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## Did Orthodox Christianity come to a Halt before Modernity?

### The Need for a New Incarnation of the Word and the Eschatological Understanding of Tradition and of the Church-World Relation

Keynote Lecture

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#### **Abstract**

The crucial issue under discussion in this lecture could be summarized in this question: *Did Orthodoxy come to a halt 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 also 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? Or do we Orthodox long for the organizational schemes and structures of our glorious past (the Byzantine/imperial in particular)? Are we turning away from the achievements of modernity and interpreting even post-modernity itself as the revenge of the Church and religion against modernity?

In any case, 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.

Obviously, theology, as the prophetic voice and expression of the Church's self-understanding, cannot but function in reference to the antinomic and dual-natured character of the Church. Just as the Church is not of this world, so is theology aiming to express a charismatic experience and a transcendent reality, over and above words, concepts or names. Just as the Church lives and goes forth into the world, so is theology seeking dialogue and communication with the historical present in every age, adopting the language, the flesh and the intellectual world of each particular era, of the historical and cultural present at any given time. Theology is not coextensive

with history and cannot be identified with history; but neither can it function in the absence of history and, more importantly, it cannot keep ignoring the lessons of history. Without this process of unconfused osmosis and reception of the world and of history, neither the Church nor theology can exist and nor can God's revelation, since the Church does not exist for itself but for the world and for the sake of the world: "for the life of the world."

For these reasons, the critical question ultimately concerns the answer that Orthodoxy will give in the face of the challenges raised by modernity, challenges which are being posed also in traditionally "Orthodox" countries, albeit with some delay.

In this respect it is perhaps reasonable to ask, however: beyond a potential dialogue between theology and the problematic of subjectivity and individuality on what other level might the encounter and dialogue be possible between Orthodoxy and modernity, given the chasm between the two seemingly introduced by the fundamental tenets of the modern era? Are there historical precedents, or at least some elements conducive to such an encounter? If indeed we accept the view that "modernity is not a specific historical event, but a historical conjuncture which has happened several times in our, albeit with different form and content," then, *mutatis mutandis*, what was the encounter between Hellenism and Christianity if not an analogous form of encounter between the Church and modernity? Was this not perhaps the most characteristic example of the Church taking up elements initially foreign to its own theological and ontological assumptions and fruitfully assimilating them into its life and theology?

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 ceased to be persecuted and suspected of subversive activity, and became the official state religion, so that being a Christian entailed privileges rather than persecutions. 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

A dynamic reinterpretation of the key Church doctrines like 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 reveal 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 which is already with us, as well as allowing modernity and post-modernity to realize their debt to their Christian past.

From the Orthodox point of view at least, we think that the key to answering the questions raised above is to be found in eschatology. Eschatology introduces an element of active expectation accompanied by the dimension of the future and the renewing breeze of the Spirit, dimensions so definitive for the life and theology of the Church and yet so lacking today. For in response to the challenge of globalization,

cosmopolitanism and internationalism, today the wind of traditionalism and fundamentalism is once again blowing violently through the life and theology of the Church. Whereas fundamentalism is a flight into the past of pre-modernity and involves turning back the course of history, eschatology is an active and demanding expectation of the coming Kingdom of God, the new world which we await; as such, it feeds into a dynamic commitment to the present, an affirmation and opening to the future of the Kingdom in which the fullness and identity of the Church is to be found. In other words, the Church does not derive its substance principally from what it is, but rather from what it will become in the future, in the eschatological time, which, since the Resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, has already begun to illuminate and influence the present and history. In the light of eschatology, even the Tradition of the Church itself acquires a new meaning and a different dimension, an optimistic and hopeful perspective. In this perspective, Tradition is not identified with habits, customs, traditions or ideas or in general with historical inertia and stagnation, but with a person, Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory who is coming. It does not relate chiefly to the past; or, to put it differently, it is not bound by the patterns of the past, by events that have already happened. Strange as it may sound, in the authentic ecclesial perspective, Tradition is orientated towards the future. It comes principally and primarily from the future of the Kingdom of God, from the One who is coming, for the salvation of the world and of humankind. This understanding of Tradition leaves the future open to the will and the plan of God, while preventing us from deciding beforehand on His behalf where the world is to go.