

The Gender Perspectives of the Economic Crisis in Greece and the Church's Witness in Troubled Times: Charity Meals or a Quest for Justice?

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is fourfold: first I explain in what sense women are more vulnerable to the economic shocks in Greece. Second, I examine the role that the Orthodox Church plays in the overcoming of the crisis. Third, I argue that the Church fails to deal with the causes of the crisis in a politically relevant and gender sensitive manner. Finally, I make a few suggestions regarding the relevance of theological discourse in troubled times.

The gender perspectives of the crisis

Greece is now sunk in its sixth straight year of recession, and with social and political disintegration reaching extremes not seen since World War II, it is no longer easy to predict the results of this situation in our life. It goes without saying that Greek economic crisis as part of the global financial crisis caused many changes in Greek society. Much has been said about the negative impact of this crisis on many aspects of public life, like on public education, on public health care and especially on democratic governance. Analysts argue that “the unfolding of the Greek economic crisis has revealed some unappetising traits pertaining not only to the Greek economic system (whose inefficiencies were after all well known to both Greeks and the EU authorities which nonetheless continued to lend Greece unimaginable amounts of money – why really?), but to public life in general. These traits include a high degree of corruption, clientelism and chronic incompetence, and have discredited not only the two major political parties in government for the last 30 years, but the entire political system, as well as the very concept of ‘public good’ and public services. Even worse, though politicians, state mandarins and churchmen, powerful businessmen, newspaper publishers and influential journalists have been associated with corruption, surprisingly few have been brought to account. In Greece, lifestyle and conspicuous consumption still thrives next to 27% unemployment (more than 50% among the youth), people searching the rubbish for food and malnourished children fainting in school”.¹

However, little attention is given to the gender perspectives of the economic crisis in Greece. What I am arguing for here is that the crisis does not affect everybody in the same way. The most disadvantaged, marginal, financially vulnerable and the illegal groups are affected differently than those groups that still enjoy their rights, such as the right to work, education, health care and security, for instance. In this case, I will limit the focus to the gender perspectives of the current crisis, as women and men are not affected in the same way. I will attempt, first of all, to highlight the importance of taking into account gender among other factors, both when describing the impact of the crisis and again when efforts are being made to define policy practices for resolving the economic problems and ensuring social justice.

Even before the crisis, women in Greece were experiencing huge inequalities in the labour market (among the highest rates in the EU) with regard to employment, wages and unemployment. In contrast, the share of men's participation in housework, child

¹ Gerasimos Makris & Dimitris Bekridakis, “The Greek Orthodox Church and the economic crisis since 2009,” in: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 13:2 (2013), 111-132, here 116 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2013.793055>, 15 September 2013)

care and elderly care was among the lowest in the EU. In autumn 2008, the female unemployment rate was 13%, whereas male unemployment was only at 5%; women accounted for 70% of part-time workers, while their average income in the private sector was 25% lower than men's. Analysing that period, Maria Karamessini asserts that: "Patriarchal concepts of male workers' better performance and greater credibility were in retreat, but still pervading an institutional infrastructure characterized by the underdevelopment of public child care and elderly care services, in combination with women's lower retirement age and early retirements. They also had a key role in discrimination against women concerning hiring, career development, compensation and access to positions of responsibility."²

The situation is clearly worse today. According to Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT), Greece's unemployment rate rose to 27.4% in the first trimester of 2013. The unemployment rate for women is considerably higher than for men (31% versus 24.7%).³ For young people aged 15 to 24 the unemployment rate is estimated at 54.9% and reaches 66.3% for females in the same age group. Two-thirds of the long-term unemployed are women.⁴ In addition, it should be borne in mind that the official unemployment rate underestimates more unemployment in women than in men. Experts point out that "in Greece, as well as worldwide, construction and manufacturing are male-dominated sectors affected first by the crisis. Redundancies and temporary lay-offs in major industries of those sectors attracted the greatest media attention, while dismissals of employees in small and medium sized enterprises and of workers with temporary contracts –a workforce dominated by women– have easily gone unnoticed as individual cases in sectors of the economy that have no union representation."⁵

Unfortunately, the prospects don't seem to be good for women. Discussing "the gender perspectives of the financial crisis" during the fifty-third session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (March 2009), economist Stephanie Seguino notes that "female joblessness can be expected to rise disproportionately as public sector budget cuts are made, since women are disproportionately employed in education, health, and social services." Moreover, it is highly likely that the old principle "fire women first" will be revived, since it is considered imperative to ensure jobs for men, who are traditionally perceived as the breadwinners.⁶ Besides, history confirms this scenario. Historian Efi Avdela has shown that during the interwar years, when Greece was hit by recession, the government, in its effort to reduce expenses, applied the "women first" principle in staff cutbacks.⁷ Research findings indicate that the economic crisis has a greater impact on women's paid work than on men's, and this is due to gender differences in aspects of life other than work:

² Μαρία Καραμεσίνη, "Κρίση, γυναίκες, ανδρική ταυτότητα," in: Κυριακάτικη Αυγή, *Ενθέματα* 30/11/2011.

³ (http://www.statistics.gr/portal/page/portal/ESYE/BUCKET/A0101/PressReleases/A0101_SJO01_DT_QQ_01_2013_01_F_GR.pdf, 10 September 2013)

⁴ *Ενημέρωση* 191 (Μηνιαία έκδοση του ΙΝΕ/ΓΣΕΕ-ΑΔΕΔΥ) Φεβρουάριος 2012, 23. (http://www.inegsee.gr/sitefiles/magazine/ESOTERIKO_190.pdf, 10 August 2013)

⁵ Μαρία Καραμεσίνη, "Οικονομική κρίση και ανισότητες φύλου," in: *Η Εποχή*, 7/3/2012 (<http://www.epohi.gr/portal/arxeio/4707>, 10 August 2013)

⁶ Stephanie Seguino, "The Global Economic Crisis and Its Gender Implications and policy responses." Paper prepared for *Gender Perspectives on the Financial Crisis* Panel at the Fifty-Third Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, United Nations, March 5, 2009, 1-13 (http://www.uvm.edu/~sseguino/pdf/global_crisis.pdf, 10 August 2013)

⁷ Έφη Αβδελά, "Το φύλο στην (σε) κρίση ή τι συμβαίνει στις 'γυναίκες' σε χαλεπούς καιρούς" in: *Σύγχρονα Θέματα* 115 (2011), 20-21.

Women, in principle, have lower income and are more dependent on social welfare measures. Consequently, they are the ones affected the most by tax evasion (which is widespread in Greece). Women in general are less involved in decision-making bodies and collective processes on issues concerning their lives.⁸ This is why the extent to which women are adequately represented in every aspect of public life as well as in decision and policy-making bodies should not be ignored.

It is too soon to determine the long-term implications of the crisis on gender relations. Will women's autonomy boundaries be restricted and will the traditional family model be reinforced as a necessary choice so that women can make ends meet? Or, will young men and women adopt new alternative lifestyles and set up alternative households instead?⁹ Furthermore, what could it mean for inter-family relations that women are becoming primary earners, being the ones working and supporting their households? This trend is most evident in migrant families because due to particular circumstances it is the jobs performed by male migrants that are mainly affected, resulting in migrant men witnessing the loss of their breadwinner role.

Our debate definitely owes a lot to economic history, to labour history from a feminist perspective and to feminist economics, which have indicated that economic gender inequality, in other words women's poverty and unemployment, is not simply rooted in the realm of biological givens or sociological imponderables, but rather in specific policy choices, specific growth models and specific household economics that affect women and men differently.¹⁰

The role of the Orthodox Church: charity meals or a quest for justice?

This is the situation within which Ieronymos assumed the leadership of the Orthodox Church of Greece in 2008. To get comfortable with the situation would have been madness. Yet, to oppose the political status quo outright would have been equally difficult, as the image of the Church of Greece had already been stained by the scandals during the archbishop of Christodoulos. Analysts argue that a more cautious approach was needed: the Orthodox Church could not stay silent while the raging crisis destroyed livelihoods, but nor could it incur the wrath of the state, upon whose goodwill much of the ecclesiastical prerogatives rested. "Soon after his election, Ieronymos disbanded Solidarity [Allilengii], the NGO that his predecessor had patronised and which had been caught involved in a fraud scandal. In its place he established Mission [Apostoli], whose main areas of activity include the environment, the rehabilitation of drug addicts, care and treatment for autistic children, care for bed-ridden persons and the elderly, and the mass distribution of charity meals."¹¹

Ever since the onset of the current crisis, the official discourse of the Church has associated it with a crisis of values and a lack of spirituality, disregarding any political aspect of the problem, which is central to Orthodox tradition, such as in the writings of St Basil the Great and St John Chrysostom. The proposed answer to the problem is sought in the ascetic ideal of Christianity. In fact, the Holy Synod seems to invite those who are hit the hardest by the crisis, the people enduring deprivation and suffering, to repent and appreciate the value of spiritual instead of material goods, consumption and comfort.

⁸ Αβδελά, "Το φύλο στην (σε) κρίση," 23.

⁹ Αβδελά, "Το φύλο στην (σε) κρίση," 24.

¹⁰ Janet A. Seiz, "Φεμινιστική Οικονομική επιστήμη" trans. Ναταλία Σερέτη in: W. Samuels, et al. (eds) *A Companion to the History of Economic Thought* (Blackwell: Oxford 2003).

¹¹ Makris & Bekridakis, "The Greek Orthodox Church and the economic crisis since 2009," 117

In Encyclical no. 2894 with the title “A Theological Conception of the Economic Crisis” (15 March 2010), the Holy Fathers state:

we, the people, acted irresponsibly. We enjoyed our wealth, gave in to pleasures, and yielded to the temptation of easy profit through tricks and deception. We did not care about the truth. The unrealistic demands made by workers’ unions and other social groups in complete disregard for social cohesion, contributed largely to our being brought to the current situation . . . The essence of the spiritual crisis is the loss of life’s meaning and our egocentric urge... Rather than seeking the meaning of life, we clung to prosperity, well-being and economic strength. But when there is no vision in life other than consumption and economic growth, when the flaunting of wealth becomes the only way to elevate your social status, then corruption is the only path in life . . . We opted for false prosperity and as a result we have lost our freedom, and our country has lost its freedom as well. [...]
We wish to tell you that the Church has the antidote to life as consumption, and this is asceticism. And if consumerism is the end, because life has no meaning, asceticism is the way, because it leads towards a life with meaning.¹²

Even in a 2011 volume published by the Archdiocese of Athens, with the title “For an Economy with a Human Face” and contributions by theologians, economists and ex-politicians, the Archbishop’s critique of neo-liberalism is articulated in personalistic terms and not in political and ethical:

And what does neo-liberalism say? Everybody can do anything freely. We do not care what the other is. I can drink his blood, take his life, steal from him, take his money through the stock exchange. I am the centre of the earth . . . What is the cause of the crisis? . . . Our moving away from God.¹³

The central field within which the Church’s ideology assumes practical forms is that of charity, especially the preparation and distribution by a great number of local dioceses of more than 250,000 meals daily (except Sunday), 10,000 of which concern the Archdiocese of Athens. Feeding the needy has always been part of the Church of Greece’s charity profile. However, there is no concrete quest for change, no quest for social justice and no criticism of the economic system, its moral basis and its consequences.

The contribution of the theological discourse to the overcoming of the crisis

Therefore, the question posed here is whether theological discourse can have a contribution in these troubled times, additionally taking into account the gender perspectives of the economic crisis.

It is true that the Christian Church and its believers are trying to help tackle the consequences of the economic crisis and relieve those who suffer. The Church, among other organisations and institutions, is obviously trying to contribute to dealing with

¹² Cited in Makris & Bekridakis, “The Greek Orthodox Church and the economic crisis since 2009”, 120.

¹³ Cited in Makris & Bekridakis, “The Greek Orthodox Church and the economic crisis since 2009”, 121.

these consequences, by the means of spiritual aid and charity.¹⁴ Also, it undertakes a commitment to “cause an outburst of empathy... for the people in pain and suffering.”¹⁵

Yet, I think that as theologians it is worth focusing on the potential contribution of theological discourse in addressing the crisis itself and social injustice – something which is carefully avoided by the official Church. I am interested, that is to say, in examining whether theological discourse may contribute to the international public debate on how to overcome the crisis. Besides, it would be quite risky to assume that the Church’s part in the current difficult situation is limited to providing spiritual aid and charity work, as that might mean it would have nothing else to offer to society once the crisis was over.

I would therefore like to briefly mention certain distinctive features present in theological thought and theological discourse which can be helpful in the public discussion about how to address the crisis. Actually, theological discourse is not in competition with other sorts of discourse (it would be a methodological mistake if it were), as its epistemological presuppositions differ. It can be said that theological approaches to the crisis are not disproved by the fact that one may also accept other economic, psychological and philosophical interpretations.¹⁶ Thus, analysing the raging global economic crisis, Christian thought focuses on the underlying causes and highlights the relation between the economic crisis and the crisis of certain values. What first comes to mind when reflecting on the causes of the crisis is the flaw of *greed* (or *rapacity*), as pointed out by the Archbishop of Athens. However, greed is linked to pride, which is evident in “my illusion that I can shape the world according to my will”;¹⁷ a pride that is manifest in the reluctance to let go of systems and projects that promise more and more secure control, the Anglican Archbishop, in his turn, explains. Theology is inviting us to realise that we are delivered or converted (regarding economic issues also) not simply by resolving in a vacuum to be less greedy, but by understanding what it is to live as an organism which grows and changes and thus is involved in risk. We change by understanding our limits.

Theological thought suggests that our ethic is essentially about how we negotiate our limits, that is, our vulnerabilities, and what relationship with power we wish to have.¹⁸ The seriousness of Christian ethics is tested by how we behave towards those whose goodwill or influence is of no “use” to us – unlike the usefulness of maintaining good relations with people who possess power and money, for instance. Hence the moral depth of a society can be assessed by how it treats its vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, the sick etc. Within the framework of theological thinking, in which the createdness of the world is recognised, men and women ought to be aware of human frailty, material and mental; aware of their own and other people’s frailty. For Rowan Williams, theological thought and Christian ethic suggest that “the duty of care for the neighbor as for oneself is bound up with the injunction to forgive as one hopes to be forgiven; basic to this whole perspective is the recognition both that I may fail or be wounded and that I may be guilty of error and damage to

¹⁴ See also. Αρχιεπίσκοπος Αθηνών και Πάσης Ελλάδος κ. Ιερώνυμος Β’ κ.α., *Για μια Οικονομία με ανθρώπινο πρόσωπο* (εκδ. Ιερά Αρχιεπισκοπή Αθηνών: Αθήνα 2011) and Μανώλης Γ. Δρεττάκης, “Οι Χριστιανοί μπροστά στην οικονομική κρίση” in: *Σύναξη* 114 (2010), 51-56.

¹⁵ Χρ. Σταμούλης, *Η γυναίκα του Λότ και η σύγχρονη θεολογία* (Ινδικτος: Αθήνα 2008), 19-20.

¹⁶ Rowan Williams, “Knowing our limits” in: Rowan Williams and Larry Elliott (eds), *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice* (Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire 2010), 19-34, here 33.

¹⁷ Rowan Williams, “Ηθική, οικονομική θεωρία και παγκόσμια δικαιοσύνη”, trans. Απόστολος Αποστολίδης in: *Σύναξη* 114 (2010), 25

¹⁸ See also Williams, “Ηθική, οικονομική θεωρία και παγκόσμια δικαιοσύνη”, 26.

another.”¹⁹ Behind this recognition that I may be guilty of error, though, lies the idea of the intentional subject taking responsibility for this world, in this world. At this point, the theological thought puts in the spotlight of public debate the concept of responsibility that people have (and specific people as a matter of fact) for the present crisis. The notion that “international markets require this or that, and moreover they are forced to impose it” is unthinkable for theology. In the Christian context, nothing is caused by impersonal forces nor is anything compulsory and inevitable, since the world operates entirely independently thanks to men’s and women’s free actions, as the people participate in God’s freedom. Thereby, not only does theological discourse recognise the concept of “personal responsibility”, but it also indicates it is central in the current crisis, entailing a substantial political aspect.

Finally, theological discourse is able contribute the vision of change, because its faith can support the idea of a better world. The vision of change is theologically grounded in the belief that the world was created by the love of God the Father, and not by necessity. In this context of understanding it as a gift, the world is free and thus able to change.

For the world to change, though, it is necessary to believe in the idea of a different world. Theological discourse has the concept of “faith” to offer. Here, the term “faith” does not mean accepting convictions articulated in phrases such as “God exists.” It rather means “I have faith in you”, “I trust in us”, and thus my hope is certain. Christian faith is for the most part performative rather than propositional, claims Terry Eagleton,²⁰ and is connected to what I would call “loving commitment.” If we wanted to see how faith (which remains a guilt-free concept in theological discourse) may contribute to overcoming the crisis, including its gender perspectives, the following could be said: If what urges people to have faith in the possibility of a non-racist society (where all people, regardless of sex and race, will enjoy equal rights) is a set of commitments to certain values, then theological discourse restores the debate over specific values. It can bring political theory back to the public sphere, through the discussion of ethics and values.

After all, if we fail to notice that there are people who cannot find a job, who are being fired or whose poverty is not visible because of their gender, it is due to our lack of dedication to a sense of justice. We have to believe in a better world in order to be able to discern the problems and the gender aspect involved, and thereby to urge decisions and new policies for changing the world and promoting equality. I consider theological discourse to express the faith in the value of ensuring liberty and autonomy for all without exception, to the extent that it maintains its eschatological perspective and judges the world based on the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God (or, as described in the secular language, the vision of a just society of people loving one another and caring for nature and the whole world), instead of degenerating into national, state or any other kind of ideology. This is the commitment that distinguishes theology from other scientific fields and sorts of discourse; and this is the commitment it has to offer.

¹⁹ Williams, “Ηθική, οικονομική θεωρία και παγκόσμια δικαιοσύνη”, 27.

²⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (Yale University press: New Haven and London 2009), 151.