

ORTHODOXY, POSTMODERNITY, AND ECUMENISM: THE DIFFERENCE THAT DIVINE-HUMAN COMMUNION MAKES

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When I was student at the University of Chicago, I attended David Tracy's course titled "Postmodernity." During a break, he said to me, and I'm paraphrasing, "You know, Aristotle, the Orthodox have a certain advantage—they did not go through the well-known chain of events within the West, meaning the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernity, Postmodernity—and because of this, those within the tradition have the advantage of knowing what it is like to think like a tradition." As with many, many things that Tracy said during my time at Chicago, it took me a while to fully understand what he was saying. However, with but a simple phrase, as he has done so often in his career, Tracy provided an important hermeneutical key for understanding Orthodoxy's place within the cultural situation that is now called postmodernity.

In this essay I will expand on what I think Tracy means by "thinking as a tradition," in a way that clarifies an Orthodox Christian response to the post-modern situation. I will begin by offering a brief and select summary of contemporary Orthodox theology that will illustrate a remarkable consensus around the centrality of the principle of the realism of divine-human communion for theology. Orthodoxy is, in essence, a tradition of thinking on the realism of divine-human communion manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. It is this particular core of the tradition that will shape Orthodoxy's response to central questions of a present situation, even beyond postmodernity, and that constitutes the single most important contribution that Orthodoxy can bring to ecumenical dialogue.

The Postcolonial Context

In addition to ending the long reign of the Byzantine Empire, the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 silenced a long and vibrant intellectual tradition in the Orthodox Christian East, whose last notable theologian was Gregory Palamas (1296–1359). It would take nearly 400 years before a revival would occur in Russia, which is discernible in part with the establishment of the intellectual academies of the Russian Orthodox Church in various cities throughout Russia. I speak of contemporary Orthodox theology in terms of "revival" because it is often forgotten that much of the Orthodox Christian world after the thirteenth century was colonized either by the Mongols, the Ottoman Turks, or the Communists. Contemporary Orthodox theology is a postcolonial attempt to shed the "effective history" of oppression so as to reconstitute Orthodoxy as an intellec-

tual tradition that draws on its past in order to confront contemporary questions. The usual caricatures of Orthodoxy are clear manifestations of this forgetfulness: the mystical smells-and-bells form of Christianity; a hopelessly male-dominated, androcentric, and hierarchical vestige of a Christendom that is much vilified in theology today; a community that refuses to encounter the modern world in its stubborn adherence to ancient doctrinal formulations. A striking example of this forgetfulness is Friedrich Schleiermacher's description of the Eastern Church as "torpid," within which "the combination of knowledge about religion with a really scientific organization is almost entirely destroyed. But just because of this purely negative character there was the less to be said here about that Church, since it cannot be determined whether it will again step back more into connexion with the world's intellectual intercourse, and so have the strength to elicit and develop within itself an antithesis analogous to the Western one."¹

The accusation that Orthodoxy never confronted modernity is most perplexing, because the obvious question is: How could Orthodox Christians engage modern currents of thought when the Ottoman Turks would not let them? It is true that the Ottomans did not occupy Russia, but the common opinion that Russian modernization was always a step behind the rest of Europe never takes into account the postcolonial effect of the nearly 200-year Mongol occupation of Russia. Most of the Orthodox world was under Ottoman Turkish oppression for over 400 years, up to the first decade of the twentieth century. The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople to this day still suffers from violations of its religious freedom by the Turkish government. The forgetfulness of this fact by most of the Christian world is exacerbated by the audacity of some scholars to describe the Ottoman Empire as tolerant.² "Tolerance" is not a word my grandmother would have used; even though she was only nine years old when the Ottomans finally left her village, she had vivid memories of their abuse. The fact that most Orthodox theology in Russia in the early nineteenth century and in Greece in the twentieth century up to the 1960's was primarily imitative of Protestant and Catholic dogmatic manuals can only make sense if one sees those contexts through postcolonial eyes. Soon after liberation, most Orthodox countries had to suffer through the tyranny of Communism for most of the twentieth century. As is known by anyone who has suffered oppression—because of race, gender, color, or domestic abuse—the oppressor's shadow lingers long after liberation, and much time is needed to recover any sense of authentic identity. Orthodox theology, as I will show, does not easily fit into the traditional Western divisions of history into the premodern, modern, and postmodern, since it is a postcolonial attempt to recover a tradition that was decimated through oppression and to discern how to retrieve that tradition in the face of contemporary questions.

In this postcolonial situation, Orthodox Christianity stands in an unusual

¹H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart, eds., *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), pp. 101–102.

²"The millet system of the Ottomans suggests another version of the imperial regime of toleration, one that was more fully developed and longer lasting" (Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997], p. 17).

middle position: It is often identified with the Christendom-like, male-dominated form of Christianity that most Christian theology today argues is irrelevant and possibly dangerous; yet, like many of the liberation theologies today, a close reading of contemporary Orthodox theology will reveal a similar complaint against traditional Western forms of theology, primarily the intellectualization of theology. Like so much of the liberation theology today, contemporary Orthodox theology emphasizes the role of “experience,” especially the experience of union with God. There is a remarkable affinity between contemporary Orthodox theology and Latino and Latin American theologies on the relational notion of the person and the link among presence, symbol, and sacrament. This affinity is especially evident if one compares Robert Goizueta’s *Caminemos con Jesús*³ and John Zizioulas’s *Communion and Otherness*.⁴ The place of Orthodox Christianity in the postmodern world is not quite as evident as might be expected. One thing is certain: Contemporary Orthodox theology can be rightly understood only if one takes into account the postcolonial situation of Orthodox Christianity.

*Contemporary Orthodox Theology:
A Tradition of Thinking on Divine-Human Communion*

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, theological faculties were established in traditional Orthodox cities throughout Eastern Europe. A movement to return to more authentic forms of the Orthodox spiritual and theological traditions began in the late eighteenth century with the Slavonic translation of the *Philokalia* compiled by Nikodemus of the Holy Mountain (1749–1809), which was followed by a series of Russian translations of Eastern patristic texts. The revival of the Orthodox intellectual tradition, however, is also indebted to individual thinkers who were not affiliated with the emerging theological institutions of higher learning in traditional Orthodox countries and who, in fact, were reacting to the theology emerging from these institutions. Although the theological academies throughout the Orthodox world did play an indispensable role in the revival of the Orthodox intellectual tradition, especially in their creative appropriation of the *Philokalia* and in producing translations of patristic texts, they were established on the models of German universities, and much of the theological work produced by these theological schools’ faculties was considered primarily imitative of the Protestant and Catholic scholastic manuals.⁵

Early-nineteenth-century Russia saw the emergence of an intellectual tradition that was simultaneously rooted in the Orthodox theological and liturgical tradition and also seeking to engage the modern philosophical currents stream-

³Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

⁴Jean Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

⁵See Christos Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, tr. Peter Chamberas and Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006 [orig.: *Orthodoxia and Dysi sti neoteri Ellada* (Athens: Domos, 1992)]).

ing into Russia, especially German idealism. From this particular trajectory emerged what is referred to as the Russian school.⁶ The most well-known and influential intellectual from the Russian school is Vladimir Sergeevich Soloviev (1853–1900), considered to be the father of Russian sophiology. Two ideas were central to Soloviev's thought: the humanity of God (*bogochelovechestvo*), and Sophia. The fact that both concepts remained central to Russian religious philosophy allows Rowan Williams to claim, echoing Whitehead's remark on Plato, that "all subsequent Russian metaphysics is a series of footnotes to Soloviev."⁷ The concept of the humanity of God is related to the Orthodox dogmatic principle of the divine-human union in Christ. Soloviev, however, was far from a dogmatician. His philosophy attempts to express this Orthodox principle of the divine-human union in Christ in the categories of German idealism, particularly the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854). Although he appropriates the thought of Schelling, Soloviev's philosophy is a unique synthesis of the Orthodox affirmation of divine-human communion and German idealism that attempts to critique the inadequacies of modern philosophies. The humanity of God forms the basis for Soloviev's attempt to conceptualize a God who is both transcendent and immanent to creation. For Soloviev, affirming the humanity of God means that creation is intrinsic, not extrinsic, to the life of God. God relates to creation from all eternity, and creation exists in the life of God insofar as God's life is the reconciliation of all opposites: the material and the spiritual, freedom and necessity, finite and infinite. Creation is a movement of recovery of that original unity that is manifested in the God-man—Christ. Soloviev expresses this particular understanding of the God-world relation with the concept of Sophia and thereby gives birth to the sophiological tradition of the Russian school. God is Sophia, which means that God eternally relates to creation, and creation itself—created Sophia—is a movement of reconciliation toward divine Sophia.

As a result of the particular understanding of God's relation to the world that is implied in Soloviev's sophiology, he had a higher estimation of secular knowledge than the more extreme Orthodox Slavophiles of his time. However, Soloviev was critical of the determinism and meaninglessness of the materialism of modern atheism. His sophiology was a *via media* between extreme ideas and currents of thought prevalent throughout nineteenth-century Russia: rationalism and materialism, freedom and necessity, modern atheism and Orthodox Slavophile nationalism. The identification of the humanity of God with Sophia allowed Soloviev to affirm that all of created reality reflects the divine Sophia and is the movement of created Sophia toward the unity of all in God, which is divine Sophia.

Although the thought of the Russian school bears the stamp of Soloviev's sophiology up until the Revolution of 1917, it would be Sergei Nikolaevich

⁶The best account of the Russian school is Paul Valliere's *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov—Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

⁷Rowan Williams, *The Theology of Vladimir Nikolaevich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique* (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1975), p. 209.

Bulgakov (1871–1944) who would advance the most sophisticated theological development of Soloviev's thought. Bulgakov was more conversant than Soloviev with the Eastern patristic tradition, and his sophiology is expressed explicitly in the idiom of the traditional theological dogmas and categories of the Orthodox tradition. Bulgakov was a convert from Marxism to Orthodoxy and was eventually ordained in 1918. After being exiled from Russia, he became the cofounder and first dean of St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris in 1925. Bulgakov was active in the ecumenical movement and was one of the most prominent spokespersons of Orthodoxy to the Western world.

The most developed form of Bulgakov's sophiology appears in his dogmatic trilogy, *On Divine Humanity*.⁸ Bulgakov follows Soloviev in identifying the humanity of God with Sophia and affirms the core meaning of Soloviev's sophiology—God is always the God for “me,” that is, for creation. God's being is not dependent on creation, nor is God exhausted in God's relation to creation; God's being, however, is such that God *is* the God who creates and redeems creation. Bulgakov would affirm the distinction between the world that God relates to from all eternity and the created world, but it is impossible for humans to think of God as not eternally relating to the world.

Unlike Soloviev, Bulgakov's sophiology is more explicitly trinitarian and appropriates the traditional trinitarian language. Sophia is identified with the *ousia*, but as such *ousia* comes to mean much more than that which the persons of the Trinity possess in common. God in God's being exists as the creator and redeemer of the world. *Hypostasis* does not simply indicate that which is particular in the three persons of the Trinity. The divine Sophia does not exist monistically but as Trinity. For Bulgakov, the relations among the persons of the Trinity are best understood in terms of *kenosis*, as a movement of self-giving and self-receiving that has the capacity to overflow and reflect itself in the creation of the world. This kenotic movement is the source of and is reflected in the world, especially in the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. Anticipating later liberation theology, Bulgakov argued that the crucifixion of Christ reveals the *kenosis* of each of the persons of the Trinity, which includes the co-suffering of the Father with the Son. Always participating in the divine Sophia, the world as created Sophia is moving toward the unity of all in God's life, which is given in and made possible by the *kenosis* of the Son and completed by the Holy Spirit.

The mark of German idealism, particularly the philosophy of Schelling, is evident on Bulgakov's theology, but equally as evident is his embeddedness within the Orthodox patristic and dogmatic tradition. Like Soloviev, Bulgakov's own understanding of the God-world relation allows him to have a more positive estimation of nontheological disciplines. Moreover, Bulgakov identified problems within the patristic tradition, which the resources of German idealism could assist in resolving. The Fathers did not have the last word for Bulgakov, and, as they used the philosophical categories of their time, so must theology today make use of modern philosophy to continue to extract the implications of the

⁸All three volumes have been translated by Boris Jakim and published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI: *The Lamb of God* (forthcoming), *The Comforter* (2004), and *The Bride of the Lamb* (2002, with T&T Clark, Edinburgh).

divine-human communion in Christ.

Sophiology did not survive in any influential form past Bulgakov. Its demise is partly due to the explicit refutation of sophiology by Orthodox thinkers in the Russian diaspora, whose own understanding of Orthodox theology would come to be known as the neo-patristic school. Although this school has roots in the translations of the Eastern patristic texts in Russia, it is most associated with Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) and Vladimir Nikolaeivich Lossky (1903–58). Both Florovsky and Lossky were part of the “Sophia Affair” in 1935—the accusation of Bulgakov’s theology as heretical by both the Moscow Patriarchate and what would become known as the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. During the time of the Sophia Affair, Florovsky was professor of patristics at St. Sergius and would later serve as dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in Crestwood, NY (founded in 1938). Florovsky framed the debate with Russian sophiology in terms of the relation between theology and philosophy. For Florovsky, theology had to be rooted in the language and categories of the Eastern patristic texts. He coined the phrase “neo-patristic synthesis,” but such a synthesis must retain the Hellenistic contours of patristic thought. Florovsky argued that any attempt to de-Hellenize the language of the Fathers would only distort their theology and divide the church.

Lossky was also a part of the Russian émigré community in Paris, but he was never affiliated with St. Sergius.⁹ For Lossky, much as for Bulgakov, the divine-human union of Christ is the starting point for theological thinking about God. Insofar as this union is one between two opposites, between what is God and what is not God, it is beyond the grasp of human reason, whose capacity for understanding is restricted to created reality. Whereas human reason functions on the basis of the law of noncontradiction, the incarnation demands that theology be antinomic—the affirmation of the nonopposition of opposites. Theology’s function is to give expression to the divine-human communion in Christ, which reveals the antinomic God—the God who is radically immanent in Christ and whose very immanence reveals God’s radical transcendence. Its purpose is not to attempt to resolve the antinomy through reason but to stretch language so as to speak of the divine-human communion in Christ in such a way that guides one toward true knowledge of God, which is mystical union with God beyond reason. Theology is apophatic, by which Lossky meant two things: that language is inadequate to represent the God beyond all representation, and that true knowledge of God consists in experience of God rather than in propositions rooted in human logic.

The affirmation of the God who is beyond being yet radically immanent to creation is the basis for the essence/energies distinction. The (hyper)essence of God refers to God’s transcendence, whereas the energies refer to God’s immanence and are the means for communion with God. True knowledge of God consists in participation in the energies of God, which are uncreated. The crystallization of the essence/energies distinction can be traced back to Palamas. Lossky, together with Florovsky and John Meyendorff (1926–92), presented the es-

⁹For an overview of Lossky’s theology, see my *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

sence/energies distinction as uniquely characteristic of and central to Orthodox theology. Its centrality is affirmed by virtually every twentieth-century Orthodox theologian, including the most famous outside of Russia and Greece, the Romanian Dumitru Staniloae (1903–93), and it is the reason why Orthodox theology today is often referred to as neo-Palamite. The distinction was also used in polemics against neo-scholastic understandings of created grace. For Lossky, the truth of the essence/energies distinction lies in its antinomic character: It expresses the transcendent and immanent God without attempting to resolve the antinomy.

In addition to the essence/energies distinction, there is an additional antinomy that is foundational for theology: God as Trinity. For Lossky, the revelation of God as Trinity is a “primordial fact” given in the incarnation. The goal of theology is not to explain how God is Trinity but to deconceptualize philosophical categories in order to express the antinomy. The patristic categories of *ousia* and *hypostasis* are given in the tradition in order to express what is common and incommunicable in God as Trinity. The trinitarian categories, however, also provide the foundation for an understanding of personhood that is defined as irreducible uniqueness to and freedom from nature. Salvation as the event of mystical union through participation in the divine energies means a realization of true personhood in which the human person is irreducible to the common human nature; thus, the person is unique but also free in transcendence from the limitations of human nature to experience what is other than creation—the God beyond being. For Lossky, this mystical experience of God occurs through union with the deified nature of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Lossky was also a vehement opponent of the *filioque*, which he interpreted as the natural result of the rationalization of the doctrine of the Trinity.

At this point, I stop my cursory history of contemporary Orthodox theology to address one relevant question: Did Orthodox theology respond to modernity? It should be clear to all that the Russian school is, in fact, an Orthodox response to modernity. A wider reading in Russian philosophy and theology during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would reveal two things: the stamp of Soloviev, and an engagement with the same questions that were central to modern philosophical and theological currents of thought.¹⁰ There is also one discernible feature evident in this response to modernity, particularly in the thought of Soloviev and Bulgakov: The response is rooted in the traditional Orthodox principle of divine-human communion. It is the case that the Russian school was drawn more to the German idealism of Schelling, but I would argue that such an attraction stems from the fact that there was a greater affinity between the conceptualization of the union of the God-world relation in German idealism and the Orthodox principle of divine-human communion than between the latter and the neo-Kantian emphasis on the divide between God and the world. The sophiology of the Russian school was never a wholesale appropriation of German idealism; aspects of the thought of Schelling, in particular, were appropriated, while the whole of his thought was critiqued on the christological principle

¹⁰See V. V. Zenkovsky's *A History of Russian Philosophy*, tr. George L. Kline, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1953).

of divine-human communion. Even the appropriation of a modern philosophical idiom was justified on the basis of the principle of divine-human communion, the logic being that, since God's presence pervades all of creation, then even so-called secular knowledge is able to reflect the truth about God.

The debate between the Russian and the neo-patristic schools is often cast in terms of contrasting attitudes toward tradition.¹¹ The Russian school is portrayed as rooted in, yet going beyond, tradition as it attempts to bring Orthodoxy into an engagement with the modern world through a creative reconstruction of traditional dogmatic formulas; the neo-patristic school is described as wedded to classical dogmatic language and resistant to reinterpretations. This particular way of looking at the debate can be misleading if the narrative does not also include the fact that the Russian school and the neo-patristic school agree on one essential point: the principle of divine-human communion. I would argue that the core of the debate is not about the role of tradition within theology but, rather, about the implications of the principle of divine-human communion for conceptualizing the God-world relation.

For Lossky—who contributed a pamphlet to the Sophia Affair, *The Debate on Sophia (Spor o Sofii)*, which he produced for the Brotherhood of St. Photius and which rejected Bulgakov's attempt to unite certain aspects of German idealism to dogmatic theology—the debate with sophiology was not primarily about the relation between theology and philosophy; rather, it was about conceptualizing the transcendent and immanent God. Both Bulgakov and Lossky agreed that divine-human communion is not simply the goal of the Christian life but the very presupposition, the first principle, in all theological thought. The essence/energies distinction, central to Lossky's thought, especially in his critique against neo-scholasticism, also constituted Lossky's response to Bulgakov's sophiology. The attributes of God, such as Sophia, are identified with God's energies, and not with God's essence, since the latter is beyond all being and, thus, unknowable. Lossky also argued that the logic of apophaticism, of affirming the incomprehensibility of God's essence, requires a strict division between *theologia*, or knowing God in Godself, and *oikonomia*, knowing God as God relates salvifically to the world. To think of God as eternally relating to the world, as Bulgakov did, is to transgress this apophatic boundary and to negate the otherness between the world and God that is the very basis for a divine-human communion based on love and freedom. Lossky's fear was that any attempt to justify the principle of divine-human communion philosophically, which is what he saw in neo-scholasticism and Russian sophiology, ultimately forgets that the only justification is the actual experience of union with God.

Bulgakov would not have disagreed with Lossky that the highest form of knowledge of God is *theosis*; however, for Bulgakov, the God who creates so as to bring the created into communion with Godself was the God who is eternally free to create in such a way and, as such, is eternally relating to creation. For Bulgakov, one could not think God without thinking creation and *vice versa*. This leads to a much less suspicious and more positive appraisal of the role in theology for philosophy and all the nontheological disciplines. Philosophy has

¹¹See Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, especially pp. 373–403.

its own integrity and reveals truths about being human. Theology does not appropriate those truths to validate the principle of divine-human communion, but it cannot ignore those truths in its never-ending attempt to interpret the realism of divine communion in Jesus Christ.

Despite Bulgakov's and Lossky's differences on the interpretation of the principle of divine-human communion, it is important to see that they were in full agreement that any response to modernity must be rooted in the Orthodox principle of divine-human communion. This consensus makes the labels of "modern" for Bulgakov and "traditionalist" for Lossky inaccurate; both would claim that the traditional Orthodox affirmation of divine-human communion in Christ is nonnegotiable and is the basis upon which to assess and to critique modern intellectual currents. Bulgakov and Lossky would have essentially agreed that nothing in modern thought could compel Orthodox theology to abandon its central claim: God has created the world for communion with God, which is effected in the person of Jesus Christ. The disagreement is over the implications of this claim for the particular questions and challenges faced by the Christian tradition in the modern period.

To continue with the brief history of contemporary Orthodox theology, the work of Lossky and Florovsky had a significant influence on a group of young theologians in Greece in the 1960's, most notably Nikos Nissiotis (1925–86), Christos Yannaras (b. 1935), and John Zizioulas (b. 1931). Elements of Lossky's theology, such as apophaticism, the essence/energies distinction, and the theology of personhood, are evident in Yannaras's major work, *Person and Eros* (1970).¹² The most influential of these theologians is Zizioulas, who synthesized the eucharistic theology of Nicolas Afanasiev (1893–1966) and Alexander Schmemmann (1921–83) with the theology of personhood of Lossky via Yannaras. Zizioulas was a student of Florovsky when the latter was a professor of Harvard; he also taught dogmatics at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts (founded in 1938), before taking a permanent position at the University of Glasgow.

Zizioulas, like Bulgakov and Lossky, would affirm the principle of divine-human communion as the starting point of all theology, but, unlike Lossky's emphasis on the ascetical, mystical ascent to God, Zizioulas would argue that the experience of God is communal in the event of the eucharist.¹³ According to Zizioulas, early Christians experienced the eucharist as the constitution of the community as the eschatological body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. This experience of Christ in the eucharist is the basis for the patristic affirmation of the divinity of Christ and the Spirit and, hence, of the affirmation of God as Trinity. Zizioulas's emphasis of the experience of God in the *hypostasis*, or person, of Christ has several implications. First, it is a noticeable break with the virtual consensus in Orthodox theology on the use of the essence/energies distinction for expressing Orthodox understandings of salvation as the experience of the divine life. Second, it is the foundation for what Zizioulas calls an "ontological

¹²Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, tr. Norman Russell (from 4th ed.) (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006 [orig.: *To Prosopon kai o Eros* (Athens: Domos, 1970)]).

¹³For an overview of Zizioulas's theology, see Papanikolaou, *Being with God*.

revolution,” insofar as it reveals God’s life as that which itself is constituted in freedom and not necessity. If the eucharist is the experience of God, and, if such an experience is for created reality the freedom from the tragic necessity of death inherent to created existence, then God exists as this freedom from necessity, even the necessity of God’s nature, since God gives what God *is*. The freedom of God from the necessity of God’s nature is the meaning of the patristic assertion of the monarchy of the Father—the Father “causes” the Son and the Spirit and in so doing constitutes God’s life as Trinity through a movement of freedom and love. With the doctrine of the Trinity, for the first time otherness, relation, uniqueness, freedom, and communion become ontologically ultimate. This understanding of divine-human communion in the life of the Trinity through the *hypostasis* of Christ also grounds Zizioulas’s theology of personhood. Person is an *ecstatic* being—free from the limitations of created nature—and a *hypostatic* being—unique and irreducible to nature. This freedom and irreducibility is only possible in relation to God the Father through Christ by the Holy Spirit because it is only in eternal relations of love that one is constituted as a unique and free being, that is, a person. Zizioulas has maintained the building blocks of Lossky’s theology of person, but with an emphasis on relationality and in a decidedly nonapophatic approach. Zizioulas’s theology of personhood is the organizing principle for this theology, and it is evident in his theology of ministry, in his ecclesiology, and in his theology of the environment.

In order to understand the place of Orthodox Christianity in the postmodern world, there are at least three aspects from the thought of the post-1960’s generation of Greek theologians that are relevant: first, the continuity with the neo-patristic school and the virtual absence of any trace of the Russian school; second, the general audience for this generation of theologians, which is primarily other Christian theologians and traditions; third, the appearance of postmodern concepts and themes, such as difference, otherness, particularity, and desire, without any substantial engagement with some of the icons of postmodern thought, such as Foucault, Derrida, and Kristeva. What emerges in this post-1960’s generation is an Orthodox theology with striking affinities with postmodern thought that developed, however, primarily in conversation with other Christian theologies and not with postmodern classics, and which extends the tradition of consensus on the Orthodox principle of divine-human communion—in continuity primarily with the neo-patristic school, while self-consciously rejecting the Russian school.¹⁴

Orthodox Responses to Postmodernity

Two contemporary Orthodox theologians have directly addressed the ques-

¹⁴Much of the preceding section will also appear in my “Orthodox Theology,” in Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milič Lochman, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, Lukas Vischer, eds., Geoffrey W Bromiley, English-language ed., David B Barnett, statistical ed., *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol 5 (Grand Rapids, MI William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., Leiden Brill, 2007), pp 414–418 I am grateful to the publishers for permission to use material from that entry for this essay

tion of the relation between Orthodoxy and postmodernism: Yannaras, and David Bentley Hart. Yannaras belongs to the post-1960's generation of Greek theologians who were influenced by the neo-patristic thought of Florovsky and Lossky. He was instrumental in spearheading the critique of the imitative theological style of the pre-1960's generation of Greek theologians. The influence of Lossky is especially evident in Yannaras's emphasis on the centrality of apophaticism in theological discourse. In 1967, Yannaras wrote a book that was recently translated into English under the title *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*.¹⁵ In this book, Yannaras attempts to argue for a revival of Dionysian apophaticism via Heidegger's critique of the Western philosophical and theological tradition as "ontotheological." A similar move that received much attention was made by Jean-Luc Marion in *God without Being*, first published in French in 1982. Since the publication of *God without Being*, Marion and Derrida have engaged in a debate about the nature of apophaticism, ontotheology, and postmodernity, which is indicative of the clear affinities between apophatic and postmodern understandings of the nature of language.¹⁶ It is clear, however, fifteen years before Marion, that Yannaras argued for the priority of apophaticism in theological discourse based on Heidegger's judgment of traditional philosophical and theological discourses as ontotheological.¹⁷ In some sense, Yannaras was ahead of his time, and his emphasis on apophaticism in theology can be interpreted as a kind of postmodern theology before the explosion of postmodern thought.

Yannaras more directly engages postmodern thought in a book first published in Greece in 1993 and recently translated under the title *Postmodern Metaphysics*.¹⁸ Yannaras argues that one can detect in "post-Newtonian physics" recourse to an apophatic language in an attempt to describe what exceeds language. Post-Newtonian physics also hints at an ontology whose constitutive features are relationality, personal otherness, and existence understood dynamically as a mode (*tropos*) rather than as substance (*ousia*). Though Yannaras is quick to argue that "a metaphysical interpretation and understanding cannot be a result of the scientific study of the world,"¹⁹ "the language of contemporary physics . . . liberates and 'validates' other modes of cognitive access to the cosmic fact."²⁰ An example of another mode of cognitive access for Yannaras is the personal encounter with a work of art, which yields a knowledge of "personal otherness" that is simultaneously "an experience of *relation*."²¹

This engagement with "post-Newtonian" physics has one central point in

¹⁵Tr. Haralambos Ventis (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005); see my review of this book in *Modern Theology* 23 (April, 2007): 301–304.

¹⁶For an account of this debate, see Arthur Bradley, "God sans Being: Derrida, Marion, and 'A Paradoxical Writing of the Word Without,'" *Literature and Theology* 14 (September, 2000): 299–312.

¹⁷This argument has been acknowledged, as far as I know, only in Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 5.

¹⁸Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, tr. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004 [orig.: *Meta-neôterikê meta-physikê* (Athens, 1993)]).

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 112.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 115.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 112–113, emphasis in original.

common with Yannaras's earlier work on Heidegger: Both make possible an ontology that is implied in the Eastern Christian affirmation of divine-human communion and is expressed in its most succinct form in the doctrine of the Trinity. For Yannaras, postmodern critiques of modern rationalism and of bourgeois individualism resonate with aspects of Eastern Christian thought, particularly its emphasis on knowledge as experience and on relational notions of personhood. Such postmodern buzzwords as otherness, difference, particularity, relationality, and desire are all central to a relational ontology that is inscribed in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Yannaras is not saying that postmodern thought validates Eastern Christian thought; rather, there is a tone of vindication in Yannaras's work in his critical appropriation of postmodern thought. It is modern philosophical and theological intellectual currents that Yannaras sees as inimical to Eastern Christian thought. Postmodern thought has revived ideas, themes, and concepts that were always central to Eastern Orthodox Christianity but marginalized by modern philosophy and theology. Yannaras would clearly argue, however, that postmodern notions of otherness, difference, particularity, relationality, and desire work only within a trinitarian ontology.

Hart's more direct engagement with postmodern thought in *The Beauty of the Infinite*²² is similar to Yannaras's but more explicit in its critique of postmodern understandings of difference. Like Yannaras, Hart affirms the postmodern critique of modern rationalism. Lest there be any doubt, he states that "the West at long last awakes from the nightmare of philosophy, even the last ghosts of Enlightenment reason having been chased away, to discover and rejoice in the irreducibly aesthetic character and ultimate foundationlessness of 'truth.'"²³ Hart analyzes the thought of many of the postmodern icons, including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault, only to conclude that "the discourses we tend to recognize as critically postmodern, however little else they may share, all come sooner or later to depend upon one or another account of the 'unrepresentable.'"²⁴ These accounts of the unrepresentable, far from being an overcoming of metaphysics, are themselves, according to Hart, a metaphysics of immanence that prioritizes all that traditional metaphysics excluded as the ontological—change, becoming, and absence, that is, difference. Insofar as postmodern notions of the unrepresentable reject any notion of transcendence, difference—the condition for the possibility of which is the original difference of the unrepresentable—is possible only through negation and, hence, through violence. Ironically, postmodern thought essentializes difference as violence and in the end offers nothing more than the choice of being "saved from violence by violence, or else by withdrawal (which is death)."²⁵ Postmodern thought is

a mystical faith in the reality of the veil, an immanent metaphysics. And the only moral effort permitted by such a faith takes the form of paradox and tragedy. However one phrases the matter, this much is certain: insofar as the

²²David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite, The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003)

²³Ibid., p. 5

²⁴Ibid., p. 44

²⁵Ibid., p. 89

“postmodern” is the completion of the deconstruction of metaphysics, it usually depends upon one immense and irreducible metaphysical assumption: that the unrepresentable *is*; more to the point, that the unrepresentable (call it *différance*, chaos, being, alterity, the infinite . . .) is somehow truer than the representable (which necessarily dissembles it), more original, and qualitatively *other*: that is, it does not differ from the representable by virtue of a greater fullness and unity of those transcendental moments that constitute the world of appearance, but by virtue of its absolute difference, its dialectical or negative indeterminacy, its no-thingness.²⁶

Hart adds that

if the world takes shape against the veil of the unrepresentable, is indeed given or confirmed in its finitude by this impenetrable negation, then the discrimination of peace from violence is at most a necessary fiction, and occasionally a critical impossibility; as all equally *is*, and power alone sustains the game of the world, violence is already present in all “truth,” though all truthlessness too—sadly or joyously—is violence.²⁷

Postmodern thought, according to Hart, contains the seed for the subversion of its account of difference. This seed is in its critique of rationality and its affirmation of the rhetorical and aesthetic, or the rhetorical as aesthetic. It is not a critique of Christianity, as Nietzsche thought, to affirm the priority of the aesthetic, because beauty, Hart argues, is at the heart of the Christian understanding of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The proper Christian response to postmodern accounts of difference is simply the claim that the Christian understanding of difference is more persuasive because it is more beautiful. Christian difference is not about violence but about peace. The difference that is inscribed in finite being is not the result of a more original unrepresentable difference but of the trinitarian difference, of the unity-in-difference of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The plenitude of God’s trinitarian being is the precondition for constituting creation as gift. The ontological divide between God and the created other is the precondition for distance to result in real difference that is an event of communion that bridges the divide. Difference as divine-human communion does not totalize the other, but lets the other simply be other. Difference that hardens into distance is a result of violence; the distance that is transformed into real difference is an event of peace realized by the prior gift of God’s love for the created other. As Hart puts it:

[T]he Trinity’s perfect act of difference also opens the possibility of the “ontico-ontological difference,” as the space of the gift of analogous being, imparted to contingent beings who, then, receive this gift as the movement of an ontic deferral. . . . The distance between God and creation is not alienation, nor the Platonic *chorismos* or scale of being, but the original ontological act of distance by which every ontic interval subsists, given to be crossed but not

²⁶Ibid., p. 52.

²⁷Ibid., p. 91.

overcome, at once God's utter transcendence and utter proximity.²⁸

In the end, for Hart, it comes down to a choice between two competing narratives of difference that cannot be adjudicated. For Hart, Christians must stand confident in the persuasiveness and beauty of their narrative of the divine-human communion effected in the person of Jesus Christ. In the battle between the "New Nietzsche" and the Christian narrative of divine-human communion, "[t]he most potent reply a Christian can make to Nietzsche's critique is to accuse him of a defect of sensibility—of bad taste. And this, in fact, is the last observation that should be made at this point: Nietzsche had atrocious taste."²⁹

In the brief history of contemporary Orthodox theology that I have offered, one can trace a line of influence from Soloviev to the post-1960's generation of Greek theologians. The neo-patristic theologians did reject the Russian sophiologists, but even this rejection forms part of a singular history. Hart's work does not fit easily into this trajectory—he is neither a neo-patristic theologian nor retrieving Russian sophiology. In fact, both Lossky and Yannaras may gasp at Hart's affirmation of Thomistic notions of analogy, which they judge as antithetical to Dionysian apophaticism. Hart, however, stands within this trajectory in one very important way: The ground of his theology, its very presupposition, is the realism of divine-human communion. In essence Hart is arguing, much like Yannaras and Zizioulas, that postmodern concerns with difference, otherness, particularity, relationality, and desire are only secured through an affirmation of the principle of divine-human communion. In the centrality of the principle of divine-human communion, Hart's response to postmodernity mirrors that of Bulgakov's and Lossky's response to modernity.

Orthodoxy, Postmodernism, and Ecumenism

In what is now a classic essay in its own right, Tracy discussed three different responses to the present situation: the (late) modern, the antimodern, and the postmodern. Toward the end of the essay, Tracy concluded that, though Christian theology can agree and retrieve elements of each of these trajectories, it does not easily fit into any of them. As he wrote, "nowhere in all this conflict of interpretations among moderns, anti-moderns, and post-moderns does a full Christian theological naming of the present as interruptive eschatological time before the living God occur."³⁰ In my brief history of contemporary Orthodox theology, I have tried to show how Orthodox thought does not easily fit into either the modern or postmodern trajectories, nor is it easily categorized as a fossilized form of the premodern. Orthodox theologians have consistently responded to both modern and postmodern theological and philosophical currents united around a shared consensus on the fundamental principle of the realism of

²⁸Ibid., pp. 193–194.

²⁹Ibid., p. 125.

³⁰David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; London: SCM Press, 1994), p. 18.

divine-human communion. Nothing within modern or postmodern thought has convinced Orthodox Christians to surrender what is at the heart of their tradition—that God has created the world so as to effect a communion between God and the world. No matter how one interprets the central questions in the postmodern situation, whether they are on epistemology, subjectivity, or pluralism, the Orthodox response will continue to be shaped by the fundamental presupposition of the realism of divine-human communion. No Orthodox theologians, their differences notwithstanding, would dispute the centrality of this principle; this consensus over the past two centuries, which I would argue extends back to the patristic period, illustrates what Tracy meant by “thinking as a tradition.”

Yannaras’s and Hart’s attack on modernity as fundamentally a mistake may lead one to categorize their theologies as antimodern. The antimodern camp, associated with such theologians and philosophers as Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, often speaks about the incommensurability between Christian and modern philosophical discourses. This position often results in the wholesale rejection of modern thought. Hart and Yannaras share elements of this antimodern trajectory, rejecting in particular the modern attack on premodern forms of knowing, modern rationalism, and the excesses of modern individualism; whether they fit neatly into the antimodern camp is ambiguous.

The ambiguous relation between Orthodoxy and modernity is further evinced in Orthodox rhetoric on democracy. This issue of Orthodoxy and democracy is especially acute since the fall of Communism, where the Orthodox churches in traditional Orthodox countries have been forced to face questions for the first time but without the necessary intellectual resources, which were decimated during the course of both Ottoman and Communist occupation. In traditional Orthodox countries, one will find Orthodox church leaders issuing prodemocracy language while simultaneously spewing invectives against the excessive individualism of the West. One will also find Orthodox church leaders lending support to what appear to be antidemocratic initiatives, such as restrictions on religious freedom, mandatory religious education in Orthodox Christianity (even for minorities within the country), or resistance to the construction of mosques. The situation in Eastern Europe in particular is one where Orthodox churches are trying to figure out how to exist politically without an emperor. Orthodox Christians have a unique history insofar as they lay claim to a proud imperial heritage in the Byzantine Empire, which provided the space for the development of their rich traditions, but they are only now emerging from a half-millennium’s worth of oppression. Orthodox Christians have been the colonizers and the colonized and often return to their imperial past to confront their post-colonial situation. I have argued elsewhere that the experience of the imperial past cannot adequately provide the resources to address contemporary questions.³¹ The modern and postmodern situations are presenting questions to the Orthodox churches that they have never before faced in their history; one cannot seek specific answers in the past to questions that were never posed in that past.

The Orthodox response to the present situation is complicated by the lack of

³¹See my “Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Democracy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (March, 2003): 75–98.

any institutional infrastructure that would allow the Orthodox churches to deliberate in a meaningful way on contemporary challenges and questions. This lack of infrastructure is a vestige of their imperial past; since the disappearance of the emperors, both pro- and anti-Orthodox, the Orthodox churches have yet to develop a transnational, pan-Orthodox authority that would facilitate meaningful deliberation on the present situation as a global church.³² When I talk about a transnational authority, I am not necessarily alluding to a popelike figure; such an authority could take many forms. Nor is it the case that the presence of such an authority would violate the Orthodox principle of conciliarity. Recent events, however, illustrate how impotent conciliarity can be without a transnational authority. As one example, a few years ago the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Church of Greece had a dispute over the election of the next presiding bishop of Thessalonika. In a move reminiscent of the Byzantine past, the dispute was resolved only after the intervention of the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs of Greece, who brokered the solution that was not really a resolution.

I mention these institutional problems within Orthodoxy only to highlight the lingering effects of its imperial past—Byzantine, Bulgarian, Serbian, Russian, Ottoman, and Communist. The lack of any global, institutionalized infrastructure on the part of the Orthodox Church has resulted in the absence of any meaningful deliberation on the contemporary challenges and questions confronting the Orthodox churches. One of those questions in the post-Communist Eastern European situation is Orthodoxy's stance toward liberal, Western forms of democracy. It is only in the past sixty years that Orthodoxy has had to confront the question of what it means to be a church in a democratic, secularized space. There were very vibrant and substantive debates on transitions to democracy in Russia in the early part of the twentieth century, but these were tragically cut short by the Bolshevik Revolution. The lack of a transnational authority to facilitate a meaningful deliberation on this new situation has resulted in confused, contradictory, antimodern, and anti-Western statements from Orthodox church leaders.

Even in the midst of this global institutional fragmentation, there is a remarkable, discernible unity within the Orthodox Church that is especially visible in its eucharistic celebration. The eucharist has the power to dispel "all the cares of this world"³³ and focus one's attention on what is real in this world. This unity in the eucharist reflects the consensus that exists among contemporary Orthodox theologians on the principle of divine-human communion, since the eucharist itself is the event of such a communion. It is this shared faith in the realism of divine-human communion that must somehow shape the Orthodox response to the present situation. Returning to the issue of Orthodoxy and democracy, there are some, such as the Armenian Orthodox theologian and ethicist Vigen Guroian, who would argue that Orthodoxy should never endorse any po-

³²On the absence of a transnational authority in Orthodoxy and its effects on the Orthodox experience in the United States, see my "The One Becomes the Many: Orthodox Christianity and American Pluralism," in Elizabeth H. Prodromou, ed., *Orthodox Christianity in American Public Life: The Challenges and Opportunities of Religious Pluralism in the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming in late 2008).

³³From the Cherubic Hymn sung during the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.

litical arrangement, since such an endorsement would betray its prophetic principle. I have argued, however, that the logic of the Orthodox understanding of divine-human communion realized in the eucharist leads to the judgment of support for a democratic and secularized space over the prevailing options.³⁴ Support of democracy and secularization does not mean an endorsement of excessive individualism or ideological secularism. To those who question how Orthodoxy can support any form of thought in which God is not the object of intentionality, I would respond by referencing the prophetic and ironic caution throughout history that God's presence is often most manifest in spaces that appear in a superficial way to be godless.

I have discussed Orthodoxy's relation to democracy at length to illustrate the simple point that Orthodoxy's stance to modernity is not and should not be a wholesale rejection. I agree with Tracy when he argues that although Christian theology does not easily fit into the three common namings of the present situation, it can recognize elements that are retrievable in each of these namings. The hermeneutical key for the Orthodox is the principle of divine-human communion, which, I would argue, allows Orthodox thought to recognize the genuine accomplishments of the modern period. The "truths" of modern intellectual currents were recognized by the Russian sophiologists, and perhaps the recent translations in English of Russian sophiology, especially Bulgakov's work, might reinfuse Orthodox theology with this particular sophiological spirit that for too long has remained dormant. Orthodox theology can learn from the sophiologists that many modern human advancements are not necessarily incommensurable with Orthodoxy simply because they emerged, in part, from an attack on religion but are, perhaps ironically, entailed within the logic of divine-human communion.

It is this very principle of divine-human communion that must also shape the Orthodox response to postmodern questions on epistemology, subjectivity, and pluralism. I have already spoken of the affinity between postmodern thought and contemporary Orthodox theological understandings of difference, otherness, particularity, relationality, and desire. It has been the singular achievement of contemporary theologians such as Lossky, Yannaras, Zizioulas, and Hart to unpack the existential implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. Zizioulas, in particular, has shown that the Christian understanding of God as Trinity is much more than a simple affirmation that God is simultaneously one and three. For Zizioulas, Christians know that God is Trinity because of the experience of divine-human communion in the eucharist, which is not simply a partaking of the body of Christ but is the event of the resurrected body of Christ. The Christian affirmation of the divinity of Christ, crystallized in the fourth century, is at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity. In the person of Jesus, God has become history; in the life of Jesus, one witnesses, as Williams has so elegantly put it, "a humanity soaked through with divine life."³⁵ It is this original trinitarian difference, not a difference whose primary presence is only an absence, that is the

³⁴See Papanikolaou, "Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Democracy."

³⁵Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p. xvi.

condition for the possibility of a difference that is created for communion.³⁶ That of God who becomes history, the Son of the Father, realizes and makes possible an eternal communion with God the Father that is effected only by that trinitarian difference that is faceless yet ever present and filling all things—the Holy Spirit. Personhood, for Zizioulas, *is* difference as particularity, but such a difference, if it is to be one of communion and not negations, is constituted in relations of love and freedom.

Given that there is a great deal of affinity between Eastern Christian notions of apophaticism and the doctrine of the Trinity and postmodern notions of language and difference, the temptation would be great to use postmodern thought as a means for validating Christian thought. I think, however, that Hart is correct in asserting that Christians need to be more self-confident about the fact that their account of difference is simply more beautiful and, hence, more persuasive than the many postmodern variations. Karl Rahner, in his theology of the Trinity, argued that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the affirmation that God can become history without ceasing to be the immutable, triune God and that this very possibility *is* God's very being as the self-differentiated triune God. Responding to those who might claim that this sounds Hegelian, Rahner wrote, "This we can and must affirm, without being Hegelians. And it would be a pity if Hegel had to teach Christians such things."³⁷ Echoing Rahner, I would say that it would be a pity if Derrida had to teach Christians about difference.

For Tracy, a Christian naming of the present "as interruptive eschatological time before the living God" is one that is dialectically mystical and political. The general perception in the Christian world is that the Orthodox tradition is a great resource for the mystical side of this dialectic. There is, however, a rich tradition of attention to the "political" in Orthodoxy, particularly in the rhetoric against poverty embodied in the sermons of John Chrysostom or the living examples of the Holy Fools of Russia. It is also evident in the writings of the Russian sophiologists, who, because of their more generous appraisal of the "secular," based on their conceptualization of divine-human communion, were much more engaged with the cultural and "political" spheres. Two women of the Russian diaspora whose work reflects the Russian sophiological tradition continued this engagement with the political: Mother Maria Skobtsova³⁸ with her work on social justice, and Elizabeth Behr-Sigel³⁹ with her work on gender and the role of women within the church.

It is fair, however, to assert that this "political" trajectory within the Eastern

³⁶For Zizioulas's recent reflections on difference and communion, see Paul McPartlan, ed., *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006).

³⁷Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, tr. Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966 [orig. *Schriften zur Theologie, IV* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1966)]), pp. 113–114, n. 3.

³⁸See *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings*, tr. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003). For a biography, see Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), pp. 59–80.

³⁹See Elizabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church* (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1991).

Christian tradition is not the one most visibly represented today in the Orthodox churches. This judgment often does not take into account the effect of the Ottoman and Communist oppressions on the Orthodox churches; in the United States, it does not take into account the fact that only now the Orthodox communities are moving beyond issues relating to preservation of national and ethnic identities.⁴⁰ It is becoming more evident that the new generation of church leaders, clerical and lay, in the Orthodox churches in the U.S. are shaping their communities to engage in social concerns. It is correct, however, to claim that the one of the greatest challenges for the Orthodox Church is the recovery of this “political” trajectory within the tradition. Participation in ecumenical organizations such as the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. is an opportunity not only to be reminded of this particular heritage in the Orthodox traditions but also to be challenged to bring this heritage into conversation with the present situation. In particular, the Orthodox tradition can learn from Latin American liberation theologians that the problem of poverty is not simply about the individual sins of pride and greed but that it involves systemic sin; the Orthodox can learn from black and feminist liberation theologies that the “political” must be expanded to include issues of race and gender. Ecumenical gatherings presuppose conversation, which presupposes listening, which presupposes risk of a realized experience of recognition that leads to such statements as “I never thought of that” or “that seems right.” To recognize that a particular prohibition or practice within a tradition needs change is not to surrender to an incommensurable language game; instead, it is a form of prophetic self-critique that allows a community to examine whether it is being faithful to its own central principles.

For the Orthodox churches, the principle of divine-human communion is absolutely nonnegotiable, in modernity, postmodernity, and beyond postmodernity; it is also the most substantial contribution that it can bring to any ecumenical gathering—to remind the world constantly, almost incessantly, that God has created the world for real communion with God, which is effected in Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Orthodoxy can also draw on its rich tradition to assert the priority of the mystical—the mystical and the political are not dialectically related to each other, as Tracy argued, but any authentic gain in the political is the realization of the mystical. The mystical cannot be reduced to the individual ascent to or manifestation of God, because any experience of the love of God must be embodied and manifested in particular relations. If sin is, in fact, systemic, then structural change that allows for the affirmation of each human being as a unique and irreplaceable child of God simultaneously manifests a greater participation of the world in the event of divine-human communion. To identify such structural change with divine-human communion is not naively to identify the realm of God with earthly structures; rather, it affirms the Orthodox understanding of the world as sacramental, as imbued with the presence of God that is latent in the world and desiring to burst forth. The world is already participating in God’s life, and the challenge for humans is to create the kinds of relationships, both political and ecclesial, that would maximize the degree of participa-

⁴⁰See the essays in Prodromou, *Orthodox Christianity in American Public Life*.

tion of the world in God. To be Christian is to recognize and accept the paradoxical state of being that strives to realize God's realm on earth while always knowing that it is yet to come. The particular challenge for the Orthodox Church is to find a way in which the very heart of its tradition, the realism of divine-human communion in the person of Jesus Christ, is able to permeate and shape its institutional structures so as to enable responses to "political" questions that are faithful to all that is entailed in this principle of divine-human communion. Such faithfulness means working to create a world in which particularity, otherness, difference, relationality, and freedom are the norm and reflect the glory of God, which is the presence of God's love that is always striving to show itself.



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