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Religious Leadership of a Majority Church

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RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP OF A MAJORITY CHURCH. THE CASE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH OF GREECE

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Introduction

A religious leadership can take place in two aspects of life: (a) in spiritual; and (b) in non-spiritual matters (secular), the latter being in relation with the State, administrative matters within the church, and so on. Inevitably they are both on a parallel road, but as in mathematics where parallel lines intersect in infinity, by the same token spiritual matters and non-spiritual matters need to be seen as connected. When I was first given the theme of this presentation ‘Responsible leadership’ and the sub-theme ‘Responsible Religious Leadership’, the latter sounded strange, not to say paradoxical, to me. My first thought was ‘How can religious leadership not be responsible?’ Anything spiritual certainly implies the sense of responsibility. Religious leadership is by definition responsible! There are no prerequisites for a religious leadership. Simply we recognise its principles. A religious leader’s nomination is a result of the intervention of Divine Grace. Or at least this is how things should be...

Due to the diversity of societies and variety of beliefs, I believe that there is no *one single model* of responsible religious leadership applicable to all. Rather, what is ideally beneficial is an exchange of information, an analysis of the existing benchmarks and lastly, a mutual understanding. Therefore, I have decided to approach the subject of the ethical criteria of religious leadership from a specific perspective; that of my denomination, i.e. from the Greek Orthodox perspective, making special reference to the situation I live in (Greece), a case of a majority church, where approximately 97 % of 10.2 million inhabitants are Orthodox Christians.

My paper is divided into three parts. In the first part I briefly sketch a picture of the structure of the Orthodox Church, with due reference to the synodical system of the Greek Orthodox Church. In the second part I concentrate on three issues: the relation between the Church and its liturgical life and religious leadership; the relation

between religious leadership with the State and politics; and the relation between religious leadership and society. The third part focuses on interreligious and ecumenical relations, which ought to be primary concerns of any religious leader in a pluralistic society.

1. The Structure of the Orthodox Church

The Greek Orthodox Church is built on the synodical system which is also the foundation of its administrative structure.¹ The synod of the bishops is ‘the ultimate criterion of ecclesiastical affairs’.² This demands the obligatory participation of all diocesan bishops in the administration of the Church for the joint handling of its daily problems as well as the proportional allocation of responsibility to all participants.

Nevertheless, the synodical system in the Orthodox Church demands conciliarity (and/or synodality) to extend not only to the demands of bishops but also to all levels of the ecclesiastical life, from local parishes to diocesan councils and further on to regional and universal ones. In all these levels – according to the 34th Apostolic Canon – the ‘one’ should always cooperate with the ‘many’ (and *vice versa*). Unfortunately, this is still a *desideratum* in most *autocephali* churches in the Orthodox world.

2. Religious Leadership in the Church’s Life

a) Church Hierarchy, the Church and its Liturgical Life

The ordination of a new bishop and his placement by the Church at the helm of a diocese constitutes a historical ecclesiastical act, not only because it ensures apostolicity in succession, but primarily because it is the continuation of an important ecclesiastical service (*diakonia*). For the new bishop, the concept of service and sacrifice are identical, as are the elevation of a bishop in his throne and his connection with the local church.

The elevation to any rank of the Church does not constitute an occupation of privilege or power, but an undertaking of service (*diakonia*) and sacrifice. The hierarchy that constitutes the ecclesiastical ranks has not the meaning of handing-over authority and rights, but distribution of ministries and services.

The picture of an ‘upside down’ pyramid represents clearly the elevation to the top in the hierarchy of the Church. Therefore, this elevation in the ecclesiastical pyramid has a ‘self-emptying’ (*kenotic*) character. The clergy, and especially the bishops, exist in the Church,

not only *in persona Christi* (*eis topon Christou*), but also in imitation, i.e. as a 'type of Christ' (*eis typon Christou*); they are called to 'empty' themselves in order to carry the burden of others and render visible the presence of Christ among the faithful.³

Christ is at the top of the pyramid. Those who choose to follow him must aim to reach this top. Christ is the *High priest*⁴ and even though in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church *priesthood* he is sometimes erroneously identified only with the ordained clergy, all the baptised faithful are understood as priests (the so-called *royal priesthood*).⁵ Of course the *higher orders* (bishops, presbyters, deacons, to be distinguished from a great number of lower orders)⁶ existed from the very beginning, but their duty was to *preside*, not to *exercise* a priestly function.⁷ The priestly function is exercised by Jesus Christ, and the priest (or bishop), when celebrating the Eucharist, is not a mediator between God and humanity, but acts *in persona Christi*. So the primate in the Church is a primate of service and sacrifice.

'If any human being wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.' (Mark 9:35) This action of unselfish love stands in opposition to any secular understanding of order, power and authority: 'You know that the rulers of the nations exercise power over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you, but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. Whoever desires to be first among you shall be your bondservant, as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Matt 20:25-28)

The hierarchical structure of the Orthodox administration is rooted in the *trinitarian theology*,⁸ which George Florovsky, John Meyendorff and Alexander Schmemmann have so beautifully illustrated. And so, the hierarchy in the Church of Greece is justified by the order of the trinitarian structure, shown by the role of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation. This is particularly apparent in the eucharistic celebration and secondly in the collegial Synod of the Bishops.

In the *eucharistic ecclesiology*,⁹ firstly developed by N. Afanassieff, emphasis is placed on the role of every local church – the expression of the whole (catholic) Church. That ecclesiology contrasts with *universal ecclesiology*, which favours the supremacy of the bishop and has until very recently been the dominant ecclesiological theory in the traditional churches. This has been the source of great debate. Afanassieff declared that 'where there is a Eucharistic gathering, there lives Christ; there lives also the Church of God in Christ.'¹⁰

In contrast to *eucharistic ecclesiology*,¹¹ *universal ecclesiology* exclusively attributes the catholicity of all local communities in the world to the one universal Church (and by extension to the first ecclesiastical see, Rome) and not from the individual local eucharistic community.

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This way of addressing ecclesiology supports the sovereignty of 'bishop centralism'. The theory of *universal ecclesiology* is based on the well-known position of Saint Cyprian of Carthage, according to whom 'The bishop is in the Church and the Church is in the bishop and who is not with the bishop does not belong to the Church'.¹²

In eucharistic ecclesiology the priority is given to the Eucharist, which is the only expression of unity in the Church, and in addition the eschatological (in opposition to the historical) dimension of the Church is emphasised. What is very important in this respect is that all clergy are understood as images of the authentic eschatological Kingdom of God, and not as higher offices within the Church (*in a secular hierarchical perspective*).¹³

This eucharistic understanding of the Church leads also to a two-fold understanding of the liturgy: as a gathering of the people of God, and their mission as a *meta-liturgy*, i.e. as an authentic witness to the world.

b) *Religious Leadership, State and Politics*

Even though religion and politics are two entirely different matters, this does not mean that religious people should disassociate themselves from political matters. Politics are a major aspect of everyday life, and for that reason religious authorities, the Church in our case, should not remain voiceless. Of course the Church should not act as an institution which tries to offer solutions and find formulas for political debates, but it can help in a different way. It could help *politics to be more thoughtful and less confident*.¹⁴

In Greece the recognition of the Church as a social institution considerably influences the integration and keeping of people in her body. The Church is considered not only as an ark where the faithful receive the Grace of God and collaborate for their salvation and restoration, but also as an element of society. However, we cannot transform faith into political action.

The quotation from Matthew: 'Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's',¹⁵ certainly separates religion from politics. But those are regulations with a deontological character and that means that they cannot form the social reality since actions by religious leaders sometimes have political consequences. Even dialogue between religion and the State can have positive or negative results, depending on the nature of their intentions.¹⁶ Similarly, as with the aforementioned *eucharistic ecclesiology*, when a religiously committed person realises the ecclesiological dimension of the Church connected with *eschaton*, namely in its eucharistic approach, then safe political solutions to social problems can be provided.

In conclusion I will draw on the accurate observation by Prof. Vasiliadis that specifies the relation between church and State as follows: 'The Church as a religious institution does not counter act against the secular State, because it is not actually a secular authority, but the eschatological and charismatic people of God that is peacefully integrated in its social environment, aiming at sanctifying and transforming it'.¹⁷

Religious Leadership and its Public Role in Society at Large

In civil society, religion in its social dimension indicates how people should relate to each other. However, one of religion's main characteristics is that it is a private affair. Some of its principles are private and some are generalised cultural principles. But both should play an important role in achieving common and personal good. The link between those two aspects is inextricably linked to how religion connects private and public life. And this connection is only possible if its role can be understood and if it relates to the field of a religious leader.

As I have previously mentioned, a religious leader should not dictate resolutions on certain political issues. What he can do is to guide and to arm the faithful with the principles of love and concern for the other and to realise the *transformative power* of the Church that empowers their lives in history.¹⁸

To summarise, the Church should dare to address the multitude of critical and controversial issues of everyday life in a fast-changing world. This is a great challenge. And the witness of the Church to society is testified in two aspects: moral and social. The Church should find solutions to connect those two aspects. Many scholars¹⁹ suggest that one possible way could be a synthesis of Eastern and Western spiritualities. Let us explain this a little further.

The Orthodox Church raises awareness about the ecclesial identity of Christianity focused on an eschatological dimension. On the other hand, Western theology reminds the world of the responsibility of the church, stressing the historical element in ecclesiology, theology and ethics. I fully agree that a *synthesis* between the two dimensions, historical and eschatological, cannot only enrich Eastern and Western traditions, but is also essential and can prevent serious dangers facing Christianity nowadays like religious isolationism and the desecralisation of the Gospel.

3. Religious Leadership and the 'Neighbour'

The great issue to which a religious leader is confronted is that of *negotiation of diversities*.²⁰ In a multireligious and multicultural soci-

ety people of different historical and national backgrounds live with concrete cultural identities that everybody has to respect. This diversity is increasing. This raises the question: 'How can one face this diversity?'

As I previously mentioned, Greek religious reality does not have to face different faiths and different religious backgrounds. But nowadays under the light of universalism, the fact that we are also citizens of one world cannot be ignored. So, it is not a question of majority and minority in an Orthodox dominated society. It is a question of facing the other as God's creation. This 'chosen people' idea that Prof. Yahya Wijaya refers to in his article²¹ quoting Wesley Ariarajah, can be a start of fundamentalist and nationalistic behaviours. The church (*ecclesia*) is not identified with the Kingdom of God, but is directed to it. And the church institutions do not constitute the utmost point of the faithful, but they are symbols of the Kingdom of God in the world that is offered to all as a result of their free will.

That great opening of the church to the world is based on freedom. And the reference to the *eschaton*, which is the essence of the liturgical life²² of the church, is a characteristic of religious freedom. We see it clearly in the last verse of the Bible: 'He who testifies these things says, 'Yes, I come quickly'. Amen! Yes, come, Lord Jesus.' (Rev 22:20)

However, religious freedom should not be confused with religious tolerance, which some times can serve as a mask for unjust behaviour and promote social inequality. There is also a need for a more active leadership that will raise awareness that *diakonia* is not an optional action, but a duty. It is the praxis of the Church that authenticates its message, not vice versa.²³ An example of such a *life in community* is presented clearly in the *trinitarian theology*. The same hypostasis of the divinity is a paradigm of *life in community* and the intervention of God in history aims to lead humanity and all creation to be one with the very existence of God.

Also, the concept of the *liturgy after the liturgy*²⁴ that was first introduced by Ion Bria offers the opening of Christian life for public and political realm in a unique way. As Bria notes, 'The church has to struggle for the fulfilment of that justice and freedom which was promised by God to all men. It has constantly to give account of how the kingdom of heaven is or is not within it. It has to ask itself if by the conservatism of its worship it may appear to support the violation of human rights inside and outside the Christian community.'²⁵

The struggle to comprehend the relation between Christianity and other religious traditions has engaged the church since the early centuries of Christianity. Christian mission has already passed through many phases. I shall refrain from referring to the historical development of the church's understanding of mission²⁶ because this is not the focus of my presentation. I simply maintain that Christian theol-

ogy nowadays has a more holistic view of the *oekoumene* and should continue like this, abandoning old paradigms of proselytism which were detrimental not only to people of other religions but also to Christians of other denominations.

In Orthodox Christianity, mission does not aim primarily at propagating or dictating truths, doctrines, moral commands and so on, but rather at making *life in community* inherent in the trinitarian divinity visible and active. The 'sending' (*pempein*) of mission (John 14:26)²⁷ is the mission of the Holy Spirit that constitutes substantially the revelation of life of God as *koinonia*. And this *life in community* is characterised by the values of God's Kingdom that can be seen to all people of good will,²⁸ even the non religious!

Conclusion

In modernity, despite the challenge of post-modernism, a person's life in religion is a private affair. That means it is optional and based on one's own free will. Leadership, all over the world, should promote the idea that the witness (*martyria*) of the church is mainly directly related to the internal individual local churches. It is a matter of identity of each concrete ecclesiastical community: 'For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another' (Rom 12:4-5).

When we address issues of personal identity and cohesion of society, religion, as part of a cultural system,²⁹ plays an important role. No one can talk about probable models of a multicultural society without taking religion into consideration.

The academic analysis of the religious phenomenon has shown that the study of religious data is not only useful but also essential to social matters.³⁰ The history of religions and academic interreligious dialogue aids the effort to achieve mutual understanding and the exchange of religious knowledge. Both mutual understanding and the exchange of religious knowledge are vital devices necessary to approach the world religious experience.

The formulation of the structure of an ecclesiastical community³¹ is related with the face of the leader and how this had gradually developed in the political systems and the cultural regulations that emerged in the long-lasting course of various Christian communities.

Nowadays, the pressing issue that arises in a continuously transforming society is how religious leadership can respond to the new demands and face the new challenges.³² In the words of Saint Paul: 'Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the good, well-pleas-

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ing, and perfect will of God' (Rom 12:2), *transforming* then seems to be the key rather than *conforming*.

It is a widely accepted historical fact that in the past religion provided a motive for bloody conflicts and animosity between people. At the same time, it is also acknowledged that religion has the internal dynamics to heal the traumas and tensions caused by errors of the past. Religion cannot remain indifferent to the anxieties and needs of people today.

Of course, many people believe that the church is betrayed by its leaders every time they abuse their leadership role and position, and every time they show an arrogant conviction that they are the only bearers of God's grace. They have to keep in mind that it is God who reconciles, and human beings actually participate in God's Mission. We are living in the new era of globalisation which has brought people together and at the same time pointed to the diversities of the several pluralistic environments. It is our duty to create safe places and reconciling (and reconciled) communities. Our vision must be to form such communities, in other words to make again the church what it really is.

NOTES

- ¹ About the hierarchy of the Greek Orthodox Church, see the official website of the Church of Greece: <http://www.ecclesia.gr>.
- ² Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, *To Pidalion* (in Greek), Athens: Astir, 1976, p. 120. English translation: *The Rudder* (trans. D. Cummings), Chicago, 1957.
- ³ Mantzarides, G., *Christian Ethics*, Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 1995, p.166.
- ⁴ Meyendorff, Paul, *The Priesthood of the Laity*. From his April 2005 presentation at the Theological Faculty of AuTh. "The notion of Christ as "high priest" is developed in the epistle to the Hebrews – cf. Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14; 5:1-10; 6:20; 7:26-28; 8:1-3; 9:11-22; 10:21".
- ⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 6. Paul Meyendorff argues that in the Orthodox liturgical life, priesthood is typically identified with ordained clergy, particularly bishops and priests, who have the authority to preside over the eucharistic liturgy and other sacraments and services.
- ⁶ More about the concept of order in Schmemmann, Alexander, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966. Translation into Greek by Fr. Demetrios Tzerpos, 1991.
- ⁷ 'All things should be done decently and in order' (1 Cor 14:40)
- ⁸ I draw the following footnote from my personal notes, which in turn may come from some reading I have done: 'Within the Trinitarian hierarchical order each one of the three Persons (*hypostases*) have an entire divine role. On this basis, the three divine persons dwell in one another (*perichoresis*): inter-dwelling, co-inherence. Each one of the three acts together with the other two; however, each of them relates to the creation in a personal way: the Father conceives the plan of creation (and of restoration of Creation in His Christ); the Son of God makes the Father's plan of creation (and the salvation of creation) a reality; the Holy Spirit leads God's (the Father's) plan of creation (and restoration of creation in Christ, the incarnate Logos of God) to its perfection.'
- ⁹ Almost concomitantly with the present conference, several thousand miles away in the small village of Assisi in Italy, another conference is taking place with the title: 'L'Eucaristica nella tradizione orientale e occidentale con speciale riferimento al dialogo ecumenico', Assisi 4-7 September 2005. There Prof. Stamoulis argues that the ecclesiastical body of the Church does not consist of bishops and clergy. Everyone that takes part in the Eucharist is part of the ecclesias-

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tical body (*royal priesthood*). He adds also the fine remark that the ‘Eucharist and practice (*askhsh*) are not magical actions that automatically transform insufficiency in sufficiency, sickness in health, pain in comfort’. There are signs of the existing unity.

- ¹⁰ Afanassieff, N., ‘Una Sancta’, in: *Irenikon* 36 (1963), p. 459. ‘Là où est une assemblée eucharistique, là demeure le Christ et là est l’Eglise de Dieu en Christ.’
- ¹¹ Vassiliadis, Petros, ‘Eucharistic Theology, the consensus fidelium, and the contribution of theology to the ecclesial witness’, delivered at the Ecumenical symposium in Bari, December 1999. ‘The eucharistic theology was not exclusively an Eastern theological product; it was rather the child of the ecumenical era’.
- ¹² Carthagine, Cyprianus, *Epistle LXVI*, 8, 3: ‘Scribe debes episcoporum in ecclesia esse et ecclesiam in episcopo et si qui cum episcopo non sit in ecclesia non esse’.
- ¹³ Vassiliadis, Petros, *op. cit.* About the notion of universal ecclesiology he argues that ‘The universal ecclesiology, having as its point of departure the historical dimension of the Church, understands unity, truth and other related aspects the Church, such as e.g. the apostolic succession, in a linear and not in an eschatological way that is why the bishop, even when he is understood as a type and/or image of the Christ, has a clear priority over the eucharistic community, and even over the Eucharist itself. The Sacrament, therefore, of Priesthood theoretically surpasses the Sacrament of the Eucharist.’
- ¹⁴ Clapsis, Emmanuel, *Orthodoxy in Conversation*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2000, pp. 221-224.
- ¹⁵ Matt 22:21.
- ¹⁶ More about the distinction of religion and politics in Greece in Petrou, I., *Multiculturalism and Religious Freedom*, Thessaloniki: Paratiritis, 2003, pp. 181-184.
- ¹⁷ Vassiliadis, Petros, *PAUL. Trajectories into his Theology*, Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2004, p. 232. In the same book he notes four bible passages that in the past were held as principles for constituting a religious leadership.
- ¹⁸ More about the public role of religion in Clapsis, Emmanuel, *Orthodoxy in Conversation*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2000, pp. 131-136.
- ¹⁹ See Vassiliadis, Petros, ‘Orthodoxy and Ecumenism,’ in *Eucharist and Witness. Orthodox Perspectives on the Unity and Mission of the Church*, Geneva/Brookline, MA: World Council of Churches/Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998 and ‘Eucharistic Theology, the consensus fidelium, and the contribution of theology to the ecclesial witness’ delivered at the Ecumenical Symposium in Bari, December 1999.
- ²⁰ I prefer the term ‘diversities’, than the term ‘differences’.
- ²¹ Wijaya, Yahya, ‘Theological Leadership in Christian-Muslim Encounters. An Indonesian Perspective’ in: Stückelberger, Christoph/Mugambi, J.N.K (eds), *Responsible Leadership. Global Perspectives*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005, pp. 71-84. See also Chapter 12 in this volume.
- ²² Eucharist does not draw its content just from the remembrance of the resurrection of Christ, but also from the expectation of the final resurrection (1 Cor 11:26).
- ²³ Clapsis, Emmanuel, *op. cit.*, p. 224.
- ²⁴ Bria, Ion, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1996.
- ²⁵ Raiser, Konrad, ‘The Importance of the Orthodox Contribution to the WCC’, in: *The Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement, Thessaloniki: Apostoliki diakonia*, 2003, p. 49.
- ²⁶ Vassiliadis, Petros, ‘Reconciliation and the Holy Spirit. The Theological Dimension of the Christian Mission’ in *IRM* 2005.
- ²⁷ John 14:26, ‘But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and will remind you of all that I said to you.’
- ²⁸ In the press release of WCC on 26 August 2003 the moderator of the Central Committee, His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, has called for ‘dialogue, relations and collaboration with other religions’ to have a ‘high priority’ in the Council’s ecumenical witness. Among other things he suggests that ‘the implication for missionary strategy is that, particularly in pluralistic environments, it is inappropriate to attempt to add new members.’ Instead, ‘we should seek to identify the Christic values in other religions’.
- ²⁹ Hock, Klaus, ‘Beyond the Multireligious. Transculturation and Religious Differentiation’, in: ‘Search of a New Paradigm in the Academic Study of Religious Change and Interreligious

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Encounter', in: Mortensen, Viggo (ed.), *Theology and the Religions. A Dialogue*, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003, pp. 46-63. 'Furthermore, the cultural turn in the humanities has had its impact on the academic study of religions, inasmuch as religious studies are now more and more understood as a 'social/cultural anthropological discipline' dealing with religions as cultural phenomena', p. 55.

³⁰ McCutcheon, Russel T./Braun, Willi, *Guide to the Study of Religion*, London/New York : Cassell, 2000. Also in the book of Russel McCutcheon, *Critics, not Caretakers. Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*, New York: SUNY Press, 2001. The same author argues that we should examine religion only as a social phenomenon, p. x.

³¹ About the evolution in the ecclesiastical structure through the ages in East and West see more in Petrou, J., *Christianity and Society*, Thessaloniki: Vaniias, 2004, pp. 80-105.

³² Many scholars had proposed a 'liturgical renewal' and a renewal of theology, in order to correspond to the requirements of the modern cultural environment, but also with the needs of the church.