere (e.g. in the Middle East or in Africa), collaborate with Christians of other

traditions or followers of other religions. Not less important is undoubtedly the responsibility of the “national Churches”, as they must not remain indifferent to the global processes towards full unity: to paraphrase Saint Paul, when a particular Church develops the consciousness of inter-Christian reconciliation, this state of mind must permeate the whole body and become a shared treasure.

In this perspective – and here we enter in point “b” – the crucial point at issue is whether the synodal institution can still be considered as the most prominent way to guarantee the missionary consciousness and ecumenical vocation of the Church or the place for the consolidation of opposed pastoral mentalities. One could answer that without synodality no synthesis is possible to take place to guide the Church organization as a whole. Yet, an observer could argue that realistically such a composition does not always take place nor occurs to a satisfactory degree. We must then return to the previous question, that is, whether there is a weakness (and if yes, of what kind) within Orthodoxy regarding conciliarity that prevents the assimilation by all the Churches of what has been already achieved by some of them. Is it reasonable to believe that the increase of the number of Autocephalous Churches hinders the full projection of the universal horizon of Orthodoxy? The real question is to what extent local autocephalies have been incorporated in the overall life of the “one” Church. In this sense, we could observe that the ancient autocephalies differ from the modern ones in that the former were “multinational” (such were the Patriarchates of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch), whereas the latter were born essentially in local-national contexts. And while the former expressed visibly the unity of the Church in the four angles of the Christian Empire, the latter reflect the emancipation of a particular Church from a Mother-Church or the autonomy of a specific ecclesiastical province within a certain state territory.

By this we do not want to support the option to abolish the institution of autocephaly altogether, but to encourage its ecclesiological reinterpretation and renewal within a new outline, which on the one hand will highlight the supra-national nature of the Church and on the other will offer a major attention not to the particular ethno-ecclesiastical identities but to the universal consciousness of the Church (according to Christ’s commandments “to and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19), so that “all of them may be one” (Jn 17:21). To achieve this, an important shift of

mind is required: is worldwide Orthodoxy willing to prioritize her prophetic nature, i.e. the proleptic revelation of the eschaton? In other words, does she comprehend her existence as “body of Christ”, ignoring the temptation to submit herself to ephemeral Caesars?

The approach to this question must be but theological, as it concerns the self-consciousness and the worth of the being member of the Church. Through baptism Christians vest a new ontology that enables them to be members of the body of Christ, and not citizens of national entities. If this observation is correct, how does the condition of “citizenship” affect the charismatic membership to Church? Since the *ekklesia* affirms the priority of adherence to Christ, then Christian self-consciousness can only be but catholic, that is, universal (a nation, by definition, has a partial ontology, as it does not represent the whole of humanity, but only a part of it). But if the principle of universality stands for Christians as individuals, it must also go for the Church as a corporate reality, that is, for the local Churches. Every Church, even if demographically national, is nothing but the catholic Church, the Church that exists always and everywhere, the manifestation of the one Christ and of the Kingdom of God. The fact that Christ’s flesh is shared in the Eucharist does not signify a dismemberment of His body, but His equal presence throughout the world Christian communities.

Thus, the Autocephalous Churches, as the Eucharistic revelation of a Christ in a given place and time and as the celebration of the reality of the Kingdom of the Triune God, promote – each in its own ground – the divine commandment of evangelization, whose coverage is above nations and states. In this sense, the notion of universality prevents on the one hand the self-isolation of a local Church and the absence of communion among the Churches, while encourages the openness of one community to the accepting of the gifts of the others.

In searching, therefore, unity today, local Churches have to attempt, within the framework – and in the spirit of – synodality, an opening to a concrete and visible universality. In this way, the “vertical” order in the Church, which coexists along with the “horizontal” inter-church communion, implies not the juridical subordination of one Autocephalous Church to a major See, but the transmission of the ecumenical awareness of the senior patriarchal Sees (as is witnessed in the multiethnic, multiconfessional and multireligious territories of Africa and Near East) to the minor patriarchal and autocephalous Churches, born in the post-

byzantine, national environments. For ideologies, whether imperialistic or nationalistic, represent nothing but the ephemeral aspect of history, while the apostolic faith remains always changeless and transcendental.

If therefore Orthodoxy want to act in a single voice and in a sole standpoint, and not as a sum of self-sufficient communities circumscribed to national contexts and subordinated to dividing ideological labels, she must explore the mystical, eschatological depth of the Christian Gospel and measure it each in her specific context. Given also that unity belongs to Church's being (*esse*) and not to her well-being (*bene esse*), inter-Church concord cannot be realized only locally, but also in global terms: from the local assemblies, to the regional autocephalies and worldwide Orthodoxy. This task presupposes and requests a structural unity that functions in the way that it was exercised diachronically, that is, under a "vertical" guidance: local dioceses over parishes, regional metropolitanates or archdioceses over dioceses, and patriarchates over metropolitanates, according to the synodal legislation (see 2nd and 4th ecumenical councils). This system offers a statutory foundation based not on "citizenship", but on the ontology of the faithful: of believers who confess the one Christ and His One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The essays collected in this volume discuss critically, each from its own viewpoint, the above remarks within the overall question of how religious nationalism affects the local Orthodox Churches and inter-Orthodox relations in general. The core of the book consists in elaborated versions of the papers presented in the panel entitled "Orthodoxy and Nationalistic Ecclesiology: Challenging the globality of the 21st century", organized by CEMES – "Center for Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies Metropolitan Papageorgiou" in March 2019 in Bologna, in the framework of the annual conference of the European Academy of Religion (EuARe). The topic of the Ukrainian Autocephaly and the debate that it generated is studied by Prof. Emeritus Petros Vassiliadis [Nationalism vs. Ecumenical Universalism after the Ukrainian Crisis] and Prof. Dn. Nicolas Denysenko [Problems of Ukrainian Autocephaly: Ukrainization and Liberation]. The two authors analyze both the historical context in which the desire of the Ukrainian people for religious freedom and ecclesial self-government was satisfied, at the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate who granted autocephaly to the

Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), while they examine the triptych primacy, synod, autocephaly. In his historical-canonical approach, Prof. Fr. Gregorios Papathomas examines the manifestation of the phenomenon of ecclesiastical in the course of Church history [L'adoption de l'Autocéphalie en Occident et en Orient à une époque de flottement identitaire], while Fr. George Kochetkov [Orthodox Church Structure and the Freedom of Church] approaches critically the issue of the synodal structure of the Orthodox Church in Russia, the conciliar structures and of their figure of the Patriarch within them, as well as the question of spiritual freedom.

Finally, a number of studies of the volume are dedicated to local Orthodox realities and the way in which nationalism is experienced and viewed by them, along with the challenge of national independence and the demand for a religious self-determination. Thus, H.E. Metropolitan Russe of the Bulgarian Patriarchate [State and Church from the Early Middle Ages to the Present: The Bulgarian Model for the Construction of a Christian State] attempts a brief retrospective of the experience of the Bulgarian Church, examining the formation of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, the Church-State relations and the role of the Church in shaping modern Bulgarian identity. Phd. Candidate Maja Kaninska examines the influence and involvement of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the social transition in Yugoslavia in the 1980s, a period in which the Serbian Church found herself at the center of wide socio-political changes, which determined in the decades after the break-up of Yugoslavia determined her profile. The difficult relationship between nationalism and the Church in the Romanian reality is approached by phd. Candidate Paul Andrei Mucichescu [Loving the nation as endorsing the ecclesial universal. A Romanian Perspective], while a special example in the Orthodox world, that of the “Macedonian Orthodox Church”, is examined by Dr. Rastko Jovic [The Fluid Labyrinths of Autocephaly: the “Macedonian” Orthodox Church].

Through an interdisciplinary approach that comprises ecclesiastical history, canon law, ecclesiology, philosophy of religion, etc. and trying as much as possible to give a pan-Orthodox perspective covering various sub-traditions of the Orthodox world, we tried in this volume to contribute to the ongoing theological reflection and to anyone involved in what concerns Orthodoxy and nationalism, synodality, autocephaly and ecclesiastical jurisdictions. We would like to express our appreciation to the “Fondazione

per le Scienze Religiose” (Fscire) for its support in carrying out this work. We hope that the present work will be proved valuable for the theological and ecclesiastical community, in a period of instability and dynamic redefinition of local and global identities.

CEMES

The Center for Ecumenical, Missiolo-gical and Environmental Studies "Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou" is a legally established research and educational no profit NGO, administered according to the status of the Greek Civil Liability Societies.

Its main aim is the promotion of the ecumenical cause and the theological documentation of all forms of ecumenical and inter-faith dialogues of the Eastern Orthodox Church; the promotion of the authentic Orthodox missionary ethos, the strengthening of the Church's missions; and the cultivation of environmental awareness for the preservation of the integrity of creation.

In other words, the ultimate goal of the Center is to offer the Orthodox Church and the wider Christian community its research, scientific and teaching services in postgraduate programs, scientific studies and conferences in the field of both ecumenical dialogue and mission, with passion and consistency.

The late Metropolitan of Thessaloniki, Panteleimon Papageorgiou, Honorary Doctor of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, was a delegate in many international forums of both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Church of Greece, as well as the first (1936) Director of her official missionary organization "Apostoliki Diakonia". The scientific study and struggle for the preservation of the natural environment, was added to CEMES activities as a gratitude to the present Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for his internationally recognized successful service for the environment

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NATIONAL AND ECUMENICAL ORTHODOXY

The essays collected in this volume discuss critically, each from its own viewpoint, the above remarks within the overall question of how religious nationalism affects the local Orthodox Churches and inter-Orthodox relations in general. The core of the book consists in elaborated versions of the papers presented in the panel entitled “Orthodoxy and Nationalistic Ecclesiology: Challenging the globality of the 21st century”, organized by CEMES

(From the Introduction)