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***The Relationship Between Orthodoxy and Modernity
and the Theological Agenda of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies***

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For primarily historical reasons, the Orthodox world did not organically participate in the phenomenon of modernity. It did not experience the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Counter-Reformation, religious wars or the Enlightenment, the French or the Industrial revolution, the rise of the subject, human rights, or the religiously neutral nation-state. What has been recognized as the core of modernity seems to have remained alien to Orthodoxy, which continues to be suspicious of modernity. This uncertainly helps explain Orthodoxy’s difficulty in communicating with the contemporary (post-)modern world.

The crucial issue under discussion can then be summarized in the following question: *Did Orthodoxy come to an end before modernity?* Or, to put it another way: can Orthodox Christian theology operate only within traditional contexts, borrowing its forms and representations from the agrarian society with which its liturgical symbolism is connected, as are the rhetorical examples used in preaching, the structure of church administration and especially the established ideas about the relationship between the sacred and the secular, religion and politics, the church and society? Has Orthodox Christianity accepted the vested rights that come with modernity and their consequences in the religious, social and cultural fields?

In fact modernity and post-modernity (or late modernity) and the framework they define constitute the broader historical, social and cultural environment within which the Orthodox Church is called to live and carry out its mission; it is here that it is called upon time and time again to incarnate the Christian truth about God, the world and humanity. Certainly, modern Orthodox theology, inspired mainly by the spirit of the Fathers, reformulated during the 20th century an admirable theology of the Incarnation, of “assuming flesh.” However, its position on a series of issues basically involving aspects of the modernist phenomenon, has often left this otherwise remarkable theology of Incarnation in abeyance and socially inert. It is clear that a dynamic reinterpretation of the theology of Godmanhood and a liberating/existential approach to the “dogma” of creation *ex nihilo* are able to shatter the hard outer shell of the ‘religious’ understanding of Christianity and throw into relief the liberating

dimensions of the ecclesial event thus creating the preconditions for a real Christian self-knowledge and for a substantive dialogue with modernity and post-modernity.

In fact, modernity appears to reverse and undo, to some degree, the compromises which historical Christianity was obliged to make in order to be accepted by the Roman state, the outside world and the masses of people wanting to join the church the moment it became the official state religion. That is why a number of people maintain that in modernity and secularization (in the sociological sense of the term) we can discern elements of a break with Christianity but also of continuity, while some even speak of a legitimation of modernity based *inter alia* on Christianity (Gogarten, Blumenberg, Pannenberg, etc). According to the perceptive remarks of the French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément in conversation with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Secularization, then, is simultaneously the daughter of Athens and of Jerusalem [...] It would be false and dangerous to see only the negative aspects of secularization, to denounce them and to dream of a ‘new’ Christianity. In the secularized world, which will certainly endure, even if only as a rampart against the assault of fanaticism, one can certainly find traces of its Greek and biblical origins. Respect for the ‘other’, freedom of the spirit, the best in a pluralistic democracy [...] – all of this, says Bartholomew, is rooted in the biblical revelation of the person and the distinction made by Christ between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar.”

The Enlightenment and modernity marked the end of religiously organized societies, but not necessarily the end of the search for the true God or the thirst for the genuinely spiritual life. Now, however, the presence of God is no longer imposed on the whole of society, nor is it an element of social order and organization. Faith in God is no longer considered a given, but something to be sought and found. We cannot go on talking about sacred communities or empires, about Christian societies, about Christianitas, Chrétienté, Christendom.

We Orthodox have become so identified with our individual ethnic churches and local traditions, we have combined Orthodoxy with our individual national narratives to such a degree, that we have largely lost awareness of catholicity and universality. We seem to have forgotten that acceptance of the gospel message and inclusion in the body of Christ cannot be understood on the basis of collectives but on the basis of a completely personal decision, free of every kind of biological, cultural or ethnic pre-determination. What seems to be then needed most urgently is a disengagement from these particular cultures and local traditions (deculturation), a re-ordering of priorities vis-à-vis the theological and cultural criteria. In the attempt to disengage the identification of faith with nation, culture and ethno-cultural identity, in this urgent need for deculturation, our generation may feel rather alone and orphaned, inasmuch as wherever we look around us in the Orthodox world, we see a continuous slide from the theological and the ecclesial to the cultural and the ethno-theological, a problematic mix of theology and ethno-phyletism, theology and the individual Great Idea (territorial/national or cultural), theology and the defense of the nation. What is necessary, then, is not a repetition and a perpetuation of the denial and reticence often

adopted by the Orthodox in their stance towards modernity, but a creative encounter and a serious theological dialogue with whatever challenges modernity poses.

The *Volos Academy for Theological Studies*, a church-affiliated institution focusing in contemporary issues for Orthodoxy, has tried to address in many ways these issues in the fourteen years since it first began. In its effort to foster interdisciplinary and inter-religious understanding, the Volos Academy (which functions as an open forum of thought and dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the broader scholarly community of intellectuals worldwide) has organized a series of studies, international seminars, conferences, roundtables, public lectures, and publications. Furthermore the Academy has collaborated with numerous other academic, ecclesial, ecumenical, and interreligious institutions, jointly addressing problems and challenges of our time, in a spirit of respect for each other's differences, and discussing topics which may interest the discussion on modernity and secularization such as: *Orthodoxy and Modernity*; *Orthodox Christianity and Otherness*; *Gender and Religion—The Role of Women in the Church*; *Theology and Modern Literature*; *Theology and Modern Church Architecture*; *Orthodox Christianity and Multiculturalism*; *Church and State*; *Issues of Reformation and Renewal in Orthodoxy*; *Biblical Liberation Theology, Patristic Theology, and the Ambivalences of Modernity in Orthodox and Ecumenical Perspective*; *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*; *Refugees, Immigrants, and the Church*; *The Place of Religion in the Public Sphere*; *Neo-Patristic Synthesis or Post-Patristic Theology: Can Orthodox Theology Be Contextual*; *Ecclesiology and Nationalism in Post-modern Era*; *Orthodox Canonical Tradition and Contemporary Challenges*, and more.

The Volos Academy in its theological agenda attempted not to ignore or bypass patristic thought, but to bring it into dialogue with the difficult and more provocative questions that are posed by modernity and late modernity. Believing that the Holy Spirit continues to give us Its fruits, the Academy also attempts a theological approach to questions that patristic thought did not have—or could not—have raised. With these initiatives, the *Volos Academy* hopes to open a new way for modern Orthodox theology, a way which combines fidelity to the tradition with renewal and innovation, receiving positively many of the great achievements that Orthodox theology has offered up to the present but also with self-criticism and openness to the future.