

BETWEEN "NATIONAL" AND "UNIVERSAL" IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH: A WARNING OR A POSSIBLE PATTERN?

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*Abstract:*The territorial-numerical obsession of the Moscovite Throne, in a state of permanent emergence, incapable of seeing anything other than its own brightness (splendid as that of ancient Rome), blocks any dialogue in advance. And Constantinople, well, Constantinople would be the SINGLE capable to draw the Universal Orthodox Church out from the "democratic" congestion that has come to pass, in which everyone blocks (excommunicates, anathematizes, interrupts communion, etc.) each other out. But it will never succeed, with all its historical prestige, from the posture and mentality of a small Greek parish in Istanbul. The Ecumenical Patriarch must ascend again, overcoming and at the same time completing Hellenism from the banks of the Bosphorus. Only when all the Orthodox nations will reflect themselves in the Ecumenical Patriarch, when all the National Churches will meet equally and honestly upon his calling, without the Turkish-Phanariot captures of the past, the primate of Constantinople will be really Ecumenical. The Russian schism can never be cured without overcoming the Greek complexes.

Keywords: National, Universal, Orthodox Church, ethnicity, the ethnic-territorial principle.

Introduction

Leaving for good any type of hegemony and the philetist obsessions which are a burden for the One, Holy, Universal and Apostolic Church, represents an authentic imperative¹. The danger that the exaggerations and the harmful influences of all the methods of forcefully imposed types of culture and civilization, such as Islamism, Latinism, pan-Hellenism, pan-Slavism, etc., if we take into account only the most obvious of these evils, and all the wounds that they have created² and still create within the Church – the Body of Christ, "the fullness of Him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1, 23) – represents a serious threat to the Trinitarian integrity and unity of Christian Orthodoxy (John 17, 20-21) and obviously a temptation coming from the wicked one (John 17, 14-15). The unity of the Church truly transcends any other organic affiliation of the Christian; in it lays the Holy Spirit, Who institutions the brotherhood (John 13, 35) among all who live by the Truth of Christ (John 14, 6)³.

1. The Orthodox Regard on the National and/or Ethnic Identity

¹ Bartolomeu I, *Mesajul nr. 1117/24. Nov.2004*, in vol. *Biserica în misiune*, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 2005, pp. 37-38.

² Mihai Săsăujan, *Gândirea națională și Bisericele Ortodoxe în contemporaneitate*, in vol. *Ortodoxie și globalizare. Relevanța relației local-universal în Europa de astăzi*, "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Centrul de Studii Teologice-Istorice și de Prognoză Pastoral-Misionară al Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă din Arad, 2006, p. 275.

³ Rev. Dr. Mircea Cristian Pricop, *Ortodoxie, etnicitate, identitate europeană*, Ed. Arhiepiscopiei Tomisului, Constanța, 2012, p. 109-215.

The nation as well as the ethnicity do not end their mandate once the Baptism is received, but they stay to help the Christian man in his struggle for fulfilling the godly commandments. The baptized nation has the mission to represent the Church in the world, as a visible aspect, by carrying forth its own highness, experience and spiritual understanding, integrated in (yet not confused with) the plenitude of the Savior's universal Body. This is the reason for which "*the Church has always been incarnated in a concrete nation, having its own language, its own roots, its own traditions... We cannot ignore this. The Church feeds on local experiences. This is why our tradition is not an intellectual one, but rather a tradition that springs from the experience of the people. We cannot stand against this local characteristic which is common for the Orthodox Churches*"⁴. The Orthodox Church, in its essence, supports national diversity and encourages the legit aspirations of the people it shepherds.

The most valuable sacrificial offering that a Christian nation or ethnicity can bring to God is its own identity. The ethnic or national identity is purified by touching the life-giving Body of Christ and by washing in the Blood of the Lord, purified by the Holy Spirit and then offered to the heavenly Father, through the intercession of the Church. In order to achieve completeness, the sacrifice shall be a continual offering (Exodus 29, 42) in a never-ending deepening movement within the knowledge and confession of the true God, as well as a permanent common effort to spiritual advance, in accordance with the last commandment (Mathew 28, 19-20).

All the elements that make up the spiritual offering of a people – its own language, culture, land, moral law, blood, liberty and independence – represent the *sine qua non* condition of the gift dedicated to God (Exodus 28, 38). Its usurpation, of any form and origin, represents a serious sacrilege, a form of paganism and a depravation of the divine-redemptive gift. For God to be pleased, the sacrifice must be done without any flaw (Exodus 29, 1-2).

The reason for which the truth has not been understood and there have been so many mistakes regarding the ethnic element and its implications in the spiritual and liturgical life, in the defense of the canonical faith and tradition, **consists either in the hyperbole of ethnicity** (and as a prime result, the people – seen only as a pure bloodline – has become an idol) **or in the abysmal disregard for ethnicity** leading up until its very annulation, the people being perceived just as a simple mechanism, as a simple result of some material conjuncture.

The true Orthodox faith rejects both exaggerations, which have unfortunately found their way to come in the world under such forms as Nazism and Communism. In the last century the human mind, tempted by the wicked one, has done nothing else than to dismember religion, producing these systems through the obviously distorted restructuring of its components. Thus, the two ideologies have entered a deadly competition with each other, during the past century, disputing the political and religious superiority⁵, having as declared purposes: the instauration of "the new man" in the "new, post-Christian Europe"⁶. We will notice that both Communism and Nazism were seen by their founders, and were therefore organized and expressed as "*secular religions*". Obviously, the two complicated destructive machineries have structurally modified the perception on the nation/ethnicity, using it as a weapon in their own propaganda.

The influence of the Islamic caliphate pattern and its impression on Nazism and Bolshevism is proven by some of the most professional researchers, such as Carl Gustav Jung⁷, Bertrand

⁴ Christos Yannaras, *Ortodoxie și Occident*, in vol. Fr. Dr. Constantin Coman, *Ortodoxia sub presiunea istoriei*, Ed. Bizantină, București, 1995, p. 50.

⁵ See the well-documented article of the Pakistani researcher Ibn Warraq, *Islam as Totalitarianism*, in the online version of *New English Review* publication, which can be found on: http://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm?frm/30778/sec_id/30778#_ftnrfl4. (accessed on 19th of November 2018).

⁶ Ștefan Negureanu, *Evoluții noi în Biserica Ortodoxă după 1989*, in vol. *Ortodoxie și globalizare. Relevanța relației local-universal în Europa de astăzi*, „Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad, Centrul de Studii Teologice-Istorice și de Prognoză Pastoral-Misionară al Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă din Arad, 2006, p. 194.

⁷ Carl Jung, *The Collected Works*, vol. 18: *The Symbolic Life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1939, p. 281.

Russell⁸ or Jules Monnerot⁹. The Persian splendor, the pomp of a “freed” thinking, the pragmatism of the pagan world, the universal earthly empire, the holy war, the fanatic masses, have all fitted like a glove on the Bolshevik and Nazis system which has followed the goal to finally institution, **the new European „caliphate”**, which had the purpose to subjugate and empty all the power of the other „caliphates” in the West. The Fascist, the Bolshevik and the Islamic totalitarianism differ from one another in what the approach is concerned, but coincide in terms of the means used and their goal¹⁰.

The sufferance and the humiliations, to which the national Orthodox Churches have been submitted in the past century, give the orthodox word an irrefutable authority. During the worst times – although some contemporary challengers, taken away by the atheist-secular obsession, will immediately try to reveal some dirt hidden by who knows what member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, generalizing it to the entire Church – the subtle Body of Christ extended in the world (which is the Holy Church) has fully accomplished its duty towards its members, even more than that, it succeeded in defeating and ruining without any weapon besides that of the Spirit (Ephesians 6, 11-16), the powers of this world (Ephesians 6, 12).

2. Present Situation of the Church Unity from the Perspective of its Relation with the Nation and the Ethnicity

The Occidental imperialism is not the only one to blame for the abuses of the pan-ideological trends that have disturbed the Orthodox Church. It would be terribly unfair to make a generalized judgment such as the manichaeian antithesis: the demonic Occident and the Eastern Paradise¹¹. The Greek empire bears a part of the fault for imprinting a certain type of non-Christian way of thinking amongst some of the members of the earthly administration of the Orthodox Church.

The emphasis of any type of earthly elitism, in any circumstances, was not necessary, was harming enough for the universal faith. Pan-Hellenism as well as pan-Slavism, or any other generalization of a cultural-ethnic aspect, are pandemic absurdities which have intoxicated the Orthodox world throughout the centuries, but the Church as a whole has avoided to assimilate them.

An example of damaging exaggeration for the Church is the one offered by some byzantine clerics from the 14th century. When the Turks were at the gates of Byzantium, the men of the byzantine Church could still see in the Greek empire – which has been dramatically reduced to Constantinople and some dispersed Greek settlements under despotic control – an essential element of the universal Orthodoxy, without which it would lose its meaning. When, in 1397, prince Basil of Moscow asked the ecumenical patriarch Anthony IV if the Russians can exclude the remembrance of the emperor of Constantinople from the Holy Liturgy, while still remembering the ecumenical patriarch, Anthony IV answered: *“It is not possible for the Christians to have the Church without having the Empire; the two are impossible to separate”*¹². We can only imagine the impact this ideology had upon the Slav warriors, especially after it was officially stated by the ecumenical patriarch. Thus, the purely earthly Constantinopolitan obsession of the Russians developed on the background of an old Greek error.

⁸ Bertrand Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, Ed. George Allen and Unwin, London, 1920, pp. 5, 29, 114.

⁹ Jules Monnerot, *Sociologie du Communisme*, Ed. Gallimard, Paris, 1949, pp. 18-22.

¹⁰ See: Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution. Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p. 233.

¹¹ Christos Yannaras, *Ortodoxie și Occident*, in *Ortodoxia sub presiunea istoriei, vol.cit.*, p.37.

¹² John Meyendorff, *Teologia Bizantină*, Ed.IBMBOR, București, 1996, transl.Fr.Conf.Dr.Alexandru I.Stan, pp.283-288.

We totally agree with Father George Florovsky in what regards the Greek inheritance of the Church: “*Giving up the Greek heritage is equal to committing ecclesial suicide*”¹³. But we most definitely cannot accept the transformation of an historical charisma, even if we are talking about the Christianized Hellenism¹⁴ into a blazon of self-sufficient monopoly over the whole Church. We affirm that “*the entire traditions, civilization, culture of a nation are embodied in the life of the Church*”¹⁵.

Therefore, all peoples shepherded by the Church are progressively sanctified through their participation to life in the Eucharistic Truth, the source of all divine truths. This fact is noticeable especially with the sanctification of the language of the participant people. “*When a divine truth is expressed in a human language, the words themselves are transformed. And the fact that the true faith is surrounded by images and logical concepts proofs the transformation of the word and thought – the words become sanctified through this utilization*”¹⁶.

We oppose to the theologians who consider that the unity of the Orthodox Church is based exclusively on the catholic and geographic principle of Eucharist¹⁷. We admit the validity of these ecclesiological principles, but if we would stop exclusively at an abstract community, we would only limit to the completely absurd opinion that in the perspective of God, the walls and terrain are more important than the community and everything the community means in terms of identity: family, nation, Church.

Putting the universality of the Church to an exaggerated generalization, would imply the complete annulment of the national thinking and feeling, which could have serious repercussions upon the continuity of the Eucharistic generations which originate in the same nation, repercussions that could even lead to the interruption of this continuity, as it has happened mostly in the case of the Catholics and the Protestants. It is true that every bishop must have his own territory¹⁸ and completely be connected to it, but beyond anything else, the Church hierarchy (deacon, priest bishop) must have an **Eucharistic community which he must serve**.

The historical patriarchates, including the See of Constantinople, operate with a multitude of bishops, assigned to long gone sees, shepherds over fictive communities. The rupture between territorial and ethnic in the ancient patriarchates, certainly caused by external political factors, leads to a serious ecclesiological problem: the denial of the bishop’s objective which is to shepherd and to **serve the Eucharistic flock** entrusted to him by Christ, more precisely, the denial of the sacred relation between the bishop and the Eucharistic community he must serve, with the Church, relation which ensures the organic and functional unity between the ecclesial body and Christ, its Immortal Head. Thus, an institutionalization is reached, a transformation of the bishop into an office employee, member of numerous commissions and committees, following the quasi-autonomous model of the Papal Curia. The present crisis of the titular hierarchs within the Greek patriarchates becomes more and more intense in a context in which patriarchal synods have a more and more similar status to the one of the Vatican¹⁹.

3. The Ethnic and the Territorial Principle – True Bases of the Church Unity

¹³Fr.George Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian Theology*, in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol.4: *Aspects of Church History*, Richard S. Haugh (ed.), transl. Georges A. Barrois, Buchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz, 1987, p. 199.

¹⁴ Christos Yannaras, *Adevărul și Unitatea Bisericii*, *Op.cit.*, p.250

¹⁵*Idem*, *Conștiința eclesială*, in *Ortodoxia sub presiunea istoriei*, vol.cit., pp.50-51.

¹⁶Pr.George Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* vol. 3, Richard S. Haugh (ed.), translated from German by Richard S. Haugh, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont-Massachusetts, 1976, p. 33.

¹⁷Ioannis Zizioulas, Metropolitite of Pergam, *Ființa eclesială*, Ed.Bizantină, București, 1996, transl. Aurel Nae, p.251.

¹⁸*Ibidem*, pp.187-188 and reference 85.

¹⁹Christos Yannaras, *Adevărul și unitatea Bisericii*, *Op.cit.*, pp.240-242.

Under the pressure of the Russian Patriarchate (which has been invaded by the philetist idea of “the third Rome”, constantly troubled, permanently willing to determine the modification of the institution of pentarchy and the order of the honorific privileges in the Universal Church, according to the **territorial-numeric principle** – proof of a deep secularization of the Russian way of seeing things²⁰), the Patriarchate of Constantinople, lacking, through God’s will, the force it used to have, has turned to some kind of a counter-offensive and has invented **the principle of a “maternal” authority** worldly spread to all the other national Churches, especially to their Diaspora. The game of two which has as a prize the introduction of some kind of “orthodox caliphate”, the death of synods, of inter-Episcopal and Episcopal-Presbyterian fraternity, appears to be extremely harmful for the Holy Church²¹.

The solution would be for all the ecclesial sees to give up any honorific title, any primacy in the Synod Church; to renounce to all the aspects of self-elevation over the other autocephalies, however tempting this might be.

The burden of a grandiose civilization such as the Byzantine heritage, in the way in which it is compressed in the Throne from Phanar, could represent an inconvenience too big for a Patriarch of the entire Christian world. The unwritten and profoundly non-Christian tradition that entails the exclusive election of ethnic Greeks for the thrones of Constantinople and the other three “first born” Patriarchates represents a serious problem of perspective, which has been completely deterrent in the case of the other Orthodox nationalities (the authentic reason for the autocephalous Church processes) thus remaining, up to our days, in a reserved yet active form. This feature of the byzantine pattern was copied in a *sui generis* form by most of the Slavic Churches, especially by the Moscow Patriarchate. The concept of “maternity”, interpreted by ecclesiastic diplomats as the argument of supremacy of their own organization over the newly converted nations or over the nations and ethnicities which have fallen under the political and military rule of the Byzantine, respectively Russian empires, even if existed already an established religious leadership, has led both Constantinople and Moscow to irreconcilable positions.

The obvious lack of fairness in occupying the “first born” thrones above mentioned and the repeated abuses committed on the local non-Greek communities, not the secular Enlightenment, represented the final stroke which was the starting point for the autocephalies in Orthodoxy. If the local Churches would have had a patriarch from within their own communities, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Arabian, Albanian, Polish, Ukrainian *etc.*, on the throne of Constantinople, at least one in a thousand years²², the situation would have definitely been different. Nobody would have risen against the personal spiritual contribution to the unity and universality of the church, personified by the ecumenical patriarch. However, since it is not stones, wood, gold or silver, but a person itself that gives the spiritual warmth to the life of a Christian nation, of a national Church, the reverence for the history of a place, for the outstanding accomplishments of the descendants of the Empire, for the indisputable holiness of the Greek sons of the Church, could not stop the frustrations of the non-Greek peoples who felt that they were considered second hand Christians, unworthy of stepping, at least once in a millennium, on the ecumenical throne. And this remains an indubitable fact, despite any attempt of justification or argumentation made by the Greek theologians.

The present role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople is overwhelming in this situation. It can literally profit by the regretful situation in which it has been brought by the cruel phases of history, and spiritualize itself even more in order to succeed – not through the intelligent arguments

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p.239.

²¹ Rev. Dr. Mircea Cristian Pricop, *Tezaurul identitar românesc*, Ed. Arhiepiscopiei Tomisului, Constanța, 2013, pp. 19-76.

²² The occidental christians have shown a great interest regarding this aspect, especially during the last century when they chose non Italian popes for the Holy See.

of its committed theologians, with which they interpret the Biblical and canonical texts²³ in order to start some kind of a Counter-Reformation, together with the jurisdictional pretensions in what regards the diasporas depending on the other autocephalies, nor through the establishment of an instability among Churches, determined by the institutionalization of the titular hierarchs – in eliminating the caliphate primacy. We must not forget the Russian perspective, which has, beyond the exaggerations we mentioned before, a consistent amount of truth. The Church of Constantinople is one of the smallest autocephalies, with a number of congregants equal to that of a single Romanian Bishopry, for example. The ecumenical patriarch could determine even the transformation of the Constantinopolitan throne, from a small Greek church into a center of authentic ecumenicity, based on disinterested love and cultural-ethnic equality.

Conclusions

The Ecumenical Patriarchate, from every point of view, is the only one that can be considered righteous and responsible to take the necessary actions of moral reparation as a first step towards an even more solid unity of the Holy Church. On the other hand, all “first born” Patriarchates, situated in the middle of mostly non-Christian populations, must go beyond any type of triumphalism, so that, untroubled by the race for primacy, they could be able to rediscover their balance and the missionary zeal which has truly affirmed them in the life of the Church. Their mission must not aim at embracing the Diaspora of other Orthodox Churches, because this would imply serious problems in what regards keeping the unity of the Churches, but it must aim at apostleship within their own geographical coordinates, which they so wisely use in their theological argumentations.

Therefore, in order to avoid the awkward aspects related to a problematic “maternity”, too often proclaimed and not always proven enough, of some of the Orthodox Churches, it is absolutely necessary to resort to **the corroboration of the territorial principle and the ethnic principle.**

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²³Such an example is represented by the way in which Constantinopolitan theologians interpreted the word “ethnos” as “region” and not “people” (nation, ethnicity). See: Ioannis Zizioulas, Metropolit of Pergam, *Ființa eclesială...op.cit.*, p.150 and note 24. See also: Archd. Prof. Ioan N.Floca, *Drept canonic ortodox, legislație și administrație bisericească, vol.I*, Ed.IBMBOR, București, 1990, pp.534-539. *Idem, Canoanele...op.cit.*, pp.27-28.

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