

Christos Yannaras

Towards a New Ecumenism

Christos Yannaras is Professor of Philosophy at Panton University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens. His books include Freedom of Morality and Person and Eros. This essay first appeared in French in *Contacts*, No. 179 (1997), pp. 202-206. It is based on the tape of remarks he made when introducing M. Rupnik's *Dire l'uomo* in Rome on 3 December 1996. The English translation was published in Souroz, nr. 70, November 1997.

TODAY WE NEED A NEW ECUMENISM, an ecumenism which will not have as its goal a "dialogue" between traditions and confessions, but rather will manifest a new "coming together" through the encounter of people of any and every tradition and confession. It would be the ecumenism of concrete encounter between those who share a thirst for the life which can conquer death, people who are looking for real answers to the "dead ends" of the civilization in which we live today.

This kind of ecumenism is of great importance for us because we Christians are responsible for these dead ends. The ecumenism of the sixties was something very different. It was an ecumenism whose goal was to give the various traditions and confessions a chance to know each other. Each tradition, each Church, affirmed its convictions and its "theories" in order to develop this mutual knowledge.

In my life I have had many opportunities to speak in such ecumenical gatherings. Those who took part were people who are sometimes called the monstres sacrés of contemporary theology. Forgive me for saying this, but as a rule it was simply impossible to reflect on that fundamental thirst in such a context. We discussed the problems of the third world, of feminism, of individual rights, etc. But, you know, I am a member of the Church because I want to know if one can get hold of, handle, feel that which can conquer death. There are so many different ways of resolving the problems of the third world or contemporary women's issues, but there is only one promise to truly conquer death—the Church.

I shall use two words—freedom and knowledge—to explain what I mean. Let me begin with freedom. The way in which our modern world understands freedom does not interest me. Freedom is thought of as the possibility of unlimited choice: the ability to choose among different ideas, different convictions, different political parties, newspapers, etc. The right of the individual to unlimited choice. The image, the "icon," of

freedom today is the supermarket. In a supermarket each person can choose for himself—in the utter loneliness of the consumer.

The freedom that interests me is the one which frees us from the constraints of the created world. Let me recall for you Peter's walking on the water. The disciples are together in a small boat on the lake of Genesareth. The lake is rough, there is a storm, it is night, and the disciples are afraid. Suddenly they see someone coming across the water towards the boat. They are overwhelmed, they are frightened. But the one who is approaching them says: "Do not be afraid. It is I." It is Jesus. And Peter says: "Lord, if it is really you, let me come to you on the water." And Christ says to him, "Come." And Peter steps out of the boat and begins to walk on the water. At that moment he receives his existence not from his own nature, but from his relationship with the Lord. This is the freedom that delivers us from death.

The Church calls us to realize our existence not on the basis of our created and mortal nature, but on an immediate relationship with him who called us from non-being into being. This is the definition of the person: the person is found in that freedom of immediate, existential relationship with God. There is no question here of abstract notions or psychological feelings. What we have here is something real, it is a reality. We exist according to the mode of ecclesial existence when we are able to walk on water, and the whole life of the Church is an ascetic struggle designed to teach us to walk on water. At times one gets the impression that the life of the Church has been changed into an attempt to improve people's behavior, their character, to enable them to control their passions, etc. Of course, this is all part of the ascetic struggle. But the goal of the struggle is freedom with regard to nature, an ability to live our existence as a realization of love, so as to reach the truth of the person.

The second word I shall use is knowledge. Knowledge as we understand it today—that is, as information—does not interest me. These days the sciences very often seem to observe reality as if while analyzing a painting by van Gogh, for example, one were to say that it consisted of a piece of canvas covered with paint. It is unable to discover, through the painting, the personhood of the artist. But if one remains at the level of the matter of which the painting is made, then the unique, incomparable character of the person of the painter has not been studied. We can, of course, read biographies of Mozart one after the other. We can increase our knowledge of his life, his work. And yet it is only experience of Mozart's music which will reveal to us his person.

I want a science which will enable me, through the reality of nature and the study of nature, to come to an understanding of the person of the Creator. I want a knowledge which will go beyond nature so as to arrive at the "otherness" of the divine person, a knowledge which will enable me to communicate with this person. The knowledge of personal "otherness," the knowledge of the person, is an outburst, an explosion of freedom. Knowledge and freedom cannot be separated, since I must free myself from myself in order to open myself to the other, in order to recognize the "otherness" of the other. I must free myself from all those individualistic, egocentric forms of resistance.

This is the only way to achieve freedom: freedom as love and freedom as knowledge. This is why the path to knowledge and freedom and love is the path of ascetic struggle: it is in this way that we free ourselves from the exigencies of the ego. To know the other it is necessary to say goodbye to oneself.

In the experience of the Church we find two ways to carry out this ascetic struggle: the service of men, social activity, and monastic asceticism, where one works to overcome those obstacles, those points of resistance which prevent one from communicating with God and with others. These two paths have in reality the same goal. Evagrius Ponticus defined it very well when he said that the Christian, and above all the monk, is separated from others in order to be united with all. Sadly, in the society in which we live, our manner of living excludes these two paths. We should become aware that we are living a paradox. On the one hand, we declare that we are members of the Church, that is, of a living body, while on the other our situation is such that our daily existence presupposes the absolutization of the individual. We live today on the basis of the rights of the individual and give an absolute priority to individual consumption. And so even theology has become a knowledge about something. We are filled with information about God. But what defines theology in the Church is concrete knowledge of God himself, the experience of faith, which does not mean the possession of particular individual convictions. In Greek the word "faith"— *pistis*— still preserves its original sense of confidence, of trust. To have faith means to give oneself, to offer oneself with an absolute trust in God and in that "other" whom we love. The two Gospel figures, the Publican and the Pharisee, are fundamental for an understanding of what I am trying to express by the word "person." The Pharisee, as a religious type, is satisfied with himself, absolutely faithful to the Law and self-sufficient. He has no need of God. That is why he is excluded from the Kingdom. The other, the Publican, can offer neither virtue nor good works. He is a sinner. He pays no attention to his personal strength, so all he has is his relationship with someone whom he loves. And he gives himself over to that love.

I dream of an ecumenism which will begin with a confession of sins on the part of each Church. If we begin with this confession of our historic sins, perhaps we can manage to give ourselves to each other in the end. We are full of faults, full of weaknesses which distort our human nature. But Saint Paul says that from our weakness can be born a life which will triumph over death. I dream of an ecumenism that begins with the voluntary acceptance of that weakness.

Perhaps you will forget most of what I say. But I would ask that you remember this one sentence: the most difficult thing in one's personal life—I do not mean in one's spiritual life, but in one's personal life—is to distinguish between what is real and what is psychological. Our civilization has replaced ontology with psychology. And I do not mean the science of psychology, which has much to tell us. I mean the psychological illusions which we ourselves create, whether through a purely rational approach or through a kind of moral self-satisfaction. We must overcome these idols in order to touch the reality which is truly theological. We must distinguish between what is real and what is

psychological so as to be able one day to sing together that by death one can conquer death.