



Christos Yannaras Denounces Orthodox Fundamentalism

Address given by Professor Christos Yannaras at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology and Hellenic College during its 69th commencement ceremonies on May 21, 2011, when the school bestowed an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity on the renowned theologian, philosopher, author, who is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Cultural Diplomacy at the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences in Athens. He is the author of more than 30 books, of which some have been translated into 10 languages, and has also received doctorates in Philosophy from the Sorbonne in Paris and in Theology from The Aristotle University in Thessaloniki.

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Your Eminences Archbishop Demetrios of America and Metropolitan Methodios of Boston, Reverend President of Hellenic College and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Dear Professors of the School, Dear Students, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please accept my warmest thanks for the honor you are doing me today: the bestowal of an honorary doctorate by the Theological School of Holy Cross. And the honor of your presence at this ceremony.

Today's event has been preceded by a special favor shown to me by the School, for which I am also grateful: the publication by Holy Cross Orthodox Press of four of my books, with two more under production. The launch of a book on the American market is a precious gift to an author: it opens up greater possibilities for his participation in current debates to be judged and evaluated. I am happy to be writing in Greek, a language with striking powers of expression. But it is only by access to an English-speaking readership that I can entertain the hope

that my work will be judged by the most demanding standards.

Academic custom demands that someone honored with a doctorate from an academic institution should set down, as a symbolic response, a brief account of his scholarly contribution, a kind of echo of Cavafy's poem "I Brought to Art." I shall attempt to do this, and try to show how fresh and relevant today is an old and much debated topic: the relationship between Orthodoxy and the West, between the Orthodox ecclesial tradition and modern Western life.

I was set this topic "Orthodoxy and the West" here at the Theological School of Holy Cross forty years ago (the first time I came to America) in 1970. I was then a post-graduate student in Paris, and I was invited to participate in a conference of the Orthodox Theological Society in America. Four decades later, what relevance does that same topic have and what is new about taking it up again?

A timely element is, I believe, the problem of neoconservatism and fundamentalism which currently afflicts the way life is led in most Orthodox churches. The "Zealots" of Orthodoxy, as our own fundamentalists are called, are as a rule, fanatically anti-Western: they regard the Christian churches and confessions of the West as opponents of the Orthodox camp, as a real threat. They proclaim that the West is steeped in error and at the same time has evil designs on Orthodoxy. Thus for the Zealots any attempt at Orthodox "dialogue" with Western Christians, any participation in the "ecumenical movement" signifies a betrayal of Orthodoxy, a surrender to error, an abandoning of the conviction that the Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

But this Zealotry certainty does not constitute a defense of the decisions of the Councils; it does not derive from a conciliar expression of catholic ecclesial experience. It is an individual choice and conviction, based usually on the opinion of some geron, or elder, also chosen individually, who is lent "objective" authority by his hagiorite, or other, monastic affiliation. The defense of Orthodoxy by the "conservatives" is conducted on the basis of their individual choices and judgements, not on the basis of the Church's conciliar expression. It is therefore a defense that manifestly undermines the coherence of the ecclesial body. It invalidates the conciliar system; it denies the episcopal ministry.

Thus the individualistic character of Zealotry-Fundamentalism and the accompanying idolization of formalism—of "dogmas" and "canons" rendered independent of ecclesial experience—assimilate the "Orthodoxy" of conservative Christians to every other ideological "orthodoxy": to that of conservative Marxists, conservative Freudians, etc. All these "orthodoxies" have the same characteristics in common: They attribute a quality of infallible authority to "sources": to the original formulations of an empirical testimony, or of a hermeneutic theory, or of a proposition concerning regulative principles (of a practical deontology). And they bitterly oppose any deviation from the original formulation because its objectified "truth" can be possessed and offer assurance to the individual, cladding the ego in certainties. The texts of Marx or Freud or the Fathers of the Church become the infallible measure that gauges the correctness of every opinion, view, or proposition— that judges which person individually possesses the truth and which is in error, which person will be saved and which will go to perdition. And the measure of this judgment is applied authoritatively by the "zealot," the defender of original authenticity.

It is thus perfectly obvious that this understanding of "Orthodoxy" is to be identified with the specific product

of the post-Roman West that we call "ideology." In defining ideology, I would say that it is the transformation of experiential knowledge into a certainty that is purely intellectual— or, more generally, the substitution of experiential assurance (which is always verified through the relations of sharing in the experience) by individual (intellectual-psychological) convictions. Ideology replaces the attaining of participation in a shared experience of truth simply with the individual understanding of the formulations of truth or with something inferior to that: blind insistence alone on the letter of the formulations.

The cultural paradigm generated by the post-Roman West, which has now attained global dimensions, is proudly acknowledged to be individualist— to be founded on the absolute priority of the potentialities and needs of the natural individual, on the protection of individual rights. On the basis of this fact one could say that one of the most western manifestations of the West today is the ideological anti-Westernism of the "Orthodox" opponents of the West, the individualism of the "Zealots" of Orthodoxy.

This paradox proves that the issue of relations between Orthodoxy and the West remains extremely topical, since in the extreme case of the fundamentalist "Zealots" the historical challenge that arose for the Church with the arrival of Modernity becomes abundantly clear. The West in Modernity is no longer the portion or party that at the time of the Schism cut itself off from the body of the One Catholic Church. Now the whole of Christendom is the West, since all of us who bear the name of Christian live integrally and self-evidently within a Western cultural context; we embody the Western mode of life. Our routines, our mental outlook, our reflexes, our prioritization of needs, the way our social institutions are formed and function are all absolutely obedient to the Western-individualistic not the social-ecclesial model. We live, we think, and we act in the mode fashioned by Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Descartes.

That is why on the level of Modernity, too, our opposition to the West, whatever our defense of ecclesial Orthodoxy, is inescapably fleshness, unrelated to the reality of our common life: an abstract piece of ideology. We recognize differences between Christians but we regard them as "confessional": as by definition ideological. They are discussed by scholarly committees of "specialists"— university professors and bishops (that is, the "professional cadres" of ideology). It has never occurred to us to bring people of experience into ecumenical dialogue, people such as authentic monks and gifted artists.

The incontrovertible fact of the Westernization of Christians in the Modern age leads us to understand that the

ecclesial critique of the errors that led the West to break away from the body of the One Catholic Church cannot today (in the nature of things) be anything but self-criticism (that is, repentance— *metanoia*). There is no entity called the West “confronting” Orthodoxy; the West is “within us” and Orthodoxy is the common nostalgia of all who perceive the falling away of both East and West. The pioneers of self-criticism, the guides to *metanoia*, are not those who engage in “dialogue” about “primacy” and “infallibility,” or about the puerile doctrine of the Filioque, but those who have boldly attempted to make a painful break with moral error: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, and closely related to them in the language of art, Baudelaire, Kafka, Bergman, and Fellini: All those who have proclaimed painfully that the alienating transformation of a relationship with God into ideology and legalism has led to the death of God— the God of individual “convictions” and crutch of egocentric Morality has died: “we are all his murderers”— “Wir haben ihn getötet, wir alle sind seine Mörder!”

An attempt to express a criticism of the West in the form of Christian self-criticism began with sincerity and with no little risk in the 1960s on two fundamental levels of interconnected topics: On the level of ontology, with a proposition for the formation of a new (and methodologically coherent) hermeneutic of the existential event on the basis of the reality of person and eros. And on the corresponding level of the reconnection of the ecclesial event with the chiefly existential problem, on the basis of the so-called eucharistic ecclesiology.

These two bold undertakings, which even today are still denigrated and ridiculed, are both based on the admission of a pair of propositions: that of the empiricism preserved by the apophaticism of the formulations of knowledge, and also that of the empirical realism of the distinctions between nature (or substance) and person, and between nature and nature’s energies. Only by the admission of these propositions can the existential otherness of personal hypostasis be grasped as the empirical reality of freedom.

The ontology of the person and eucharistic ecclesiology implement criticism of the West as Christian self-criticism, because they were both born from a consistent grappling with the impasse to which the West (and now also the East) has been led by intellectualism and legalism— the rendering of Christian “religiosity” independent of the ecclesial event. The ontology of the person could not have emerged if it had not been for the need to confront Heidegger’s nihilism— as an attempt to articulate as an experiential counter-proposition a (Christian) *metanoia* for the (Christian) errors which lead with the utmost consistency to Heidegger— to the plumbing of the depths

of existence’s absence of “meaning.” And eucharistic ecclesiology could not have emerged except as an attempt to shed light on ecclesial catholicity, as the existential wholeness of the καθ’ ἑκάστο (*kath’ ekasto*),¹ the uniqueness of each of us, in the face of the nightmarish manifestations of the totalitarianism of ideologies.

I am grateful to you for honoring this evening an attempt to give a self-critical account of the relationship between Orthodoxy and the West.

¹ Καθ’ ἑκάστο (*kath’ ekasto*) is the opposite of the καθ’ ὅλο (*kath’ olo*, from *kath’*, ‘according to’ + ‘*holon*’, ‘the whole’)— that is, the ‘catholic’ dimension of life and truth.