

The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World: An Ecumenical Conversation

Keynote Address of
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1. Introduction

I offer my wholehearted thanksgiving to God for the joy and the blessing to be with you this evening and to begin this momentous Ecumenical Conversation on *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World*. For this significant event, I express my warmest thanks to the Reverend President of Hellenic College/Holy Cross, Fr. Nicholas Triantafilou, and to the Reverend Dean of the School of Theology, Dr. Emmanuel Clapsis, who has worked enthusiastically for this encounter, which perhaps he has seen as an opportunity for a more elaborate and inclusive research and discussion on a cherished topic he dealt with in his recent book *Orthodoxy in Conversation, Orthodox Theological Engagements*. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Konrad Raiser and the World Council of Churches, to Dr. Rodney Petersen and the Boston Theological Institute, and to Professor David Little and the Center for the Study of Values in Public Life, Harvard Divinity School, for their substantive cooperation in producing this Ecumenical Conversation.

Sincere thanks belong also to the esteemed colleagues of the Faculty of the Holy Cross School of Theology and of the various universities from America and from Europe who were kind enough to participate as speakers in this meeting. Omission of thanks due to ignorance, forgetfulness or multitude of names, to use St. Basil's phrase, is of course unintentional.

We are calling this conference a "conversation." But in the spirit of this conference on pluralism, we should not be too ready to take at face value our own label of "conversation." This conference is more than a conversation; it is more than just an exchange of words.

We recall from the field of linguistics the idea of *performative speech acts*. These are sentences which not only convey information, but also accomplish some action just in the process of being spoken. For example, the statement, "I apologize," not only conveys information about the speaker's mental state, but also performs the work of creating an apology; just as the use of the phrase "I promise" can bring about the existence of a promise, or the words "I thank you" effect an expression of gratitude.

What we do here this week in holding this Ecumenical Conversation on Orthodoxy and Pluralism is not simply the conveyance of information between one another. This conversation is itself a *performative speech act*, whereby we create the very thing we are talking about. We are living out, albeit in a small way, Orthodox values and priorities in a pluralistic world through this conversation with members of the wider American and international theological community. We are not merely talking theologically; to borrow a modern expression, we are truly "producing theology" by the words that we exchange here in a spirit of mutual respect, interest, and love.

But here, we are going to have more than a performative speech act. The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, a Nobel prize winner in 1980, wrote a remarkable poem under the title *Readings*. The text begins with the following five verses:

You asked me what is the good of reading the Gospels in Greek.
I answer that it is proper that we move our finger
Along the letters more enduring than those carved in stone,
And that, slowly pronouncing each syllable,
We discover the true dignity of speech.

We discover the true dignity of speech. This conversation on pluralism is also a terrific opportunity *to discover and to promote the true dignity of speech*, in addition to producing a performative speech act.

Let us then proceed with a few thoughts on *The Challenge of Pluralism for Orthodoxy*. What follows could be called just introductory comments. The program of the next two days is so rich and thorough that any attempt to offer something truly comprehensive in the form of a keynote address would certainly become an exercise in frustration and futility. Here, then, are some introductory comments, grouped around three themes: a) The challenge of pluralism for Orthodoxy, b) The context of our conversation, and c) suggestions for responding to the pluralistic challenge.

2. The Challenge of Pluralism for Orthodoxy

From the outset, we must be clear about the matter before us. The issues of pluralism and globalization are intimately related to one another and are matters of profound interest, not only for Orthodox Christians in America but in every place in the world. The effects of globalization are felt everywhere, especially through the means of the internet, e-mail, cellular telephone technology, and the different forms of electronic media. Even in communities around the world which do not have the cultural or racial heterogeneity of the United States, there is nonetheless a sort of “pluralism by proxy,” due to the power of modern technologies of communication to represent the wealth of human diversity across vast distances, almost instantaneously.

What this means, then, is that a given society can be a cultural island no more. The marketplace of ideas is open to all, and geographic isolation is no longer an issue in the dissemination of ideology. No society is “immune,” so to speak, from the possibility of influences from outside. The Orthodox Church in Greece, for instance, must take into account the same ideas and societal trends that are faced by the Orthodox Churches in America or in other places. With the advent of globalization, every community is a pluralistic community, even those societies which try to be closed to outside influences. Let us then speak more specifically about the dimensions of our pluralistic reality that, through globalization, are common to all civilized societies, and therefore common to all Orthodox Churches across the world.

In a period of rapid globalization, in a world community that is increasingly conscious of its pluralistic character, the Orthodox Churches meet a great *challenge*. The word “challenge”, however, is not to be understood with negative connotations, but rather in the most positive and optimistic sense. The pluralistic world is not an *obstacle* to Orthodoxy; it is rather an *opportunity*. In a pluralistic global society, the Orthodox Church is challenged to match her incarnational Christology with an equally incarnational ecclesiology.

At this point, it is important to bring to our conversation a truly programmatic passage from St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians. In chapter nine, he speaks of his labors as a true Apostle of Christ, defining his Apostleship not in terms of rank or privilege, but in terms of servanthood and sacrifice. He says:

19. For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. 20. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law – though not being myself under the law – that I might win those under the law. 21. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law – not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ – that I might win those outside the law. 22. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 23. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

19. Ἐλεύθερος γὰρ ὢν ἐκ πάντων πᾶσιν ἐμαυτὸν ἐδούλωσα, ἵνα τοὺς πλείονας κερδήσω· 20 καὶ ἐγενόμην τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὡς Ἰουδαῖος, ἵνα Ἰουδαίους κερδήσω· τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον ὡς ὑπὸ νόμον, μὴ ὢν αὐτὸς ὑπὸ νόμον, ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον κερδήσω· 21 τοῖς ἀνόμοις ὡς ἄνομος, μὴ ὢν ἄνομος Θεοῦ ἀλλ' ἔννομος Χριστοῦ, ἵνα κερδάνω τοὺς ἀνόμους· 22 ἐγενόμην τοῖς ἀσθενέσιν ἀσθενής, ἵνα τοὺς ἀσθενεῖς κερδήσω· τοῖς πᾶσιν γέγονα πάντα, ἵνα πάντως τινὰς σώσω. 23 πάντα δὲ ποιῶ διὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, ἵνα συγκοινωνὸς αὐτοῦ γένωμαι.

If we were to attach a label to Saint Paul's approach to evangelism, we might call it *personal pluralism*: the Apostle takes a positive approach to the pluralism that he finds in the Roman world of the first century A.D., by seeking to express, in the microcosm of his own personhood, the full panoply of human diversity: Jewish, Gentile, under the law, outside the law, strong, or weak.

And why does he exhibit this “personal pluralism?” The Apostle tells us: *I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings, πάντα δὲ ποιῶ διὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, ἵνα συγκοινωνὸς αὐτοῦ γένωμαι* (1 Cor. 9:23). We are not to understand by this statement that Saint Paul expects to *earn* the blessings of the Gospel through his pluralistic labors: such a sentiment would be completely incongruous with Saint Paul's experience and theology of salvation by grace. Rather, by this statement we understand the Apostle as meaning that he enjoys the blessings of the gospel *in and through* his work of being “all things to all people.” The blessing *is* the pluralistic labors, directly related to the salvation of the people.

The reason for this statement is transparent if we understand correctly the Christology of Saint Paul. *Becoming all things to all people* requires an act of personal *kenosis*, a self-emptying, accomplished in order to accommodate the needs of the other, followed by a journey into the depths of one's humanity to discover the fullness and variety of our extraordinary nature as creatures who bear the image of an infinite God. And having found within himself the potential to become all things for all people, and having the true apostolic freedom to become all things for all people, the Apostle shows himself an *imitator of Christ*, *μιμητής Χριστοῦ* (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:1), *who took the form of a servant, μορφήν δούλου λαβών* (Philippians 2:7) in order to redeem our enslaved race, who condescended to come even *in the likeness of sinful flesh, ἐν ομοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας* (Romans 8:3) in order to save sinners. For Saint Paul, therefore, the pluralistic encounters of his apostolic ministry become a means for greater Christ-likeness within his own person. His work is a most existential and experiential way of living in union with Christ so that he might declare "*It is*

no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me", ζῶ δὲ οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ζῆ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός (Gal. 2:20).

This then is the challenge of a pluralistic society for our Orthodox Church: to encounter the contemporary world as St. Paul did in imitation of Christ the God who became a human being. The more pluralistic encounters we effect for the sake of the Gospel, the more opportunities we have to become all things to all people, in the Pauline sense, sharing in the blessings of the Gospel.

3. The Context of our Conversation

It would be wise for us, at the beginning of our conversation on pluralism, to take a moment to consider the context in which we find ourselves. This is a necessary exercise to examine thoughtfully our present situation, the historical antecedents, and the trends leading into the future for our global society.

There would seem to be a general consensus among Americans that we are living in an increasingly pluralistic society and in a world that is rapidly evolving towards greater and greater diversity. Objectively, however, quite the opposite might be true. If anything, the standard cultural markers point to the fact that the world is also rapidly growing more *homogeneous*. If we speak in terms of languages, for instance, we observe a rapid dying-off of indigenous languages around the world, and even of whole language groups in some places. Linguists predict that the number of distinct languages in the world will have shrunk from about 6000 to around 3000 by the end of this century—a loss of some thirty languages *each year*.

In conjunction with this trend is the increasing loss of biodiversity in the ecological sphere, with a concomitant change in the lifestyle of the indigenous peoples. Wetlands are being drained and paved. Desert communities are converted into lakeside resorts through the damming of rivers. Rain forests are rapidly being turned into grazing land for cattle. This trend goes hand in hand with the global spread of Western cultural expressions in terms of music, dress, cuisine, entertainment, and most recently, electronic communications via the Internet.

Sometimes, phenomena related to globalization and diversity might be misleading. Let me cite a pertinent example. Here in the USA, many Americans are able today to receive a Spanish-language television channel through their local cable system; twenty years ago this would not have been possible. Some would point to this as proof of a greater diversity in America in 2002 than in 1982. But the argument is weak. The United States has always been an ethnically diverse country, even from its very inception and up until the imposition of immigration quotas. Moreover, Spanish-speaking communities have been a significant part of many American cities for most of the nation's existence. The fact that they have their own television stations now is only proof that these communities are more visible to their neighbors than before, but not that they are part of a trend towards a more diverse society. In fact, in terms of content and appearance, the game shows, soap operas, movies and news programming of the Spanish channels on TV appear to borrow more from standard American network fare than to be an expression of authentic Hispanic-American culture. Therefore, in spite of the appearances, the phenomena of Spanish language TV channels in America could be a pointer to homogenization rather than to diversity.

So while on the one hand, it is certainly true that America is becoming more *conscious* of its pluralistic makeup, it is certainly not the case that America is necessarily becoming a more diverse society. America has always been home to a wide range of ethnic, linguistic,

cultural, and religious communities. If anything, one might argue rather that America is losing its diversity as the grandchildren of immigrants become more “Americanized,” as the traditional ethnic neighborhoods of towns and cities are transformed, as the Greek-towns and Chinatowns of our major cities shrink and change, and as electronic media promulgate the Hollywood standards for dress, behavior, and speech habits.

It is paradoxical, then, that in this period of increasing homogenization, America and many countries in the world find within themselves a growing conflict of cultural polarization. By cultural we mean here a large spectrum of components including religion. But this perhaps is the main area of diversification. The so-called “Culture Wars” have been escalating year after year, and the battlefields are the school board meetings, the radio call-in shows, the sidewalks around women’s health clinics, the jury rooms, and the voting booths. From the vast relevant literature let me mention as an example the book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, by James Davidson Hunter.¹ In this book the author describes the combatants most actively engaged in the struggle: the advocates from both sides are deeply patriotic, committed to the founding values of America, profoundly moralistic, fully engaged in their religion (or philosophy of life), well-read and well-spoken, and open to forming non-traditional alliances to further their cause.

Hunter also documents the fact that the lines of today’s cultural struggle do not fall along any of the old societal boundaries like race or creed, but rather cut across them. Catholics oppose Catholics at the abortion clinic picket lines, Jews vilify Jews in the media, and Protestants lambaste Protestants at the town meeting. In this sense, the pluralism of contemporary America and several modern countries is quite different from the diversity of the past. Increasingly, America is becoming a neighborhood of “houses divided” so to speak. The new diversity of America is not in the variety of languages spoken at the marketplace, but in the use of a common vocabulary of words, symbols, myths, and meanings to express radically different visions of national life. And this has a tremendous importance for our conversation.

This, in fact, is the chief battleground of the culture wars: a semantic tug-of-war to impose a particular set of definitions and a particular narrative and interpretation of national history on the population as a whole. As specialists say (Hunter p. 184): “The battle will be nearly over when the linguistic preferences of one side of the cultural divide become the conventions of society as a whole.”

What this means for our conversation here is that we must be sensitive to the fact that the pluralism is often obscured by common speech habits. In former times, the pluralism of American society was a visible and audible property, observed in differences in skin color and language. Today, however, the most authentic pluralism seems to be ideological rather than racial, and this pluralism is often invisible and inaudible, unless one knows how to decode the shared keywords of the various parties on the ideological spectrum. This challenges us as Orthodox Christians, therefore, to be extremely careful and sensitive in our use of language. It forces us to re-assess what we truly intend to mean by our theological speech, to examine how it is likely to be understood by our fellow citizens in this society. It is not enough to say the right thing, objectively. In many cases, we will need to discover fresh metaphors and narratives to articulate our beliefs in this pluralistic society of ours. This task is facilitated by our classical cultural Hellenic heritage, which is in essence transcultural and favors creative usage of language and expression of ideas and beliefs. To use the metaphor of the Gospel, we

¹ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. BasicBooks/HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.: New York. 1991.

need *new wineskins*, in terms of communication and language, for the *new wine* of our Orthodox Faith in America (cf. Matthew 9:17).

This, in short, is an oversimplified overview of the context in which we conduct our conversation of this weekend. We are mistaken, however, if we think ourselves to be inhabiting an entirely novel cultural milieu, unlike any seen before. A quick look at the cultural setting of first-century Palestine will reveal to us several affinities with our own time. Jesus Christ was born into a society that was struggling with the frictions of an uncomfortable pluralism. In the mix were a Jewish ruling class with accommodationist attitudes towards the regime of Caesar, Hellenized Jews, conservative Sadducees, progressivist Pharisees, isolationist Essenes, along with Samaritans, Gentiles, and Roman overlords. One could not have predicted that from within this cultural chaos and ideological diversity would emerge a way of life that would unite men and women of every social class, nation, tribe, and tongue, and ultimately even the fractured Roman Empire itself. And yet this was precisely the power of the Gospel in that ancient reflection of our own times. And by the grace of God, it can have this same power again in our own times as well.

4. Responding to the Pluralistic Challenge: Three Suggestions

Within this cultural-ideological diversification, within this pluralistic context, what can we as Orthodox Churches offer to contemporary society? In the course of the following two days of our *Ecumenical Conversation*, we are going to hear numerous suggestions and propositions worth considering.

In this closing part of my introductory comments, allow me to submit three, I suppose, well known suggestions, which might be useful to remember in our discussions.

a) The first is a suggestion related to the story of Pentecost and to the practice of the Early Church. The central event in Pentecost was the fact that the Apostles were empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak the good news in all the languages of the multitude gathered that day in Jerusalem.

It is noteworthy that the miracle of Pentecost was *not* that the assembled crowd was made to understand the speech of a single man in a single language, regardless of the native tongue of the hearers. Rather, the miracle was that the one Gospel was expressed equally in a variety of languages. Anyone who recognizes the intimate link of language to culture must also recognize the bold statement that Pentecost makes: the truth of Christ can be embodied in more than one or two cultural-linguistic systems. The work of the Church is not to construct a single universal culture; instead, the Kingdom of God created by the One Holy Spirit contains many languages, many cultures. In the words of Fr. Emmanuel Clapsis, Pentecost tells us about “the active presence of God in all cultures.”² This is a strong Orthodox view of the Kingdom, and for it we can lay claim to a long-standing tradition of insisting that “the Christian faith must become incarnated (or indigenized) in order to produce authentic fruits of dynamic human cooperation with God” (Clapsis, page 8).

In this instance, let us consider the practice of the Early Church. How did she treat the Holy Scriptures? The Greek language was still the *lingua franca* of the Roman world even into the era of the Church Fathers. And for most Greek speakers of the time who employed the variety known as *koine*, around the Mediterranean Sea, the language of most of the New Testament would have been accessible and understandable in the original.

² Fr. E. Clapsis, “Gospel and Cultures—An Eastern Orthodox Perspective,” in *Orthodoxy and Cultures*, Ioan Sauca (ed.), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1996, p.21.

And yet, very early on in the life of the Church, we find a significant commitment to the work of translating the Scriptures into the various local vernaculars: Syriac, Ethiopic, Georgian, Armenian, the Vulgate of Saint Jerome, Coptic in both the Sahidic and Bohairic dialects, and Gothic. What does this multiplicity of Bible versions demonstrate, if not a strong sense among the early Christian Fathers that the Faith of Christ must be indigenized, so to say, to the greatest extent possible?

We all know that translation is an inexact science, that the difficulty of finding equivalent renderings can introduce unintended meanings to a text, or conversely limit the range of purposeful ambiguities. We know also that in the face of the Gnostic movements, early Christianity was deeply concerned about *the form of sound words* (2 Timothy 1:13), about vocabulary and nuances of meaning. Nevertheless, despite the risks inherent in the translator's art, the early Church responded to its mission in a pluralistic world by deliberately advancing her own linguistic pluralism in the core expression of the Faith, the Holy Scriptures. This diversity was matched as well by a diversity of liturgical expressions, and an openness to variety in other facets of life for the Christian communities of the Eastern Empire, so that even in the "globalized" environment of the ancient Roman world, the Church never neglected the particular and specific cultural elements of local parishes, never overlooked the socio-cultural or ethnic pluralism.

b) The second suggestion refers to our Orthodox notion of *personhood*, and the importance that this idea has in our dealing with the challenge of the pluralistic world of today. With the theological term *person*, we express a complex of ideas and values. Among persons there is a fundamental commonality of essence, while at the same time an indelible distinction of uniqueness. Personhood at one and the same time implies the existence of the other through the shared nature, and yet also upholds the primacy of the individual, as significant and precious in his or her own right.

Modern society has a tendency to reduce persons to the description of their external characteristics. How often, for example, do we see reports in the media that present demographic information solely in terms of the categories of race, gender, or social class? How much of our political rhetoric is shaped by the notion that the nation is simply a collection of constituencies: blacks, whites, senior citizens, or blue-collar workers? This sort of reductionism is offensive to the anthropological sensibilities of Orthodox theology, and as loyal citizens of our society we should resist it. By no means should the pressures of modern globalization be allowed to define the emerging global community simply in terms of focus-groups and market targets.

As Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon has written in his book *Being as Communion*: "Uniqueness is something absolute for the person. The person is so absolute in its uniqueness that it does not permit itself to be regarded as an arithmetical concept, to be set alongside other beings, to be combined with other objects, or to be used as a means, even for the most sacred goals. The goal is the person itself."³ Our Orthodox insistence on the uniqueness of personhood is strongly evident even in our liturgical practice. To mention an example, every sacrament is personalized by the recitation of the name of the Christian who has been given a renewed personhood and a new name in Christ.

And yet our Orthodox notion of personhood is altogether distinct from the American idea of "individualism." For personhood is fulfilled only in community, only in the relationship of love and openness to the other, as different as the other might be. Thus, no matter how advanced is the state of globalization, no matter what forms pluralism will take in

³ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, (1985), Saint Vladimir Seminary Press, p. 47.

the near or the distant future, our Orthodox notion of personhood will be of paramount importance and has to be constantly emphasized in any and every pluralistic context.

c) The third and final suggestion connects the pluralistic challenge to the Eucharistic community to the Orthodox parish. Whereas the Apostle Paul practiced a kind of personal pluralism, our parishes should be the proponents of *a parish pluralism*, being all things to all people, by their makeup and their outlook and above all by their communal mode of life, instantiating constructively a “unity in diversity” that could be a model for our whole society. This idea has been articulated in the past years by Christos Yannaras, among others, in his book *The Freedom of Morality* (cf. especially chapter 11), where he identified the eucharistic community—the local parish—as the starting-point for an Orthodox program of a more comprehensive social engagement, an emphasis on personal relationships within the Eucharistic community and a fostering of strong communal and Eucharistic life among our people. The spiritual reconstruction of the local parish into an authentic community is, then, not simply one of the priorities for Orthodoxy in this era, but the “priority program.” As we conduct our conversation on pluralism this weekend, let us be mindful about how our ideas and proposals can be translated into the concrete actions of community church life, leading our parishes into offering some sort of a parish pluralism. Such a parish pluralism, saving the uniqueness and integrity of the person and the unity and vitality of the community, could serve as a superb model for our globalized and pluralistic society.

5. Conclusion

At the very beginning of this presentation, we mentioned, as a guiding text, the declaration of St. Paul in First Corinthians 9:22: *I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some*. We end with the same phrase: “I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.”

An adequate theology of pluralism is not simply a philosophical nicety for our Orthodox Churches of the twenty-first century. It is the necessary tool for our accomplishment of the work set before us by the Lord in His Great Commission to go forth into all the world to preach the Gospel. Unless we understand how we, as a Church and as local parishes and as theologians and clergy and laity, can become “all things to all people” in an appropriate, and authentic, and Orthodox way; unless we understand how to *live* our pluralism while still holding fast to the one truth of the one Lord Jesus Christ, and one Church; we will by no means save any. And we will by no means respond to the sublime mandate of the same Lord telling us: *As the Father has sent me, even so I send you* (John 20:21).