

## Orthodoxy and Modern Greek Literature and History

### FAITH AND THE CHALLENGES OF WORLDLY POWER. WHAT IS LEFT OF ORTHODOXY?<sup>1</sup>

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This paper examines the temptations of “worldly entanglement” that the Orthodox Church has faced throughout its history. As the official religion of the Eastern Roman Empire the Orthodox Church while integrated into the imperial power it remained a distinct institution zealous of its spiritual independence. Even though the Church would eventually assume worldly functions under Ottoman rule, its priority still remained the provision of moral guidance to the faithful through monasticism, education and the example set by martyrdom. The emergence of independent states fragmented the Eastern Church into a series of national churches prone to the divisive ideology of nationalism, an issue that the modern Orthodoxy still struggles with. In considering the question “what is left of Orthodoxy” the paper examines how Orthodoxy can be understood by approaching it as a living tradition of faith and experience, and as a potent force in shaping the human condition.

**Keywords:** Religion, Christianity, Eastern Roman Empire, Orthodoxy, monasticism, Neomartyrs, nationalism.

*For Andrei Pippidi*

Religion is a constitutive element of human experience. The theoretical refinements of the philosophy of religion, the reasonable counsels of agnosticism or the secular arrogance of atheism notwithstanding, religion still remains integral to the human condition through the millennia and it has been a source of inspiration that directs human sensitivity to higher things. There is no clearer record of this than the multiple forms of art since the earliest prehistory of all civilizations that invariably express the human sense of the sacred and the divine. It is easy to understand why. Religion and its expression in an infinite variety of faiths and traditions tries to make sense and respond to the human need to understand the metaphysical unknown and to cope with the fear of death. Such primordial needs and feelings have always been present in humanity’s tortuous march through time and have inspired exquisite forms of art in the visual and in the literary domains of human creativity and also most notably in music. However, such needs are not or cannot always be understood by secular-minded scholars, especially those among them whose mindset remains incapable of grasping the elusive world of inner feeling and spiritual inspiration.

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In our contemporary intellectual world, which has been shaped by modernity, that is the illusions of secularism and progress, anthropology has done better than the other human sciences in understanding religion, its power and existential significance. I refer of course to the serious twentieth century anthropological tradition expressed most notably by Clifford Geertz, a tradition that goes back to Emile Durkheim and his so perceptive treatment of the “elementary forms” of religious life.<sup>2</sup>

Historical scholarship has neglected religion for much too long, overtaken by trendy fashions and a masochistic obsession to do things differently and be “progressive”. In the very recent past, however, some branches of historical scholarship, intellectual history most notably, have witnessed a “return of religion”, as it has been called, a return which is producing remarkable results, including the development of the concept of “thick religion”, drawing on ideas suggested by Max Weber and Charles Taylor.<sup>3</sup> I find the concept of “thick religion” very fertile and evocative and I would like to explore it in my remarks today in connection with Orthodox Christianity.

Before engaging in this task, I feel I should say a few more words about religion and religious faith as modes of human existence and the complexities that mark their encounters with other constituents of the human condition and the social world around it. Religion is a primordial component of the human condition, responding to deep needs in the human soul and supplying answers to perplexing questions in people’s mind. To transact these difficult and challenging tasks, which as a rule surpass the human ability of comprehension, religion needs intermediaries whose task is primarily to create interpretations that might make things comprehensible, allay fears, provide solace and hope before the unknown and unknowable. Fulfilling these roles, transacting the task of explanation and solace, becomes the source of the influence of religion in society. Its interpreters acquire the role of privileged interlocutors with the divine and are thus identified with sacredness. In human society this means power and it is inevitably intertwined with conflict with other wielders of power. Nothing illustrates this better than the conflict of soothsayer Teiresias with King Oedipus in Sophocles’s greatest play or the endless conflicts of the prophets with kings and other wielders of earthly power in the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System”, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, New York, 1973, p. 87–103.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular, Sudipta Kaviraj, “On thick and thin religion: some critical reflections on secularization theory”, *Religion and the Political Imagination*, ed. by Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones, Cambridge, 2010, p. 336–355. I should add as a comment on this highly suggestive essay that the idea of “thick and thin” was introduced by Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin. Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame and London, 1994. To be sure Walzer initiated the idea as a way of describing moral arguments. Its expanded use in the analysis of religion attests to its heuristic value and conceptual fertility. On the impoverishment of religion as a component of the construction of modern identity see the perceptive remarks by Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 234–247.

These confrontations eventually set up religion and its “godlike prophet, in whom alone truth is implanted” as Sophocles writes in *Oedipus Rex* (verses 298–299), into systems of power that seek to appear as alternatives to worldly power but in fact remain as deeply embedded in the structures and contradictions of the world as the systems of secular power themselves. This is the big challenge facing religion and its claims to otherworldliness, its claim to appear as an alternative mode of human existence.

The existential significance of religion in the human condition has been a source of power but also an inexhaustible source of inspiration not only for art but also for systematic reflection. The latter has given rise to the great theological traditions that have marked world religions. Thinking about the divine since Hesiod’s *Theogony* has been an integral component of all civilizations. By contrast to ancient paganism and the great religious traditions of Asia, the theologies associated with the main monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been marked by exclusiveness, demanding the total dedication of the faithful and ruling out any form of syncretism in faith or ritual. Exclusiveness has been connected with claims of a monopoly of truth and purity of faith precluding other religious options and loyalties for the faithful.

Yet at the same time religious traditions despite the claims of theological rigidities, have been shown by history to have been remarkably malleable, vulnerable to the pressures of other forces in society, especially politics, which have always tried to capitalize on the psychological and moral power of religion to serve their own worldly ends. This in turn leaves religion open to criticism and pertinent evidence, which is endless indeed, supplies ammunition to atheism and other forms of religious skepticism and criticism. All this can be well founded and convincing as historical analysis and even as moral appraisal. The question that is not usually raised in this kind of critical reflection is whether and to what extent the human failures of their ministers and their engagement in the expediencies and conflicts of the world constitute sufficient reasons to question the intrinsic value and persuasiveness of the basic religious teaching itself.

Should persons of good will and a sense of rectitude turn their backs on Christianity because of the Crusades or European colonialism or to Islam because this particular religious tradition has had the tragic fate to be literally hijacked by tyranny and terrorism?

This is the deeper substantive concern implied by the question mark in the second part of my title: is anything left of Orthodoxy as religious faith amidst the challenges and temptations of the world? I think it is a serious question that should concern all scholars of religion. If they are not concerned about this issue, studying religion loses a great deal of its value and interest as an intellectual pursuit and runs the risk to be reduced to some form of historical gossip as in fact does happen with a considerable part of contemporary writing on Orthodoxy.

After these preliminary generalities let us turn to Orthodoxy. What I propose to do is share with you some reflections, tentative and exploratory for the most part, on two levels of analysis. First, we should try to take stock of the question of the temptations of worldly entanglement that have faced Orthodoxy in its history, and their significance for Christian faith. To do this I will recapitulate and reappraise ideas expressed in my writing of the last two decades or so and I beg for your forbearance.

Secondly in considering the question “what is left of Orthodoxy” I would like to test the concept of “thick religion” by looking at Orthodoxy as a living tradition of religious faith and experience and the ways it can be understood to shape the human condition.

It is not hard to perceive the problems and contradictions marking Christianity and Orthodoxy in particular in the two millennia of its history. The community of the faithful, the Church, its founders and their heirs and successors are in the world but do not belong to the world as we hear in the Gospel of John the Evangelist (15, 18 and 17, 6). That is why the world hates them, we hear further on (15, 18–19), and presents them with temptations to which, being human, they often succumb. This is very epigrammatically the history of Christianity and of Orthodoxy. Although human weakness and failure tend to scandalize the faithful, the evidence of worldly entanglements and concomitant failings is not really a reason for an independent observer to subject the basic principles and doctrines of the faith to serious questioning. If humans fail to live up to the standards of belief and morality set by their faith, it is not necessarily the problem of those standards and principles as we know too well from the long march of ideologies and moral systems in human history.

It could be said of course that the most authentic period in the history of Christianity as far as acting out the principles of evangelical truth was the period of the primitive church and the time of persecution by the Roman Emperors during the first three centuries of the Christian era, when martyrdom tested the power of the faith and made possible its triumphant vindication.

Eventually, however, persecution and martyrdom gave way to toleration and the transformation of Christianity into imperial religion: the Johannine characterization “not of the world but in the world” appeared to be taking a historical actuality of great immediacy and even urgency. As an imperial religion in the Eastern Roman Empire, Orthodoxy, by now the Great Church of Christ, found itself confronted by many challenges and temptations but never lost its original Christian character and mission that is a critical attitude toward and distance from the world. The continual existence of the Roman Empire as the wielder of secular power and legitimacy in fact preserved Orthodoxy in the East as the repository of faith and spiritual life. It is true that the Church was integrated into the imperial power structure and many patriarchs and other senior clergymen assumed political roles as servants of the empire but the Church remained a distinct institution zealous of its spiritual independence.

The model of the Orthodox attitude towards the powers-that-be remained until the end of the empire John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople, rather than patriarchs like Photius, Nicolaos Mysticos or Antony IV who proved very effective servants of the empire's diplomacy. John Chrysostom's model of resistance and censure of imperial power for doctrinal or moral reasons set the norm in the life of the Church all the way through the iconoclastic controversy to conflicts with the Western Church and down to resistance to submission to the papacy through union of the Churches on the eve of the fall of the empire. It was this attitude along with the model of the denial of the world represented by monasticism that saved the faith and Orthodoxy in the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

The survival of the empire thus saved Orthodoxy as a religious tradition and spared it the tragic fate of the Western Church, which was transformed into a polity after the disappearance of the Roman empire in the West. That was indeed a challenge for Christian conscience, which was taken up by one of the doctors of the Western Church, Pope Gregory the Great, as part of his struggle to combat the repaganization of Europe after the barbarian invasions.<sup>5</sup> The completion of the task initiated by Gregory the Great took almost half a millennium to achieve and it was not rounded up until the reign of Gregory VII in the eleventh century.<sup>6</sup> It is not possible at this point to go into that story, which nevertheless, represents a critical chapter in the history of survival and formation of Western civilization.

I am noting the significance of the story of the Church as Polity in Western Christendom not only in order to illustrate the issue of the recurring challenges of worldly power that the Church has confronted throughout its history but mainly as a caution addressed to Orthodox self-righteousness and complacency in denying to the Western Christian tradition its ecclesiological significance on account precisely of the worldly role the Roman Catholic Church had to assume in the absence of an Orthodox Christian state in the West. Humility and moderation are evangelical lessons to all of us in thinking and judging in questions of religion, a lesson that should not be lost especially on religious zealots. The turn of the Eastern Church and the Orthodox tradition to face challenges not dissimilar in their religious substance from those the Western Church had faced in the fifth and sixth centuries,

<sup>4</sup> On these complex subjects J.M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, Oxford, 1986 remains an authoritative source. Likewise, the selections from primary sources on church and state in Ernest Barker, ed. and transl., *Social and Political Thought in Byzantium*, Oxford, 1961. On the "ambiguities" of the normative order within which the Church had to transact its mission cf. Gilbert Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre. Étude sur le "césaropaganisme" byzantin*, Paris, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> See Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*, London, 1987, p. 145–182.

<sup>6</sup> For an authoritative treatment see Walter Ullmann, *Medieval Political Thought*, Harmondsworth, 1975, p. 100–116. See also I. S. Robinson, "Church and Papacy", *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350 – c. 1450*, ed. by H. Burns, Cambridge, 1988, p. 252–305. On the respective mystical claims advanced by Church and state in their struggle for supremacy in the West, Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton, 1957, p. 194–206, 207–232 offers a greatly evocative and instructive account.

came up in the fifteenth century with the disappearance of the Eastern Roman Empire.

The fall of Constantinople and the disappearance of the Christian empire reduced the Orthodox Church to a condition of subjection, which was marked by paradoxes and antinomies on many levels. The Church had to learn to coexist with a non-Christian state and to pray for a sovereign who could not be seen as saintly and pious as the Orthodox emperor had been. That ideological adjustment proved relatively easy to make and provided the basis of the coexistence of Orthodoxy with the Ottoman state. Within the context of that coexistence, however, the Church had to assume tasks of a worldly nature in the governance of the Orthodox subjects of the non-Christian sovereign such as the collection of their taxes and the guarantee of their loyalty to the new masters. To carry out these tasks the Church was granted some administrative functions, the so called “privileges”, which remained an object of contention between Church and state at various points in the subsequent history of their relations, especially in the nineteenth century and also an object of historiographical debate as to what they really in fact involved.

The worldly functions of the Church, substantively transformed her into a quasi state within a state as far as the governance of the Christian Orthodox subjects of the Sublime Porte, now restyled as the “Rum millet”, was concerned. The Church, that is the patriarch as his clergy, were seen by the sovereign state as “supervisors of the erroneous religious habits of the infidels”.<sup>7</sup> In this capacity the Orthodox Church exercised a range of forms of power over the life of its flock, that went far beyond the spiritual domain. It was this state of affairs that exposed the Church to the temptations of the world, temptations made worse under the conditions of despotism. Hence the stories of tyranny, corruption and moral failure, which are recorded in a broad range of sources from works inspired by the traditional Christian outlook such as those of Damaskinos Stouditis in the sixteenth century down to the literature of severe social and religious criticism associated with the Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup>

This was one side of the coin. The reverse in the paradoxical condition of Orthodoxy in the non-Christian empire was the return of martyrdom. Whenever the assurance of the loyalty and submission of the infidel subjects appeared questionable to the masters, the first to pay the price was the leadership of the Church. Eight patriarchs, four of them incumbent on the patriarchal throne were executed between 1639 and 1821 for disloyalty to the empire. Three of them have been canonized as martyrs of the faith. The Greek Revolution in 1821 provoked a wave of reprisals at the expense of the Church, which was held responsible for the

<sup>7</sup> P. Konortas, *Οθωμανικές θεωρήσεις για το Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο*, Athens, 1998, p. 315. On the character of the integration of the Orthodox Church into the Ottoman institutional context Elizabeth A. Zachariadou, “The Great Church in captivity, 1453–1586”, *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. V: *Eastern Christianity*, ed. by Michael Angold, Cambridge, 2006, p. 169–186.

<sup>8</sup> P.M. Kitromilides, *Enlightenment and Revolution. The Making of Modern Greece*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2013, p. 250–259.

disloyalty of the Christian subjects. Ecclesiastical leadership throughout the Orthodox East was decimated: in Constantinople the Patriarch Gregory V and four senior metropolitans were executed; in Adrianople metropolitan Dorotheos Proios and former Patriarch Cyril VI, both of them proponents of the Enlightenment, were executed; in Crete Metropolitan Gerasimos and ten of twelve members of the insular hierarchy were executed; in Cyprus Archbishop Kyprianos, head of the local autocephalous Church, the three metropolitans and a hecatomb of abbots and other ecclesiastical dignitaries and lay notables were executed; in Tripolitza in the Peloponnese eight bishops of the region were imprisoned as hostages by the local governor, only two surviving the imprisonment; local prelates were martyred at many other places around the Greek peninsula and Asia Minor.<sup>9</sup>

Martyrdom was not limited to the prelates of the Church. The centuries of Ottoman rule over Orthodoxy were the period of Neomartyrs, mostly persons who had converted to Islam for various reasons and upon reconvertng to Orthodoxy were subjected to martyrdom. The Church stressed particularly the phenomenon of Neomartyrs as part of a strategy to stem conversions to Islam which were occurring on a large scale in the Balkans, Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and elsewhere and posed a serious threat to the integrity of the faith.<sup>10</sup> Not all Neomartyrs were apostates returning to Orthodoxy. Several of them were faithful who remained steadfast in their Christian religious faith in the face of pressure to convert to Islam. As late as 1839 with George of Ioannina and 1867 with George the Cretan from Alikianos, neomartyrdom remained a witness of living faith. Both of them secretly canonized by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, they were widely venerated in the still Ottoman-held provinces of their origin.

Under the paradox of the concurrent assumption of extensive worldly functions and martyrdom, the Orthodox Church in the Ottoman empire had to carry out its pastoral work of caring for its enslaved flock. Its response took two main forms. In the early period after the fall, especially in the course of the sixteenth century, what stands out in ecclesiastical life and activity is a sustained effort of monastic renewal and reconstruction. The sixteenth century was a period of revival of the great monastic centres of the Orthodox world, especially the Holy Mountain of Athos and Meteora and the establishment of a series of new foundations along the whole length of the Greek peninsula from North to South, including the Monasteries of Saint Dionysios at Olympos, Saint Nicanor at Zavorda, Saint Bessarion of Dousiko, the monastic houses on the Agrafa mountain massif, Penteli and Kareas monasteries in Attica and the monasteries along the steep ravine of Lousios river in the mountainous central region of the Peloponnese.

The main function the monasteries were expected to serve was to provide support for the faith but also material sustenance to Christian society to help it

<sup>9</sup> P.M. Kitromilides, "The Legacy of the French Revolution. Orthodoxy and Nationalism", *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. V.: *Eastern Christianity*, p. 229–232.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth A. Zachariadou, "The Neomartyr's Message", *Studies in Pre-Ottoman Turkey and the Ottomans*, Aldershot, 2007 (Variorum), no. XXI.

survive the consequences of conquest. Further north in Serbia, Bulgaria and Thrace the monastic foundations had been fulfilling this mission since the Ottoman conquest of those regions. So the revival of monasticism could be seen as a strategic move of the Church to sustain the cohesion and material survival of the society of Christian subjects and by these means to sustain the faith from the threat of conversion. In this effort of the Church support from the Romanian princes proved of decisive importance.<sup>11</sup>

The second component of ecclesiastical strategy was education. The conquest brought total ruin to education in the lands of the former Byzantine empire and for centuries the Orthodox people in Southeastern Europe and Asia Minor were reduced to illiteracy and ignorance. One of the first tasks of the Patriarchate of Constantinople after the conquest was to reestablish the patriarchal academy for the training of higher clergy and teachers. This remained a constant concern of the Church during the following centuries. The patriarchal school was repeatedly reformed and reorganized in order to meet the needs of the Orthodox Church in educated cadres. What is remarkable about these successive reforms of the highest school in the Orthodox community was the openness and willingness of the Church in the course of the eighteenth century to enlist scholars of the Enlightenment in its highest educational institutions and to encourage them to introduce a modernized curriculum in order to better serve the educational needs of the community. At a time that the Inquisition and the *Index librorum prohibitorum* were still in operation in the Western Church, the Orthodox Church, or at least some forward-looking patriarchs and senior prelates were prepared to rely on the services of articulate exponents of the Enlightenment in advancing a pastoral strategy of strengthening education as a defense against conversion to Islam and Western religious propaganda.<sup>12</sup>

It was by these means amidst the tribulations and sorrows of conquest that Orthodoxy, reduced to the condition of the “Church of Christ’s paupers”<sup>13</sup>, fought the struggle of saving the faith and delivering the people of God to the independent national states that eventually emerged in Southeastern Europe in the course of the nineteenth century. The relation of Orthodoxy to the liberation projects of Balkan peoples, a self-evident axiom in earlier national historiography in Southeastern Europe, is now a problematized subject, which I cannot take up at this point. Suffice it to say that the involvement of the Church in various ways in these liberation projects added still one more challenge to the host of temptations facing it as modernity dawned upon the Orthodox world.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the classic account by Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance*, Bucharest, 1935, p. 129–134.

<sup>12</sup> P.M. Kitromilides, *Religion and Politics in the Orthodox World. The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Challenges of Modernity*, London and New York, 2019, p. 12–24 and idem, “Orthodoxy and the West. Reformation to Enlightenment”, *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. V: *Eastern Christianity*, p. 202–209.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Manuel Gedeon, *Ιστορία των του Χριστού πενήτων*, ed. by Ph. Iliou, Athens, 2010.

In order to come to the problems of the present I would like to direct our attention to the eventual outcome of the involvement of the Orthodox Church in liberation projects, which meant its breakup into national Churches attached to the new nation states.<sup>14</sup> The nationalization of Orthodox Churches through their subjection to nation-states which used them without any qualms for their own secular and, as a rule, un-Christian ends, constitutes, in my judgment, the most serious challenge to Orthodox faith and conscience in the modern and contemporary age and in concluding this essay I feel I should address a few reflections to it.

About the antinomy of Orthodoxy and nationalism I have written extensively in earlier writings, in which I made my views clear and thus I do not need to repeat them here. What I think is more interesting to reflect upon concerns precisely the question what has been left of Orthodoxy after two centuries of nationalized ecclesiastical life through willing self-subjection to the nation-state, its principles and values.

Nationalism is a secular ideology, the foremost expression of political modernity, whose values are characterized by exclusiveness and partiality, that is exactly the opposite to the ecumenicity of Christian values as taught in the Gospels and the Letters of Saint Paul. How can Orthodox Christianity, therefore, be identified and enthusiastically serve the agenda of such an un-Christian ideology as nationalism? This is a real, if perplexing question, which of course can have convincing historical answers, explaining how the identification came about. Such historical answers and explanations, nevertheless, cannot be reassuring in an ethical sense to the Christian conscience. In witnessing the active involvement of the nationalized Orthodox Churches in the bloody conflict in Macedonia in the first decade of the twentieth century, or in the wars that tore apart Yugoslavia in the last decade of the same century, or in listening to the discourse of leading Orthodox prelates in many Orthodox countries, including Greece and Cyprus, one wonders indeed what is left of Orthodoxy.

After worrying about this question for many years, as some of the readers of these lines may know, I could try to sketch an answer to it on the occasion of this important Congress. Looking at the issue from the vantage point of the twenty first century, my answer is the following: a great deal indeed, perhaps surprisingly so a remarkably living Orthodox witness can be observed in our contemporary world despite the continuing entanglement of the administrative structures ruling over the most populous and powerful ecclesiastical jurisdictions with nationalism and ethnophyletism. Let me clarify: historically from the vantage point of the early twenty first century we can witness among the fifteen jurisdictions or canonical autocephalous Churches that make up the Orthodox communion, two Churches, Constantinople and Albania, which in a truly admirable way have managed to resist and stay clear of the temptation of nationalism. Orthodoxy remains a living faith

<sup>14</sup> P.M. Kitromilides, *Religion and Politics in the Orthodox World*, p. 25–59.

and religious experience elsewhere also, amidst and despite the temptations of nationalism and its secular values.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the cataclysmic changes of modernity and the pressures of global society, Orthodoxy in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, in the Caucasus, amidst the tragedy in the Middle East, in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the Orthodox diaspora in the Americas, Oceania and increasingly in Western Europe, remains a living religious witness. This is largely due to the pastoral work of the regional Orthodox Churches. It is expressed first and foremost in the participation of the faithful in religious worship, in the organization of the family and social life of the faithful on the basis of the ecclesiastical calendar, an indication that the meaning of life is still to a considerable extent sought and defined by reference to the heritage of Orthodoxy. Nothing illustrates this better than witnessing congregations worshiping in nature, at distant or semi-ruined chapels on islands or in the mountains, celebrating local saints and religious anniversaries and partaking in the service of the blessing of festal bread, wheat, wine and oil and the fruit of the season and sharing these as a community and with strangers who happen to be by. All this seems to suggest that in contemporary Orthodoxy we can locate many substantive elements of a “thick” concept of religion and the practices, not only in terms of ritual but also in terms of morality and social conscience, associated with it.

The place of the faith in the life of persons and communities explains their support for the Church and its work in Orthodox countries. This in turn is the source of influence for the Church in a wide range of domains of social life and of the power it can exercise from time to time beyond ecclesiastical life. This of course can and does invite objections from secular-minded observers and critics but it is recorded here as a fact of life. The position of the Church in Orthodox societies or more accurately in countries with Orthodox majorities in their population can be occasionally controversial but it is a product of a remarkable historical resilience and an indomitable cultural and moral authority and strength.

From the perspective of critical social and political thought this phenomenon of religious resilience needs first of all to be treated with respect and second it should be acknowledged as an ultimately positive factor in social solidarity and respect for persons. Let me conclude by citing a few examples from contemporary Greece. If it hadn't been for the Orthodox Church and the support it can mobilize among the faithful, the humanitarian crisis brought about by the protracted economic crisis and austerity policies of the last ten years, would have been much worse. In fact, the Orthodox Church of Greece through its extensive network of dioceses, parishes and philanthropic establishments handled the humanitarian consequences of the crisis so effectively to the point of in fact resolving this part of the problem. It could thus save the country from a deeper social crisis,

<sup>15</sup> On the miracle of the resurrection of the Orthodox Church in Albania under the leadership of Archbishop Anastasios see Anastasios Yiannoulatos, *In Albania. Cross and Resurrection*, Crestwood, N.Y., 2016.

accompanied by more acute phenomena of social destitution and *anomie*. Through the same mechanisms the Church could also contribute decisively to facing the humanitarian problems caused by the refugee wave that brought to the country more than 80.000 refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa in the last ten years.

The refugee crisis was a real test for the Orthodox conscience in Greece. It did provoke occasional embarrassing expressions of bigotry and racism, but it also contributed to awakening the conscience of the Good Samaritan in a Christian country, an awakening which has been indeed salutary for Orthodoxy. I want to close, therefore, by recalling a few words I exchanged a few years ago with one of the very senior and articulate prelates in the Church of Greece, Metropolitan Nicolaos of Phthiotis, who unfortunately passed away only a few weeks before the meeting of our Congress in 2019. When the refugee crisis emerged, he was one of the few outspoken members of the hierarchy of the Church of Greece who appealed for readiness to help and support masses of people of a different religion but in dire distress, arriving in the country. When I mentioned to him my admiration for his position he simply replied: “What else could we do, what kind of Christians would we be otherwise?”. This is how Orthodoxy survives, meets the tests of the times and confronts the temptations of the world.

