

Bloggers in the name of Christ: The Orthodox faith in network and “private” theologies in Greece today

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Abstract: In the era of globalization, internet is the major contemporary way to present the faith in Christ. In Greece, where over 90% of residents are registered as "Orthodox Christian", there are hundreds of religious blogs which, for various reasons, present, describe and examine closely the Orthodox faith. However it seems that there is a significant number of these blogs, whose administrators act as though certain qualitative criteria of evaluation did not exist. They usually introduce or advertise an individual understanding of faith which is psychologically based on the subjective assessment of the religious phenomenon, forming, “in the name of Christ”, “private theologies”. At this point, conceptual tools, like the theory of third-person effect, may contribute as an important factor to the understanding of the sociological and psychological background of several Christian bloggers.

Key terms: *blog, Orthodox Church, private theologies, Elderism, theory of third-person effect, Depth psychology.*

According to various findings of empirical researches, concerning the emerging of Christian blogs, “much of what is found in the Christian blogosphere has its analog in the blogosphere as a whole”¹. In other words, a Christian blog, taking advantage of every possible technical support in the era of on line communication, represents a Christian version of the blogosphere as a whole. In Greek Christian blogosphere there are blogs that present the views of various Christian Churches. We shall focus on Orthodox blogs, since, over 90% of people, living in Greece today, are registered as "Orthodox Christian".

An outline of Christian blogs:

A typical blog contains various labels concerning ecclesiastical news (including information on various events such as all-night vigil services and pilgrimage tours), issues of Orthodox spirituality (e.g. stories from the lives of saints and other teaching stories from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers), missionary issues, but also modern issues such as parenting, culture, ecology and bioethics - they even include Lenten fasting recipes - through articles, posts or threads relating to it. Many Orthodox Christian bloggers upload folkloric material and draw the readers’ attention to Greek folkloric tradition and national issues. On the other hand, many Christian bloggers, trying to suggest new ways of fruitful dialogue between the Church and modern Society, emphasize culture and art. Furthermore, some bloggers choose to express themselves through music, cinema, poetry and photography. They usually make critical comments on the Church’s conservatism for its reluctance to develop progressive ideas for social issues.

Aspects of “private theologies”:

Thereafter, we shall examine the reasons and causes of "private theologies", that is to say the pathological forms of theology, drawing on my research into the network and the religious press. We should like to emphasize the fact that our theoretical context for understanding the term "private theology" is the tradition of the Orthodox Church, taking seriously into account the compact and historical character of the Orthodox Church which is founded on the theology of the Churches Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils. Hence, we use the term “private theology” to describe a theological teaching which, in spite of its being merely an individual’s interpretation of the faith, claims to possess the authority of a universal truth². The members of the Church who promote their “private theologies”, rather than create an autonomous religious system (e.g. in Greek orthodox blogosphere does not exist the practice of «Religion on line»)³ seem to prefer a general acknowledgement of their individual religious identity⁴.

In this context, major issues emerge, such as religious intolerance (especially concerning the issue of the places of worship for the Muslims) and religious fundamentalism. Those issues reflect the apocalyptic prophecies and messianic hopes of the 17th and 18th centuries and are due to ecclesiological misconceptions, such as the confusion between political and religious identity. Thus, in several blogs we meet a *sui generis* revival of ethnophyletism: for many Christians, the Church should be based not on a local [ecclesial] criterion, but on a national one. In this respect, the main role of the Church is to maintain national identity. Through many Christian blogs we are informed that a large number of members of the Church, though they avoid confessing it, share the belief that the nation is protected by immediate divine guidance, which is granted to certain ruling officials, including military ones. Within this ideological context, there are blogs that reproduce apocalyptic prophecies concerning the future of Greece (reminding us of the apocalyptic literature of the seventieth and eightieth centuries), such as the “prophecies” of elder Joseph from Vatopedi monastery (Holy Mountain)⁵.

This practice affects pastoral care significantly, since, via the network, many religious people give spiritual advice. A serious issue is the phenomenon of “*Elderism*” (spurious “Elders”), i.e. the situations in which clergymen, especially younger, celibate ones, aspire to become spiritual fathers and often present themselves as Elders. Although they have never practiced obedience themselves, they demand strict obedience from their own (usually gullible) spiritual children. As Nilus the ascetic teaches, those “elders”, who possess the false sensation of spiritual maturity, become self-designated teachers, “pulling along a row of disciples”⁶, without realizing that “to look after souls is the most difficult task of all”⁷. They lack spiritual experience, namely the source from which they could draw streams of divine wisdom in their pastoral teaching. This lack of spiritual experience has damaging consequences for the souls of their spiritual children. For those clergymen, spiritual fatherhood is a trophy and not a ministry. We read in a reliable Christian blog: “Nowadays the web is full of sites advertizing modern elders! This is not a joke. Enter the term and you shall be amazed!”⁸

Clergymen of this kind are immature and inexperienced in pastoral models. They have confused views on pastoral guidance, and their pastoral interests are based on selfish motives and ambitions. They are usually formalists and instead of humble living, they prefer self-assertive sophistication. An Orthodox blog, criticizing this

situation, notes: “We blame the Pope for the doctrine of infallibility, while we have also in practice adopted it”⁹.

In addition, a serious issue in this context is the dependence of those bloggers on the advice, inducements or admonitions of remarkable modern spiritual fathers (such as the well - known in Orthodoxy Elder Paisios). On the internet there is immediate access to sites and blogs promoting the authority of those elders, but the selection of their sayings from those to post them follows no particular pattern of individual counseling. This practice, however, seems to ignore Basil the Great's favored distinction between *oikonomia* (economy) and *akribeia* (exactness)¹⁰ which is necessary in exercising pastoral care. The readers of those blogs learn how to deal with the difficulties of spiritual life by means of distant impersonal spiritual guidance which is not able to distinguish between different levels of maturity among individuals.

Obviously, this kind of pastoral guidance affects adversely also the way of spiritual life, in terms that lead to the confusion of two different lifestyles, namely monasticism and secular life. These blogs often upload on the web instructions on moral life, taken from ascetic sources or monks who are experienced in a different lifestyle and try to relieve modern man from his daily difficulties in secular society. Inevitably, there are Christians who follow these instructions or inducements (either because of the strength of their faith, or for reasons irrelevant to the meaning of spiritual life, such as religious phobias or neuroses) and Christians who fail to follow them. Hence, this variety of modes of spiritual life, which is often due to pathological attitudes, causes divisions in the Body of the Church. Christians, who are strong enough to follow the ascetical teaching without any particular difficulty, are usually under the illusion that they are perfect, while the “weak” Christians suffer from the realization that they are at a far distance from the ideal of Christian perfection and encounter the danger of deep feelings of guilt as the beginning of pathological attitudes.

Finally, those “private theologies” create a religious context in which the two fundamental concepts of Christianity, freedom and love are underestimated. In that case, we have to deal with a religious behaviorism, according to which the dynamics of the Holy Spirit is limited to the community of religious people who share the same religious ideas¹¹.

Following Maximus the Confessor's classic distinction between Christians' states of spiritual development, namely the state of the *servants*, the state of the *wage-earners* and the state of the *sons* who obey God's will out of love for Him¹², we can argue that those blogs, by advertising their “private theologies”, actually confine Christians to the first two states, preventing them from achieving spiritual progress. As a matter of fact, one can argue that those blogs, by giving rise to feelings of guilt in the souls of their Christian readers, to some extent confirm Bertrand Russell's theory that “*Religion* is based, primarily and mainly upon *fear*”¹³ or Freud's conclusion that *religion* is “a defensive maneuver akin to neurosis”, relieving the devotee from feelings of *guilt* and fear of divine retribution¹⁴.

Undoubtedly, fear is an incentive to spiritual life to such an extent that numerous blogs avoid discussing the real problems of modern man, and highlight instead eschatological “prophecies”. For example, a problem, common to all Christian Confessions, is the era of the Antichrist and the end of the world¹⁵. Thus, in those blogs we meet the certainty that we are already in this era. As their administrators or the blogging community claim, there are certain signs that herald the advent of the Antichrist, such as α) an apparent intention to build the Third Temple in order to

fulfill the relevant prophecies on behalf of the Jews, b) the phenomenon of globalization and c) the number "666", used by the format of the information recorded on the stripe in the new electronic ID cards.

Sociological and psychological profile of the blogger:

The act of a blogging individual claim in a theological context can only be understood through the scrutiny of sociological and psychological profile of the blogger. A "private theology" is considered as "private" because it reveals effort of an individual to adjust religion to his or her psychological needs. It is obvious then that any personal interpretation of religion also reveals the unconscious quest for self identity and the problem of guilt in case of one's failure to be no less than perfect. As a matter of fact, a blogger, by creating a Christian blog, through all its contents (posted texts, selected images, music or chants, comments from its owner or the Christian community) unconsciously seeks to be praised by the community for his religious experiences and his own interpretation of the Christian faith. In several Christian blogs, there exists an imaginary conception of truth and in spite of the blogger's certainty that he sets his readers free from their ignorance on spiritual issues¹⁶, his blogging activity promotes his truth instead, which he believes to be redemptive for him and therefore necessary.

At this point, we would like to refer to *the theory of third-person effect* (Davison, 1983)¹⁷, for we believe that it can make an important contribution to the understanding of the sociological and psychological background of several Christian bloggers. According to this theory, a person exposed to a persuasive communication from various mass media presumes that this has a greater effect on others than on him. Therefore, he believes that he himself remains unaffected by any message he receives and transfers the problem to third parties. In this way, a message may lead to action not because of its impact on those who are seemingly addressed, but because others (third persons) think it will affect the above-mentioned people. This is the concept of *behavioral hypothesis*, which explains the imposition of various restrictions by religious leaders on the community, such as restrictions imposed for fear of a heretical propaganda.

Behavioral hypothesis explains, from this point of view, the phenomenon of religious censorship, which presupposes an arbitrary distinction inside the community between persons who are, by definition, vulnerable to the dangers coming from various messages and those who are strong enough to resist such dangers because of their abilities or knowledge of how to do so (reminding us of the distinction drawn by Origen and the Alexandrian school in general between imperfect and perfect Christians)¹⁸. Several blogs echo this distinction while reproducing the debates of modern theologians who fairly easily accuse one another of ecumenism (for espousing the principles of promoting cooperation among various religious faiths) or fundamentalism (for their strict adherence to the Orthodox tradition).

It is generally accepted that the fundamental contribution of Depth psychology to the study of human soul, is the discovery of the unconscious. The unconscious part of the soul affects the behavior of personality to such a degree, so that the way in which one reacts to life's difficulties and experiences depends directly on its content and operation. This means that, if human behavior is affected by unknown forces,

then we have to be cautious when examining the criteria of religious life, since an act of devotion to the Church, e.g. a missionary activity, may derive its dynamics from outside conscious perception so that it is not always clear whether a pious or humanitarian intent is always such.

Under this perspective, a man's choice to create a Christian blog, for promoting his "private theology" must be analyzed through the perennial problem of man's relationship with himself. Psychoanalytic thought, through various theories, claimed more or less the same thing: that man needs to become an integrated personality¹⁹, that there is always the danger of self idealization and that man is ready to defend and support this idealized self at any cost²⁰, which is actually a neurotic symptom.

In this context, we realize that a Christian blog can be itself a sort of «defense mechanism» serving the spiritual and psychological needs of its administrator. Such a mechanism could be *introjection*, which means that the Christian blogger identifies himself with religious people and ideas he admires, presenting thus the spiritual life in terms of onerous requirements. On the other hand, pejorative comments on ecumenism or fundamentalism from Christians against each other and frivolous accusations of heresy against those who approach faith from a different point of view are due to the mechanism of *projection*. In this case, while the blogger considers himself as the guardian of the integrity of his community's faith, he fails to realize that it is his unconscious that forces him to an enthusiastic spiritual life with passionate piety and devotion.

On these grounds, we believe that we can easily understand that the mechanism of *introjection* explains sufficiently the *conceptual hypothesis* of *third-person effect theory* (the blogger identifies himself with models of mature spiritual life), while the mechanism of *projection* explains the *behavioral hypothesis* (the blogger, projecting to others his failure to live a consistent spiritual life, unconsciously attacks his own self through actions like censorship).

According to the Sermon on the Mount, Christians "are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden". Hence, no one should "put the lamp, after lighting it, under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand" so that "it gives light to all in the house" (*Matt. 5, 14*). In relation to the aforementioned scriptural text, the way of Christian blogging reveals the degree of collective and individual consciousness of the members of the Church. Consequently, whoever desires to blog his religious experience in the name of Christ really contributes not only to community but also to blogosphere as a whole only if he realizes his responsibility to verify Paul's teaching that Christians are "letters", "to be known and read by all" (*2Cor. 3, 2*).

¹ A. Barlow, *Blogging America: the new public sphere*, Praeger Publishers, Westport 2008, p. 151

² According to V. Thermos, a "private theology" is formed as a result of interaction between individual and collective unconscious ["Private theologies and the wholeness of the truth", in E. Voulgaraki – Pissina (edr), *Love and witness, Essays in Honour of Elias Voulgarakis*, Akritas Publications, Athens 2001, p. 268 (Greek text)].

³ On this topic we follow the distinction between "Religion on line" and "On line Religion", introduced by Chr. Helland ["Surfing for Salvation", *Religion 32* (2002) p. 294].

⁴ Heidi A. Campbell, discussing the "profile and practices of Christian bloggers", concludes that "it is possible that Christian bloggers may link themselves to Christian groups ... in attempts to support their particular interpretation of religious beliefs online. It may be that they hope that readers will know they

are Christian bloggers not just because they say so directly, but because they present a particular picture of their religion online” [“Religious Authority and the Blogosphere”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 15 (2010) 271].

⁵ Cf. “Greek Monk Prophecy - Third World War” in <http://doomsday-prophecies.blogspot.com/2009/02/greek-monk-prophecy-third-world-war.html>

⁶ Nilus of Ancyra, *Liber de monastica exercitatione*, PG 784C.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ <http://www.enoriako.info/index.php/2011-05-04-14-28-02/2011-05-05-17-38-19/156-2011-05-06-20-50-44> (Greek text).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cf. Alan Jacobs, *A theology of reading: the hermeneutics of love*, Westview Press, Colorado/ Oxford 2001, pp. 141 ff.

¹¹ In this case, Internet becomes a place “where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit” [“Finding God on the Web”, *TIME* (1996, December 16) 57].

¹² Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia*, PG91, 709D-712A.

¹³ *Why I am not a Christian, and other essays on religion and related subjects*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1957, p. 22. Russel considers fear “as the most important source of religion” (*Has religion made useful contributions to civilization?* Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1929, p. 24). He also regards religion “as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race” (*ibid.*, p. 5).

¹⁴ Diane Jonte-Pace – W. B. Parsons, *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain, Contemporary Dialogues, Future prospects*, Routledge, New York 2001, p. 18.

¹⁵ Cf. the research of R. G. Howard, who claims that he has uncovered a hidden church in network, which initially started as a new type of new religious movement (from early ‘90s), having as a mission to predict the dates and details of the End Times (*Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*, New York University Press, New York 2011).

¹⁶ Cf. Pauline Hope Cheong, Alexander Halavais and Kyounghee Kwon, “The Chronicles of Me: Understanding Blogging as a Religious Practice”, *Journal of Media and Religion* 7:3 (2008) 122.

¹⁷ Davison, W. P. «The third-person effect in communication», *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47.1 (1983) 1-15. A remarkable evaluation of this theory’s effects, we can find in, Julie L. Andsager - H. Allen White, *Self Versus Others: Media, Messages, and the Third-Person Effect*, Routledge Communication Series, Lawrence Erlbaum Publications, New Jersey 2007, pp. 5-11.

¹⁸ Cf. “Individuals of higher religiosity are likely to view their own moral character as equal to, if not greater than, that of those with lower levels of religiosity” [G. Golan, “Religiosity and the Third-Person Effect”, *Journal of Media and Religion*, 1:2 (2002) 109].

¹⁹ C. Jung searches the unity of inner man in *Verselbstung* through the process of *individuation* (*Die Beziehungen zwischen dem Ich und dem Unbewussten*, Rascher Verlag, Zürich 1950⁵, p. 91 ff.).

²⁰ K. Horney, *Our inner conflicts*, Routledge, London 2001³, p. 96 ff.