Interfaith Dialogue and Today's Orthodoxy, from Confrontation to Dialogue

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Orthodoxy has a long experience of cohabitation with other religions and Christian denominations. However, this experience has not always been a peaceful and easy one, especially when molded by the rise of nationalism during the second half of the 19th century and global geopolitical forces throughout the 20th century. A series of historical events, from Russia to the Middle East, from the Balkans to Central Europe, have shaped the Orthodox relationship to religious pluralism, redefining the religious landscape through movement of populations and migrations. These many conflicts and historical events have proved the multifaceted reality of Orthodoxy, from its role as a state religion, such as in Greece, and a majority religion, such as in Russia, to a minority religion with limited rights, such as in Turkey, or, more generally speaking, in the Middle East. It is in this very complex context that interfaith relations unfold, too often in a very violent and traumatic way.

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Orthodoxy as a whole has developed a very differentiated understanding of interfaith relations and dynamics that has changed according to time and location. There is nothing unique in this understanding in comparison with other global religions. However, the way Orthodoxy engages with religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue remains an oxymoron based on the uncertain balance between, on the one hand, a limited understanding of ethno-religious identities, and on the other hand a more inclusive, one might say universal, vision regarding the place of faith in the public space. Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou even refers to this as “the Orthodoxy’s ambivalence towards pluralism.”¹ This is why the decisions made during the course of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (2016) are so crucial when considering the issue of interfaith dialogue. The Conciliar Encyclical stated:

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¹ Elizabeth Prodromou, “Orthodox Christianity and Pluralism. Moving Beyond Ambivalence?,” in *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Emmanuel Clapsis (Geneva-Brookline, MA: WCC Publications, Holy Cross Press, 2004), 25.

Honest interfaith dialogue contributes to the development of mutual trust and to the promotion of peace and reconciliation. The Church strives to make *the peace from on high* more tangibly felt on earth. True peace is not achieved by force of arms, but only through love that *does not seek its own* (1 Cor. 13:5). The oil of faith must be used to soothe and heal the wounds of others, not to rekindle new fires of hatred. (§ 17)

This position was then deepened in light of the principle of dialogue as described with great relevance in the recent document blessed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, *For the Life of the World, Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (FLW).

In short, the Church is dedicated to a sustained dialogue with other Christians. Dialogue, in the Orthodox understanding, is essentially and primordially a reflection of the dialogue between God and humanity: it is initiated by God and conducted through the divine Logos (*dia-logos*), our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Pervading all human life, dialogue takes place in all our encounters, personal, social, or political, and must always be extended to those who adhere to religions different from ours. (FLW, § 54)

One could add that dialogue even takes place with those without religion. Despite these declarations, the theological foundation upon which interfaith dialogue is built and promoted contrasts with the very strong symbolic boundaries that emerge from a power struggle depending on the minority-majority nexus. This ambivalence finds its source not only in internal tendencies tied to the evolution of ethno-religious identities since the 19th century but also in the very conceptual approach of the field of political science, especially in geopolitics, used to define events and conflicts in which Orthodox were and still are involved. This oxymoron is not a *fait-accompli*, and FLW constitutes a very important tool in transforming this anomaly into an opportunity by offering an internal evaluation of the mission of the Church in the world.

Orthodox Civilization(s)?

The geopolitical dimension of Orthodoxy emerged in the field of political science, particularly in France, after the beginning of the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001). The resurgence of deadly conflict in southeastern Europe, which shaped the term “balkanization” to mean territorial fragmentations based on ethno-religious conflicts, quickly ruined hopes for a Hegelian “End of History.” Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History” predicted the decline

of ideological conflicts in favor of global interconnection in which liberalism and capitalism would act as conflict regulators.²

However, the bloody Yugoslav Wars demolished these arguments, and Samuel Huntington, father of the “Clash of Civilizations,” quickly opposed them. History did not end in the early 1990s because blood was still flowing, not only in the Balkans but also in Rwanda (1994). In a now-famous article published in *Foreign Affairs* (1993), Huntington argued that in the wake of the collapse of Marxism as an alternative to liberal capitalism ideological conflicts are indeed over, but that large regions of the world continue to compete around cultural dividing lines, generally along religious borders. Huntington proffered a list of different civilizations: Western, Latin-American, Orthodox, Eastern World, Muslim World, Sub-Saharan Africa, giving priority to religious solidarity within large cultural areas. Religion became the new ideological background for global conflicts. His conviction was clear: an appeal to solidarity in the West (the United States and Europe) under American leadership to face the Islamic threat or, worse, an unlikely “Islamic-Confucian” alliance. It should be noted that, according to Huntington, the Orthodox bloc – including the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania, as well as Armenia (despite the fact that the majority of its population belongs to the non-Chalcedonian Armenian Apostolic Church) – is akin to Islam in its opposition to Western Christianity, although it is itself split by a line across southeastern Europe, offering an explanation for the Yugoslav Wars.

The homogeneous representation of blocs of civilizations is a recurrent criticism of Huntington's theory. A simple glance at the composition of the Orthodox Churches shows the diversity of cultural, not to say ethnic, contexts that compose it and form distinct civilizational areas: Hellenic, Slavic, Georgian, Arabic, etc. It reflects very appropriately, however, the role of religion in a sort of international partition of the world to which Orthodoxy has not remained completely foreign. Indeed, the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill, has been known to use the expression “Orthodox Civilization.” It is not only a patriotic conception that identifies the cultural seeds of the Slavic world, but also the acknowledgement of religion as “the matrix [...] which supports major ideological tendencies, now put forward by the political power over the community and collective identity. [...] In international circles, the Church defends a model of coexistence and dialogue of civilizations that is opposed to a unipolar world and defend the foreign policy of the State.”³

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

³ Kathy Rousselet, “Sécularisation et orthodoxie dans la Russie contemporaine: pour une hypothèse continuiste?,” *Questions de recherche* 42 (Mai 2013): 16.

At the same time, religion should not be reduced to its purely ideological dimension as the only factor explaining every modern conflict. One can even wonder whether or not civilization theory applies to the Orthodox context at all. According to French philosopher and Orthodox theologian Jean-François Colosimo: “This theory does not seem obvious. It appears to depend excessively on the occidental-centrism of Spengler.”⁴ Spengler, an early 20th-century German philosopher, inspired not only Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations but also George Florovsky’s concept of “pseudomorphosis,” which defined the theological borders of the Orthodox Church in opposition to Western influence since the 16th century. According to Spengler, civilization cannot hybridize. Its process of growth and evolution guarantees its intrinsic homogeneity. However, the so-called ‘The Orthodox bloc,’ was meanwhile dissolved before reemerging: “from 1991 to 2001, the new Balkan wars seemed to revive the lines running from Riga to Split which, since the 8th century, have separated Ottoman-Byzantine Europe from Frankish-Latin Europe. At the same time, Russia could not prevent Kosovo’s secession from Serbia, nor the integration of Bulgaria and Romania into the European Union, putting a final end to Yugoslav and Pan-Slavic ideas as being pan-Orthodox.”⁵

Far more problematic than the founding of the Greek Orthodox Church (1833) were the separatist tendencies of the Bulgarian Exarch in Istanbul, who, not content with setting up a community on the canonical territory of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, considered ethno-religious configurations (ethnophyletism) as more important than the spiritual unity of the universal message of the Orthodox Church. The Constantinopolitan Synod officially condemned this tendency in 1872. Despite this condemnation, the penetration of Orthodoxy as an essential symbol of identity was not confined to Greece but established itself as a paradigm throughout south-eastern Europe. This is not to say that Orthodoxy carried within it the seeds of nationalism. It would be presumptuous to make such a generalization. It would appear, nonetheless, that the “value of reference” provided by the Orthodox Church enables it to respond to the issue of collective identity by exploiting identity-based attachment to nationalist ideals.

The territorial reconfigurations mentioned in the introduction have led to migration flows of transnational and even transcontinental networks. They are accompanied by a strengthening of identities, also organized in the context of the “diaspora,” that is to say outside the boundaries of the canonical territory of Orthodox local churches (Western Europe, America,

⁴ Jean-François Colosimo, “Métamorphose du divin,” *Le Débat* 160 (2010): 84.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

Asia and Australia). The “deterritorialization” of the Orthodox Churches is probably the more significant sign of the persistence of ethno-religious synthesis brought by globalization today. Some Orthodox Churches continue to support the interests of their States of origin, serving as relays of influence, too often considered as part of the States’ “soft power,” especially on the international level. FLW, however, offers a different perspective on the role of Orthodoxy. Rather than building walls, Orthodoxy can also serve as a bridge in a pluralistic world where religions themselves are in mutation.

The Mutations of Religion: Violence

Characteristic of many of our contemporary societies, and curiously common to their otherwise often incompatible political systems in both East and West, is the novel teaching that there is such a thing as a purely public sphere that, in order to be at once both neutral and universal, must exclude religious expression. Religion, moreover, is understood in such societies as essentially a private pursuit, which must not intrude upon public discussions of the common good. But this is false in principle and, almost invariably, oppressive in practice. For one thing, secularism itself is a form of modern ideology, invested with its own implicit concept of the good and the just; and, if it is imposed too imperiously upon a truly diverse society, it becomes just another authoritarian creed. (FLW, § 80)

Faith is no more an answer to fear, but its source. Extremism and terrorism, wars and conflicts are constant realities that transform religion. Terrorist attacks in the name of God happen everywhere: from Paris to Istanbul, from Brussels to Pakistan and beyond. Unfortunately, terrorists use religious fundamentalism not only to inspire massive bloodshed but also to inspire fear. However, the only fear that religion should ever generate is a godly one. As it is written in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament: “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and there is good understanding in all who practice it.” (Proverbs 1:8) Fanatics and terrorists despise wisdom and God’s commandments. Across spiritual tradition, they may claim to believe in God, but they do not know wisdom nor do they live a virtuous life. Consequently, they do not truly believe in God. Terrorism, extremism, separatism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia are a threat to religion and to interreligious cooperation. As His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew repeats time and time again, “a crime committed in the name of religion is a crime against religion.”⁶

⁶ John Chryssavgis, *Bartholomew Apostle and Visionary* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2016), 20.

Religious fundamentalism has been and remains a global challenge for peace on the world global level. The war against terrorism has shown us some deadly mutations of religion becoming a deadly tool in the hands of extremism. Based on the reality of religious violence in today's world, we should continue to reflect on the religion-violence nexus. FLW invites us to this when it states:

In the end, we may justly say that violence is sin par excellence. It is the perfect contradiction of our created nature and our supernatural vocation to seek union in love with God and our neighbor. It is the negation of the divine order of reality, which is one of peace, communion, and charity. It is the denial and suppression of the divine dignity inherent in every soul, and an assault upon the image of God in each of us. (FLW, § 43)

Fanatics and terrorists despise wisdom and God's commandments. They may claim to believe in God, but they do not know wisdom nor do they live virtuous lives. Consequently, they do not truly believe in God. As we have often said: a crime in the name of religion is a crime against religion. In a recent address during the International Conference on Peace, at Al-Azhar University, in April 2017, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said with audacity: "Islam does not equal terrorism, because terrorism is a stranger to any religion. This is why interreligious dialogue can chase away fear and suspicion. It is central for peace, but only in a spirit of mutual confidence and respect."⁷

One of the more insidious aspects of modern Western cultural history has been the emergence of religious fundamentalism, including fideistic forms of Christianity that refuse to accept discoveries in such fields as geology, paleontology, evolutionary biology, genetics, and the environmental sciences. (FLW, § 71)

Conclusion

FLW is an essential tool that allows us to consider the social engagement of the Orthodox Church in broader society while acting for the transformation of the world. This modest contribution focused on some difficulties to better invite readers to expose themselves to the substantive resource that FLW is as it identifies ethos and dialogue. Dialogue is a divine mission from which humanity cannot be separated, for dialogue unites. It must then be understood as the real answer to divisions and fragmentations. Dialogue is a healing

⁷ H.A.H. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Religions and Peace," <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2017/04/30/religions-and-peace/> accessed March 31, 2021.

power beyond any oxymoron, paradox or ambivalence. It is the transformative power of the Word of God in which we are all called to participate and that brings peace in the world.

The encounter, in 2016 on the island of Lesbos, of Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens exemplified the power of dialogue, or rather the healing and transformative effect of dialogue. This encounter would not have been possible if decades ago a rapprochement had not taken place between Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, in 1964, in Jerusalem. These two primates became the symbols of a Christianity opposed for centuries, strengthening the line of demarcation which divided Europe in the aftermath of World War II and the rise of the Cold War. Nevertheless, Fukuyama was wrong because history is written by peace and not war. Huntington was wrong because civilizations implode rather than clash when no bridges connect them. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has embraced the legacy of the past through his personal leadership as head of the Orthodox Church of Constantinople, but also as an inspiring force of today's Orthodoxy by modeling it through the spirit of conciliarity. FLW continues to carry this same inspiration, motivated by the Holy and Great Council of Crete. A true Orthodox ethos is theology in action, where the only response to violence is dialogue. This ecumenical experience also applies to the interfaith dimension of dialogue, to build bridges and open borders.

Finally, the powerful role of religions working together to promote social inclusion and justice highlights another commitment that the Orthodox Church should pursue. We cannot separate our concern for human dignity, human rights, peace or social justice from our concern for ecological preservation and sustainability. These concerns are closely linked, as Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew continues to repeat. If we value each individual made in the image of God, and if we value every particle of God's creation, then we must also care for each other and our world, not separately, but together. This interdependence becomes a nexus and an opportunity for relationship, especially between religions. Thus, if dialogue is the foundation of an Orthodox ethos, the first step on this path is to read *For the Life of the World*.