

**UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

*Demos and Ecclesia*

*An Orthodox Theology assessment of modern liberal democracy*

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**ABSTRACT**

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Combining Theology and Political Science, two areas of knowledge with such seemingly different presuppositions, is a challenge. Still, a fruitful and balanced coupling of political science and theology, and, indeed Orthodox Christian theology, may be very timely today. Almost thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the issue of how Orthodox Christianity relates to liberal democracy is still theoretically relevant, not the least due to the numerous challenges facing liberal democratic systems in the West itself. This research aims to shed light on the questions of whether Orthodox Churches have a propensity to align with authoritarian rule, and Orthodoxy's stance towards democracy and liberalism. An in-depth evaluation of literature shows that there are two main trends in Orthodox political theology: one that tries to accommodate modernity, accepting the main framework that modernity has set as regards human action and interaction; and a second trend that is openly critical. It is this second trend that, from the thesis point of view, is more fecund for a constructive Orthodox contribution to political theology. A critical historical analysis leads to rejecting the idea that Orthodoxy is at odds with modern democracy because of a supposed dependence on a centuries-long-lost "Byzantine" imperial ideal. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that the Orthodox tradition of conciliarity, collective decision-making and the strong role of popular consent all bear significant similarities to the essence of a non-authoritarian 'democratic' devolution of power. Orthodoxy does not challenge but has affinities to the democratic character of a liberal democratic system, while at the same time exerting constructive criticism of the excesses of liberalistic individualism, among other on the basis of the Orthodox understanding of individual rights and personhood. The proposal for an Orthodox theology based on an original understanding of what politics means is well suited to adopt a consistent critical and prophetic stance vis-à-vis modern politics, not *contra* the West, but rather "more than the West". In other words, the addition of Orthodox political theology voices can benefit the development of a robust Christian theopolitical vision on the question of human existence and co-existence.

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## Introduction

### **“My Kingdom is not of this world” - The alleged absence of an Orthodox Political Theology.**

*“As the ideological division of Europe has disappeared, the cultural division of Europe between Western Christianity, on the one hand, and Orthodox Christianity and Islam on the other, has reemerged. The most significant dividing line in Europe may well be the eastern boundary of Western Christianity in the year 1500...The peoples to the north and west of this line are Protestant or Catholic;... they may look forward to increasing involvement in a common European economy and to the consolidation of democratic political systems. The peoples to the east and south of this line are Orthodox or Muslim ... they seem much less likely to develop stable democratic political systems<sup>1</sup>...Western ideas of individualism, human rights, equality, democracy, the separation of church and state have little resonance in Islamic... or Orthodox cultures.”<sup>2</sup>*

This is how Samuel Huntington classified the Orthodox Christian world in his controversial hypothesis on *the Clash of Civilizations*. Far from being just an arbitrary personal opinion, the statement resonated with a long-established stereotypical image of this part of the European civilization. Indeed, the renowned professor did not feel the necessity to go any deeper into his analysis: he provides no theological details or justification for his positions, neither does he quote other sources to this effect. He expected that his audience would have no problem identifying with his categorical claim. In any case three decades on, developments have proven the aforementioned dictum wrong;<sup>3</sup> however, the relationship between Orthodoxy and certain political aspects of modernity remains an issue for debate both within and beyond academic circles.

The question of the “compatibility” between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and modern liberal democracy gained new momentum with the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The efforts to establish liberal democratic systems in this region gave rise to a political science bibliography on democracy and democratization, covering almost every aspect, from the relationship between market economy and democracy, to historical, international, socio-cultural and other factors. Religion did appear in many analyses, but mainly as a sociological and cultural/historical aspect, rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington, “The clash of civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs* 72, no.3, (1993): 29–31.

<sup>2</sup> Huntington, 40–1.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, during this period, three more countries of Orthodox Christian culture, namely Bulgaria, Cyprus and Romania joined Greece as EU members, democratic consolidation and human rights being basic criteria for their entry.

theology. The approach was typical of modern social sciences, where theology as such has been deemed fairly irrelevant. As a result, whenever there was a reference to Orthodox Churches, or Orthodox Christianity in general, old established stereotypes easily reappeared.

Almost thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the issue of how Orthodox Christianity relates to liberal democracy is still theoretically relevant, not the least due to the numerous challenges facing liberal democratic systems in the West itself. During the period that has passed since the beginning of the present research, a series of paramount global events has taken place: the decision of the majority of British voters for the UK to leave the EU, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, the strengthening of various anti-systemic parties all over the Western world, the continued rise of China, the reappearance of Russia as a dynamic international actor, for example in Syria, coupled with the relative backfiring of parts of US foreign policy, including the evident failure of liberal democracy in North Africa, the Middle East and beyond. To the above political events, one has also to add the worldwide extraordinary conditions provoked by the coronavirus pandemic that has put to the test both the issue of societal cohesion and individual rights inside states, as well as the process of globalisation in its economic, social, and interstate dimensions. These, one may say, world-defining events have already triggered a number of debates, political and academic, regarding the rise of populism, in particular the threat that populism, or adversely, elitism, are perceived to represent to democracy, the apparent inability of established elites to adequately respond to peoples' anxieties, the effects and the future of globalization, and the inequalities reinforced or born from it.

Despite covering a wide range of issues, these debates all point to one major theme: the functioning of modern representative political systems, of 'liberal democracies', and an agony over the impasses that these systems seem to face today. Impasses that further discredited the unsubstantiated thesis for the "End of History"<sup>4</sup>, and need to be tackled with fresh ideas, beyond the box of Western (post)modernity. Perhaps more than before, these events allow for a possible change of perspective: the traditional "Orthodoxy encounters liberal democracy" approach can be turned around to the perspective of "liberal democracy encountering Orthodox Christianity", an interesting change of dependent and independent variables.

However, we must underline that the question of the relationship between Orthodoxy and liberal democracy is part of the wider debate regarding the relationship between Orthodoxy and modernity. The latter is understood as a historical condition characterized by a new type of state and economy,

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<sup>4</sup> I refer to the well-known book of Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (NY: Free, 1992).

secularism, rationalism, and liberalism, as they historically appeared in post-Medieval Europe, and gradually became the main global paradigm (even if different cultural contexts may have led to what Eisenstadt called “multiple modernities”<sup>5</sup>). After the literature review in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 of the thesis covers an examination of the reception of modernity by Orthodox theology, from the Russian school, to the “neopatristic synthesis”, to date.

Chapter 3 represents a seemingly odd but essentially necessary digression: an examination of whether Eastern Orthodoxy is somehow culturally and historically connected to authoritarianism. Since Orthodox Christianity, modernity, and the political system of liberal democracy are not merely theoretical abstract categories but refer to specific historical realities, it is useful to take a brief look at the historical background of the Orthodox approach to “political power” and “state”, focusing on Byzantium, which, as a long and decisive era in the formation of Orthodox thought and practices, will be examined in more detail. Based on existing scholarship, the examination challenges the old assumption that Byzantium was the ‘absolute despotism’ model *par excellence*, or that Orthodox Christianity has an intrinsic dependency on imperial political models. The analysis rejects the idea that Orthodoxy is at odds with modern democracy because of a supposed dependence on a centuries-long-lost “Byzantine” imperial ideal. On the contrary, it later highlights that the Orthodox tradition of conciliarity, collective decision-making and, at times, the strong role of popular consent all bear significant similarities to the essence of a non-authoritarian ‘democratic’ devolution of power.

What follows in Chapter 4 is a short review of the notions of democracy, liberalism and their modern combination, liberal democracy. Instead of treating liberal democracy as a monolithic term, whose content is implied rather than defined, this examination distinguishes between its two constituent parts, namely liberalism and democracy. Democracy is understood as an ideal but also as a set of principles and institutions, while liberalism is understood as an ideology that has the individual and his or her self-interest at its epicenter. This clarification is followed by a more in-depth look at an interesting example of recent thinking on liberal democracy and Orthodoxy by US theologian Aristotle Papanikolaou. From the vantage point of the political scientist, I argue that a sound and balanced political theology on the issue should include a consistent theological argument as well as a nuanced view of the term “liberal democracy”, informed by history and political science. Moreover, when examining the relation between liberal democracy and Orthodox Christianity, a certain level of contextualization is necessary, since different liberal democratic political systems mirror the contingent factors of the respective societies.

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<sup>5</sup> Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities”, *Daedalus* 129, no.1 (2000): 3–29.



The lack of such contextualization coupled with insufficient nuancing in terms borrowed from political science may affect the overall argument, as well as the effort to draw general conclusions on the issue.

On the basis of this understanding of liberal democracy as the historical combination of two elements, Chapter 5 comprises an investigation into the basics of the relationship between democracy, liberalism and Orthodox tradition; The tentative conclusion that emerges is that Orthodoxy does not challenge but could affirm the democratic character of a liberal democratic system, while at the same time exerts constructive criticism of the excesses of liberalistic individualism. The latter falls short of the Orthodox understanding of the notion of personhood; numerous scholars have pointed out that personhood transcends both individualistic and collectivistic understandings of the human being. As such, Orthodoxy could contribute to a fuller understanding and realization of the rights and obligations of the human being within the community.

It is obvious from the outset that the enterprise undertaken here is complex and challenging for many, closely interrelated reasons: first, the whole issue cuts across theology and political science. If and how the two fields relate to each other in modern times is a contested issue, for the very development of modernity led to the rise of social sciences and the simultaneous delimitation of theology<sup>6</sup>; second, the question of Christianity's relationship with politics in general and with the state and liberal democracy in particular has been the subject of a vast bibliography that covers the subject matter from every possible angle: theology, history, sociology, and political science among others. In this vast bibliography, however, the examination of Orthodox Christianity's position is comparatively rather limited, and as noted above, typically haunted by stereotypes. As Prodromou noted, "the dominance of political science research in Western constructions of Orthodoxy, in contrast to the dominance of theologians in shaping Orthodox constructions of the West, has made for parallel monologues, rather than engaged dialogue".<sup>7</sup> Third, in political science, the question of what liberal democracy entails, is an open subject, with democratic theory representing a separate research domain. And last but not least,

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<sup>6</sup> Milbank offers a comprehensive presentation of the relationship between social sciences and theology in modern times. Among others, he demonstrates the existence of a huge gap between the two, stemming from the very genesis of social sciences as a discipline born by modernity and aiming at the justification of modernity's assumptions on religion and society, rather than serving as an 'objective scientific' tool. He, thus, criticises contemporary political theology for neglecting the importance of specifically Christian traditions of social thought, and for been subjected to categories and assumptions of modern social sciences that are themselves ultimately anti-theological. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Prodromou, "Shaking the Comfortable Conceits of Otherness: Political Science and the Study of 'Orthodox Construction of the West'", in *Orthodox constructions of the West*, eds. George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 202

the general subject “Orthodoxy and modernity” is a hotly debated topic that at times has taken on the proportions of an almost existential issue.

This thesis has no ambition to present a comprehensive political theory on the relationship between Orthodoxy and liberal democracy. Not only because this is impossible in this work’s scale, but also because there are real doubts if a general, abstract theory could be adequately developed at all. Indeed, today’s globalized nature of modernity has created a multiplicity of environments where the Orthodox tradition interacts with modern societies. On the one hand, there are a number of European countries where Orthodoxy is traditionally the dominant religion, representing more than two thirds of the population. On the other hand, Orthodox migration has created noticeable Orthodox communities in many countries of Western Europe and the Americas. And lastly, although outside of the scope of this work, one should not forget the many Orthodox (and Oriental) Christian minorities living under extremely challenging circumstances in the Near and Middle East. In each of these cases, how Orthodoxy comprehends its place in society and relates to the political system (liberal democracy or other) depends unavoidably also on the context. Acknowledging these variances, the aim is to offer a glimpse of an alternative theoretical and anthropological basis which could help address the aforementioned challenges faced by liberal democracy in the West and the world today.

## Chapter 1

### Literature Review on Orthodox Political Theology and Liberal Democracy

#### I. Political Theology and its Orthodox variants

Before turning our attention to the bibliography on the relationship between Orthodoxy and liberal democracy and the latter's valuation by Orthodox theology, it is necessary to draw a tentative map of the general literature on Orthodox political theology. This can help us understand better the different stances adopted by Orthodox theologians regarding today's liberal democratic systems. First of all, however, it will be useful to say a few words on the contents of "political theology" as such.

The term "political theology" has been used in order to express different issues; a good recapitulation is offered by Elizabeth Phillips.<sup>8</sup> Phillips refers to three ways of describing how and when political theology came into existence: first, as being conterminous with Christianity, starting with the very Christian scriptures; second as more explicitly starting with Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*; and thirdly as a distinct academic discipline that emerged in the mid-twentieth century. In my project, the term will consistently be employed in its more "practical" third meaning. Additional useful resources are *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* edited by Scott and Cavanaugh<sup>9</sup>, and the homonymic *Cambridge Companion* by Hovey & Phillips<sup>10</sup>. These volumes contain articles on all major figures and trends of the classical political theology, but also on some of the critical opinions. The above works allow for a useful – if tentative – systematization and categorization of the main voices in the field, as a prerequisite for an analogous identification of relevant Orthodox voices. Of special interest here is Michel Kirwan's book<sup>11</sup>, where the author detects two schools of thought: the classical post-war political theology – what Phillips also calls "first generation political theology"<sup>12</sup> – that kept faith with the project of Enlightenment, and a newer movement – the "second generation"<sup>13</sup> – that keeps an openly critical position on the project of modernity. The "first generation" appeared in Catholic and Protestant circles in the 1960s as an attempt to reconcile Christianity and modernity, the latter understood as the historical condition characterized by a new type of state and economy, secularism, rationalism, and

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Phillips, *Political theology: a Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Craig Hovey & Elizabeth Phillips, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: a New Introduction* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Phillips, *Political theology*, 42-50; for the author, this category includes Political Theology (with capital "P" and "T"), Liberation Theology, and Public Theology.

<sup>13</sup> Phillips, 50-54; Phillips classifies here Post-liberalism, Radical Orthodoxy, and "Contextual Theologies"

liberalism, as they historically appeared in post-Medieval Europe, and gradually became the main global paradigm. But since the 1990s, the “second generation” critical political theological understanding of modernity and secularism, and subsequently, today’s liberal democracy, appeared. It went beyond mainstream normative terms. A key author in this more recent strand is John Milbank. His work is important because it is his critical approach to secularism and liberalism that provide a framework for useful comparison with similar arguments from an Eastern Orthodox point of view. In his magnum opus *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Millbank argues that the difference of Christianity to modern secular logic, and thus secular modern politics, is a difference of ontology that is reflected in the understandings of the social and the political: the pagan, and today’s nihilistic, “ontology of violence” versus a Christian “ontology of peace”. There is no original violence, chaos and conflict inscribed in the structure of cosmos, but an ontological peace that is both the origin and the *telos* of creation. More recently, Milbank together with co-author Adrian Pabst recapitulated the critique of contemporary liberalism and went on to describe possible post-liberal alternatives in politics, economy, culture, and international relations.<sup>14</sup>

Turning to the contributions of Orthodox theologians in political theology, a preliminary observation is that the relevant literature is considerably smaller, compared to the production from a Western Christian point of view. Nevertheless, the interest in political theology from an Orthodox perspective has lately increased. Moreover, despite their smaller number, Orthodox contributions seem to follow the aforementioned division witnessed in Western Christian literature, that is, the two general trends vis-à-vis secular modernity. There is however no chronological division into a “first generation” friendly to modernity approach and a later, more critical one. In fact, in Orthodox theology, the critical approach is at least as old as the “accommodationist” one<sup>15</sup>. For the sake of presentation uniformity, we may start with the latter.

As was the case with its Western counterpart, the Orthodox “accommodationist” trend has as its main characteristic the acceptance of modernity, and more specifically of the process of gradual secularization of modern societies, and of the ideology of liberalism as a normative given. Early attempts at a contemporary Orthodox view on social issues in general (understood as including politics too) were made by the late Greek professor of theology, Savvas Agourides. At this early stage, Agourides

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<sup>14</sup> John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Nature* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> One can also detect some outright rejecting voices of modernity in Orthodox circles in general. Characterized by their refusal of getting into meaningful dialogue with modernity, these “rejective” voices do not represent today a coherent trend of political theology in Orthodox academic circles.

did not produce a book presenting a certain political theology view, but his thought developed gradually, and his position was implicit in various articles and lectures<sup>16</sup>. His effort showed similarities with the Marxist lineages of liberation theology, focusing on the issues of the fight against oppression and injustice, and arguing in favor of an Orthodox socio-political activism. Agourides argued against the view of a socially withdrawn and ‘mystical’ Orthodox Church which in his opinion was connected with its Byzantine past, although his depreciatory view of Byzantium was not free from negative historical “caesaropapist” stereotypes<sup>17</sup>. He wanted Orthodoxy to adapt to the presuppositions of modernity, and accept its agenda, in order to tackle the problems posed by the latter. Overall, Agourides’ primary task was to argue that Orthodox theology *can* support social and political activism, as did the Catholic and Protestant theologies. Agourides’ efforts aimed not so much as a proposal for an explicitly Orthodox political theology but were rather an attempt to find in Orthodox theology elements that would allow for an Orthodox support of existing non-Orthodox political theology currents, like Liberation theology.

During the 1990s, Petros Vassiliadis, a student of Agourides and professor of Theology, authored several articles on the issue of politics and Orthodox Christianity. He accepts that “if one wants to approach, and reflect on, any specific issue, like politics, from a distinctly Orthodox perspective, it is eucharistic theology in its broad sense that should guide his or her effort.”<sup>18</sup> Eucharist encapsulates the communal, relational and eschatological identity of the Orthodox Church; the latter “has consistently accepted the priority of the eucharistic *experience* over all theological *views* and *convictions*, the priority of *communion* over *faith* or *belief*.”<sup>19</sup> Compared to Agourides, Vassiliadis holds a more nuanced and less negative view on the relations of the Church to political authority in Byzantium, the model of *symphonia*, which he sees as a particular historical case.<sup>20</sup> While remaining within the framework influenced by first generation political theology, Vassiliadis more readily recognizes the pitfalls of modernity (for example international economic inequalities,<sup>21</sup> ecological crisis etc.). He understands Orthodox political theology primarily as part of an ecumenical effort to respond to these pitfalls.

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<sup>16</sup> Savvas Agourides, “The social character of Orthodoxy”, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 8, (1962): 7-20; in Greek, Σάββας Αγουρίδης, *Οράματα και Πράγματα* (Athens: Artos Zois, 1991), and *Θεολογία και Κοινωνία σε διάλογο* (Athens: Artos Zois, 1999), which are compilations of articles published by the author during the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>17</sup> Agourides, 17

<sup>18</sup> Petros Vassiliadis, “Politics in Orthodox Christianity”, ed. J. Neusner, *God’s Rule: The Politics of World Religions* (Georgetown University Press 2003), 92

<sup>19</sup> Vassiliadis, 85.

<sup>20</sup> Vassiliadis, 102

<sup>21</sup> Petros Vassiliadis, “Παγκόσμια Οικονομία και Χριστιανική αντίδραση”, in <https://auth.academia.edu/PetrosVassiliadis>, accessed 01/09/2021

Pantelis Kalaitzidis is a more recent example of the “accommodationist” trend. In his book *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*<sup>22</sup>, he exhibits a long line of regret about what he calls the inability of Orthodoxy to develop a Political or Liberation Theology, attributed to an alleged failure of Orthodoxy to accept Western modernity. Searching the reasons for this failure, Kalaitzidis – like Agourides in the past – is fervently critical of the Byzantine era and the “caesaropapist” and authoritarian tendencies it supposedly left in Orthodox tradition<sup>23</sup>. Similarly, he holds a critical view on the neopatristic movement in Orthodox theology, seeing it as responsible for a 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox introversion and for “the unresolved theological issues still remaining in the relationship between Orthodoxy and modernity”<sup>24</sup>. Conversely, Kalaitzidis is positive towards modernity, its alleged ideological and religious neutrality and secularization.

For Kalaitzidis, the most unfortunate element, hindering the emergence of an Orthodox liberation Theology, is the historical confusion of the ethnic or national element with the religious during the Ottoman occupation, and the subsequent national awakening of Orthodox peoples against the Sultan. The Orthodox Church forgot its eschatological outlook and got “involved in the process of ethnogenesis and national jockeying”<sup>25</sup>. Thus, the Orthodox Churches were trapped in a purely ethnocentric dimension, the consequence of which is the identification of the ethnic to the Christian identity<sup>26</sup>. But Kalaitzidis neglects to mention that this identification had long been an actual historical *fact*, and not the result of an intentional Church policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is more accurate to say that the religious identity was *the* main element of ethnic identity for the Sultan’s Christian subjects. Nevertheless, Kalaitzidis concludes that this “ethno-theology” represents a peculiar Orthodox contextual or even liberation theology, only that in this case, liberation refers to the “wrong” subject, that of nation: it is “clearly limited to the ethnic level, with an ignorance, underestimation, or even denial of the social and the political”<sup>27</sup>. The problem with this crude allegation is that Kalaitzidis should also demonstrate in which cases during modern times, and to what degree the ethnic/national, social and political were not in fact intimately connected for the predominantly Orthodox countries.

Finally, discussing other Orthodox trends of political theology, the author is highly critical of the movement of “neo-Orthodox theology”, and especially of Christos Yannaras. The main reason is what

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<sup>22</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: WCC, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Kalaitzidis, 65

<sup>24</sup> Kalaitzidis, 76

<sup>25</sup> Kalaitzidis, 67

<sup>26</sup> Kalaitzidis, 68

<sup>27</sup> Kalaitzidis, 73

Kalaitzidis perceives as the “anti-westernism” and “anti-modernism” characteristics of this movement. The author accuses this movement as having resulted in neo-nationalism and neo-conservatism, but he refrains from giving more details<sup>28</sup>.

After this general assessment of Orthodox political theology and tradition, Kalaitzidis provides his view on the appropriate basis for an Orthodox Liberation Theology: the eschatological reality witnessed by the Orthodox Church. As an icon of the eschaton, the Church must embrace the Other and seek human liberation from all structures and ideologies of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. It is this eschatological reality that allows the Orthodox Church to embrace modernity with its concomitant pluralism. Kalaitzidis offers monasticism – a traditional eschatological witness of the Kingdom - as a factor of balancing and resistance to state power<sup>29</sup>.

All in all, for Kalaitzidis the problem is Orthodoxy’s less than halfhearted acceptance of Modernity. Thus, there are only two possible answers: either i) the development of a correct, “leftish” and “progressive” (and thus good) Orthodox political theology – an Orthodox version of Political or Liberation Theology – that will stop confronting Western modernity, trying to correct the inequalities and injustices of the modern world, while accepting its general beneficial conceptual framework; or ii) the development of an Orthodox political theology that will continue confronting modernity, which then by definition is “rightist”, anti-western, conservative (and thus bad), following the (supposed) problematic historical political tradition of the East. His preference is definitely for the first.

The increased interest in an Orthodox theological voice in politics during the past decade is reflected in publications that combined the contributions of many theologians and historians. More specifically, these books are i) *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine* edited by the Greek-American theologians Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos that contains fourteen articles from different authors<sup>30</sup>, and ii) *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, edited by Papanikolaou together with Christina Stoeckl and Ingeborg Gabriel, with eighteen contributions.<sup>31</sup> The majority of works, usually covering a narrow subject, are interesting and informative, as e.g. in the first book the articles of Stoeckl on the relative reception of the human rights concept by the Russian

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<sup>28</sup> Kalaitzidis, 80

<sup>29</sup> Kalaitzidis, 138-9

<sup>30</sup> George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou, eds., *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine* (NY: Fordham University Press, 2016)

<sup>31</sup> Kristina Stoeckl, Ingeborg Gabriel and Aristotle Papanikolaou, eds., *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity* (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2017).

Orthodox Church<sup>32</sup>, and Hämmerli's examination of the "Lautsi case" as an example of how post-Communist Orthodox countries understand the concept of secularization.<sup>33</sup> Regarding the second volume, of special mention are the contributions by Papathanasiou<sup>34</sup> and Džalto<sup>35</sup>. Both authors propose what they call "Orthodox Christian anarchism" as a sound basis for an Orthodox political theology: for Papathanasiou it is the anti-capitalist spirit inherent in the mentality of the Orthodox Church, whereas Džalto even more openly argues that this sacred anarchism is "the only expression of Orthodox political philosophy that is consistent with basic postulates of Orthodox theology."<sup>36</sup>

The aforementioned articles are certainly not the only interesting ones but represent some of the few that seem to deviate from a certain politico-theological framework and stance that runs through the two books. This framework, as expressed in the introduction of the first book by the editors exemplifies a version of Orthodox political theology, where Orthodoxy and western modernity – and especially liberalism – are fully compatible; moreover, any criticism towards modernity from a theological point of view is more or less a distortion of Orthodox theology, informed by non-constructive "anti-westernize" trends. Mitralaxis, in an insightful review of these books, notes how the framework, rather than being a variant of "first generation" political theology, represents a "tendency at constructing Orientalism (or, in Greece's case, Balkanism) by the Orthodox for the Orthodox"<sup>37</sup>. In sum, these books are a valuable contribution to the debate regarding an Orthodox political theology, although the general rationale behind them suggests a very specific understanding of Orthodox political theology, not far away from that expressed by Kalaitzidis in his book mentioned above.

However, such an understanding of an Orthodox political theology, focusing on Orthodoxy and its necessary changes in order to 'fit' in the modern world, has to be juxtaposed to an understanding of political theology that is more critical of modernity, similar to the "second generation" political theology in Western Christianity. Such an approach is represented by the voluminous work of the Greek

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<sup>32</sup> Kristina Stoeckl, "Moral Argument in the Human Rights Debate of the Russian Orthodox Church", in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*, ed. Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou (NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 11-30

<sup>33</sup> Capodistrias Hämmerli, "Post-Communist Orthodox Countries and Secularization: the Lautsi case and the Fracture of Europe", in *Christianity, Democracy and the Shadow of Constantine* ed. Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou (NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 31–60.

<sup>34</sup> Athanasios Papathanasiou, "The Politics of a Weak force", in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, ed. Stoeckl et al (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2017), 97-110

<sup>35</sup> Davor Džalto, "Orthodox Political Theology: an Anarchist perspective", in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, ed. Stoeckl et al (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2017), 111-134

<sup>36</sup> Džalto, 129

<sup>37</sup> Sotiris Mitralaxis, "On Recent Developments in Scholarly Engagement with (the Possibility of an) Orthodox Political Theology", *Political Theology* 19, no.3, (2018), 252



theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras. Yannaras' work, which until recently was rather unknown to the English-speaking readers, holds a twofold importance: first, it provides a basis for an Orthodox political theology; second, and in line with the former, he provides a critical examination of modern liberal political and economic systems. It is true that Yannaras is not getting into details, and his critique remains at a philosophical and ontological level. For example, he adopts two very general analytical categories, the Western and the Greek paradigm that remain constant in his analysis, although he acknowledges nuances inside these categories through time and space (i.e., the differences inside the "Western paradigm" between Roman-Catholics and Protestants). Or, talking about the modern economic systems of capitalism and communism, his critique is not focused on a detailed exposition of their structural functioning or malfunctioning from a theological point of view, but on an examination of the ontological preconditions that lie behind their development. But his analytical framework shows a high level of consistency, and his works have to be treated as a whole. His main works that have a more direct reference to sociopolitical issues: i) *The inhumanity of right*<sup>38</sup>. The issue of individual rights has been at the core of the ideology of liberalism and is considered a main component in a liberal democratic system, namely as a safeguard against the so-called "tyranny of the majority". Simultaneously, the rights of the individual are essentially an expression of the principle of individualism, a basic premise – if not the most basic principle - of liberalism. Yannaras in his book offers an ontological critique, not to the issue of the "right" itself, but mainly of the orientation that it took, and the "anti-social" results it has led to, becoming a mere panoply of the individual against the intentions of other individuals. Yannaras' critique is based on a juxtaposition of the notion of the "individual" to that of the "person" in its Christian understanding and ii) *Logos and Political Practice*, also untranslated, where Yannaras turns his attention to politics and, albeit briefly, gives a description of what a political system that may serve the need for personal relations could look like<sup>39</sup>. To these books one must add his short "programmatic" article in English 'A Note on Political Theology'<sup>40</sup>, where he explains his opinion on the prerequisites for the development of an original Orthodox political theology, and the more recent *For the "meaning" of politics*, a brief exposition of his political theory<sup>41</sup>. In the

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<sup>38</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Η απανθρωπία του δικαιώματος* (Athens: Domos, 1998); In the present work, all translations from this book into English are mine. In late 2021, as this text was finalised, the translation of Yannaras' book in English by Norman Russel was published by James Clarke & Co, under the title *The inhumanity of Right*. For reasons of consistency with the rest of text, I decided to keep my translation, as the differences with Russel's translation are not significant.

<sup>39</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Ορθός λόγος και πολιτική πρακτική*, (Athens: Domos, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> Christos Yannaras, "A Note on Political Theology", *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27, 1 (1983), 53–6

<sup>41</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Για το «νόημα» της πολιτικής* (Athens: Ikaros, 2019)

following chapters, there will be a more extensive engagement with the thought of Yannaras and its contribution to Orthodox political theology.

## II. Orthodoxy and liberal democracy – the current state of literature

After reviewing these diverse approaches in Orthodox Political Theology, we can turn to the more specific bibliography on Orthodoxy and liberal democracy. In the aftermath of Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and his ostracism of Orthodox Christianity from Western civilization, there have been some attempts to respond in defense of Orthodoxy. One such attempt was Elizabeth Prodromou's article 'Paradigms, power, and identity: Rediscovering Orthodoxy and regionalizing Europe'<sup>42</sup>. In a spirited way, Prodromou tackles one by one the usual stereotypes and goes on to show how Orthodox societies are consistent with liberal democracy and capable of politically significant internal change. Later she adopts a more apologetic tone, trying to explain why, for historical reasons, the Orthodox countries and societies seem to show 'ambivalence' towards 'liberal democracy'<sup>43</sup>. But there is no attempt to assess whether this ambivalence refers to democracy or to liberalism, that is, to the system of governance or to the axioms and presuppositions of the dominant western ideology.

Another attempt of presenting Orthodoxy in a more objective light was made by Nikolas Gvosdev in his book *Emperors and Elections*<sup>44</sup>. He has an optimistic view of the relationship between Orthodox tradition and modern politics. Like Prodromou's, his work is not *strictu sensu* political theology, and he is not trying to assess the relationship between Orthodox tradition and democracy, but to show that the Orthodox tradition is not inevitably connected to authoritarianism and autocracy. In an analysis that combines historical facts and theological sources, Gvosdev counter-argues against what he calls misconceptions around the political history of the Orthodox world, before getting in a double analysis: first, he provides an analysis of the position of the emperor in Orthodox thought and whether autocracy is the default position in the political history of the latter<sup>45</sup>. His conclusion is that "the Emperor is neither an enduring institution within the Orthodox world, nor a necessary precondition for the existence and functioning of the Church"<sup>46</sup>. Second, he tries to find those historical and theological resources in Orthodox thought that can sustain "democratic republicanism": the answer is found in the elective and

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<sup>42</sup> Elisabeth Prodromou, "Paradigms, power, and identity: Rediscovering Orthodoxy and regionalizing Europe", *European Journal of Political Research*, 30 (1996), 125-154

<sup>43</sup> Elisabeth Prodromou, "The Ambivalent Orthodox", *Journal of Democracy*, 15, no.2 (2004): 62-75

<sup>44</sup> Nikolas Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections: reconciling the Orthodox tradition with modern politics* (Huntington: Troitsa Books, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Gvosdev, 47-84

<sup>46</sup> Gvosdev, 84

conciliar principles of Orthodox tradition, connected with historical examples of popular participation in self-governing Orthodox communities (the *veche* of medieval Russia and the conciliar tradition of governance in the Orthodox Churches)<sup>47</sup>. All in all, Gvozdev's book is an interesting effort to collect and present sufficient information on Orthodox political history and thought, in the aftermath of the Huntingtonian opinion. There is no extensive discussion of the relationship between Orthodox thinking, liberalism and democracy, so issues of disagreement, like individualism, are not examined in detail.

In the Greek literature, in the aftermath of the 1967-74 dictatorship, the sparse works on Orthodoxy and democracy usually refer to the specific case of Greece, and the Church-State relationship. They do not represent a systematic theoretical attempt to assess the relationship between the democratic system and Orthodoxy. The monograph by theologian Ioannis Panagopoulos under the title *Democracy and Greek Orthodoxy: an attempt to dialogue with the orthodox phronema*<sup>48</sup> is an exception. This work was published in 1982, eight years after the restoration of democracy in Greece, and more importantly, after the electoral victory of the socialist party. Due to the dictatorship's earlier manipulation of part of hierarchy of the Church of Greece, which led the whole Church to a rather defensive position, there was a need to confirm the Church's favorable view on the democratic transition, and equally its wholehearted acceptance of the new socialist government. In the above context, Panagopoulos strives to open a dialogue between Orthodox theology and the democratic political system.

For Panagopoulos, the Church is fundamentally social and political, without identifying with the dominant ideologies of the time. It is the fluctuant and ever-changing nature of politics, that obliges theology to continually anticipate the incentives and principles behind every political action. The Church does not aim at the establishment of a certain earthly Christian polity, in the way Plato had proposed his ideal *polis*. The Church in its *praxis* seeks to assume and transform the world in all its expressions, including the political, for earthly politics and political systems belong to the domain of created realities.

Every political system is an expression of the historical particularity of a specific society, argues Panagopoulos: its form has to be analogous to the political conscience of the people it represents, which in turn is based on its identity, historical and cultural conscience. Yet, as political power is by nature fluid, the democratic *phronema* cannot be based on a momentary conception of public interest that mirrors the superficial perceptions of the day, but on solid principles that organize and serve human life.

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<sup>47</sup> Gvozdev, 97-121

<sup>48</sup> Ioannis Panagopoulos, *Δημοκρατία και Ελληνική Ορθοδοξία: δοκιμή διαλόγου με το ορθόδοξο φρόνημα* (Athens: Vasilopoulos, 1982)

Democracy, thus, needs a center that is *external* to the fluidity of democratic politics, a constancy and a stability in agreement with the people's conscience and identity. The author concludes that the Church, being this center, comes to satisfy an internal need of democracy<sup>49</sup>. This does not mean that the Church dictates 'right' policies or offers legitimacy. It always adopts a stance of witnessing of her principles, even more so as the democratic idea today is loaded with a messianic vision. Theology has to raise awareness of the consequences of a possible deviation of democracy. The Church cannot accept any absolutized power on earth (and this includes any form of political system), other than the power of the Incarnated God.

In sum, Panagopoulos sees the role of Orthodox Church as a criterion to assess whether democracy is truthful to itself. He focuses on the issue of popular sovereignty without reference to liberalism. He claims that since in a democracy the priority is society as a whole, individual interests have to identify with the common popular *phronema*: the participation of a citizen in the democratic whole presupposes an unavoidable sacrifice of personal freedom. To this Panagopoulos juxtaposes the example of the Church, where the individual member is not becoming a mere part of an impersonal sum<sup>50</sup>. This is his vantage point in order to claim in Aristotelian lines that democracy can easily be corrupted into mob rule, as far as the common interest is every time identified with that of occasional majorities. However, this is a treatment of democracy that leaves out the explicit element of liberalism, which poses quite the opposite challenge: that the priority is given to the individual and their freedom to define what is good for herself. Such an omission does not allow for an evaluation of the liberal element of liberal democracy, but it is understandable, given the fact that Panagopoulos wrote his book a decade before the end of the Cold War, when this issue was not so pronounced.

A relatively more recent work by a Greek Orthodox theologian that touches on the issue of liberal democracy and Orthodoxy is the book by Marios Begzos, under the telling title *Theocracy or Democracy: studies of Sociology of Religion*<sup>51</sup>. This is a compilation of articles, both academic and more popular texts that the author published from late 1990s till 2005. Due to this, there is a notable difference in style and depth between the various parts, accompanied by a not always consistent use of terms borrowed from political science.

There is an obvious tension that runs through the whole book. On the one hand, there is an explicitly normative understanding of "democracy", "progress", and a rather positive acceptance of

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<sup>49</sup> Panagopoulos, 37-8

<sup>50</sup> Panagopoulos, 52-3

<sup>51</sup> Marios Begzos, *Θεοκρατία ή Δημοκρατία: Μελέτες Κοινωνιολογίας της Θρησκείας* (Athens: Grigori, 2005).

modernity. This is an element that puts Begzos on the side of “first generation” or “accommodationist” political theology that attempts to mediate Christianity with modernity and Enlightenment, seeing the latter in a positive light. On the other hand, Begzos exerts criticism of both liberalism and socialism, and in a rather conventional fashion he sees Orthodoxy as a corrective to certain failures of these two ideologies of modernity. However, he does not engage in an in-depth analysis, but limits himself to describing the situation with these two ideologies and in referring at possible remedial theological resources.

Of special interest is his treatment of liberalism. Begzos sees liberalism exclusively as a political ideology represented by specific political parties, and not as a general characteristic of today’s liberal democracies. He takes the old ideological cleavage capitalism/liberalism vs. socialism, or in popular parlance “Right and Left”, for granted. In this respect, the analysis of liberalism is always accompanied by a similar analysis of socialism, as the second major ideology of modernity.

Moreover, Begzos divides liberalism into three spheres, stating that its strength lies in the political sphere (political individual liberty), whereas the economic and social spheres are liberalism’s weaknesses<sup>52</sup>. This division allows for a criticism of liberalism, but equally hides the possible weakness of political liberalism, independently of the economic side. Simultaneously it blurs the philosophical baggage upon which both political and economic liberalism are based.

The author’s criticism on economic liberalism focuses on two closely related characteristics of this ideology: on individualism and on the elevation of property and possession as an ultimate value. In a rather conventional presentation, Begzos states that liberalism as the first ideological child of Enlightenment was the response to absolutism’s totalitarian understanding of human life<sup>53</sup>. Yet, what constitutes liberalism’s coup de force against the medieval and early modernity absolutism was also its Achilles’ heel: the absolute prioritization of the self against the social whole and the Other, or in one word, individualism<sup>54</sup>.

All in all, for Begzos confines his criticism of individualism principally at the economic sphere. He sees socialism as aloof from this economic individualism, but simultaneously as failing when he turns against individual freedoms. Orthodox tradition is a corrective to individualism and may contribute to the restoration of a real democracy which is seen somehow as a social democratic model (without stating it explicitly, Begzos seems to show preference to some kind of social democratic political

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<sup>52</sup> Begzos, 124

<sup>53</sup> Begzos, 101-2

<sup>54</sup> Begzos, 102

ideology, an ideology that he deems closer to the Christian spirit of fraternity). However, he does not give more details on this, for his reference to Orthodox personhood and apophaticism as main components of this corrective is very brief.

Essentially the first systematic attempt to assess the relationship of Orthodoxy and liberal democracy, from a clearly political theology point of view is Aristotle Papanikolaou's book *The Mystical as Political*<sup>55</sup>. The author aims at providing an Orthodox counterargument to those Christian thinkers who criticize basic aspects of modern liberal democracy. In fact, Papanikolaou goes even further, claiming more or less that the very essence of Orthodoxy must lead its followers to endorse a political community structured around certain modern liberal principles. At the center of his analysis, Papanikolaou puts the fundamental Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* (deification), which he minimally defines as "divine-human communion". For the author, "divine-human communion" can affirm a liberal democratic system, in which sharp state-church separation liberates the church and allows the free realization of the divine presence in creation. His theological argument is that divine-human communion equals to the unconditional love of the Christian towards 'the other', including those that reject God, and that the liberal society imposes an ascetic challenge to each Christian. As to political science terms, from his analysis, Papanikolaou seems to treat the particular historical-political experience of liberal democracy in the USA as a catholically accepted paradigm.

Papanikolaou has continued in the same line of argumentation in his later shorter contributions, as the editor of the previously mentioned volumes that concern Orthodox Political theology. A similar tone regarding Orthodoxy and liberal democracy is adopted by Clapsis<sup>56</sup>, and Delikonstantis<sup>57</sup>. Papanikolaou's general work and his argument is important for the subject under question in this thesis, and in the following chapters there is a critical assessment of his view, and of his understanding of liberal democracy.

Finally, without being exclusively dedicated to the issue of liberal democracy, the works of Yannaras quoted in the previous section contain many critical references to modern representative political systems, and comparisons between them and the paradigm of direct democracy in the ancient *polis*. In

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<sup>55</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012)

<sup>56</sup> Emmanuel Clapsis, "An Orthodox Encounter with Liberal Democracy", in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*, ed. Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou (NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 111-126

<sup>57</sup> Constantine Delikonstantis, "Orthodoxy Facing the Modern Secular State", in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, ed. Stoeckl et al (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2017), 243-252

his voluminous work, he is not always consistent in the use of the term 'liberal democracy', but he does allow for a differentiation between democracy and the ideology of liberalism.

### ***Conclusion***

The above review provides a tentative map on the efforts for an Orthodox political theology, and specifically on the treatment of liberal democracy by Orthodox theologians. It becomes obvious that a big part of these attempts, those that I called "accommodationist", concern an inclusion/adaptation of Orthodox theological arguments in the "first generation" political theology that holds a mediating position vis-à-vis modernity. On the other hand, as exemplified by the case of Yannaras, Orthodox theology do also exhibit a strand of political theology that stands critical to modernity and could be included in the so-called second generation of western political theology. The relationship of Orthodoxy to modernity (as the general context in which the Orthodox relationship to liberalism and democracy is placed) will be more extensively discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2

### The Elephant in the room: Orthodoxy and its relation to Modernity

From the above review of representative Orthodox voices, it is apparent that the main question underlying today's efforts to form an Orthodox political theology is the relative degree of acceptance or rejection of modernity (a question not particular to Orthodoxy but one that has concerned the whole of Christianity). Therefore, when certain Orthodox authors lament that Orthodoxy has not managed to develop a Political or Liberation Theology similar to the one that arose in Catholic and Protestant circles in the 60s and 70s, they refer specifically to the post-World War II theological developments mainly in Germany (Political Theology, with capital P and T), but also in Latin America (Liberation Theology). These theologies emerged as a "call for the implementation today of the political dimensions of the Gospel and the liberating social aspects of the Christian faith"<sup>58</sup>, an understanding that, at least at the beginning, was close to neo-Marxist/new Left political theory. It was a kind of theological thinking that could also include an implicit or explicit invitation to some sort of social activism, or even for the development of specific policies. In Rasmusson's words, this sort of theology was a mediating project, 'it emerged as an attempt to mediate Christianity and modernity'<sup>59</sup>. Today, political theology (with small p and t, following the example of Phillips<sup>60</sup>, in order to differentiate it from the specific Political Theology School mentioned above) has developed as a subfield of theology that alludes to a theological reflection on politics, and especially on specific, recurrent issues in modern society. As such a subfield, it encompasses views and approaches considerably different to those of the first-generation political theology.

However, as said above, the very term 'political theology' stands precariously on the tension between its two aspects, religion and politics. As the Church is *in* the world but not *of* the world, there is always the danger of the Church becoming distant from society's current issues, or that it becomes politicized and partisan and forgets its salvific mission open to all. Writing from an Orthodox perspective, Clapsis notes that the Church must be the voice of the victims of injustice, poverty and violence, but this is far from suggesting that the Church must propose specific political programs; since,

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<sup>58</sup> Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, 45

<sup>59</sup> Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 375. The author provides an interesting analysis of the deep tensions that exist in this sort of mediating Political Theology, through a critical review of the works of a major Protestant theologian of this trend, Jürgen Moltmann.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips, *Political Theology: a Guide*, 42, note 25



as human products, all political ideologies and actions contain imperfections, the task of the Church is “to unveil the suffering and the alienation that human ideologies have caused the world, and simultaneously urge the world to move beyond them by offering herself as a model of how the world should be in its true nature.”<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, the very notion of a political theology firmly enclosed inside a modern conceptual and political framework has been contested from an explicit Orthodox point of view. Already in late 1970s, Christos Yannaras criticized the then politico-theological attempts to explain the evangelical preaching of the salvation of humanity in categories offered by contemporary political theories. For Christos Yannaras, the emergence of what we named earlier “first-generation political theology” in the West (Political Theology, Liberation Theology) was an expression of the agony of Western Christianity to find a role and a voice in today’s overly secularized sociopolitical milieu, to prove that it is not less “modern”. Behind the dual form of this quest, the academic attempts to underline the political importance of the Bible on the one hand, and the direct participation of clergy and laity in socio-political radical movements on the other, “one can discern the classic problem of Western Christianity: the oscillation between the transcendent and the secular, between the abstract idealism of a conceptual metaphysics and the immediate affirmation and pursuit of material goods in life”<sup>62</sup>. Either as a conceptual, theoretical exercise to demonstrate that the political meaning of Christian teachings is at the root of modern sociopolitical revolutionary movements, or as direct political activism, this is a sign of a certain sense of inferiority vis-à-vis secular ideologies: Christianity feels obliged to demonstrate that is not less “revolutionary” and, in the end, that it is still “useful” in the secular society. Despite the noble intentions of these attempts, for Yannaras the question remains: to fight social injustice, why is it not enough for somebody to enroll in a political party? Why is it necessary to also be a Christian?

Yannaras goes on to offer an Orthodox Christian understanding of political theology, based on a concept of politics that moves beyond the notions of utility and effectiveness:

The politics that serves social utility and the rational regulation of rights and desires, or the relations between work and capital, has nothing to do with theology. It is *a priori* submitted to individual demands and their conventional limitations ... Politics can be considered as a chapter of theology – a true ‘political theology’ – when it takes upon itself serving the

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<sup>61</sup>Emmanuel Clapsis, “Politics and Christian Faith”, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 37, no.1-2 (1992),101–102

<sup>62</sup>Yannaras, “A Note on Political Theology”,53. It is interesting to note the similarities of Yannaras’ opinion on social sciences with John Milbank’s (note 6 above).

political nature of humanity – i.e. the power of love, which is at the heart of existence and which is the condition of the true communion of persons, the true city, the true polis.<sup>63</sup>

Here lies the critical issue for Yannaras: to formulate a version of political theology from an Eastern Orthodox point of view, one needs not only the criteria of Orthodox theology, but also a radically different conception of politics from the one that dominates the – today globalized – Western paradigm. Yannaras wants to break with the very content of the modern definition of politics that sets the framework and seems to predetermine the answers of Western political theology. In this attempt, one can discern a criticism towards modern political theory very similar to the one expressed against modern social theory by John Milbank.

In modern political theory there are various ways of defining what politics is: politics may be seen as the “art of government”, or as the “public affairs”, as the processes and institutions for power distribution and conflict resolution in a society<sup>64</sup>. Perhaps, the best encapsulation of all these definitions of modern political theory was given by the renowned American political scientist Harold Lasswell: Politics is “*Who Gets What, When, How*”<sup>65</sup>. This is exactly the utilitarian and exclusively instrumental version of politics that Yannaras rejects. For if political theology accepts this as the very essence of politics, then it is obliged to position itself along the lines of already formulated ideological proposals regarding the efficiency and/or justice of the socioeconomic distributive system, more or less liberal, radical, or social-democratic.

Surely, Orthodox theology does not bypass silently the problems of distributive justice and socioeconomic inequality; one only needs to read certain passages in John Chrysostom’s homilies in order to find some of the harshest criticisms of material inequalities. Neither does Yannaras reject the relevance of this issue for theology and the Christian worldview, on the contrary, he often underlines the acute nature that this problem poses in the modern world. What he rejects is the identification of politics with that of the effective distribution of mainly material goods and, finally, of power. Instead, Yannaras insists on an understanding of politics that reflects the original Greek meaning: politics are the things pertaining to a special form of living, *polis*. Historically, organized human cohabitations served the need for survival and of a more effective satisfaction of the individual’s first needs; but the ancient Greek *polis* was not just a larger and more efficient form of human cohabitation. It was serving also a very different priority. As Aristotle noted in *Politics*, the *polis* “while coming into being for the sake of

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<sup>63</sup> Yannaras, 54

<sup>64</sup> For a concise presentation see Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), 1-12

<sup>65</sup> This is the title of Lasswell’s famous book on politics, published in mid-1930s and republished several times since then; Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics; Who Gets What, When, How* (NY: Whittlesey House, 1936).

living (n. surviving), it exists for the sake of living well”<sup>66</sup>. This is not a reference to a materially more comfortable life, but to the *telos* of humans to live a life of happiness and virtue. For Yannaras, this *telos* was the *seeking of truth*, the latter being not a “thing”, a “what”, but a mode, a “how”: the way of *Logos*, the logical harmony that unites the cosmos. Hence, for the Greeks, *politics* is not an art (of managing and satisfying needs) but the feat of organizing their interrelations according to the above standard that mirrors the *kata logon*, logical cosmic harmony. Moreover, this communal feat it is an exercise to real freedom: freedom from individual-centric deterministic necessity of human impulses. Efficiency and utility are still sought in the ancient *polis*, but they are not the main priority anymore. In Yannaras’ words, “starting from the communing of necessity, which is the initial incentive for collective organization, they created the *polis* as the communing of truth. The formation and functioning of *polis* are the result of free intentionality, a deliberate pursuit of freedom from deterministic and individual-centric necessity”<sup>67</sup>.

The original content of *politics* is for Yannaras immediately connected to Christianity. In its quest to go beyond the “communings of necessity” and to prioritize the “communings of truth” as an attempt to existential freedom, the Greek world was met with a basic problem: the transcendental *Logos*, upon which their attempts for a transcendental *political* life was based, was inexplicably given and deterministic. As Yannaras points out, “the Causal Principle of existence, “God”, was for the Greeks obliged by his own essence to be what he is; his existence remained given but unexplained and predetermined; he could not *not be* what he is.”<sup>68</sup>

It was this impasse in Greek political thinking that Christianity transcended: the logical cosmos, the rational harmony that the Greeks wanted to imitate in their political life was not based on a divine necessity, but on the Christian teaching that “*God is love*”: the Cause of All exists because he freely wills to exist, and he wills to exist because he loves. In Yannaras’ words, “the concept of the *ecclesia of demos*, the gathering of the citizens, alluded to the achievement that politics was: a feat of transcending the egotistic impulses so that the collectivity realizes the *logical* (according to *Logos*) harmony, order and beauty of cosmic “truth”. In its Christian continuation, the word “*ecclesia*” alluded specifically to this self-transcendence that realizes freedom as existential relation of communed love, in the image of the Trinitarian Causal Principle of existence.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> “γινομένη μὲν τοῦ ζῆν ἔνεκεν, οὗσα δὲ τοῦ εἶ ζῆν”, Aristotle, *Politics*, 1262b30

<sup>67</sup> Yannaras, *Για το «νόημα» της πολιτικής*, 71

<sup>68</sup> Yannaras, 71-2

<sup>69</sup> Yannaras, 77

Hence, the Christian Church came to fulfill the existential objectives of the Greek polis and politics. The “coming together”, the “Assembly”, *Ecclesia* in Greek was transferred from the level of the polis to the level of the Christian community. Coming together to reveal the truth, the truthful way of living remains a political aim.

Clearly for Yannaras the adjective “political” in political theology is a hyperbole; theology is quintessentially political. The Greek theologian and philosopher claims back the real content of politics as having certainly a transcendental core and aim. Any understanding of politics – as is the case today – that puts first the efficient and utilitarian managing of individual needs (the “who gets what, when and how”), is in fact not authentically political but *pre*-political. And a political theology that is limited in the above conceptual framework – the conceptual framework of modern political thinking – will be necessarily trapped in merely giving theological interpretation to already pre-existing modern political and social ideologies.

It is clear from the above short exposition of Yannaras’ thought that the alleged absence of an Orthodox Political Theology, similar to the one that appeared elsewhere, in Protestant and Catholic circles, does not mean that Orthodox ideas and teachings cannot also be political in the wider sense: not merely as a possible Orthodox view on the very specific questions posed within and by the framework of modernity, but rather as a critical stance towards the very framework *per se*, which is quintessentially political.

So, the issue “Orthodoxy and politics” in general, and “Orthodoxy and liberal democracy” in particular is placed under the umbrella-issue of Orthodoxy vis-à-vis modernity. As already noted, this issue has troubled Orthodox theologians and other scholars for two centuries. It is a historical fact that the periods and events we conventionally call Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, Counter-Reformation, Enlightenment, and the emergence of modernity, were more or less “organic” to the West, whereas they do not immediately correlate with the developments or culture of Orthodox European lands (or, indeed, any other part of the world).

In fact, contemporary historiography acknowledges that the eastern part of the Roman Empire had not experienced the radical break with antiquity and its Roman/Hellenistic culture that characterised the end of the antiquity and the beginning of the Western Middle Ages<sup>70</sup>. This is especially true for the Eastern Roman territories of South-Eastern Europe, Asia Minor and Southern Italy, after the loss of the

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<sup>70</sup> Norman Davies somehow hyperbolically summarizes this difference by saying that “Byzantium remained civilized, while most of the countries in the West were, in terms of formal culture, struggling in outer darkness”; see Norman Davies, *Europe: a History* (London, Pimlico, 1997), 250-1; on the Byzantine preservation and transmission of classic culture see, Sylvain Gouguenheim, *La gloire des Grecs* (Paris: CERF, 2017).

Levant and Northern Africa during the Arab Islamic expansion of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. In keeping with the use of conventional terminology, if “Dark Ages” signifies a period of significant rupture or stagnation in the reproduction and progress of a civilisation due among others to a sudden lack of knowledge (i.e. loss of classical learning), one could claim that the real “Dark Ages” for the Orthodox world of the Balkans started in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (and a few centuries earlier in Asia Minor). It was the final fall of the last remnants of the Byzantine Empire that marked the end of independent centres of production of Eastern Orthodox Roman high culture, education and thought. Interestingly, this development arrived after a period of a final flourishing of Byzantine culture and letters, an explicit Eastern “Renaissance”, as it has been named by the renowned historian Sir Steven Runciman<sup>71</sup>, characterized not only by a classicist revival, but also by the last twilight of Byzantine theology (and philosophy) during and after the Palamite controversy. Palamas’ theological teaching on the distinction between divine essence and divine energies – in itself not a new doctrine but a “clarification”/exegesis of already existing concepts of the Greek Fathers – was arguably the last major articulation of genuine Eastern Orthodox thinking, before geopolitical events put an end to any possible osmosis that this Eastern Renaissance could provide to European civilisation. Russia and the Eastern European lands that escaped the Ottoman conquest, still peripheral to the Eastern Orthodox world, did not have the historical and educational depth, nor the necessary institutions to continue this independent Orthodox thinking. It may not be coincidence, then, that the major revival of Orthodox theology in the twentieth century started to a large extent from where the story ended in the 15<sup>th</sup> century: the Palamite theology.

Overall, due to their political subjection to the foreign and inimical power of the Ottomans starting in the 15th century, and, in the Russian case, more briefly to the Tatars, the Orthodox were unable to embark on a meaningful dialogue with developments in western parts of Europe. In other words, Orthodox societies were relative latecomers to modernity.

### **I. Eastern Orthodox encounters with Modernity: the Russian school**

Although the historical encounter of Eastern Orthodoxy and modernity came gradually after the Enlightenment, it is the so-called Russian School of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that represents a first attempt on the part of the Christian East ‘to wrestle with the problem of Orthodoxy and modernity’<sup>72</sup>. Its members were consciously indebted to Western philosophy, especially to German

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<sup>71</sup> Steven Runciman, *The Last Byzantine Renaissance* (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>72</sup> Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 2.

idealism<sup>73</sup>. The main representatives, such as Soloviev, Florensky and especially Bulgakov, were very much persons of their times, amalgams of social theorists and political activists. Given the extremely turbulent situation in Russia at the time, they attempted to formulate a political theory and a programme based on Christianity that would address social injustice as an alternative to the growing popularity of modern atheistic and materialistic ideologies like communism.

Vladimir Soloviev is considered one of the first intellectuals who attempted to tackle challenges posed by Western modernity - including social ones – from a perspective informed by Russian Orthodox concepts. He was writing during an era when the debate in Russia centred on the position of the country in the new modern world, and on the adaptation of the Tsarist Empire, a debate that had not yet taken on the urgency of the early 20th century. This was also a time when the Enlightenment’s rationalism and positivism were severely questioned in the West itself, by philosophical trends like German Idealism that clearly influenced Soloviev’s thought. His Slavophilism did not lead him to an isolationist complacency for the Russian particularity, but to the belief that Russia could offer to the perplexed West a worldview that would not obliterate the transcendental: a cultural combination of the best values of the Enlightenment with the deepest truths of Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

Soloviev’s ideas were founded on two concepts. The first, based on the Incarnation and directly connected to the doctrine of *theosis* (deification), was the concept of *bogochelovechestvo*, translated as “Godmanhood” or “divine humanity”: The Incarnation opened the possibility for the humans to be partakers of the divine nature, a process that will be completed in the eschaton, but has already started. As Valliere notes, for Soloviev amidst the “godless human individual” of the modern West and the “humanless” God of Islam, “Godmanhood” offers the world a better moral and spiritual ideal.<sup>75</sup>

The second concept is “free theocracy”. This paradoxical term is indicative of the tension in Soloviev’s thinking. Yet, for Soloviev “free theocracy” is a system of harmony between reason and religion. It has nothing to do with political rule by religious leaders, where the religious order and its representatives run the state and dictate society. This system, Soloviev calls “false theocracy” or “abstract clericalism”<sup>76</sup>, where there is an absolutization of the religious principle. On the contrary, his theocracy is free, that is, it defends the freedom of conscience, and the freedom to exercise rationality on all sectors of life.

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<sup>73</sup> For a brief account, see Kallistos Ware, “Orthodox theology today: trends and tasks”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 12, no.2 (2012), 110

<sup>74</sup> Paul Valliere. “Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900): Commentary”, in *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witt Jr and Alexander Frank, (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 36

<sup>75</sup> Valliere, 37

<sup>76</sup> Valliere, 47

Soloviev underlines the need for the protection of the human right to dignity, and he rejects the use of state fiat. The state must respect that and limit its power. Love surely transcends law, but the religious principle should not abolish and replace the juridical order; the latter must be affirmed and incorporated in a free theocracy<sup>77</sup>. On the other hand, inside these spaces of free/rational rule of law, the ultimate goal remains “the actualisation of the divine principle in the world”<sup>78</sup>, with the Church being the exemplary. As Ladouceur points out, “the religious aspirations of the population must be reflected in the goals of the state (hence ‘theocracy’) and must be freely realized, not imposed by state or religious power (hence ‘free’ theocracy)”<sup>79</sup>.

By accepting the notions of freedom of conscience and religion and by attacking clericalism, Soloviev distances himself from traditionalists and conservatives. Yet, he equally distances himself from classic Western liberals and secularists. Although he distinguishes the role of the Church from that of the state, he rejects a strict separation and still speaks of a “Christian state”. He disagrees with the formula “a free church in a free state” because it implies an isolation of the Church; if in theocracy there is no distance between state and church, in the secularist liberal state there is not enough interaction<sup>80</sup>. This interaction is however necessary in order for this space of freedom to be well grounded in the divine.

So, it is difficult to fit Soloviev into the conventional categories of liberal or conservative. If his ideas were a kind of Russian liberal thinking, it is certainly far from Western liberalism<sup>81</sup>. What can be detected is a re-articulation of the Byzantine *synallēlia*, with church and state holding clearly distinct roles in a context of interaction and cooperation, that can allow the Church to influence the transformation of the state, without itself becoming part of a secular state apparatus managing spiritual affairs (as was indeed the case in Russia after Peter the Great’s reforms).

Soloviev’s disciple Bulgakov began as a fervent political activist, atheist at first, Christian afterwards, who turned into one of the most important Orthodox theologians of the 20th century. The period when Bulgakov started his social activity was markedly different from the times of Soloviev. The question was no more a theoretical one, namely, which path should Russia follow as a member of the modern world. The cracks in the Tsarist regime were irreparable and the demands for modernization were radicalized and popularized. It was a time of great urgency, this was exactly the title that the ex-Marxist, reborn

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<sup>77</sup> Valliere, 48

<sup>78</sup> Paul Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 335

<sup>79</sup> Ladouceur, 335

<sup>80</sup> Valliere, “Soloviev”, 48

<sup>81</sup> See Greg Gaut, “A Practical Unity: Vladimir Solov’ev and Russian Liberalism”, in *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 42, no3 (2000), 295-314

Christian Bulgakov gave to his written intervention in 1905: "An Urgent Task". The latter was not a theologian's academic study on politics, but a political manifesto of a highly educated Christian political activist about how things are, and what needs to be done specifically in early 20th century Russia.

Bulgakov concurs with the political goals of socialism for the sincere defence of the socioeconomically hampered classes: "Christ's precept...definitely directs us to *stand on the side of labor...*"<sup>82</sup>. It is socialism's militant atheism and materialism that Bulgakov vehemently rejects: "Atheism, understood as the belief in Man-God, is their religion, and it is from this religion and not from the direct and simple love of humanity that their democratism and socialism derive". At the same time Bulgakov scorns the stance of the official Russian Orthodox Church, which, having been subjected to the state, "has disgraced the Christian religion"<sup>83</sup> and, with its indifference to the condition of the masses and its identification with the regime, became an inadvertent ally of socialist atheism<sup>84</sup>. For Bulgakov, the formation and practical expression of a Christian politics is a matter of urgency, to break the monopolisation of what is essentially Christian values by antichristian materialistic ideology and parties.

Bulgakov's theological argument is also based on Incarnation: "history is the process of the God-Man, wherein a united mankind is assembled and organised. For this task ... not only personal morality but also social morality, that is politics, are essential"<sup>85</sup>. Moreover, Bulgakov endorses the political and economic emancipation of all humanity from despotism and socioeconomic slavery. At the same time, he affirms that the state should have a clear connection to the divine and must perform Christian tasks, without imposing a specific dogma, and without resort to compulsion. The freedom of conscience must be protected. Meanwhile, it is the task of the politically active Christians gradually transform the state from within, "to subject the Leviathan of the state to Christian tasks, to strive for its inner enlightenment"<sup>86</sup>. The Church appears in his thought as a Christian political community, active in the promotion of Christian values, based on the essence of Christian beliefs without denominational doctrinal rigidities, and not an inward clerical institution. The "Urgent Task" closes with a call for the foundation of a Union of Christian Politics to reclaim solidarity and emancipation from atheistic parties.

After his return to the Orthodox Church, his disillusionment with party politics, and his exile, Bulgakov abandons the idea of Christian Socialism. His position becomes less activist and more

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<sup>82</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, "An Urgent Task", in *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia, 1890-1924*, ed. Bernie Glatzer Rosenthal and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, (NY: Fordham University Press, 1990), 147

<sup>83</sup> Bulgakov, 139

<sup>84</sup> Bulgakov, 141-2

<sup>85</sup> Bulgakov, 142

<sup>86</sup> Bulgakov, 143



theological. In “The Soul of Socialism”, he contrasts Christian values to the *ideology* of Socialism, which he sees as identical to communism. Understood as the demand for social justice, “socialism” has been a constant in human history; but the modern ideology of socialism “has a *soul* of its own – a soul that is admittedly wholly pagan – and a *spirit* which has so far been decidedly hostile to God”<sup>87</sup>. This socialism understands the human being as an abstract unit of a whole, totally belonging to a “materialist economism”, and in constant struggle for the material satisfaction of the self. Ladouceur notes that, “Bulgakov does not admit the possibility of non-religious liberal humanism free of militant communist atheism, with which Christian humanism could collaborate in the edification of a modern state reflecting Christian values”<sup>88</sup>. Perhaps, the Russian theologian believed that modern materialism, regardless of its ideological expression, eventually takes the form of God’s rejection.

Bulgakov may have been writing about socialism, but his insights concerned modernity in its totality. Modernity’s rationalisation has brought a greater individualism and simultaneously an aggregation of atomised and de-personified humans. On the other hand, the natural longing of humans for solidarity gave rise to new group identities that were soon absolutized. For Bulgakov, social class, national identity, the state, have a value of their own; but their absolutization turn them into Pseudo-churches<sup>89</sup>. Bulgakov’s rejection of his contemporary rise of communism and fascism on these grounds could be relevant today; in the words of the former Archbishop of Canterbury,

Were he [Bulgakov] commenting on the nineties, he might well note the ways in which group identity in a fragmented, rationalised or bureaucratised society increasingly fosters a model of society entirely dominated by the conflicting claims of interest groups. These pages can be read with profit by anyone looking to understand the Balkanisation of interest groups in the USA and its satellites and the erosion of a lively understanding of common good.<sup>90</sup>

William’s above observation in the late 1990s is still very relevant today, considering the continuous fragmentation of societies in conflicting groups based on old and new identities.

What is the role that the Church is called to play in the midst of the fragmentation of the human person and society? How to find a balance between the freedom of the one and the unity of the many? Bulgakov has an answer: *sobornost*, the free unanimity of the many, freedom and brotherhood. For

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<sup>87</sup> Sergey Bulgakov, “The Soul of Socialism” (1932-33), in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams, (T&T Clark, 1999), 239

<sup>88</sup> Ladouceur, “Modern Orthodox Theology”, 340

<sup>89</sup> Bulgakov, “The Soul of Socialism”, 262-3

<sup>90</sup> Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 232-3

Bulgakov, based on *sobornost* the Church sets a living example of unity-in-plurality, for Christ, as the God-Man, encapsulates humanity both as a generic reality, as well as the reality of unique persons. On this basis, the Church must fight the tendency of “godless sociology” to understand human beings as uniform monads. As said, he strongly rejects indifference and escapism: the Church must be actively involved in social life and address social issues, but it cannot be secularised and politicised. Of course, Bulgakov stresses that the Church *is* in fact ‘apolitical’, as it can never identify its eternal values and goal with partisan tasks, or with historical institutions and systems: “the Church cannot be a party; it must be *the conscience of a society...*”<sup>91</sup>. It is a battle *from within*, the active engagement in the society.

Bulgakov expressed his late views about politics in his book *The Orthodox Church*, particularly in the chapter named “Orthodoxy and the State”<sup>92</sup>. He notes that Church and state aimed at symphonic relations during Byzantium and the same was attempted later in Muscovy, till the decision of Peter the Great to impose Lutheran elements in church-state relations undermined the efforts for *symphonia*<sup>93</sup>. Bulgakov argues that the dissolution of Orthodox Empires twice (1453 and 1917) shows that the existence of an imperial office is not essential to the existence of the Church; in his words “it is true that the idea of king in the person of Christ is inherent in the Church. This is not a political idea, connected with a certain form of state organisation, but an idea wholly religious. This idea may be realized in a democracy, by an elected representative of power...It is in general the idea of the sanctification of power in the person of its supreme representative”<sup>94</sup>. This sanctification concerns the influencing and ultimate transformation of political power by theological criteria, not the formal legitimation of a certain political system. One should not take a certain historical case as the preferable system: “there is no dogmatic connection between Orthodoxy and a predetermined political system”<sup>95</sup>. Having to choose under the then circumstances Bulgakov would opt for the USA model of church-state separation that offers to the Church the necessary liberty of action, and certainly not the Soviet one. He adds however that this juridical separation does not mean that the Church renounces its influence over the whole of life; rather it continues its struggle for a change within “for that separation remains exterior and not interior”. No need for a state and its head to impose a state-sponsored Christianity from above, but a

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<sup>91</sup> Bulgakov, “The Soul of Socialism”, 256

<sup>92</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988) (first publication in English 1935)

<sup>93</sup> Bulgakov, 157-9

<sup>94</sup> Bulgakov, 160

<sup>95</sup> Bulgakov, 162

transformation of the state from inside and below<sup>96</sup>. It seems, however, that to him such society would still largely adhere to Christian values.

Taking all the above into account, in conventional political science terms, the Russian school presented a form of socialism with solid reference to the transcendent. It staunchly opposed collectivist totalitarianism, rejected the injustices of capitalism, as well as the atheistic ideologies and their exclusively materialistic conception of the human person. Especially in the case of Soloviev and Bulgakov, the need for a Christian economics and Christian politics was paired with their view of *sophia*, the Wisdom of God. Sophia was a quite speculative attempt to explore the continuous interaction between God and the world that overemphasized divine immanence vis-à-vis divine transcendence. For the Russian religious thinkers, it was a convenient concept that justified Christian political activism aiming exactly at the realisation of the *Sophia*, God's wisdom, already present latently in the material creation. This is the controversial point in the politico-theological attempts of the aforementioned protagonists of the Russian school. For as we shall note in the next pages, the reaction of the next generation of theologians was directed not so much against these politico-theological attempts, but to the fact that they were based on a theological category that was understood as a modern addition, and a rather unnecessary one, in the Orthodox doctrine. Nevertheless, in recent literature, one witnesses a rather sympathetic turn towards Bulgakov and his sophiology, not only from Eastern Orthodox theologians<sup>97</sup>, but also from Radical Orthodoxy proponents like John Milbank<sup>98</sup>. For them, sophiology created a new language that re-engaged theology with philosophy and thus it is appropriate for addressing modern problems. Combined with their interest for political and socioeconomic issues, the Russian religious thinkers came to be considered as forefathers of an early modern Orthodox political theology, one that supposedly could be compatible with modern liberal principles<sup>99</sup>.

Indeed, the representatives of the Russian School tried to bring Orthodoxy in conversation with modernity, accepting the latter as a historical fact. As Plekon summarized, this stance was not a submission to modernity but an attempt to use the language of the modern world and express the Gospel as its citizens<sup>100</sup>. The question was how the Church may respond to the challenges of this modern

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<sup>96</sup> Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 163

<sup>97</sup> Paul Valliere's work is such an example.

<sup>98</sup> For example, John Milbank, "Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon", in *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word*, ed. Adrian Pabst and Christophe Schneider (London: Routledge, 2009), 45-85

<sup>99</sup> For example, Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 42-3

<sup>100</sup> Michael Plekon, "Social Theory working with Theology: the case of Sergius Bulgakov as an example of Living Tradition", *Logos: a Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 47, no.1-2 (2006), 91

world, accepting it as it is and trying to rectify its failures. However, this does not necessarily prove an openly positive acceptance by Soloviev and Bulgakov of modern liberalism<sup>101</sup>.

This invitation to active engagement against injustice that characterized the Russian school carries resemblances with the Catholic Liberation Theology movement in Latin America: first, their outlook was politically 'socialist' and both the Russians and the Latin Americans understood the Christian message as a message for dignity and equality for all humans, and emancipation from socioeconomic degradation; second, both schools were in favour of an active intervention for the achievement of these goals; thirdly, both to a certain extent were critical of clericalism and its social conservatism and disinterest. Any further comparison would be arbitrary, given the dissimilarities in the temporal and regional context where the two schools were active, the number of people involved and the impact they had. Liberation theology was active at various levels: in the academia, in the ecclesial level, and as a grassroots movement. The Russian school while theoretically in favour of activism, did not have the opportunity to develop in the same way, and certainly its practical expression before 1917 was brief and had an abrupt end<sup>102</sup>. Academically, after Bulgakov there had not been any significant continuance. However, one could possibly discern a qualitative difference: the main Latin American Catholic priests of the Liberation theology were Christians that met and got interested in critical theory and Marxism<sup>103</sup>. Bulgakov was an ex-Marxist that became Christian. Both were critical of the pitfalls of capitalist economic exploitation, but the Russians had also a first-hand experience of the pitfalls of Marxist socialism, and of the historical materialism theory.

## II. The Neo-patristic synthesis

The theoretical endeavours of these Russian intellectuals did not manage to bring tangible results. The victory of the Bolsheviks made any kind of such political activism or thinking in Russia impossible. Modernization in the form of atheistic Marxism prevailed and the need for a reevaluation of the Russian school's approach became necessary.

This new approach was coined the 'Neo-Patristic synthesis', with Georges Florovsky – arguably the most prominent Orthodox theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - as its initiator and main representative. The

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<sup>101</sup> Vigen Guroian, "'Godless Theosis', review of A. Papanikolaou's 'Mystical As Political'", in *First Things* (April 2014), 54

<sup>102</sup> Mother Maria Skobtsova's social work in Paris until her arrest and execution by the Nazis is a solitary example of practical activism inspired by the Russian school. See, Michael Plekon, "Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891-1945): Commentary", in *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witt Jr and Alexander Frank (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 233-70

<sup>103</sup> Phillips, *Political Theology*, 45

aspect in the theological reflection of the Russian school that was immediately attacked was sophiology, the basis of their whole engagement with modernity. The problem that all Orthodox theologians willed to address in the beginning of the 20th century was the connection between the divine and the human planes that has been radically broken during modernity, especially as regards the question of worldly power and politics. In other words, it was the old question of God's immanence and transcendence. It may not be a coincidence, thus, that the renewal of Orthodox theology in modern times continued the thread from the point where it was left off in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, through Gregory Palamas' theological work. In his *Triads*, Palamas had gradually unfolded his doctrine of the uncreated energies: the essence of God remains transcendent and is unknowable and unparticipable. God makes himself known through his *energies* (activities), to those that have achieved the grace necessary to experience them. This is how God is known and experienced, without losing His transcendence. Humans cannot know God's essence, but they can participate in the divine uncreated energies, otherwise *theosis* and salvation would not be possible.

One way of seeing sophiology was exactly as an effort to further develop the Palamite essence-energies distinction in order to make it more intelligible in a modern world, where not only such a distinction was not in its tradition, but also where God's immanence was not of a concern at all, since the Man-God was now the potential bearer and developer of his own wisdom. In the gulf between God and creation, Sophia constitutes an "in between". Divine Wisdom, the uncreated Sophia has its reflection in Sophia in creation. It is through Sophia that God created the Universe and man, and it is a task of the human to pursue Sophia in the creation. Those theologians that rejected sophiology insisted that the notion of Sophia could be dangerously interpreted as introducing a fourth person in the divine Trinity. It seemed as if Bulgakov was singling out Sophia as first in rank of the divine energies and he was coming close to essentialize it: Sophia was somehow both divine essence and divine energy. All in all, sophiology was deemed at best a non-necessary addition to the Palamite doctrine, and for his critics, Bulgakov could have said exactly the same things without this terminological insistence.

If the sophiological incidence shows something, it is that there was a need for a better self-understanding from the side of Orthodox theology. The need for a more thorough understanding of the rediscovered Palamas was such an indication. The priorities were changed. For Florovsky, in order to encounter modernity, Orthodoxy needed to rediscover its own voice first. And this could be realised by the liberation of Orthodox theology from Western philosophical and theological categories, through a rediscovering of the riches of its neglected patristic tradition. As Stoeckl put it, "it is not enough to merely repeat answers previously formulated in the West – the western question must be discerned and

relived...the social question itself is above all a spiritual question, a question of conscience and wisdom... The Church needed to re-appropriate its dogmatic foundations, to achieve a spiritual renewal, and from this a true engagement with the world would follow.”<sup>104</sup>

Thus, regarding a possible Orthodox theological engagement with socio-political issues, the Neo-patristic response was not a blunt “no”, but rather a “not yet”. It is true, that the newer generation of Russian émigrés theologians did not have the experience of the pre-revolutionary political atmosphere in Russia, as they left their country very young. So, the element of a personal activist involvement, as in the case of Bulgakov, was lacking. Despite occasional works, there was no development of a political theology at this period<sup>105</sup>. But it would be inaccurate to say that the Neo-patristic school was totally indifferent. Florovsky himself may have not produced many works on the subject, but he did present his view in an article under the title “The Social Problem in the Eastern Orthodox Church”<sup>106</sup>. He states clearly from the beginning that Christianity is a social religion: in fact, it is not primarily a doctrine, but a community. He points out the example of coenobitic monasticism that “was not a higher level of perfection, for the few” but a model of a new society, a “Socialist experiment”, and he states the anti-plutocratic views of Fathers like Chrysostom<sup>107</sup>. As to why the Orthodox Church despite these resources did not develop a social teaching, Florovsky reminds that Church-state relations in the social domain may have been collaborative, but they have also been competitive, even antithetical, because Christian and secular criteria do not necessarily coincide, as was for example the issue of usury in the Middle Ages. In case of conflict of principles, the Orthodox Church’s intervention was preaching and admonishing and as a rule she was reluctant to interfere in a political manner<sup>108</sup>. He warns that a wrong interpretation of the “other-worldly” character of the Church is dangerous: Christian principles do not concern only the spiritual sphere, but also the material one<sup>109</sup>. Here Florovsky sheds light on another problem of “other-wordliness”: not just the possible voluntary withdrawal of the Church in a “mystical” isolation of its own, away from the concerns of this world but also the expulsion of the Church from the social sphere by the state. An utter separation of a Church concerned only with the souls, and a state concerned only with the “body”, is what happened in the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the Church

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<sup>104</sup> Kristina Stoeckl, “Community after the Subject. The Orthodox Intellectual Tradition and the Philosophical Discourse of Political Modernity”, *Sofia Philosophical Review* 2, no.2 (2008), 124-5.

<sup>105</sup> Ladouceur refers to Paul Evdokimov as such an example of neo-patristic theologian; see Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology*, 345

<sup>106</sup> Georges Florovsky, “The Social Problem in the Eastern Orthodox Church”, *The Journal of Religious Thought* 8, no.1 (Autumn 1950-Winter 1951), 41–51

<sup>107</sup> Florovsky, “The Social Problem”, 43

<sup>108</sup> Florovsky, “The Social Problem”, 47

<sup>109</sup> Florovsky, “The Social Problem”, 48

must have the opportunity to adopt an open social action, for it is “a society which claims the whole man for God’s service and offers cure and healing to the whole man, and not only to his ‘soul’”<sup>110</sup>.

From the above, one can see an important degree of identification between the views of Florovsky and Bulgakov: the social and communal character of Christianity, the Church’s social mission, the advantages and the failures of the cooperation with the state, the solidarity with the needy, the need for social action. If one may discern a differentiation, this is not if social engagement is necessary but on what form such engagement takes. Florovsky points out that historically in the Orthodox Church, the main emphasis was given to the direct care of the needy and poor, rather than the elaboration of ideal social programmes: “immediate human relationship is more important than any perfect scheme”<sup>111</sup>. Without stating it specifically, Florovsky here hints at the cultivation of personal relationship as the main focus of Christian social activism. The creation of abstract systems was a more modern way of responding to social problems, and Bulgakov, at least in his early stages, seemed to opt for a more systematic and programmatic response from the side of the Church.

Florovsky was arguing for an emancipation from the ways the West was understanding the modern *problematique*, not from the *problematique* itself; for Orthodoxy was part of this modernising world. One way or another, in real historical terms, a balance between modernity and Orthodoxy had emerged; it would be false to claim that countries and societies of Orthodox tradition did not finally participate in the new, modern culture. It was, however, an uneven and uneasy balance, with a defensive Orthodox tradition being obliged to hurriedly adapt to a given and very dynamic situation, rather than to adopt it on her own terms. Indeed, for a very big part of the twentieth century, modernity — in the form of communist ideology — almost annihilated Orthodox Christianity in the majority of her historic European lands.<sup>112</sup>

### III. The current state of the debate

As briefly described, the action, and reaction of Orthodox scholars and activists vis-à-vis the galloping of modern ideas in Orthodox societies were neither uniform, nor did they remain the same during the last two centuries. According to the late Bishop Kallistos Ware, “while the distinction between the

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<sup>110</sup> Florovsky, “The Social Problem”, 51

<sup>111</sup> Florovsky, “The Social Problem”, 45

<sup>112</sup> Greece has been a major exception, being the only predominantly Orthodox country to escape the post-war fate of the rest of European Christian Orthodoxy. Moreover, modern Hellenism has been the locus of an early encounter of Orthodoxy with Modernity and in this respect, Greece exemplifies a case of modernity-Orthodoxy which is different from what Eastern European countries experienced during communism.

'Russian 'and the 'Neo-Patristic' trends is useful as a working model, it should not be interpreted too rigidly or taken too far, since the two approaches overlap"<sup>113</sup>. However, especially as regards the question of modern socioeconomic and political issues, there is a tendency among some Orthodox theologians to maintain this distinction: their argument implies that the Russian school represented a fecund encounter of Orthodoxy and modernity that had unfortunately no continuance due to the more traditionalist and conservative inward-looking stance of Orthodox theology after the neo-patristic turn. Valliere has made this point, when he argues that compared to the Russian school, the neo-patristic thinkers "embraced a rigorously mystical and apophatic view on theology that effectively discouraged the theological interpretation of legal, social, and political questions"<sup>114</sup>. Ladouceur adopted a nuanced stance, but he still sees this observation as valid<sup>115</sup>. Kalaitzidis, who is adamant that the absence of an Orthodox Liberation Theology is due to Orthodoxy's historical past and "the lack of a democratic ethos and a culture of dialogue and deliberation"<sup>116</sup>, claimed that Bulgakov and the other Russian religious thinkers "expressed views that, in a way, foreshadowed "leftish" political theology"<sup>117</sup>.

This argument goes hand in hand with a conventional and broad-brush distinction in Orthodox theology today – as well as in the overall attitude of the Orthodox Churches – between a traditionalist "anti-Western" camp, versus a moderniser, open to the West, camp. The former is connected to the neo-patristic epigones of Florovsky, whereas the second camp is claiming some loose ancestry, at least as regards its intentions, with the Russian school. What is of interest in this distinction is the obligatory trans-temporal association of modernity with the West, so that criticism of modernity is more or less an anti-western stance. This classification of Orthodoxy on the basis of its stance vis-à-vis the West may sound like an echo of times past, but it has recently reemerged. Characteristic is the example of the book *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, edited by George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou<sup>118</sup>. The very use of the term "constructions" already implies a strategy of dismissal of criticism directed to the "west", since the image of the latter is based on subjective "constructions" rather than an objective

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<sup>113</sup> Ware, "Orthodox theology today", 114

<sup>114</sup> Paul Valliere, "Introduction to the Modern Orthodox Tradition", in *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witt Jr and Alexander Frank (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 14

<sup>115</sup> Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology*, 344

<sup>116</sup> Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, 54

<sup>117</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Toward an Orthodox Political Theology: the Church's Theological Foundations and Public Role in the Context of the Greek Economic Crisis", in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, ed. Kristina Stoeckl et al (NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 155

<sup>118</sup> George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou, eds., *Orthodox constructions of the West*, (NY: Fordham University Press, 2013)



analysis. The book contains many interesting contributions, especially those that examine specific issues; but the main framework provided by the editors implies an effort to support the compatibility of Orthodoxy and modernity through dismissing criticism by Orthodox authors against the “West”.

Without implying that anti-westernism has not been a characteristic among Orthodox circles -quite the contrary – I believe that there are at least three weak points in the above line of argumentation. First, as Mitralaxis has shown, although the editors claim to adopt a “post-colonialist” perspective, their argument is not a post-colonial critique of a probable historical Orientalisation of Orthodoxy by the West, but rather the opposite: a critique *from the centre* (the “West”, where most contributors of the volume live) against the criticism *of the periphery towards this centre*<sup>119</sup>. So, although an anti-western feeling can be discerned in Orthodoxy, a) not every criticism is necessarily and primarily “anti-western”, and b) we must equally be aware that a criticism of the critique against western modernity may also hide an internalisation of historical Western constructions of Orthodoxy. Second, if any Orthodox critique against western modernity is “anti-western”, then should the same characterisation apply also to well-known Western critics of modernity like Hauerwas or Milbank? And thirdly, one should distinguish between a total rejection of western modernity as a phenomenon external to supposedly purist Orthodox societies, and a critique of modernity that accepts that Orthodox societies are in fact today modernised and “westernised”, and thus the criticism is also directed toward them. To the above three points, one may add a fourth observation: the connection of the current trends in Orthodox theology and thinking in general with the Russian and Neo-patristic schools is not as linear as supposed.

Instead of the conventional binary “traditionalists vs. modernisers”, one could tentatively discern three characteristic attitudes. First, there exists a trend that essentially rejects in principle the idea that there could be any meaningful dialogue between Orthodoxy and main aspects of western modernity, for it understands these exclusively as two warring ideological schemes. This trend risks transforming Orthodoxy into what Christos Yannaras has termed “Orthodoxism”, a rigid and zealous rendering of the faith, based on individualistic pietism<sup>120</sup>. The rejection of Western modernity is based on ideological certainties rather than on an ecclesial and experiential understanding of the Orthodox tradition, and such an approach fails to give any productive review of modernity’s undeniable failures. In effect, “Orthodoxism” acquires the characteristics of a secular ideology reminiscent of other modernist ideologies, and thus ironically much more modern than its proponents would like to admit.

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<sup>119</sup> Mitralaxis, “On recent developments”, 256-7

<sup>120</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Το ρητό και το άρρητο* (Athens: Ikaros, 1999), 313-4

Second, at the other side of the spectrum there is the “accommodationist stance”, which I have already referred to in the literature review. Here the main argument is that while recognizing and criticising the negative sides of modernity, Orthodoxy has to adapt to and accept its “realities”. Kalaitzidis gives a characteristic example of this position, arguing, among others, that the Church may have a role in the public sphere only insofar as it respects the boundaries and the conditions of this sphere, namely the alleged ideological and religious neutrality and the values-free character of the public space, as well as the secularisation and division of society into autonomous sub-systems (i.e. politics, economics, society, culture, education, religion).<sup>121</sup> Moreover, the Church’s public role must be based not only on the acceptance of the above, as well as of modernity’s achievements (religious freedom, human rights, tolerance), but also on a self-limitation as regards the issues she can deal with: for Kalaitzidis, foreign affairs, national issues, ethnic identity should be outside the Church’s scope<sup>122</sup>. This may be a warning against an unwanted partisan stance from the part of the Church on certain issues; but the trouble with this stance is that it remains too vague and leaves the impression that it is acceptable for the Church to have a view on certain political issues but not on others. In fact, the “accommodationist” to modernity stance is connected with a call for a radical and “progressive” or “leftish” political theology, as these terms have been understood by modern social sciences. So, the framework within which Orthodox political theology is obliged to take a position, is the very classical axis of Left and Right, whatever this may connote in politics today.

As noted above, the view that rejects modernity on ideological grounds runs the danger of rendering Orthodoxy today inward looking and irrelevant. But the view that has as its starting point an acceptance of modernity’s characteristics and worldview, if taken to its extremes, also runs the danger of boxing the Orthodox tradition too tightly into the conceptual and ontological framework of modernity, whereas the latter is parading in a full, positive, normative panoply.<sup>123</sup> All in all, in the question of Orthodoxy vis-à-vis

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<sup>121</sup> Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, 81–3. The author holds that “the modern person does not want religion to be involved in his or her other sub-systems or activities or to exercise tutelage over them, because he or she regards this as a violation of the freedom and autonomy from the power of the church that was won with such difficulty”. This is a claim that could be describing, in very broad terms, the historical developments in Western Christendom after Renaissance; but one wonders if this is relevant to the Orthodox historical experience, given that for many Orthodox societies, especially in the Balkans, the primary problem for centuries was not “Church’s tutelage” over various spheres of life but their subjection to Muslim Turkish rule. In these cases, the liberation struggle of these people was directed against the power of an oppressive authoritarian state, whereas the Orthodox Church served as a shelter against islamisation and cultural eradication.

<sup>122</sup> Kalaitzidis, 82

<sup>123</sup> Especially on the division of modern society into autonomous sub-systems, we should note that many western voices have been expressing their worries over this rigid fragmentation of modern human life, as well as their

modernity, the “accommodationist” trend tends to see Orthodoxy and the civilizational and cultural paradigm it embodies as a dependent variable that has to be evaluated against the standards posed by western modernity. This can ironically also turn into an inward-looking approach, focusing on Orthodoxy and the “required” changes it has to make in order to “fit” in the modern world.

Third, somewhere in between the aforementioned two trends, there are voices that have called for a critical engagement with modernity, including a thorough criticism of its ontological and worldview framework. As stated earlier, among the most elaborate is that of Christos Yannaras. He stands in line with the abovementioned call of Florovsky, for an engagement with modern problems based on a reinvigorated Orthodox approach. His analysis goes back in time and is rooted in philosophy and theology, in an attempt to define the roots of the problems. Yannaras’ level of analysis is neither social science, nor historical *per se*; it is philosophical and theological, namely an analysis at the level of ontology. Yet, it is not an abstract account, but it is rooted in a consistent comparison of two paradigms, one that was historically rooted in ancient Greece and further elaborated in the Orthodox Christian tradition, and one represented by the paradigm of the “West”. At the same time, he refers to the very specific impasses of today’s globalized modern world. Yet, his position does not represent mere traditionalist “antimodernism”. As Yannaras notes, “what we must certainly not do is to slip into the easy answer of fundamentalism: an escape backwards, into pre-modernity”; instead, one should, from these traditions, “participate actively and dynamically, and above all quickly, in the formulation of post-modernity, to make use of the achievements of modernity and transcend the stalemates it creates”<sup>124</sup>. In this sense, it can be characterized as a political Orthodoxy that seeks sincere dialogue, and not a mere polemic. It is an outward looking approach: Orthodoxy is not just a category that has to fit in modernity’s shoes, but an independent variable, an autonomous tradition that may be useful precisely by being critical. Moreover, this is self-criticism as well, given that today’s societies where the Orthodox Church holds a prominent position do not occupy the role of righteous observers. On the contrary, as they fully participate in modernity themselves, they share the same impasses and problems as all modern societies.

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doubts regarding the extent to which the public sphere in today’s capitalist-consumerist societies is indeed ideologically neutral and value-free.

<sup>124</sup> Yannaras quoted in Kristina Stoeckl, *Community after Totalitarianism: The Russian Orthodox Intellectual Tradition and the Philosophical Discourse of Political Modernity* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 161

### ***Conclusion***

Talking about Orthodoxy and liberal democracy, in the framework of political theology, we need to take into account the general issue of Orthodoxy and modernity. The two historical trends in Orthodox theology, namely the Russian and the Neo-patristic schools informed two different stances, an activist and a more reserved one respectively. However, these trends are characteristic also of the political and regional context of their times. What is useful are the common points that these trends have as regards political and social issues: the support of the freedom of the person, the parallel rejection of individualism, the communitarian and societal aspect of the Church, and the dynamic character of church and state relations. The current debate in Orthodox theology about modernity contains voices that are not merely pro-, or anti- modern (or western).

## Chapter 3

### Political power and the Orthodox Church: a historical overview.

#### I. Church and politics: was 'Byzantium' the epitome of submissive caesaropapism?

In its long history, the Orthodox Church has been exposed to and existed under a variety of political systems, from the pagan Roman Empire, to its Christian successor, to subjugation to Muslim overlords, and later to communist regimes, to modern authoritarian and democratic systems. Despite this rich historical background, Orthodox theology has not developed a comprehensive political approach or theory for the relationship of the Church to the state<sup>125</sup>, and to the worldly political power in general. Written accounts on the issue are few even in the case of "Byzantium", despite the long life of the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>126</sup> Nor in the centuries that followed the final demise of the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453, did Orthodox thinkers and theologians produce any political theory, since the Orthodox Church, especially in South-Eastern Europe and Minor Asia, faced dire circumstances and its very survival was at stake. The ascent of modernity found the Church still solidly popular, but poor and unprepared in ideas and means; both in Russia, as well as in the newly liberated Balkans, it was the modernisation, i.e., westernisation of the societies and political systems and the organisation of the state along this line that set the tone.

What follows is a concise outline of some basic elements of the Orthodox historical relationship with state and political power. Since, as Papanikolaou noted "the Byzantine Empire was not just a passing moment in the history of Orthodoxy, but, rather, a formative period of its thought and practices"<sup>127</sup>, there will be an emphasis on the Eastern Roman era. This is important also because certain theologians have ascribed to a somewhat negative assessment of Orthodoxy's Byzantine connection. For example, Papanikolaou argued that a discernible scepticism of the Orthodox vis-à-vis modern democracy stems

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<sup>125</sup> The term 'state' here is used in a general sense, as the organised political power over a certain human collectivity during history. But it must be noted that terms such as 'church-state separation' and 'secularism' outside the historical confines of the *modern state* specifically, would constitute an anachronism, as they have little resonance in earlier periods.

<sup>126</sup> In fact, the people of the Eastern Roman Empire never used the term "Byzantine" to define their identity or their state. Till the very end of the Empire in 1453, and much beyond, they called themselves "Romans – Ρωμαίοι", and their state "Rhomania – Ρωμανία." The latter, with its Greek-Orthodox culture, was in both legal and political sense the surviving part of the one Roman Empire. "Byzantium" and "Byzantine" were terms invented later in Western Europe. For the sake of historical accuracy, I use the term Eastern Roman Empire together with the term "Byzantine" which, while inaccurate, has for long dominated literature and everyday speech.

<sup>127</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Democracy", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no.1 (2003), 77

from this legacy, “the source of this ambivalence is, in part, Orthodoxy’s past and, more specifically, the Orthodox Church’s self-avowedly proud link to the heritage of the Byzantine Empire.”<sup>128</sup> In an even more critical tone, Kalaitzidis states that the alleged absence of an Orthodox political theology of liberation is due to the traditions which the Orthodox world inherited from the Byzantines: “...Orthodox political theology and eschatology are often mixed with theocratic and caesaropapist elements from the Byzantine political system.”<sup>129</sup>

The above positions echo old stereotypes in Anglophone and western literature in general that either the Orthodox tradition on politics is somehow historically problematic, or that if Orthodox theology can support modern democracy, this is “*despite its Byzantine past.*”<sup>130</sup> In order to examine whether the above claims hold truth, one has to answer the question: was the Eastern Roman Empire indeed the epitome of a despotic and “caesaropapist”<sup>131</sup> state, and what was the role of the Orthodox Church in relation to that state? How absolute was “Byzantine imperial absolutism” both in theory and practice?

## II. Political power and the Early Church

In the early Christian literature, there are few allusions to the stance of the Church vis-à-vis the power structures of this world, exemplified by the pagan Roman Empire. Jesus’ words contain few direct political references that are rather limited and vague. “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 21:22): this is one of the most famous quotes that demonstrates both a compliance and a detachment. More importantly, the Kingdom of God is radically different from the earthly kingdoms: “My Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). In fact, beyond words, it was by example that Jesus has demonstrated the fundamental attitude of a Christian towards power: to rule is to serve.

The Revelation and the Johannine epistles come closer to a rejection of this world. On the other hand, Paul advocates obedience to civil authorities, for, as part of the created world, they have been instituted by God (Rom 13:1). So, in Paul, there is a more positive attitude, however this may not be attributed to the Roman Empire as such, but rather to the very concept of government. It is this that Paul sees as having divine origin. As Christians were increasingly targeted and persecuted by Roman authorities, Paul’s words were not taken literally, but “as indicative of a good ideal, if, and only if, the

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<sup>128</sup> Papanikolaou, “Byzantium”, 77

<sup>129</sup> Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, 65

<sup>130</sup> Papanikolaou, “Byzantium”, 78

<sup>131</sup> The term connotes a state where the secular ruler is simultaneously head of the church/religion.

rulers were righteous.”<sup>132</sup> In addition, there was the Epistle to the Hebrews that underlined again the otherworldliness of the Kingdom of God, declaring for the Church that “here we have no abiding polity” (Heb 13:14)

One may concur with Papanikolaou that “there is no evidence of a strong current of Christian anarchy in these first centuries: until the coming of the Kingdom of God, political institutions were deemed necessary.”<sup>133</sup> And yet from very early, Christians would be perceived as dangerous for the Roman Empire. The reason for this may well be, as Florovsky argued, that “Christianity entered history as a new social order, or rather a new social dimension. From the very beginning Christianity was not primarily a ‘doctrine’, but exactly a ‘community’.”<sup>134</sup> Still, he continues “it would be utterly misleading to interpret the tension between Christians and Rome as a conflict or clash between the Church and the State.”<sup>135</sup> On the one hand, the Christian Church was not just another religious organization, but a community of believers beyond time and place, a “different system of homeland” in Origen’s words (*Contra Celsum*, VIII.75). On the other hand, the pagan Roman Empire was not a secular state in the modern sense. It claimed to be the final embodiment of “Humanity”, of all human values and achievements, as Sir Ernest Barker noted, it was “in effect, a politico-ecclesiastical institution.”<sup>136</sup> Loyalty to the state was of a religious nature, as epitomised by the emperors’ cults and their worship as gods. Any particular religion could be accommodated, as far as it was not challenging this religious framework and the pagan foundations of this arrangement, namely, the very divinisation of power itself, and subsequently of the Roman state, in a *cosmos* where violence was deemed to be the ultimate foundational principle. But Christianity was among others rejecting the idea that violence, necessity, and naked power are the creation’s foundations. In this setting, the Christians would be persecuted exactly because their ecclesial belonging had a clear and radical political connotation.

### III. The Empire becomes Christian: a political theology for the *Imperium*?

The years that followed Constantine’s lifting of the Christians’ religious persecution and his conversion marked a crucial turning point in the history of Christianity. Rather than being the outcast of the political order, the Church was now offered not just freedom and peace, but protection and

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<sup>132</sup> John McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 385

<sup>133</sup> Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 15

<sup>134</sup> Florovsky, “Empire and Desert”, 133

<sup>135</sup> Florovsky, 135

<sup>136</sup> Ernest Barker, *Church, State and Education* (University of Michigan Press, 1957), 20; also in Florovsky, 135

promotion. In this highly paradoxical situation — that was not met with unanimous response, as the rise of monasticism at this era attests — what prevailed was the advancement of the Church’s mission in this world: her purpose was not only to redeem humans out of this world, but also to redeem the world itself. The fact that man is essentially a “social being”, meant that the “redemption of society” was a task that the Church should undertake.<sup>137</sup> Thus, in Florovsky’s words, “the Church was finally forced into alliance with the Empire, by the double pressure of her own missionary vocation and of the traditional logic of Empire.”<sup>138</sup>

Christian Roman political theory is considered to start in the early fourth century with Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 260 – 339), ecclesiastical adviser and biographer of Emperor Constantine the Great. For Eusebius, Constantine’s conversion was the culmination of History, a providential development. Constantine was the wise king, the imitation of God, ruling a realm which could now become the imitation of Heaven. The emperor is the Viceroy of God, specially chosen and constantly inspired by Him. And as such, he “frames his earthly government according to the pattern of that Divine original, feeling strength in its conformity to the monarchy of God.”<sup>139</sup> Although writing specifically about Constantine, Eusebius has been considered as the author that expressed the general schema of the imperial structure as an image of the Heavenly Kingdom: the worldly Christian sovereign reflects the divine sovereignty; monarchy on earth as monarchy in Heaven.

Numerous works have been written on Eusebius and his politico-theological views. His exaltation of Constantine’s imperial rule with all its excessive rhetoric would easily be accepted as suggestive of the supposedly theocratic, caesaropapist political system of “Byzantium”. And although much has been written more recently to reveal the ideological and theological presuppositions underlying this constructed “Byzantinism”, these 19<sup>th</sup> century caricatures will resurface here and there, especially in works that only indirectly deal with Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox political theory.<sup>140</sup> So, Eusebius has been viewed with suspicion for legitimizing theologically imperial absolutism, by subjecting Christian theology to the Hellenistic theories of kingship, and consequently, for setting a specific political theory that defined Eastern Orthodox thought and went unchallenged for over a millennium. All these presumptions, though, need a closer and more nuanced look.

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<sup>137</sup> Florovsky, 156

<sup>138</sup> Florovsky, 139

<sup>139</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Oration in Praise of Constantine*, 1486

<sup>140</sup> Indicative of this occasional reproduction is Huntington’s words that “...in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar’s junior partner.”; Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 70



In his endeavour to exalt Constantine, Eusebius stands, indeed, on the pre-existing theoretical ground of divine kingship as developed in the Hellenistic East. What he does is adapting the existing ideas of late antiquity to a new situation. But he does not do this uncritically: Eusebius altered the pagan political concept of the king-god and put in its place the concept of a God-appointed king. Pagan polytheism allowed for an intermediary space between gods and humans that was filled by demigod figures like the emperors. Christianity's monotheism and radical differentiation between the Creator and creation excluded such a possibility. The importance of this difference should not be underestimated; Drakopoulos argues that, "without doubt, Eusebius' theories, written in a very diplomatic language so that they appear as a precious gift, are an ultimate rejection of pharaoh-like worship: the Augustus, the Emperor, is not God, but image of God."<sup>141</sup>

This is not to deny that Eusebius did attempt to theorize that (Constantine's) monarchy was divinely legitimized. He may well be the author that has underlined the most ancient kingship idea that monarchy affirmed worldly order by imitating the divine order. But the Christian faith prevented a subsequent absolutization of this image. First, there was also the biblical idea of kingship: the image of David as the God's anointed priest-king served as a type for the Christian emperor. Yet, the Old Testament messianic character of David's kingship found its fulfilment in the person of the eternally regnant Christ.<sup>142</sup> The Byzantines were also aware that according to Scriptures God can also withdraw his favour from a king if he strayed, as in the case of Saul. Consequently, as McGuckin aptly observes, this Davidic model of the prophetic priest-king that the Byzantine religious philosophy afforded to the emperor, was a model "that heavily underlined the 'tentative' nature of his sacred role; not its absolute force."<sup>143</sup> The status of the Christian emperor was *conditional*: his power was considered divinely validated, but his rule was subject to God's rule and the canons of the Church, so if he drifted away from the latter, his power was rendered fragile.<sup>144</sup> A closely interrelated aspect that prevented an absolutization of imperial power was that the emperor was after all a human being, just as everybody else. Many Byzantine authors, like Agapetus, would refer to the earthly nature of the emperor, another reminder of his essential equal status with his subjects: "let no man feel conceit about nobility of birth.

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<sup>141</sup> Drakopoulos, *Μεσαίωνας ελληνικός και δυτικός* (Athens: Eropteia, 1987), 130.

<sup>142</sup> McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 384

<sup>143</sup> McGuckin, 382

<sup>144</sup> John McGuckin, "The Legacy of the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle: Origins of the East Christian Conceptions of Church and State Relation", in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 47, no.3-4 (2003), 257–8.

All men have clay for their ancestor – both those who boast themselves in purple and fine linen, and those who are afflicted by poverty and sickness.”<sup>145</sup>

There is no doubt that Eusebius was a fervent proponent of the imperial and monarchical idea. Nevertheless, we should note that he was not a political theorist, the way Plato, Aristotle and other ancients have been. Comparing and choosing between different political alternatives is not his purpose.<sup>146</sup> In any case, in order to avoid the danger of anachronism, this pro-monarchy position should be contextualised in time and space. For the historical realities of the era, the real question was not a matter of constitutional forms and structures, but of specific results, that is, stability, peace, and order. Already from the times of Isocrates centuries ago, a world organised along the lines of city-states was discredited due to the incessant civil strife and intra-cities wars that became endemic in late classical Greece. By late antiquity, the word “democracy” had already come to designate mob-rule, anarchy, and social unrest. It had practically no resemblance to the meaning of the term during classical ancient times, nor to the content that the term acquired in modern times.<sup>147</sup> In fact, it was not the original meaning of word “democracy” that survived, but rather the latter’s practical and experiential expression: the term “*ecclesia*”, that is, the assembly, the gathering of the community of equal members of ancient democracy had already been transferred to the new Christian context. Subsequent Byzantine authors are presented as unwilling to question the imperial political system. This is all too theoretical a

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in Erickson, “Human Dignity: Byzantine Political Philosophy Revisited”, in <https://www.svots.edu/content/human-dignity-byzantine-political-philosophy-revisited>, accessed 20/4/2018. Agapetus wrote for emperor Justinian in the sixth century, and his work has informed later literature on the qualities of the good king, known as “mirror of princes”, in both East and West.

<sup>146</sup> There are instances where Eusebius explicitly singles out monarchy as superior to other government types, as in his frequently cited phrase from the Oration in Praise of Constantine, “and surely monarchy far transcends every other constitution and form of government: for that democratic equality of power, which is its opposite, may rather be described as anarchy and disorder” (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Oration in Praise of Constantine*, 1486). This phrase has been interpreted as Eusebius’ rejection of democracy (Papanikolaou, *Mystical as Political*, 20), but it could be a rather vague, and quite old, English translation of the original Greek text. In the latter Eusebius does not use the word ‘democracy’ or ‘democratic’; he talks about polyarchia (πολυαρχία): “Μοναρχία δέ τῆς πάντων ὑπέρκειται συστάσεώς τε καί διοικήσεως· ἀναρχία γάρ μᾶλλον καί στάσις ἢ ἐξ ἰσοτιμίας ἀντιπαραξαγόμενη πολυαρχία.” (Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Laudibus Constantini*, III, A–D, in P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 20, 1332). Apart from its literary meaning as “the power of the many”, *polyarchia* may also connote in Greek the simultaneous existence of many mutually competing power holders, and not necessarily exclusively the institutional empowerment of a *demos*. It is *polyarchia* that Eusebius rejects, and this is probably an allusion to the previous period of Roman civil wars between equally powerful co-emperors. The translation of *polyarchia* into “democratic equality of power” appears in Philip Schaff and has been inopportunately repeated in more recent texts, as in O’Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 60, a useful compilation of Christian political texts.

<sup>147</sup> Ljubomir Maksimović, “Democracy in an Autocratic System: the Case of Byzantium”, in *Athens Dialogues E-Journals*, <http://athensdialogues.chs.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/athensdialogues.woa/wa/dist?dis=81>, accessed 25/12/2016

discussion as it does not address the issue of what real historical necessities existed for such a demand to arise; were there realistic alternatives of political organisation during a period when contemporary rival systems would include Persian despotism, later the Islamic Caliphate, Western feudalism, or tribal kingdoms?

Lastly, Eusebius is considered as the founder of a specific political theology of empire that remained unchallenged for thousand years. In modern times there have been attempts to propose a single broad Byzantine political theory, one of the most prominent was Dvornik's study from late 1960s.<sup>148</sup> Dvornik sees Byzantine political thinking as perilously tied to Hellenistic thought, Eusebius being the main culprit for this, while it is easily assumed that subsequent Byzantine scholars and theologians have accepted uncritically his theory of a divinely sanctioned imperial absolutism.<sup>149</sup> Implicit in all this is the belief — mainly of 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant coinage — that this was an unfortunate corruption of some original Christian attitude to politics, a belief that echoes the old stereotype of the monolithic, despotic Byzantine political system and its Orthodox Church that was sold out to “caesaropapism”. McGuckin has provided a brief rebuttal of Dvornik's macro-thesis. For McGuckin, Dvornik wrongly “presumes that the notion of the king's *mimesis* of God... simply means the same as the king being an earthly god”<sup>150</sup>, and he is also unaware of the fact that according to the Scriptures a king can be an agent of God but also can become the servant of the beast. Yet, it is this dual potentiality of the king “which Eusebius and the Christian fathers apply, and it is this which refashions the Hellenistic absolutism Dvornik wishes to foist on them.”<sup>151</sup>

As a general observation, McGuckin argues that there is no single Eastern Christian religious political theory, that could be compared with Catholic medieval or early modern Protestant theories of church-state relations, and there is also no single, coherent Byzantine political theology; this absence may be both because the Scriptures and canons did not suggest such a single coherent and generalizable theory and because the significant Byzantine theorists were too concerned with finding *ad hoc* solutions to occasional and locally contextualised controversies to allow them to elaborate such an authoritative macro-theory.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Francis Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy*, 2 vols (Dumbarton Oaks Studies IX, Harvard, 1966).

<sup>149</sup> For later Byzantines, although respected as a history author, Eusebius was theologically suspicious of pro-Arian leanings. For a short account on Eusebius' reception see Lukhovitskiy, “Άσεβής Εὐσέβιος: Eusebius' of Caesarea image in 14th century Byzantium and its sources”, in *Byzantinoslavica* 1-2 (2014), 234–46

<sup>150</sup> McGuckin, “The Legacy of the 13th Apostle”, 262

<sup>151</sup> McGuckin, 263

<sup>152</sup> McGuckin, 252–3

#### IV. Political rule must become Christian: the way of *mimesis*.

All in all, older scholarship's dry assumption that for the Byzantines the monarchy and the empire was the particular political system "willed by God and sustained by Him"<sup>153</sup>, does not lead us very far after all. In searching Byzantine and Orthodox attitudes towards political power, instead of concentrating on the question which *form of government* was preferable, a focus on what *kind of rule* was prescribed as divinely sanctioned maybe more fecund. A prominent Greek Father that dealt with the issue of political power was St. John Chrysostom (A.D. 349–407). Chrysostom, interpreting Paul's view on respecting the authorities, maintains that rather than specific forms or individuals, it is the very institution of government that has been established by God for the good of humanity.<sup>154</sup> Rightful government is necessary so that men will not fall into the state of nature: "So, if you deprive a city of its rulers, we must lead a life less rational than that of the brutes, biting and devouring one another; the rich man, the poorer; the stronger man, the weaker; and the bolder man, the man who is more gentle. But now by the grace of God none of these things happen."<sup>155</sup>

In an interesting book on Chrysostom and his stance vis-à-vis the empire, Bozinis underlines the many ways in which John essentially undercuts the Eusebian enthusiastic embrace of imperial rule. John adopts a pragmatic rather than an ideological stance towards monarchy and the *Imperium*. He did not turn against the particular constitutional arrangements of his era – why would he? – but neither did he exalt monarchy in the way Eusebius did in the person of Constantine. On the contrary, as Bozinis argues, in Chrysostom's works the institution of the king is stripped of the Eusebian metaphysical baggage, as the one *mimesis* of a divine archetypal cosmic order and is identified more frequently with this world.<sup>156</sup>

Chrysostom also talks about accountability of powerholders, whether it is the power of the rich, or of the monarch. Indeed, his focus is the *ethos*, the moral level of the exercise of power, and not an institutional theoretical one. The source of power is given: it is God. He has instituted all authorities. It is the *way* that power is exercised that matters. And in this framework, if the Church has a role in the social and political sphere, this is not one of direct involvement in politics but that of educating virtuous people.

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<sup>153</sup> Norman Hepburn Baynes, "The Byzantine State", in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays*, (London: Athlone, 1955), 48

<sup>154</sup> Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections*, 44

<sup>155</sup> John Chrysostom, *The Homilies on the Statues*, in *Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*, Series I, vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.pdf>, 541

<sup>156</sup> Konstantinos Bozinis, *Ο Ιωάννης ο Χρυσόστομος για το Imperium Romanum* (Athens: Kardamitsa, 2003), 196–7

Indeed, as the prominent Byzantinist Deno Geanakoplos observed, although in secular matters the church considered it a duty to follow imperial leadership, at the same time “the ‘secular’ sphere was permeated throughout by the moral influence of Christian ideals, the church deeming it a responsibility that imperial law should be humane and in accord with the moral teachings of the church.”<sup>157</sup> In this framework, the God-given legitimacy and power of the emperor was not absolute but conditional. “Power must be exercised responsibly and carefully” as Gvosdev remarks, “an emperor’s resemblance to God, in fact the resemblance of anyone placed in authority over others to God, comes in the execution of the office”.<sup>158</sup>

Compared to Eusebius’ emphasis on structure, Chrysostom’s stress on the *ethos* of power may be translated and have validity for any given political system, beyond the imperial. In line with many ancient philosophers, Chrysostom believed that the basic element behind any constellation of institutions in a polity is the human soul. As Bozinis noted:

The attempted intervention by this Church Father in public affairs, did not concern the transformation of the political system, or of some specific constitutionally enshrined legal arrangements; he was of the belief that in order for the system to change, firstly there must occur a change in the human beings that comprise and internalise its functioning, reproducing it in their everyday interpersonal relations...For, in accordance with John, democracy also is an achievement of virtue that presupposes the spiritual elevation and enlightening of the people, an aim that he always identified with Church’s social mission. When, on the other hand, a polity foments the unreasonable passions of the human soul, even when it proclaims the liberty and the rights of the human being, in essence it enslaves its members in corrupt and illegitimate power mechanisms that usually develop under the surface of constitutional normality.<sup>159</sup>

In the framework of the empire, as Erickson says, for the Byzantines “the God-imitating emperor was expected to act in certain ways – above all to practice philanthropy. He also was expected *not* to act in certain ways...that might cause him to be labeled a tyrant.”<sup>160</sup> This utter antithesis between the lawful king (the *basileus*), and the tyrant, inherited from classical philosophy, is indicative of Byzantine political thinking. Tyranny is a regrettable perversion, a government that departs from any frame of justice and is

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<sup>157</sup> Deno Geanakoplos, “Church and State in the Byzantine Empire: a Reconsideration of the Problem of Caesaropapism”, in *Church History* 34, no.4, (1965), 387

<sup>158</sup> Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections*, 59

<sup>159</sup> Bozinis, *Ο Ιωάννης ο Χρυσόστομος*, 204–205.

<sup>160</sup> Erickson, “Human Dignity”

based solely on the unrestrained will of the ruler. Whereas the *basileus* executes his God-given task in the framework of divine economy and for the benefit of the ruled, the tyrant insists on his individual desires and interests, and privatizes the imperial office. He becomes a usurper of power that loses God's Grace, and his subjects can depose him through rebellion. For the Byzantines, as for the ancient Greeks, and in sharp contrast to post-Renaissance Machiavellian political theory, ethics and politics cannot be separated. This difference of *basileus* and tyrant is not limited to the framework of a monarchical rule, it can also concern every single citizen: each one of them can be *basileus*, or tyrant, Christian virtue is the key.

#### V. The concept of *symphonia* and the position of the Emperor

Eusebius can at best be considered as having provided a very general framework and not a comprehensive political theory. It has been rightly pointed out that it was never a written legally binding constitution, so it could be adapted to suit the needs of the time<sup>161</sup>. Beyond theoretical concerns, in practice two main issues are of particular importance in the evolution of the Christian Roman Empire after Constantine: the way the Church and the Empire related to each other, and the specific place of the emperor.

As regards to the former, the cohabitation of the Church with the political structures of the Empire was based on the notion of *symphonia* (or *synallelia*), meaning in Greek concordance and mutuality/cooperation respectively. This was not a constitutional arrangement but a wider principle that, according to McGuckin had a twofold meaning: "an attempt at *symphonia* between the policies of the earthly ruler and the values of God's Kingdom (as was also the central aspiration of the Lord's Prayer) and a corresponding ideal *symphonia* between the church and the political authority in a Christian imperium."<sup>162</sup>

Emperor Justinian gave a definition of what *symphonia* entailed in an often-quoted passage of his sixth Novella in 535 AD:

"There are two major gifts which God's heavenly philanthropy gave to men, the priesthood and the imperial authority – *hierosyne* and *basileia*; [sacerdotium and imperium in Latin]. Of these, the former is concerned with things divine, the latter presides over human affairs and takes care of them. Proceeding from the same source, both adorn human life. ... Now if priesthood is in every respect blameless and filled with

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<sup>161</sup> Runciman, *Byzantine Theocracy*, 24

<sup>162</sup> McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 388

confidence toward God, and *basileia* rules justly and properly over the commonwealth entrusted to it, good harmony will result, which will bestow all that is beneficial on the mankind.<sup>163</sup>”

It is obvious that *symphonia* entails a distinction that should be based on cooperation, a kind of interdependence aiming at harmony, not a rigid duality that may spark conflict. This distinction should not be read as one between two organizations, namely “Church” and “State”. It is rather a distinction of two different but interconnected ontological levels, in practice two ministries of a singular Christian polity.<sup>164</sup> This was an idea reminiscent of the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ’s two natures in one person: unconfused, yet indivisible. Their existence as two parallel levels of the same body politic working towards a common task, harmony and peace, gives a different image from what the concepts of caesaropapism, or theocracy suggest, as Geanakoplos noted: there is no complete subordination of one power to the other.<sup>165</sup> Imperial power was supreme on worldly affairs, at once an authority and a service, but not a goal in itself. Although the imperium was certainly not subordinate to the clergy, its power was legitimate only “within the Church.”<sup>166</sup> Power was not self-constituted and self-legitimized. Of course, the notion of *symphonia* concerned mainly an ideal to be achieved, rather than an elaborated political theory or a stable historical achievement. During the Byzantine millennium, conflict was not infrequent, as a number of emperors tried to overturn the equilibrium to their benefit.

As to the place of the emperor, this was high and exalted. The aura of sacralisation surrounding the office led wrongly some observers to believe that he was a kind of high-priest. In pagan Rome, the emperor held the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, in essence a religious office. For some time after Constantine, there would be a continuance; after all, paganism’s presence within the Empire was still very strong. But, as McGuckin stated, “what is interesting is not the affirmation, but the way later Byzantine tradition limited and cut back the emperor’s priestly prerogatives, thus denying them in

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<sup>163</sup> McGuckin, 393; also Florovsky, “Empire and Desert”, 142

<sup>164</sup> In contrast, under the influence of Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*, and due to the disintegration of the Roman political authority in the West, Western Christian political theory presupposed a sharper separation of the two spheres that historically culminated in an open conflict between the Pope and various Germanic kings for political supremacy. The fear that the See of Rome would become an instrument to the hands of the state (Franks, Holy Roman Empire) if a division was not maintained, led the popes to seek also political autonomy. Augustinian thought on politics and later the papal “Two Swords” theory had little resonance with the Eastern Roman tradition.

<sup>165</sup> Geanakoplos, “Church and State in the Byzantine Empire”, 382

<sup>166</sup> Florovsky, “Empire and Desert”, 142

substance, by affirming them economically, *kat'oikonomian*.”<sup>167</sup> Despite the flamboyant rhetoric of court authors and the “liturgical privileges” he enjoyed, the emperor was just a layman, surely the most exalted one, but he was not a priest.<sup>168</sup> The line was clear: he had no role in the sacraments. “For neither does he stand at the altar nor after the consecration of the bread does he elevate it, saying ‘Holy things for the holy’, nor does he baptize, or anoint, or lay on hands and make bishops and priests and deacons....”, as put by Maximus the Confessor.<sup>169</sup>

Yet, if “caesaropapism” is not verified by a supposed priest-status of the emperor, is it affirmed by his possible role as director of the Church? Was the Church subjected to political power? What may have caused such an interpretation is the emperor’s interference in Church’s organizational issues, mainly as part of his supreme power on secular affairs. The emperor did indeed play a paramount role in the administrative affairs of the Church, ecclesiastical appointments, arrangements of dioceses etc. Patriarch Neilos had provided in the 1380s a list of nine articles describing the emperor’s rights with regard to the Church. They all concerned administrative matters, with no mention of sacral aspects of the imperial office<sup>170</sup>. In the most essential issue, the definition of the doctrine, he had no role. This belonged to the Church alone, and this means the clergy but also the people as the witness. At the end of the day, the principal concern of the Church was not with the externals of its administrative structure, but with the integrity of its faith, as clarified in its doctrinal expression<sup>171</sup>. Imperial politics and preferences had placed or displaced Patriarchs, but in the long-term no emperor was able to force the Fathers to compromise their views, as Maximus the Confessor reminded his judges.<sup>172</sup> Despite many attempts by emperors to impose dogma — for example Arianism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism, and Iconoclasm— the Church resisted the incursions of political power and in the end prevailed. Emperors could not change at will the truths that defined the earthly *mimesis* of the Kingdom.

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<sup>167</sup> McGuckin ‘The Legacy of the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle’, 272. *Oikonomia* is an important aspect of Orthodox canon law that allows flexibility and occasional adaptation to particular circumstances, as long as this does not affect the substance of faith.

<sup>168</sup> On the emperor’s ‘liturgical’ privileges see Geanakoplos, “Church and State”, 390–2

<sup>169</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Selected Writings*, ed. George Berthold, Classics of Western Spirituality series (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), 21

<sup>170</sup> Norman Russel, “One faith, one Church, one emperor: the Byzantine approach to ecumenicity and its legacy”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 12, 2 (2012), 125–6

<sup>171</sup> Aristides Papadakis, “The historical tradition of church-state relations under Orthodoxy”, in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Pedro Ramet, (Duke University Press, 1988), 42

<sup>172</sup> Maximus, *Selected Writings*, 20–1



## VI. Sheer political power: Byzantine political institutional “absolutism” reconsidered

Hence, the term “caesaropapism” fails totally to describe the real relationship between state power and the Orthodox Church, and this came to be widely accepted by scholarship today<sup>173</sup>. Still, even the image of the Eastern Roman emperor as an absolute ruler in secular affairs must be qualified too. As mentioned above, the ideas around the post of the emperor in the Eastern Roman polity encompassed some altered characteristics of both the Roman and the Hellenistic political ideas, but also the concept of the biblical king-priest of the Old Testament, whom God could ordain but could also unordain if he strayed. In addition, in political terms, the Eastern Roman Empire retained specific elements of the republican Roman heritage; as part of this “the idea of being governed by an elected ruler never died out in the East.”<sup>174</sup> It is not a coincidence that although in the stage of election the emperor had the discretionary power to nominate a successor, in Byzantium the principle of rightful hereditary succession was not formally approved<sup>175</sup>. In his recent book on the republican aspects of Byzantium, Kaldellis provides among others an interesting overview of the imperial succession; he argues that although dynastic succession was not uncommon in the Eastern Roman Empire, this did not mean that it excluded the elective element: “hereditary ‘right’ was basically only one among many arguments that could be used to support a candidacy, a condition that precludes this from being considered a hereditary monarchy.”<sup>176</sup> Indeed, tendencies for the establishment of a formal dynastic hereditary model were counterbalanced by a “republican legitimation schema.”<sup>177</sup>

Traditionally, the establishment of an emperor followed three stages: election, proclamation, and coronation. In the thousand years of life of this polity, this procedure was not observed in every case, as during this long historical period, Byzantium understandably witnessed periods of anomaly, and extraordinary circumstances, civil strife, and external wars. What is surprising is not that this tradition would be in some cases bypassed, but that it was not officially abandoned. Especially the proclamation

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<sup>173</sup> As Papadakis observes, “on purely historical grounds, the label (which, significantly, is of western origin) best reflects the political pretensions of the papacy, for it was the popes, rather than the Byzantine emperors, who repeatedly put forth their own claims to imperial rule” and “attempted to combine in a single office both *regnum* and *sacerdotium*”; see Papadakis, “The historical tradition”, 42. Similarly, calling the Eastern Roman Empire a ‘theocracy’ would need a careful and precise qualification of the term, since in the Byzantine state neither was there an identification of supreme religious and political power in the same person, as it has been observed in Islam, nor was there exercise of political administration by religious officials, as for example in the medieval Papal State or Calvin’s Geneva.

<sup>174</sup> Maksimović, “Democracy in an Autocratic System”

<sup>175</sup> Compared to the more rigid social stratification of feudalism, in the Eastern Roman Empire, there was a certain vertical social mobility, which allowed even an illiterate peasant like Basil I to become Emperor.

<sup>176</sup> Anthony Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 114

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*; see also 111-113, where Kaldellis presents some characteristic cases of this “republican legitimation of emperors’ succession.

retained the character of a public approval, expressed through three distinct polity elements, namely the Senate, the army, and the *demos* of Constantinople. However nominal the participation of these three elements would be at times, this procedure preserved the vestiges of the political rights of the people from early Roman times that functioned as a kind of symbolic — and many times more than symbolic — counterbalance to imperial autocracy, especially at the stage of the ascendance of a new emperor to the throne.<sup>178</sup> At critical moments, popularity was essentially legitimacy. As Kaldellis argued, “popular sovereignty lacked institutions of governance but found expression in the continual referendum to which emperors were subject.”<sup>179</sup> Constantinople’s hippodrome would many times function as the place where an informal but direct interaction between the emperor and the people would take place.

Hence, the people held a very specific position in the order of things, one that was much more active than the mere loyal subjects of an absolute sovereign. Theophylaktos, bishop of Ohrid, (1080AD) gave a characteristic definition of the key difference between a *tyrant* and a lawful king, a *basileus*: the *tyrant* does not receive the reins of power from the people but grabs them for himself by force; the *basileus*, by contrast, receives power “by the good will of the multitude and the consent of the people.”<sup>180</sup> This connection and interdependence between the emperor and the people is reflected in the etymological interpretation that many Byzantine authors give to the word *basileus*, as *basis laou*, that is, the “basis of people”, their stable support and foundation<sup>181</sup>.

More importantly, people had a say in matters of faith, which, for the Byzantines, were not theoretical, but had political importance. As Henry Gregoire states, “the Byzantines became accustomed to the idea that organised opposition to the Imperial will in religious matters was normal and legitimate.”<sup>182</sup> In reality this was not merely “doctrinal” but essentially political issues<sup>183</sup> This was not

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<sup>178</sup> Maksimović, “Democracy in an Autocratic System”; also, Karayannopoulos, *Η πολιτική θεωρία των Βυζαντινών* (Thessaloniki: Vaniias, 1992), 47–59

<sup>179</sup> Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic*, 200

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Kaldellis, 102

<sup>181</sup> Theophylaktos in his definition of the various political systems states that “monarchy, also called legitimate *basileia*, being the basis and support of people, according to the etymology of the name” (« η μεν μοναρχία, και έννομος και βασιλεία καλείται, βάσις ούσα λαού και στήριγμα, κατά το έτυμον το ονόματος», (Theophylaktos 269B); also Nicephoros Vlemmydes in his “Mirror of Prince”, uses the same etymology (« έστι τοίνυν βασιλεύς βάσις λαού»); in Konstantinos Christou, *Ο «Βασιλικός Ανδριάς» του Νικηφόρου Βλεμμύδη: Συμβολή στην Πολιτική Θεωρία των Βυζαντινών* (Thessaloniki: Kyromanos, 1996), 76

<sup>182</sup> Quoted in Florovsky, “Empire and Desert”, 144

<sup>183</sup> Iconoclasm is a characteristic example of this essential inseparability of politics and doctrine. Apart from doctrinal affair, iconoclasm was also a conscious effort by the emperors to centralize and maximize their power by dictating dogma. Icons were targeted because they represented a quintessentially centrifugal element, in sharp contrast to the highly centralist and ordered iconoclast view of the society as a mere chain-of-command.

institutionalized but at historical moments it became a decisive factor. Combining this with the aforementioned role of the people in legitimizing imperial power, one can discern an image much more dynamic and nuanced than that of a monolithic absolute monarchy suggests. As we discuss in Chapter 5, this popular element of Orthodoxy is an interesting factor to consider in relation to modern democracy.

## VII. Post-Byzantine developments: political captivity and cultural drought

The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 was a major turning point: the emperor was no more. In order to survive, the Orthodox Church in the Balkans and Asia Minor had to adapt to a totally new reality, where the political overlord was the sultan, whose faith, Islam, did not recognize any distinction between church and state, religion and society. In this framework, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople was called to play a new role, the *ethnarch*, the leader of the Orthodox Christians, the sole intermediary between the Ottoman state and his flock that included effectively all the Christian Orthodox subjects of the sultan at least in the Balkans and Asia Minor: as such, the Patriarch was under the constant supervision and control by the state and was held accountable for any action that his flock would dare to undertake against the authorities. His position was frequently at peril, while he always had to take into account the tendency of the Ottoman state to revert to violence and indiscriminate persecutions against his flock.<sup>184</sup> The Orthodox Church did manage to survive without the protective shell of the Christian empire, but impoverished, under harsh circumstances, and with a heavy blood toll.

In the more “provincial” Eastern Slavic Orthodox lands, in the city-states of northern Russia like Novgorod, the Orthodox Church and *symphonia* functioned under a political system that had many republican elements.<sup>185</sup> The rise of tsarist Muscovy also led to a framework that resembled the Byzantine *symphonia*. However, already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the westernising/modernising policies of Peter the Great led to the abolishment of the Moscow Patriarchate and the creation of a synodical body under total state control. The fine distinction and dynamic harmony sought by the Byzantine model was over; for, after all, *symphonia* entailed together with cooperation a form of independence between the ecclesiastical and the political authority, as Papanikolaou says, whereas “the imposed configuration was

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Iconoclasm was doctrinally and politically an imperial effort to compromise the *symphonia* ideal. It is indicative of how issues that concerned human relation to the divine were closely interrelated with ‘real’ life, the everyday social conduct; see McGuckin, “The Theology of Images”, 39–58

<sup>184</sup> Papadakis, “The historical tradition”, 47

<sup>185</sup> See Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections*, 104–7

unprecedented in the history of Orthodoxy and weakened substantially any possibility of ecclesial resistance to state power.”<sup>186</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century national liberation movements of the Balkan Christians coincided with the growth of nationalism and secularism in the West. After liberation, state-building was in many cases undertaken by bearers of these new ideas that “were familiar with the way in which the triumphant secular state in the West had handled its relationship with the church.”<sup>187</sup> The modernisers in the Balkans saw too this relationship in exclusively subservient terms: neither total separation, nor a Byzantine-like *symphonia* was desirable. It was rather cooperation-through-subordination to the modern state. The Orthodox commonwealth that survived under the Ottomans would fragment into a number of national churches. Ironically, a kind of modern ‘caesaropapism’, where the church somehow became a state agency, appeared in the Orthodox Balkans and Petrine Russia via the crude imitation of Western Protestant models, alien to their own Byzantine tradition.<sup>188</sup> If a more balanced relation was eventually formed, it was thanks to the fact that, between state and Church, there stood a society that would cling to its Church and the tradition that helped her survive during the dire years of foreign rule.<sup>189</sup>

In the above political developments, no serious theological attempt at political theorising was made. It was modernisation-cum-westernisation that set the tone; the hundreds years of foreign occupation of the most ancient part of the Orthodox world had regrettably led to the decline of an autonomous Orthodox thought production. This informal *bras-de-fer* between Orthodoxy and modernity would reach a dramatic point with the establishment of militant atheist Communism in Eastern Europe that would “barely “tolerate” even a fully state-controlled church, for as much time it would take for her to wither away. Especially in the USSR, persecution would resemble the organized state violence that the Church faced in its early centuries.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 31

<sup>187</sup> Papadakis, “The historical tradition”, 49

<sup>188</sup> Whether the establishment of a symphonic model in the independent Balkan states after the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an ideal, and whether it is an institutional fact, is an issue that needs further examination, since the existence of such symphonic models is more often assumed rather than proven. Indeed, Protestant, in particular Lutheran in the case of Greece, influences may have played a considerable role in the formation of modern Church-state relations in these countries.

<sup>189</sup> As a general observation, it is worth noting that conspicuously, the modern notion of “church and state relations” effectively leaves society out of sight.

<sup>190</sup> For a concise presentation see Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, London, Penguin, 1993), 145–171

## Conclusion

It is evident that not only “caesaropapism”, but the very stereotype of Byzantium as the exemplary despotic state in political terms, does not really hold ground, especially if compared to real conterminous historical alternatives, and not checked anachronistically against modern ideals and models. It is recognized today that the Eastern Roman Empire preserved more characteristics of the Roman *res publica* than previously thought.<sup>191</sup> The emperor was definitely not a high priest, but neither was he *the* absolute ruler. In fact absolutism, divine rights, and the view of the king as the ultimate source of sovereignty, vis-à-vis the authority of the Pope and the centrifugal elements of feudalism, would historically reach an apex much later in Western Europe. No Eastern Roman Emperor ever pronounced the phrase “*l'État, c'est moi*”.

For the Orthodox Byzantines, the question was not the source of government/sovereignty — that was God — but the purpose of government. They did not absolutize the emperor; despite his exalted position, at the end of the day they knew that he was also a mortal and a sinner accountable to God, as any other man. The biblical king model underlined the unsure and conditional nature of the emperor’s role, not its absolute force.<sup>192</sup> Unlike their pagan predecessors, Christian emperors were subject to judgement. It was not an absolute but a conditional monarchy. How was this monarchy substantiated in practice? The emperor is an agent chosen by God; but the people is also an agent of God, insofar they, together with the *sacerdotium*, play a role in verifying the fulfilment of God’s conditions by the emperor.

The conditional character of the monarch’s divine validation, based on his exercise of God-given power rightly; the traditional “constitutional” role of the Constantinopolitan people as *demos*, in legitimizing imperial rule; and the role of the same people as *ecclesia* in witnessing the orthodoxy of the faith: this is a very interesting, more complex and dynamic image than the usual top-down pyramidal understanding of power in the Eastern Roman polity.

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<sup>191</sup> Kaldellis in *The Byzantine Republic* gives a persuasive historical account against the Gibbonian prejudices of ‘dark despotism’ that haunted Byzantium’s image for centuries. However, he comes too close to throwing out the baby with the water: in his attempt to demonstrate the fallacy of the theocratic caricatures, Kaldellis ends up in the other extreme, namely to consider Byzantium, in a very modern way, a solely “secular” state, undervaluing considerably the role of Orthodoxy in its history and in its non-absolutist character. In this respect, the author seems to fall victim to the same modern exegetical framework that had previously misconstrued the Eastern Roman polity from the opposite perspective.

<sup>192</sup> In this respect the observations of Hannah Arendt regarding the concept of authority are of great interest: we should not make the common mistake of confusing authority with authoritarianism. Commenting on Arendt’s views, Elshtain notes that historically, the legitimate authoritative figure (here the Emperor) was bound by law (divine, but also in many cases human), by tradition and by the force of past example and experience. He was therefore not free to do whatever he liked or wanted; that was the lawlessness of the tyrant; See Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Democratic Authority at Century’s End”, *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring 2000), 28

So, the byzantine past is not a one-way road that theoretically influences Orthodox position towards monarchy. The real question is not whether Orthodox theology and tradition can support a liberal democratic system despite its past, but whether this past does provide ideas about what political power should be and how it should be exercised. In this respect, the question can be rearranged: how can any political system be compatible with an Orthodox idea of political power? This turns our attention to the political system itself: what is the “liberal democracy” that challenges Orthodox theology?

## Chapter 4

### Liberalism and democracy: attempts for affirmation and contextual challenges

#### I. Liberal democracy and the association of the liberal and of the democratic ideas: an overview

As shown in the previous chapter, contrary to the stereotypical “bad Byzantium” mantra, the Orthodox Church does not demonstrate a special historical predisposition in favour of authoritarianism. Before we embark at a more direct assessment of the relationship between Eastern Orthodoxy and modern democracy, a closer look at the constituents of the political system we call liberal democracy is necessary. We saw in the literature review that most attempts at formulating an Orthodox Political theology take the term “democracy” for granted, with a self-evident positive meaning. In this chapter, I firstly examine the two distinct elements of liberal democracy, before I take a closer, critical look at the way the term liberal democracy is employed in one of the more interesting works on Orthodox Political theology, that of Aristotle Papanikolaou.

“Democracy” has been a catch-all term. It is omnipresent in modern political vocabulary, and still, it defies a clear definition. Academically, it may mean a system of state governance, a cluster of institutions and a set of procedures, as well as an ideal. Politically, due to the great legitimating power that the term bears, it has often been used to describe essentially different political systems claiming the same thing: that the polity in question was somehow ruled by its “people”. This plurality ceased after 1989, when the end of Cold War marked the victory of “bourgeois” or “liberal democracy”, against soviet-style “people’s democracy”, the only serious big-scale modern contender for the term.

As a minimal definition we could say that liberal democracy is a form of government, namely a system of freely elected representatives, operating under the principles of liberalism, in which individual rights and freedoms are officially recognized and protected. But for the purposes of our analysis, a further examination of the basics of liberal democracy is required.

When we talk about liberal democracy, there are two obvious and distinguishable elements, the democratic and the liberal. As to the former, one recurring line of thought understands democracy as an ideal, emphasizing the importance of people’s participation in government and the moral value of self-rule.<sup>193</sup> At the other opposite stands the pragmatist or “procedural” view of democracy as a struggle between different elite groups for popular support, represented by Schumpeter, according to whom

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<sup>193</sup> Eduard Song, “The Democratic Ideal: a brief review”, *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring 2000), 142.

democracy is “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people’s vote”.<sup>194</sup> This is a minimalist definition, since elections are the hallmark of modern democracy, a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. For others, modern democracy is a system of governance, in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by the citizenry, acting indirectly through competition and cooperation with their elected representatives.<sup>195</sup> The most generally accepted and frequently quoted definition of modern democracy was given by Robert Dahl. According to the prominent American political scientist, democracy is a system of government, where the officials are elected by means of free, fair and periodic elections, and where all citizens have the right to vote, to run for offices, to seek alternative sources of information and to form independent associations.<sup>196</sup> All in all, one can claim that the central elements of modern democracy are dispersion of power, delegation of authority by consent, and the possibility for popular participation to various degrees.

A first observation is that today’s democracy bears little — if any — actual resemblance to the classic democracy, as it firstly appeared in the fifth century BC in ancient Greece. A major dissimilarity is that in the original ancient democracy, there was no differentiation between state and society, government and ruled. Citizenship meant automatically active participation in public affairs: it was a “direct democracy”, in modern parlance.<sup>197</sup> In the original democratic polities, there were no elections: any citizen would and should serve as an official for a certain period of time, and this was done mainly through drawing lots, not competitive voting.<sup>198</sup> Undoubtedly, this was possible due to the fact that the scale of the political unit would not surpass a city of some thousand inhabitants. In sharp contrast, modern democracy, which concerns political units of a much bigger scale, is in fact *representative democracy*, governance through representatives: people do not rule directly, but through officials, whom they choose in periodic elections. Elections is also the major tool for controlling elected politicians and the policies they implement, at the end of every term. In the meantime, between elections, different groups try to control and have a say through exerting various forms of influence. This is how rule *by the* people is substantiated.

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<sup>194</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1993), 260

<sup>195</sup> Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, “What Democracy is...and is not”, *Journal of Democracy* 2, 3 (1991), 76

<sup>196</sup> Robert Dahl, *Polyarchies: Participation and Opposition* (Yale University Press, 1971), 3–20

<sup>197</sup> This direct involvement also meant that “politics” was simultaneously “policy making”. Interestingly, although both English terms originate from Greek, in Greek itself there are no different words for ‘politics’ and ‘policy’, but only the root word ‘*politiki*’.

<sup>198</sup> It is well-known that, given the historical realities of antiquity, citizenship was afforded only to free males. The comparison here between ancient and modern democracy concerns what was the role and the degree of participation in politics for those who were considered citizens then and now.



A second remark is that there is not one single ‘proper’ institutional arrangement for a representative democracy. In fact, modern democracies show considerable variation of institutions and procedures, e.g., the relationship of the legislature and the executive, the electoral system, and their federal or unitary structure. Of significant importance for the present analysis, this variation includes different church-state relations: no specific type is considered intrinsic to the nature of democracy. As democratic theory scholar Alfred Stepan noted, “...secularism and the separation of church and state have no inherent affinity with democracy, and indeed can be closely related to nondemocratic forms that systematically violate the twin tolerations.”<sup>199</sup>

Similarly, talking about different modes, patterns and degrees of secularization, Jose Casanova concluded: “...I am not certain that the secular separation of religion from political society or even from the state are universalizable maxims, in the sense that they are either necessary or sufficient conditions for democratic politics... As the example of so many modern secular authoritarian and totalitarian states show...strict no establishment is by no means a sufficient condition to democracy ...strict separation is also not a necessary condition for democracy”<sup>200</sup>. Mouffe, commenting on the difference between liberalism and democracy noted that “indeed, the separation between church and state, between the realm of the public and that of the private ... which are central to the politics of liberalism, do not have their origin in the democratic discourse but come from elsewhere.”<sup>201</sup>

Now, for this system to be liberal, that is, a “liberal democracy”, the government must respect and protect a set of rights that every single citizen must enjoy. Of course, as Beetham notes, not all individual rights relate to the function of democracy *per se*. Democratic rights are primarily those

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<sup>199</sup> Alfred Stepan, “Religion, Democracy and the ‘Twin Tolerations’”, *Journal of Democracy* 11, 4 (2000), 42–3. By the term ‘twin tolerations’ Stepan means that the church should not mandate policies to democratically elected governments, and the latter should respect the autonomy of functioning and the public stance of the church.

<sup>200</sup> Jose Casanova, ‘Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective’, *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring and Summer 2006), 21. Interestingly, Casanova speaks about different connotations of secularization and of the need for a contextual and historical understanding of this reality. He talks about the apparent presence of religion in the public domain and adds that he finds that a complete separation of church and state is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for democracy. So, beyond the general normative liberal democratic principles for the protection of any minority, no additional particular secularist principle or legislation is necessary. Yet, later on, following admittedly his personal normative preferences, Casanova seems to contradict his own observations about historical contextuality when he claims that “historically and pragmatically”, it *may be* necessary to disestablish ecclesiastical institutions that claim monopolistic rights over a territory or special privileges, giving no further details as to why this would be historically justified, respectful of the specific society/community, or even more so, democratic. For the context of the present monograph, it should be noted that Casanova speaks solely on Western Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy is mentioned just once *en passant*, as “Byzantine Christianity”.

<sup>201</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2005), 2

individual rights that are necessary to secure a constant basis for popular control over a collective decision-making process, namely, the freedom of expression, of association, and the right to stand as a candidate and the right to vote<sup>202</sup>. Yet, a liberal democracy must also protect other rights that liberalism *per se* considers vital, such as the right to the acquisition and protection of private property, which in many respects is a hallmark of liberalism. Freedom of religion in general is another core element of modern liberal democracy, but neither historically nor conceptually has such freedom been identical with the notion of a strict church-state separation. As stated above, democracies have over time exhibited a great variety of church-state relations, a fact that mirrors historical and social realities in each individual national case.<sup>203</sup>

What lays underneath the basic characteristic of liberalism, that is, the respect for and protection of specific individual rights? Liberalism as an ideology has a rich history, and different exponents have put emphasis on different aspects, e.g., John Locke on the unalienable natural rights, Rousseau on the social contract, Adam Smith on the salience of unhindered economic activity. Intellectual production on liberalism and its aspects has been ongoing for centuries and it has resulted in a vast literature that has described, defined and redefined the concept: hence liberalism is classified among others in terms of “classical vs. modern”, “utilitarian vs. rights-oriented”, “egalitarian vs. libertarian”. However, there is a basic thread that underlines the essence of all variations: the abstract, undifferentiated *individual*, who is the primary subject not only of economic, but also of social and political action. The world consists of a multitude of independent individuals, who at some point entered into an agreement, a contract, in order to establish common ties and through these to promote their particular interests. In the liberal conception, the underling spirit is meritocracy: those individuals who were capable of making a better life for themselves should not be hindered in their endeavours by institutions —the remnants of feudalism, the church (meaning the clergy), the absolute monarchies, and in general the state — which may be in the hands of less competent people, or people with other, more socio-centric or collectivistic priorities. What is bypassed, of course, in the above argument is the fact that the starting point of each individual usually varies considerably and, thus, theoretical claims for meritocracy may hide a substantial degree of elitism.

Individualism, thus, is considered the hallmark of liberalism. According to Parekh, unlike the ancient Greeks who “took the community as their starting point and defined the individual in terms of it,

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<sup>202</sup> David Beetham, “Liberal Democracy and the limits of Democratisation”, in *Prospects for Democracy*, ed. David Held (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 56

<sup>203</sup> See Stepan, “Religion, Democracy and the ‘Twin Tolerations’”.

liberalism takes the individual as the ultimate and irreducible unit of society and explains the latter in terms of it.”<sup>204</sup> Society is nothing more than the sum of the individuals it is made up of. Consequently, any political arrangement has as its reference point the individual and not the society which is a by-product, or the result of the contract agreed by individuals. This is necessarily a limited accord though.

The primacy of the individual to the society implies a very specific anthropology and an understanding of the human being as a kind of pre-social and definitely a pre-political self. This goes hand-in-hand with an obviously pessimistic view of human nature as selfish and aggressive, a view especially prominent in Hobbes. Rawls’ famous account of liberalism based on the concept of justice as “fairness”, where the rules of the polity are agreed upon by rational autonomous individuals with different conceptions of the “good”, presupposes an essential detachment of each individual from any context<sup>205</sup>. Rawls takes for granted that individuals have different conceptions of what is good, largely based on their convictions – including religion – or as he says their ‘comprehensive doctrines’. So, his *political* liberalism is proposed as the solution to the problem of irreconcilable views, their irreconcilability and the lack of a common basic doctrine are taken as contextually granted. Justice as fairness is secured to every individual through the provisioning of a set of rights that are not based on a specific understanding of the “good”, but are the result of a prior agreement, a kind of a neutral framework. The latter enables the citizens to pursue their own self-defined aims and ends, for a just society should not promote any particular end based on a single doctrine.

The weak point here is that the whole hypothesis of the possibility of an agreed set of rules presupposes not a moral consensus, but an obligatory moral neutrality. Yet, as Hoehner argues, in itself such a starting point is obviously not morally neutral and has significant implications for how the individual as well as the social institutions are conceived. It assumes that the individual can somehow divorce himself or herself from the social context in which he or she is embedded, to rationally determine which ends to pursue and how. Moreover, prosperity is understood solely in material terms.

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<sup>204</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, “The cultural particularity of Liberal Democracy”, in *Prospects for Democracy*, ed. David Held, (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 157

<sup>205</sup> John Rawls’ book *A Theory of Justice* has been as a major contribution in the reinvigoration of the theory of liberalism after the Second World War. Rawls would later elaborate and partly alter his initial argument with his second book ‘*Political Liberalism*’. His major effort here was to detach liberalism from any metaphysical and ontological claims about the nature of the self and to confine it solely in the sphere of politics. In this way he tried to respond to accusations that his initial understanding of liberalism was essentially representing a comprehensive moral doctrine like those doctrines whose uncompromising claims on the nature of the “good” liberalism was supposed to remedy.

‘Such an arrangement ignores possible transcendent ends around which a society could be arranged’.<sup>206</sup> It is in line, however, with the above-mentioned modern understanding of politics as the procedure of “*who gets what and how*”.

All in all, liberalism is not a specific system of governance. It appeared mainly as a political philosophy and a political ideology that “seeks societal stability and unity in the absence of shared conceptions of the common good.”<sup>207</sup> For later liberal scholars like Rawls who tried to detach liberal theory from ontological perceptions of the human being, this societal stability is actually not social but technically a political issue; liberal political theory rests on the separation of the political from the social. From this perspective, “a well-ordered polity is not a community, but the product of an overlapping consensus on political issues”<sup>208</sup>, Accordingly, for liberalism, democracy is seen not as a form of collective existence, but as a mechanism for establishing and controlling public authority, that is, not as a way of life but merely as a system of government.<sup>209</sup> The accent is on the process, not at the telos, which is an individual affair after all.

Liberalism is essentially a political doctrine devoted to protecting the rights of the individual to life, liberty, property, and the “pursuit of happiness”. As a consequence, a powerful state is indeed needed to protect those rights against the encroachments of others, but it must also be guarded against, so that it does not violate these rights either. Hence, the government has to be limited by constitution and the rule of law. At first sight, however, there does not seem to be any reason in principle why such a government must be chosen by the people, as Plattner, amongst others, has observed.<sup>210</sup> Indeed, liberalism was not always joined with democracy. Whereas in the modern era, the two concepts have become intrinsically linked, historically, this was not always the case. In his aptly titled book *Liberalism and Democracy*, Bobbio explains how liberalism and democracy, at times antithetical, were combined in the course of Western history to the extent that they became necessarily complementary, but also that there is an ever-present tension between them.<sup>211</sup> For example, for a good part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberals were deeply suspicious of democracy and especially the extension of voting rights

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<sup>206</sup> David Hoehner, "Liberal Democracy and Christianity: The Church's Struggle to Make Public Claims in a Post-Teleological World," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 32,no.4 (Oct. 2008): 349–50

<sup>207</sup> Craig Hovey, “Liberalism and Democracy”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Hovey and Phillips, (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 197

<sup>208</sup> Stoeckl, “Community after the Subject”, 118

<sup>209</sup> Parekh, “The cultural particularity of Liberal Democracy”, 162

<sup>210</sup> Marc Plattner, ‘From Liberalism to Liberal Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy* 10,no.3 (1999), 121

<sup>211</sup> Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy* (London: Verso, 1990)

to the populace at large, fearing that a majority of less wealthy would outvote and turn against the few wealthy ones.

In many respects, the historical joining of democracy and liberalism was a marriage of convenience. I tend to agree with Beetham's observation that, on the one hand, certain key assumptions of liberalism proved to be indispensable to the maintenance of modern democracy, but, on the other hand, liberalism also served as a constraint on the process of democratisation.<sup>212</sup> A characteristic case was the formal insistence of liberalism on individual liberty based on rights, without putting equal importance to the conditions necessary for one to exercise a right. For example, in reality, there are citizens who often for economic reasons lack the capacity to take advantage of some rights. So, for liberalism, the child of an industrialist and that of an unemployed have the same general right to property and its protection; a factory worker and the owner of a newspaper enjoy the same equal claim to the right of expression. In theory, this is sufficient.

The above tension has been conventionally exemplified as a tension between the principle of liberty and the principle of equality. For liberalism, liberty is indispensable for autonomy, the freedom of choice and the flourishing of each individual, unconstrained by unwanted state or societal barriers. Thus, beyond the threat of majoritarian tyranny, for a true liberal the tendency of democracy to equalize the initial condition of citizens to achieve a more meaningful exercise of liberties appears as a biased pressure for conformity and mediocrity. The counterargument here is that if unchecked, liberties give rise to gross inequalities in economic power, access to information etc., and then they become *disempowering* liberties.<sup>213</sup> The liberty-equality dilemma has been a constant theme in democratic theory. The most traditional and insistent cleavage in western party systems, Left vs. Right, was crystalized around this issue.

Yet, this covers only one aspect of a modern dilemma. The equality discourse focuses on the amelioration of social conditions, but the focus is still the individual. It is remarkable that from the famous motto of the French Revolution "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity", democratic theory has focused primarily on the first two, effectively downplaying or devoting less attention to the issue of fraternity. However, as Reisinger noted, it is indeed fraternity that represents the goal of true community among the members of a society.<sup>214</sup> This absence of fraternity, rather than a more typical view of conflict between the concepts of liberty and equality is, perhaps, what pertains to the current crisis of liberal

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<sup>212</sup> Beetham, "Liberal Democracy", 56

<sup>213</sup> William Reisinger, "Choices Facing the Builders of a Liberal Democracy", in *Democratic Theory and Post-Communist Change*, ed. Grey, Robert, (Prentice Hall College, 1996), 40

<sup>214</sup> Reisinger, 47 note 7

democratic systems. The latter appears as a renewed antagonism between the democratic element that is influenced by confused demagoguery, “populism”, and the liberal element that has morphed into a “super-liberalism” of an eternally transgressive self that “is antithetical even to the liberal community which is its creator and sponsor.”<sup>215</sup>

Lastly, and in view of what we have seen above regarding fraternity, one must always keep in mind that “liberal democracy” is not merely a theoretical category or an ideal system. It is intimately connected with the emergence of the modern state, and the modern state represents the matrix and the unit in which it has developed. Modern representative systems that are classified as liberal democracies are not identical, as the way the liberal and the democratic principles are joined and balanced are the result of contingent factors, such as history, culture, socio-economic and political elements. We are reminded of this in the obvious but sometimes forgotten statement that democracy is a form of government of the organized human collectivity that today we universally call modern state. It presupposes a well-defined, sovereign, territorial unit as base and framework. As Dahl argues, “[w]e cannot solve the problems of the proper scope and domain of democratic units from within democratic theory...the democratic process presupposes a unit. The criteria of democratic process presuppose the rightfulness of the unit itself”.<sup>216</sup>

## **II. Modern liberal democracy and Orthodoxy: the argument of Papanikolaou**

Having tentatively mapped a historical stance of Orthodoxy vis-à-vis political power, as well as the core of the notions of democracy and liberalism, we may now turn to a more specific review of recent thinking on the relations between Eastern Orthodoxy and modern liberal democracy. As noted previously in the literature review, the bibliography from an Orthodox point of view on this particular subject has been limited until recently. This is regrettable, since the void, especially after 1989, was filled by analyses that, as exemplified by Huntington’s case, were not founded in a deep historical or theological argumentation. Addressing this question from a theological point of view in *Mystical as Political*, Papanikolaou aims mainly at providing an Orthodox counterargument to contemporary Christian thinkers, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, who criticize basic aspects of modern liberal democracy and what is perceived as materialist, individualistic, and militant secularist tendencies of modern liberalism. Papanikolaou offers a positive view, claiming that the very essence of Orthodox

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<sup>215</sup> Michael Walzer, “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism”, in *Political Theory*, 18,no.1 (1990), 14–5

<sup>216</sup> Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its critics* (Yale University Press, 1989), 207

Christianity leads to the endorsement of a political community structured around certain modern liberal principles.

At the center of his analysis, Papanikolaou puts the fundamental Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* (deification), which he minimally defines as “divine-human communion”.<sup>217</sup> Divine-human communion entails the unconditional love of the Christian towards ‘the other’, including those that reject God; a liberal society imposes an ascetic challenge to each Christian, for its pluralist political space poses a constant challenge that enables her to learn to love the “other”. From this minimalistic position, Papanikolaou concludes that “divine-human communion” can affirm a liberal democratic system, in which sharp state-church separation liberates the church and allows the free realization of the divine presence in creation. In this framework, “the function of the state is to maximize the conditions for the possibility of free realization of [divine-human] communion”<sup>218</sup>, to freely allow even a rejection of God’s calling.

This is an innovative effort to establish a positive connection between Orthodox theology and modern liberal democracy, and Papanikolaou should be commended for stimulating a dialogue on this issue. However, there are also detectable gaps and limitations, especially as to the presuppositions on which he bases his argument. From a theological point of view, his definition of *theosis* has been criticized as inadequate; as Guroian noted, it does not take into account the ecclesiastical and sacramental framework— namely Baptism and Eucharist, where *theosis* necessarily takes place according to Orthodox Theology.<sup>219</sup> For *theosis* cannot be understood outside this framework, for the personal relationship with the divine is then transformed into an individualistic pursuit. The way “divine-human communion” is presented could lead to it being misinterpreted as an essentially individualistic endeavor. In addition, it seems as if Papanikolaou somehow suggests that *theosis* depends on the right political system, rather than on an ecclesial calling to each human, who through baptism and participation in the sacramental life of the church is called to achieve communion with God<sup>220</sup>. If the appropriate political system was the question, then one could similarly argue that an oppressive anti-Christian regime also “maximizes the possibility for free realization of *theosis*”, as the innumerable martyrs and saints in the two thousand years of the Christian Church may attest to.

Moreover, the argument has obvious weaknesses from a political science point of view. At times, in Papanikolaou’s writings, there is an underlying confusion between democracy *per se* and liberalism *per*

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<sup>217</sup> Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 1–3

<sup>218</sup> Papanikolaou, 79

<sup>219</sup> Guroian, “Godless Theosis”, 54

<sup>220</sup> Vigen Guroian, Reply, *First Things* (June-July 2014), 15

se.<sup>221</sup> The key terms “democracy” vis-à-vis “liberal democracy” are used interchangeably, in fact democracy is equated more or less with the ideology of liberalism, a *lapsus* in the everyday use of the terms committed not only by Papanikolaou. In this respect, the author does provide a definition of liberal democracy which is simultaneously too abstract and too limited in its scope. He talks about “...the minimalist conception of liberal democracy that embodies modern liberal principles minus the philosophical architecture within which these principles were developed”<sup>222</sup>. Moreover, Papanikolaou does not touch the economic side of liberalism (and, in fact, neoliberalism), which is an inseparable part of liberal ideology and principles.<sup>223</sup> Equally arbitrary is his conception of freedom of religion as more or less a strict church-state separation, and vice versa; the two are not identical, neither in theory, nor in practice <sup>224</sup>. Finally, a bigger degree of contextualization would be useful; for otherwise, Eusebius’ and Chrysostom’s usage of the concept of ‘empire’ and ‘democracy’ appear as if they meant the same as we understand these concepts today.

There is an explanation for all the above: Papanikolaou, as a member of the new generation of Orthodox diaspora in the US, seems to approach the whole issue solely from an American point of view. His legitimate venture is to describe and provide advice on the appropriate political stance of Orthodox Christian Americans in the specific contemporary US political context. Unfortunately, he arbitrarily treats the particular historical-political experience of the USA as a universally accepted paradigm, ignoring the large variety of church-state arrangements, religious demography etc., in different democratic systems, and over time. For example, the very explicit US churches-state separation, dictated by the historical demographic reality and denominational fragmentation of the American society, is somehow upgraded to a core principle for the whole democratic ideal, everywhere and always.

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<sup>221</sup> For example, Papanikolaou sees Milbank attacking *liberal democracy*, whereas I think Milbank’s position is more accurately described as a harsh critique against *liberalism*. See, Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 132. For a more recent account of Milbank’s thesis see Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*.

<sup>222</sup> Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 12.

<sup>223</sup> In his informative monograph, Michéa demonstrates lucidly the common metaphysical origins and mutually reinforcing character of the economic and of the socio-political/cultural liberalism (supported respectively by the supposedly antithetical Right and Left of the classic western political spectrum, although after 1989 and most apparently today these terms have been rendered obsolete). Any analysis of liberalism cannot bypass the economic side of the former, intrinsically related to its social and sociological aspect. See Jean-Claude Michéa, *The Realm of Lesser Evil* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2007), 1–39.

<sup>224</sup> Indeed, whereas freedom of religion / conscience holds a prime position in every liberal constitution, state-church relations in Europe vary to a great degree, with the extreme *laïcité* of modern France being the exception and not the rule. Moreover, there is also a significant difference between “established” and “state” church, as pointed out by Fergusson: “An established church need not be a state church. To be established does not entail state control over the affairs of the church... In surveying modern Europe, one finds various manifestations of establishment which have evolved in different ways over time”; in David Fergusson *Church, State and Civil Society*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 168



Such an approach fails to capture entirely different cases, where Orthodox Christianity is the religion of the vast majority of the population. In this context, it is worth remembering that any political system, although expressed through state structures, concerns mainly the society, the *demos*, in the case of democracy. Each society or *demos* is not just an abstract concept: it has specific characteristics conditioned among other by history. The eschatological character of the Church is paramount, but its mission takes place in a historically contingent societal framework. Since the aim of the Church is the transformation of the world, including the societal and political structures, it cannot ignore the specificities of each society on ground. If one accepts Papanikolaou's implicit view that the US model of liberal democracy is the political system par excellence affirmed by divine-human communion, it runs the danger of imposing a political presupposition on the mission of the Church.

In search for a balance, Papanikolaou states that the system favored by divine-human communion “looks like a liberal democracy, minus the anthropological baggage of modern liberalism”<sup>225</sup>. How such subtraction is achieved remains uncertain. Moreover, one wonders if such a system should continue to be called Western liberal democracy”. In fact, in an earlier paper, Papanikolaou interestingly says that “...the understanding of democracy more consistent with the understanding of “church” in the Orthodox tradition is the *communitarian form of democracy*”, without, however, further elaborating on the contents of this model.<sup>226</sup> Neither is there any indication that the use of the word “communitarian” here is a direct reference to the homonymous strand in political science and philosophy that underlined the importance of community as a counterargument to Rawlsian liberal individualism in the 1980s.

The above line of argumentation conforms to the accommodationist trend of Orthodox political theology: tradition being forced to fit with modernity, in this case a notion of liberal democracy of the US sort, as if the latter is somehow the epitome in the development of political systems. The proposed implications of an Orthodox political theology are based on a not solidly defined notion of democracy, or liberalism. In fact, in his very critical review, the American Orthodox scholar Vigen Guroian wonders if Papanikolaou ‘would have us believe that American liberal democracy is Orthodoxy fulfilled, much as in another day, Eusebius of Caesarea argued that the Roman Empire was the kingdom of God fulfilled’<sup>227</sup>. So, while Papanikolaou does indeed represent a rare example of recent thinking that focuses specifically on Orthodoxy's relation to modern liberal democracy, his analysis lacks a more nuanced use of political science input.

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<sup>225</sup> Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 86 (emphasis added).

<sup>226</sup> Papanikolaou, ‘Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Democracy’, 95, note 25 (emphasis added)

<sup>227</sup> Guroian, “Godless Theosis”, 53

The basic impression given by his work is that there exists an ideal relationship between an “authentic” Orthodoxy and a liberal democracy that represents the best secular political system. Or that such a relationship *should* exist, based on the single “divine-communion” principle. Papanikolaou’s argument could be the starting point for a more thorough examination of this relationship, but instead of being an introduction, it is the conclusion. Few things are said on the real question of what is the proposal of Orthodox Political theology when liberal democracy fails to deliver what it promises to do, for example in the economic sphere, or as regards freedom and security. Papanikolaou understands politics as “the engagement with the neighbour”<sup>228</sup>. This is an interesting definition that breaks away from the classical political science understanding of politics as “distribution of power”; yet, what is the final purpose of this engagement? The respect and toleration of other individuals, as liberalism would want, or the creation of a *polis*, a communion of needs and of mutual understanding, that for Yannaras has been the purpose of the ancient *polis* and the Christian *ecclesia*?

In a later contribution, Papanikolaou argues that for the Orthodox Churches “to support liberal democratic structures would mean to accept that the morality of the public space would not be identical to that of the ecclesial public space...”<sup>229</sup> This position begs a response to the question, “if there are two independent moralities, which are their originating principles? As regards to the so-called “ecclesial public space” the answer is straightforward: the Triune God. It is not so clear, however, which is for Papanikolaou the originating principle of the general public space morality that is distinct from the ecclesial. One can accept that certain moral positions of the Church – and here the question of what “morality” entails opens a separate, huge question<sup>230</sup> – cannot be imposed politically and legally on everyone in a secular society, even in a largely homogeneous Christian one. But this does not mean that a Christian should accept a source of morality for the general public space, other than God: for, to accept the moral independence of the public space in relation to that of the church, implies that the two have separate trajectories, and therefore they do not rely on each other. Papanikolaou understands this impasse, and in his article, as well as in the *Mystical as Political*, he recognizes that there has to be a connection between the two, Church and public space. In his book he agrees with those theologians

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<sup>228</sup> Papanikolaou, *Mystical as Political*, 4

<sup>229</sup> Papanikolaou, “Whose Public? Which Ecclesiology?”, in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity*, ed. Kristina Stoeckl et al. (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2017), 241

<sup>230</sup> For example, does the Orthodox Church have a uniform position through time and space as regards to all moral issues? The existence of the Orthodox notion of “according to economy” at least suggests that there may be variations. Even more central is the question of what morality and ethics are for the Orthodox Church and whether this differs from Western understandings. In the end, the whole issue is connected to the notion of sin, and the way it has been understood in East and West; but these questions are beyond the scope of this research.

who believe that liberal democracy needs a transcendental horizon in order not to implode on itself<sup>231</sup>. Yet, he argues that this transcendent referent need not to be the divine, but it can take the form of the “common good” of the whole political community, Christians and non-Christians. The author dedicates one chapter to analyzing how this common good can be in line with Christian metaphysical commitments, without having an immediate reference to the divine, but without being immanentism either: “for Christians who affirm the principle of divine-human communion, there would be a recognition that the common good inherent to a democratic political community is grounded in the Christian conviction that God created the world for communion ... a Christian understanding of the common good need not to be linked to a theory for natural law that ignores Christian presuppositions, nor is it necessarily a product of “public reason” that is imposed on Christians”<sup>232</sup>. Christians can accept this “common good” as a minimum, and keeping their prophetic distance, they must engage in civic dialogue in order to participate in and influence its perpetual shaping.

Later in the aforementioned article “Whose Public? Which Ecclesiology”, Papanikolaou, quoting Rawls, talks about an “overlapping consensus” that is the basis of public morality, and that the latter is contested and shaped by many voices”<sup>233</sup>. This public morality, as said above, is not identical with that of the Church. In fact, in order to create structures that guarantee the uniqueness of each human, a Christian should be working “toward maximizing pluralism” and “toward a public political space that is shaped by a morality that exists as an overlapping consensus”, not a space that “endorses the morality of a single religious tradition, *no matter the cultural history of that shared public political space*”<sup>234</sup>. In the whole argument, it is taken for granted that the structures that guarantee the uniqueness and irreducibility of all humans are similar to today’s liberal democratic structures. But it is not clear whether by pluralism, the author means a political or moral one, and how the “liberal democratic” structures that maximize pluralism can also help in the creation of an overlapping consensus regarding public space morality. Moreover, apart from facilitating the maximization of pluralism and from accepting a distinct public morality as an overlapping consensus, can a Christian also participate in the shaping this overlapping consensus? For Papanikolaou, the Churches in traditionally Orthodox countries *should not* use the power of their public presence in order to advance the particular morality of the Orthodox Church or particular moral points; this power should be used in shaping a public political space and structures that maximize pluralism. Yet, these are two different things: the Church could welcome and

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<sup>231</sup> Papanikolaou, *Mystical as Political*, 8, also 133

<sup>232</sup> Papanikolaou, 157-8

<sup>233</sup> Papanikolaou, “Which Ecclesiology?”, 235-6

<sup>234</sup> Papanikolaou, 241.

endorse the pluralism of the public space, while at the same time advocating in favor of its positions, as an active member in this space. Unless Papanikolaou, by using the word “Orthodox Church”, means only the clergy, his position above is a contradiction with his earlier position regarding the Christian participation in the shaping of the common good.

Although in “Whose Public? Which Ecclesiology?”, the Greek-American theologian recognizes that the ‘public political space’ has always a case-specific content, and despite his attempt to make a certain level of differentiation between the cases of Greece, Russia and the USA<sup>235</sup>, he concludes that in all cases, the Church must accept a public role limited by whatever agenda claims to promote ‘pluralism’ – again one that is very similar to the American case. This position does not equally address the danger of societal over-fragmentation and atomization – a danger that many countries under communism understood all too well. The problem here is that “pluralism” is presented somehow as identical to human rights protection, although they are philosophically and legally two different things. Moreover, the call to Orthodox Churches to refrain from using the importance of their historical and cultural position to defend Orthodox Christian morality in the public space does not take into account the possibility that this public space may already overwhelmingly engulf such a historically and culturally specific morality. For not all countries in the world are immigration nations, that were created on the basis of a compulsory cultural and ethnic pluralism. There exist many countries where culture, despite its alterations through time, has a deep and solid history, often reflected in the relationship of its society with a specific religion or Church. In these cases, the members of the society may themselves be the bearers and supporters of specific moral principles, irrespectively of the actions of the institutional Church. In other words, if the overlapping consensus about morality in a given society is closer to what is considered to be Orthodox Church’s morality, it may be cultural and historical phenomena independent of the Church’s current actions that promote such a morality<sup>236</sup>.

It is the society - and for democracy the *demos* in particular - that is historically the bearer of certain beliefs and ethics. Every *demos* is a community brought together on the basis of its specific historical and cultural elements, not the accidental regression of individuals cohabitating in the same geographical space. Paradoxically, the use by Papanikolaou of the rather cumbersome technical term ‘public political

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<sup>235</sup> Papanikolaou, 234

<sup>236</sup> A characteristic example is the support for same-sex marriages in certain Orthodox countries. According to the 2017 report of the Pew Research Center about religious identity in Eastern Europe, in Russia support for same-sex marriages among those declaring Orthodox Christians was 5%; yet, the positive answers among religiously non-affiliated Russians was also very low, just 8%; similar were the poll results in Ukraine, with support for same-sex marriage being 9% among Orthodox, 6% among Catholics and 13% among religiously non-affiliated. See, Pew Research Center, “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe”, 109

space' in place of 'society'<sup>237</sup> ends up marginalizing the role of the latter, and consequently that of the people as a collective body; yet, for a democracy to be democracy, the popular element is indispensable. Otherwise, the argument is about liberal democracy and Orthodoxy in the absence of the society that connects the two. In fact, in line with the distinction we drew in the beginning of this chapter, the way Papanikolaou sees the relationship between Orthodoxy and liberal democratic structures concerns liberalism rather than democracy.

In addition, the political events that occurred in the West since the publication of Papanikolaou's works (visible detachment of elites from the rest of society, rise of populism, escalation of identity politics etc.) have added crucial questions as to whether the shaping of a notion of common good and the acceptance of a public morality as overlapping consensus are still valid descriptions of the situation in the USA itself. One could argue that US political and social life shows serious signs of over-fragmentation, unbridgeable polarization, and ideological sclerosis. In this situation, liberal structures alone may not be sufficient to guarantee a stable societal coherence.

### III. The importance of *demos* and its culture

To better illustrate how society - or "the people" - is the interconnector between Church, State and democracy, we turn to Hämmerli, who provides an informative empirical account concerning the issue of Church – state relations in the European framework.<sup>238</sup> He examines the court case *Lautsi vs. Italy*, concerning the appeal against the Italian state by Soile Lautsi, a Finnish national residing in Italy and member of an Italian Association that promotes strong secularism. Lautsi claimed that the presence of the crucifix in Italian schools violated the principle of *laïcité*. In essence, it was a claim based on her ideological convictions, than on any possible moral damage inflicted on her children by the presence of the cross. The initial ruling of the European Court of Human Rights was in favor of Lautsi; it essentially tried to establish *laïcité* as a binding political norm, although such a value is not mentioned in the European Human Rights Convention. As Hämmerli soundly points out, this initial ruling reveals that the decision of the supranational court was founded on the implicit idea that European identity and unity may rest only on secular values and not on the overall European Judeo-Christian heritage, nor on

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<sup>237</sup> By public political space, Papanikolaou means "society as a whole constituted as a shared communal life, which would include relations to state, culture and civic associations". In this definition public political space turns society into a rather neutral 'object', a meeting-place of individuals and their political choices; Papanikolaou, "Which Ecclesiology?", 230.

<sup>238</sup> Hämmerli, "Post-Communist Orthodox Countries and Secularization: the Lautsi case and the Fracture of Europe", 31–60. The following text draws mainly from his examination of the issue.

respect of particular historical and societal realities in each country, indeed not even their national judicial systems. After the fierce reaction of Italy and a number of other European countries (twenty in total, of Catholic and Orthodox majorities), and their active intervention in the court case, the European Court Grand Chamber completely reversed the initial ruling. The European Court Grand Chamber declared that Lautsi's discomfort was of a subjective nature and that the Italian state was not guilty of indoctrination simply because it allows crucifixes in schools.

In this case, there are two different interpretations of what consists a right: the first ruling upheld the position that strict state religious neutrality is the only way to protect "pluralism", in a horizontal way and independent of historical and societal realities, particularity, and difference on the ground. On the other hand, the intervention of member states and the final ruling understood pluralism in a different way: real pluralism at the European level means respect for the identity and the historical particularities of each member state. If the French political model adheres to strict *laïcité* – for very specific historical reasons – it does not mean that the Italian state is obliged to abandon its traditions in favor of the French model, as if the latter represents a superior model. If indeed such a course would be pursued, then one could reasonably argue that an appeal to protect individual rights would run the danger of turning to a mere pretext for the implementation of a very specific political agenda, that of an imposed secularism on European societies that historically have had their own way of coping contingently with the Church-State relation issue.

It is not a coincidence that among the countries that actively reacted to the first ruling was a majority of Eastern European countries that enjoyed actual religious freedom only after the fall of Communism. In their case, the ruling of a supranational non-elected body was reminiscent of their past experience of imposition of ideological doctrines from above and from the outside. The idea that this kind of 'pluralism' should be imposed politically and judicially for the sake of achieving egalitarianism sounded too unwelcomely familiar, reminiscent of the communist period of forced de-Christianization.

Indeed, turning back to our main topic, the most problematic part with this imposed universalistic pluralism-in-universalism — one that is enforced by the state-referee in the name of "equality" — is that it takes into account only two agents: the state and the individual. Society/community and its culture is not present in the equation. This may resonate with liberalism, but it is in disagreement with the existential characteristic of democracy: there can be no democracy without a *demos*; and *demos* is exactly a community, and in the case of modern states, the relevant national society. So, the aforementioned demand, exemplified in the Lautsi case, for the imposition of one univocal variant of secularism not existing among the many European traditions, but solely at the national level in certain

states, risks undoing national identities, and, in the words of Hämmerli, creating a nationless state<sup>239</sup>. One wonders in this case what kind of state and democracy could function above and irrespectively of the society/community it is supposed to embody and represent.

This leads us to examining the context within which the Orthodox tradition is active. If the legitimate concern about the political position of the Orthodox in a society where they constitute a small minority (less than 1 percent in the US case) leads to a *de facto* acceptance of the American type of secularism, and churches-state relations, this does not automatically upgrade this case to a normative standard. The case of Greece, for example, shows that there can be a liberal democratic system working in a society where around 90 percent of the population still identifies at least culturally with Orthodox Christianity<sup>240</sup>. Greece does not represent an attempt to build a Christian society with state means, as many liberals fear, but mirrors the mere historical fact that the society still considers itself culturally predominantly Christian. In Western Europe there has been a move toward a disestablishment of Churches, as a consequence of the dramatic drop in the identification of societies with their traditional Church(es), not only at the ecclesiastical but at many other levels. The situation is markedly different in many Orthodox countries. After the traumatic experience of militant communist atheism, membership in the Orthodox Church is on a strong rise in all Eastern European Orthodox societies, thereby representing an interesting case of post-secularism. It is furthermore worth repeating that church-state relations do vary across Western Europe as well. The Lautsi case shows that the imposition of a universalistic theoretical secularism, inspired by late liberalism, which does not resonate with the history and traditions of a country, will be perceived exactly as such: an imposition. For it is understood not so much as an attempt to turn the state into a neutral organization vis-à-vis religion, through a strict separation of Church and state, but as an attempt to promote Church-society separation, to the extent that it blurs the fact that the very society is the source of the sovereignty of the state. The democratic state cannot be a neutral organization over and above the very national society it stems from and its social realities and history.

This is not an argument in favour of close state-church relations in Orthodox countries, or for the state sponsoring of moral positions stemming from the ecclesial leadership, or from assumed but abstract Orthodox majorities, or dynamic minorities that claim to represent the whole *Ecclesia*. It is an argument that underlines the importance for democracy of the culture a specific *demos* and the institutions that this *demos* managed to create through a specific, long, and sometimes painful historical

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<sup>239</sup> Hämmerli, *Post-Communist Orthodox Countries and Secularization*, 42

<sup>240</sup> Pew Research Center, "Religious Belief" May 2017; Eurobarometer, "Biotechnology Report", October 2010

process (subjection to Ottoman rule, communist totalitarianism etc.). This historical process, which is definitely ongoing, leads to a balance as regards the relations of state, society and Church. Certain universalizing tendencies of late liberalism that understand secularism as progress against a normatively bad conservatism, far from establishing an ever freer and more plural environment may well just destroy this balance and lead to a extreme polarization and fragmentation. So, Papanikolaou's argument about the obligation of the Orthodox Christian who is sincerely seeking divine-human communion to support liberal structures that maximize pluralism, must be counterbalanced by another Christian obligation: to be peacemakers and work towards a community that facilitates mutual understanding and the possibility for the establishment of personal relations, beyond identity politics, over-fragmentation and polarization. The history of the Tower of Babel alludes that the Christian should try to prevent the structures that verify human arrogance which leads to inability to commune/communicate. This critical prophetic stance of the Christian concerns all historical political structures and institutions. For divine-human communion takes place in a specific context each historical period. History cannot and should not replace eschatology, but history and culture are human realities present in the way towards the eschaton.

### ***Conclusion***

Summarizing the above chapter, democracy is a system that focuses on 'we', the community, whereas liberalism is an ideology that focuses on 'I', on the individual and the rights that s/he must enjoy vis-à-vis the others and the polity at large. Although historically, democracy appeared first, in the modern era, liberalism preceded democracy by nearly two centuries and created the world to which the latter had to adjust. In other words, liberal democracy is basically a *liberalistically* constituted political system: that is, democracy defined and structured within the limits set by liberalism, which specifies the rights that are inviolable and must be protected by law. In the framework of modern liberal democracy, these contradictions were worked out, and each nation that managed successfully to establish a liberal democracy was able to strike a balance. Yet, the intrinsic tension between democracy and liberalism never ceased to exist. This intrinsic tension, as well as the historic and case-specific context must be taken into account if one is to assess the relationship of Orthodoxy with modern liberal democracy(ies).



## Chapter 5

### ***Demos and Ecclesia, Liberalism and Personhood: an examination of the “Orthodoxy, Liberalism, Democracy” triangle***

As argued in the third chapter, according to the ‘accommodationist’ school of Orthodox theology, modernity and its elements, including the modern representative political system of liberal democracy, are to be taken for granted; thus, the effort is to show how Orthodoxy is not in fundamental dissonance with modernity. Yet, the difficulty with arguing that Orthodox Political theology can affirm – enthusiastically in the case of Papanikolaou – modern liberal democracy lies not so much with theology itself, as with the content that the theologians give – if they give - to what liberal democracy is. Usually, an ideal and abstract type of liberal democracy is the subject of this Orthodox Political theology’s affirmations.

On the basis of the distinction done in the previous chapter between the different constituent elements of liberal democracy, we can proceed to examine what Orthodox theology and history can tell us about the relevance of Orthodoxy to the democratic and to the liberal elements of the homonymous modern political systems - not just affirming (or rejecting) a notional modern liberal democracy, but critically engaging with its basic elements, and detecting specific points of accord and discord. This is important before we look at how a constructively critical Orthodox political theology may enrich our modern notion of living together in a democratic polity.

The first part of this chapter addresses the issue of Orthodoxy and democratic power structures: there is reference to two traditional elements of the Orthodox Church, conciliarity and the ideal of unanimity in decisions, as being in line with the democratic spirit of power dispersion. The second part turns to the second element of liberal democracy – liberalism – and seeks to juxtapose liberalism’s central concept of individualism to the concept of person, as it came to be understood in Orthodox theological circles in recent times.

#### **I. Democracy and Orthodoxy: elements of accord**

##### *i. Conciliarity: decentralised structure and consensus-like decision-making*

In its internal structure, the Orthodox Church has traditionally been adhering to the supremacy of the council. In this respect, conciliarity is the principle and belief that the Church must be self-governed by means of councils, i.e. synods of equal bishops, rather than ruled by a single authority, be it a bishop, or a single principle like *sola scriptura*. There is neither the single leadership, nor the clear vertical

organisation of the Roman Catholic Church. The spirit of conciliarity is found at many levels, and determines the way decisions are made, from the level of local synods to the Ecumenical Councils, as well as the structure of the global Orthodox Church as an assembly of independent sister Churches, united by a common tradition and doctrine.

Of course, conciliarity does not rest on any worldly concept of authority and power, but on the very teaching of the Orthodox Church. Neither should it be delimited only at the level of institutional expression and form, i.e., a synod of bishops. For as Hopko noted, conciliarity is not something that the Church *has*, it is what the Church *is*.<sup>241</sup> Orthodox theology's understanding of the Church is that of an "assembly", a "council". In Greek, it is literally "ecclesia", the gathering of the called people, a word and meaning borrowed from ancient democracy. Conciliarity has its foundation in the Trinitarian God. The Holy Trinity is a "council", a unity of three diverse persons who live in communion with each other. As a reflection of the Trinity, the Church is a unity and community of persons in which unity and diversity are preserved as they are in the three persons of the Triune God.<sup>242</sup>

Following the Apostolic Tradition (Acts 15:6–29), where the Holy Spirit manifested itself through the collective gathering of the people of God, conciliarity combines two principles: the principle of unity, as expressed by catholicity, and the principle of freedom, as expressed by the free gathering of the assembly of believers.

"Catholic" in the Orthodox Church has a very specific meaning, not equated with the usual "quantitative" understanding of the term. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the Russian Nikolai Afanasiev, who focused on Eucharist as the element that unites the Church: ecclesiastical unity is a communion that brings together the human and the divine, and this communion is manifested exactly in the Eucharist<sup>243</sup>. It is not a coincidence that in the Greek language, the concepts of *communion* and *Eucharist* (as well as that of *society*) are expressed with the same word, "*koinonia*". Afanasiev's eucharistic ecclesiology holds that each local church is in full, catholically (*καθολικῶς*) the Body of Christ in its eucharistic aspect. The different eucharistic localities, with the eucharistic president (the bishop), the clergy and the participants (the people) constitute or reveal the whole Church: it is the local church, and yet she reveals

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<sup>241</sup> Thomas Hopko, "On ecclesial conciliarity", in *The legacy of St. Vladimir*, ed. J. Brech, et al., (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 209

<sup>242</sup> Maximos Aghiorgoussis, "Theological and historical aspects of conciliarity: some propositions for discussion", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 24, no.1 (1979), 5

<sup>243</sup> Afanasiev's main points are presented in his article 'The Church which Presides in Love', in *The Primacy of Peter*, ed. John Meyendorff, (London: Faith Press, 1963), 57–110. A fuller exposition is given in his book *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, published in French and German in the 1970s, and translated finally in English in 2007.

the catholic mystery of the one Church.<sup>244</sup> Each local Church is the whole church, and at the same time, all the local churches together are one church. This ecclesiology stands in contrast to a 'universal ecclesiology' or any ecclesiology which sees the whole Church in a pyramidal way, as a single organic entity, where the local church is just a part or a piece of the universal Catholic Church, which in reverse, is the sum of its parts.

John Zizioulas is the other Orthodox theologian representative of the "Eucharistic ecclesiology". Adding to Afanasiev's argument, Zizioulas also sets the context in which eucharistic unity takes place: the unity of faith, and the unity of all parts of the ecclesia/assembly, laity and clergy, centred around the office of the bishop. This is not a change of focus from a spiritual to a more institutional understanding of the Church, Eucharist is still the answer to the question "where is the Church?". As the Greek theologian noted "the multiplicity is not to be subjected to the oneness; it is constitutive of the oneness...the 'one' – the bishop – cannot exist without the 'many' – the community – and the 'many' cannot exist without the 'one'"<sup>245</sup>. Moreover, Zizioulas would also underline that the catholicity of the local church goes hand in hand with the communion amongst local churches.

The above "eucharistic ecclesiology" has as its root in previous attempts of Orthodox thinkers to assess in a rather passionate tone the differences between Western and Eastern Christianity's understanding of the issue of unity vs. freedom inside the Church. It is the Russian word *sobornost*, a difficult-to-translate term<sup>246</sup>, which encapsulates remarkably the link between Church as catholic and Church as conciliar. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Slavophile thinker Alexei Khomiakov was one of the first to advance the ecclesiology of *sobornost* in conscious opposition to the West. For Khomiakov, Orthodoxy managed to maintain a functioning balance between freedom and unanimity, liberty and unity. In his view, in the East, there is neither subjection to an exterior authority, as the Papacy, nor individual interpretation and fragmentation, as with the Protestants, but "unity-in-diversity" expressed through mutual love, as in the life of the Holy Trinity.<sup>247</sup> In his view, in the Roman Catholic case, unity derives from hierarchical centralisation. To the other extreme, the Protestant flattened, "egalitarian" structure achieved institutional freedom, at the cost of unity: a free association based only on common interpretation of the Scriptures is a purely human unity and has proved fragile. In the Orthodox case, conciliarity is unity

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<sup>244</sup> George Dragas, "Orthodox Ecclesiology in outline", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 26,no.3 (1981), 187

<sup>245</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 136-7

<sup>246</sup> Having as root the Slavonic *sobor* – meaning gathering, assembly – it was used to express the Greek word *katholikos* (overall, of the whole) as the characteristic of the Orthodox Church.

<sup>247</sup> See Kallistos Ware, "Sobornost and eucharistic ecclesiology: Aleksei Khomiakov and his successors", *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11, no.2-3 (May-August 2011). 218-25

and decentralisation together: it confirms freedom without affecting unity. There is no infallibility that can be imposed on the whole Church from a single human source. The certification of Truth does not depend on a single external authority. On the other hand, this does not mean that for Orthodox Christianity, there is not one single Truth. The conciliar system is not relativist in its orientation. Human beings are fallible, they have differences, and they make different interpretations of what is true. The role of conciliarity is through discussion, debate and dialogue to allow for the emergence of truth. Truth is not relative; it is not determined by shifting, changing majorities, but is discovered through a process<sup>248</sup>.

To understand the issue of externally imposed unity (which is equal to an externally certified understanding of Truth) as being in contrast to the Orthodox understanding, it is useful to turn to Yannaras. As in many other cases, he starts his analysis with the etymology/meaning of the word “truth” in Greek – *aletheia*. In its original sense, the word *aletheia* meant non-oblivion, emergence, a “coming to light”<sup>249</sup>. This word reflected an experiential event, the participation in the surrounding reality. In contrast, in the medieval West, truth acquired the meaning of “the adequation of the thing with the intellect” (*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*). Truth was not an experiential/participative but an intellectual/mental conception. For the western understanding, to say that a person judges correctly, and to say that what he judges is true, are one and the same. The opposite of “true” is “false”, “incorrect”, “erroneous”. Truth is just the opposite of error. In this way, truth as “correct thinking” turns into a specific object that can be mastered and possessed by every single individual. The individual possession of truth produces individual beliefs (“my truth”). The only way to combine or reconcile these individually possessed beliefs is either via the universal recognition of an external authority that can impose *ex cathedra* a correct interpretation, or via a *contract* or a *convention* where all the consenting participants agree freely to accept a specific interpretation as correct. In the religious sphere, papal infallibility, and the principle of *sola scriptura* are representative of the above two ways of asserting the “correct truth”, as are the divine right of the sovereign and the social contract in the domain of politics.

Contrary to the above, Yannaras argues that for the ancient Greeks too, at the root of knowledge, there is always an individual and subjective immediate experience of reality. Yet, for this subjective experience to become *truth*, it must be verified by the communal experience, through a procedure of critical dialectic. *Aletheia* is a reality manifested to all, a *phenomenon* (something that comes to light) that is common to all, but it is experienced individually by each one of use. The coordination of our

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<sup>248</sup> Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections*, 114

<sup>249</sup> Yannaras, *Για το «νόημα» της πολιτικής*, 46

individual experiences does not depend on an external source though, but it depends on each individual being in *koinonia* with the others (communion, but also society in Greek): “Knowledge is true and is verified by communing it, “communing” means to coordinate experientially with the knowledge resulting from the experiential relationship of other men and women with the same objective existent or event”<sup>250</sup>. The criterion for what is true or false is this experiential verification. Truth is the communed experiential certitude (the coincidence of experience of all or the many), and belie the uncommuned insistence in one’s particular, individualistic view or opinion. For the one who does not commune, does not coordinate his individual experience, the Greeks say that he or she *idiazei*: in the political sphere, he is not a *politis* (man of the city, citizen) but an *idiotis* (a solitary, self-referential man).

Hence, the ancient Greeks named *koinonia* this participatory knowledge, the coordination of understanding and experience, the common rendering of meaning: “*koinonia* is the action or the condition that creates something common, participated by many”<sup>251</sup>. Going beyond a mere utilitarian version of truth for serving our individual needs, the Greeks decided to give priority to the communion of truth. This method of communal verification of truth, that goes hand in hand with the creation of a community of interpersonal communion continued even after the Greeks adopted Christianity’s “good message”. In fact, if there is a connection between *demos* and *ecclesia*, the *polis* and the Church, this is to be found in this priority for communing the truth. Yannaras is fond of talking about the church in terms of the “ecclesial event”, having its foundation in the incarnation of God in the “historical person” Jesus Christ<sup>252</sup>. Church is primarily the assembly of those seeking communion among themselves and with God, it is neither a religion (in the sense of a set of “metaphysical beliefs”), nor an institution.

Participation, equality in the communion of personal experiences, absence of any external worldly source of certification, these are elements of *sobornost* and the “eucharistic ecclesiology” that one can also detect in the democratic ideal. As Andrew Louth argued, *sobornost*, developed as an ecclesiological concept to account for what was regarded as the peculiarly Orthodox understanding of unity in the Church, is equally a term to describe the fundamental nature of human community, which is unity and freedom together<sup>253</sup>. So, this preference for collective bodies, collective decision making, and consensus-reaching, all reminiscent of democracy’s emphasis on the community, has a more anthropological meaning as well. Conciliarity/*sobornost* is an attempt to strike a balance between the

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<sup>250</sup> Yannaras, *Για το «νόημα» της πολιτικής*, 48. Yannaras usually quotes Heraclitus’ phrase “for, if we are communing we are in truth, while whenever we are in particularity, we are in error”.

<sup>251</sup> Yannaras,, 51

<sup>252</sup> Yannaras, *Η άπανθρωπία*, 114

<sup>253</sup> Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (London: SPCK, 2013), 94

individual and the collective. In the community, the self is not absorbed, but renounces his/her exclusiveness for the sake of common understanding and harmony. The freedom of the individual is balanced against the obligations towards and demands of the community. The goal of the conciliar system is to achieve consensus and harmony, not through the imposition of force, but through persuasion and mutual agreement<sup>254</sup>.

This is also mentioned by Paul Valliere, who notes that ‘the cultivation of *sobornost* also bears on the practice of Orthodoxy in a democracy. To be sure, a church council is not a democratic assembly. Yet it is an assembly, and the virtues and skills that sustain it are transferable. These include the practice of shared responsibility, an understanding of due process, technics of discussion, debate, and decision making, and above all, the experience of participating in decisions about matters that affect one’s life’<sup>255</sup>.

#### *ii. Equality in participation and the popular element*

Yet, it is true that the Orthodox Churches are not flat organisations, but they have been traditionally organised along specific roles and “division of labour” that entails a very specific and externally quite rigid hierarchy. Does conciliarity contrast with the principle of hierarchy? The answer is negative, if one takes into account the original understanding of the term ‘hierarchy’ in Orthodox theology. The term originates from the writings of the sixth century author that has been known under the pseudonym of Dionysios the Areopagite. Today, the word has come to mean a rather inflexible bureaucratic structure, a ladder one has to climb, and a system of higher and lower levels, associated with separation, subordination, and competition. This interpretation has a lot to do with the reception and interpretation of the writings of the Areopagite in medieval Western Europe.<sup>256</sup> Yet, this is not the meaning that was originally attributed to this word by its creator. In fact, with ‘hierarchy’, Dionysios does not refer to a power-pyramid with God at the top, but a chain through which the light of God can reach the creation, and where the ‘higher’ order helps in the illumination of the ‘lower’. It is an educative, enlightening chain of the more experienced helping the less experienced in the contemplation of the divine. It is an Eastern Orthodox reading of the concept of hierarchy as “service and love, not oppression and envy”<sup>257</sup>.

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<sup>254</sup> Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections*, 115

<sup>255</sup> Valliere, “Introduction”, 22

<sup>256</sup> As Louth demonstrated, in medieval Western Europe, Dionysios was read in the light of presuppositions that are increasingly remote from his era and concepts; see Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Chapman, 1989), 120–6

<sup>257</sup> Eric Perl, “Symbol, Sacrament, and Hierarchy in Saint Dionysios the Areopagite”, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 30 (1994), 356

As the purpose of the Dionysian hierarchy is assimilation to God and union with Him, this concerns *each* participant in these processes, and it is accomplished by each human being fulfilling her or his proper role in the hierarchy.<sup>258</sup> Hence, far from “heavily promoting the image of a hierarchized/oligarchic world” and from “providing theological support and justification for the imperial institution”, as Kalaitzidis claims<sup>259</sup>, the Dionysian hierarchies envisage cooperation, participation and *equal* possibility to establish a personal experiential relation with the divine among all members of the church. Thus, they are close to an egalitarian, participatory and ‘democratic’ spirit. This participatory and ‘anti-oligarchic’, or better, ‘anti-elitist’ Orthodox spirit is manifest, for example, in the great Hesychast doctrinal controversy of the 14th century in the Eastern Roman- or ‘Byzantine’ - Empire. Vis-a-vis the scholastic view that the highest form of knowledge of God was to come via intellectual cultivation through philosophy, and thus, was attainable only by the few capable, Gregorios Palamas defended successfully the Eastern Orthodox understanding that a personal experience of God is open to all, and is attained through a proper Christian life, not through the limited human intellect. *Theosis*, relationship with the divine, is both for the educated philosopher and the uneducated shepherd.<sup>260</sup>

The above observations concern the spirit of the synthesis of conciliarity and hierarchy. However, history alludes to the fact that participation and popular element were not just theoretical aspects. Throughout Byzantine history, the popular element was active not only when there were ‘secular’ state interventions in ecclesiastical matters, but also vis-à-vis the clergy. As Geanakoplos noted:

“If, however, the people felt that they had been betrayed by a council, then ... they might take it upon themselves to reject its decisions. This will of the people, a form of popular expression that reflected clerical as well as lay opinion and which is hard for us to grasp in concrete terms, has been referred to by some modern theologians as the “conscience of the church”. And it is this, in the last analysis, even more than the general council, that was the true guardian or repository of faith of the Greek church.<sup>261</sup>”

The authority of councils is of a charismatic, not canonical order. A council is not above the whole Church<sup>262</sup>. Only those doctrinal affirmations of episcopal synods which are truly received in due course by the people of God are to be seen as authentic and in harmony with the faith of the Church<sup>263</sup>. This is

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<sup>258</sup> Louth, *Denys*, 38–9

<sup>259</sup> Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, 54–5.

<sup>260</sup> For a brief account of the Hesychast controversy, see Georges Florovsky, “Saint Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers”, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 5, no. 2, (1959-1960), 119–31

<sup>261</sup> Geanakoplos, “Church and State in the Byzantine Empire”, 396–7

<sup>262</sup> Aghiorgoussis, “Theological and historical aspects of conciliarity”, 11

<sup>263</sup> Thomas FitzGerald, “Conciliarity, Primacy and the Episcopacy”, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 38 (1994), 34

the conviction which stands behind the often-cited reply of the Eastern Patriarchs to Pope Pius IX in 1848: “Among us neither Patriarchs nor Councils could ever introduce new teachings, for the defender of religion is the very body of the Church, that is, the people itself, which desires that its religion should be unchanged from age to age, identical with that of the fathers”<sup>264</sup>. This is a statement that highlights the importance of understanding conciliarity and the role of bishops in their proper context.

Of course, the above examination does not imply that historically, the picture was rosy. In its long history, the Orthodox Church was not waterproof to clericalism, or intense internal conflicts. Today, there is a notable gap between theory and practice in the life of the Orthodox Churches, as regards to the very limited direct formal participation of laity in ecclesiastical councils. This has been an issue where various Orthodox churches have at times adopted different approaches. It is an open question how the participation of laity could be increased, a possibility certainly given by Orthodox theology and tradition. What is important here is that despite these noted challenges and different approaches, the concept of conciliarity was never replaced by a different ecclesiology that would try to legitimize deviations.

Outside the strictly ecclesiastical domain, the spirit of ecclesial conciliarity may well have later influenced local self-government in many Orthodox lands. As Gvosdev noted, the self-governing parish, and the role of the local councils remained strong through the Middle Ages in many northern Russian city-republics, like Novgorod, and a similar tradition existed among the Cossacks. The congregations had a voice in the selection of their pastors and selected lay elders to administer the parish<sup>265</sup>. Similarly, in the post-Byzantine Greek communities, the social dynamism of the eucharistic community was not lost after the demise of the empire.<sup>266</sup>

To sum up, one should not draw direct parallelisms that would inappropriately blur the fundamental difference between Church and a polity. Conciliarity in the ecclesiastical context does not mean a kind of modern ‘one person - one vote’ competitive decision-making procedure. As Bulgakov said on the issue of the popular reception of conciliar decisions, “this does not mean that the decisions of councils should be confirmed by a general plebiscite and that without such a plebiscite they have no force. ... But from

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<sup>264</sup> Quoted in FitzGerald, “Conciliarity”, 35

<sup>265</sup> See Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections*, 99–109

<sup>266</sup> The nature and the role of the local communities in the Greek world during Byzantine and Ottoman era remains largely an under-researched subject. I think that this is an aspect of socio-political organization that is missing from most accounts on the character of the political system of the Eastern Roman Empire, and an important indication of how in the framework of the Christian communities-*poleis*, *ecclesia* remained an exemplary manifestation of the *demos*, in a new meaning of course, but still with clear influence on the political organization of the community.



historical experience it clearly appears that the voice of a given council has truly been the voice of the Church or it has not: that is all.”<sup>267</sup> However, if the democratic spirit is dispersion of power, decentralisation and wider participation in decision-making, balanced by the necessity to hinder that divergent views fragment the community/polity, then the above analysis has tentatively shown that the ethos and principles of the Orthodox Church, with the emphasis on collective praxis, the popular element, and the notion of hierarchy as top-down service, do indeed have a lot in common with the basis of democratic spirit.

## II. Liberalism and Orthodoxy: overcoming individualism

### *i. Individualism vs personhood*

The view that the individual is conceptually and ontologically prior to society and can in principle be conceptualised and defined independently of society — individualism — lies at the heart of liberal thought and shapes its political, legal, moral, economic, methodological, and epistemological aspects.<sup>268</sup> Liberalism defines the individual in austere and minimalist terms, as an abstract, average, undifferentiated nature. It abstracts the human being from his/her relations with other people and defines him/her as an essentially self-contained and solitary unit. For liberals, each individual is distinct, and defines his/her individuality in terms of separateness from others. As an outcome, the individual feels threatened and diminished when the boundary of individuality is blurred<sup>269</sup>. Intrinsic to this is the idea of self-ownership and self-determination: the individuals’ aim is to make their own decisions and choices, to formulate their own beliefs and to articulate their own opinions without being limited by other forces, conventions etc., bar the individualism of others. Since any individual is born in a social context that is concomitant to, and imposes, certain conditions, his/her constant effort is to decondition him/herself. Moreover, since the individual is prior to society, individual liberty is theoretically prior to any social morals. Connections that exist with other humans are based on common interests, which are the basis of a contractual society. Contrary to common belief, traditional liberalism wants and

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<sup>267</sup> Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 89.

<sup>268</sup> Parekh, “The cultural particularity of Liberal Democracy”, 157

<sup>269</sup> As Hovey observed, liberalism’s creation myth that there has always been a “natural”, original enmity, rivals Genesis, where an original goodness and harmony is envisaged; see Hovey, “Liberalism and Democracy”, 199. John Gray, a scholar supportive of liberalism as a *modus vivendi* rather than a normative universalist value framework, easily admits that ‘the root of liberal thinking is not in the love of freedom, nor in the hope of progress, but in fear – the fear of other human beings and of the injuries they do one another in wars and civil wars’; see John Gray, ‘Two Liberalisms of Fear’, *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring 2000), 9.

presupposes a strong state, capable to enforce and protect individual rights<sup>270</sup>. Power and force are necessary for securing freedom, even if they ironically turn against and pause some freedoms to protect others (as it happens with the right to 'security' in recent times).

In conventional political science, liberalism's emphasis on individual's freedom was ideologically countered by socialism's prioritisation of socio-economic equality<sup>271</sup>. The biggest part of the twentieth century was to a great extent an ideological and political battle of the two, with Marxism being the rival of liberalism. Despite the variety of cases and the different forms that the expression of these ideologies took in different parts of the world (communism, social-democracy, socialism, "Third Way", neoliberalism, social liberalism etc.), this fundamental rivalry was understood as a competition of prioritisation between the individual and the society. By emphasizing the collective, Marxism changed the focus from freedom to equality.

Nevertheless, seen from the point of view of Yannaras' political theology, this change of focus is not so important, compared to the basic orientation that both liberalism and Marxism share in common. Indeed, Marxism does not emphasize the individual freedom of classic liberalism, but the economic rights of the individual, as the culmination of a more just society. However, despite the fact that the goals were supposed to be societal, the Marxist collectivism still presupposed the individual as a unit, and society as a contract. In fact, Marx readily acknowledged that liberalism was a step forward in the fight against tyranny<sup>272</sup>; from his perspective, communism was essentially a culmination of each individual's personal emancipation. After all, as children of the Enlightenment, both liberalism and socialism are based on the ideology of historical materialism that defines human needs and priorities from the perspective of a material eudemonism.<sup>273</sup> In fact, their common ancestry can be traced back

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<sup>270</sup> The common view that liberalism is in favour of a "minimal state" (especially in economy) or for a "limited state", does not contradict the position that a state must be powerful, or effective enough to be able to protect and enforce individual rights. "Minimal state" is not equal to "weak state". This is obvious not only in the case of Hobbes, but also in Locke, who for this reason argued for counterbalances to state's legitimate power (constitutionalism and rule by consent). See, Gray, "Two Liberalisms of Fear", especially 9-11; also Walzer, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism", 6-23. The author argues that increased individualisation in modern societies tends to weaken intermediate social institutions, like family, trade unions, churches etc, in favour of a more direct connection of the bare individual with the state, the problem here being that "the more dissociated individuals are, the stronger the state is likely to be, since it will be the only or the most important social union", (p.17)

<sup>271</sup> For a typical political science presentation of these ideologies see Heywood, *Politics*, 30-33 and 37-40

<sup>272</sup> David Held, "Democracy: From City-States to a Cosmopolitan Order" in *Prospects for Democracy*, ed. D.Held (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 21

<sup>273</sup> The dilemma of synthesizing the individual and the community gave rise to the communitarian political theory in the 1990s. Communitarians like Alasdair MacIntyre, Amitai Etzioni, and Charles Taylor insist that a substantial grounding of life in common is desirable and possible without inevitably leading to totalitarian mutilation.

even further and is connected to the natural propensity of the human being to secure his/her individual existence.

The basic orientation of both main ideologies of modernity remains, in Yannaras' words, "*individual-centric*" that stems originally from the natural condition of humanity, its impulses for self-preservation, survival, dominance, and pleasure: "survival is not originally a matter of free choice for humans, it is a necessity. In the language of Christian experience, the individual-centric way of existence defines the created world. Nevertheless, the human being is vested with the capacity of free will, that is, the possibility of freedom from instinctive impulses of individual-centrism, from the way of created existence"<sup>274</sup>. For Christianity, the human being has access to the way of existence according to the image of the uncreated, of God: the way of self-transcendence and self-offering. The existence founded on the basis of the freedom of love is the mode of the uncreated.

The relevance of Orthodoxy vis-à-vis the ideologies of liberalism and Marxism is not linked to a different emphasis on the axis 'individual vs. the collective', but rather to a totally different understanding of the human subject: it is a different ontology and anthropology. This anthropology — the theology of 'personhood' — was especially emphasized in the late 1960s by prominent Orthodox theologians such as Yannaras and Zizioulas, who built on the earlier observations of prominent Russian émigré theologians, namely Vladimir Lossky<sup>275</sup>.

The concept of the 'person', central in Orthodox theology after the 1960s, is seen as an expression of the human being truer than that of the 'individual'. Its understanding goes back to the teaching of the Greek Fathers, and especially the Cappadocians of the fourth century. In their attempt to provide a better expression of the Trinitarian existence of God, Gregory of Nazianzos, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea redefined the term *hypostasis*, which in ancient Greek philosophy was almost equal to the substance/essence (*ousia*) of human beings. By separating *hypostasis* from *essence*, and identifying it with the word 'person', the Cappadocians could talk of the Holy Trinity as "one substance, three

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However, they have not come up with a new ontological approach on the human subject, rather avoiding the issue; see Stoeckl, "Community after the Subject", 119–20

<sup>274</sup> Yannaras, *Για το «νόημα» της πολιτικής*, 116-7

<sup>275</sup> It should be noted here that the *person* is not *per se* an exclusively Orthodox theological concept. As a philosophical movement, *personalism* gained prominence from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been explored by Catholic and Protestant theologians and scholars, among others, Emmanuel Mounier, Jacques Maritain, Pope John Paul II, Martin Luther King. Despite their differences, these personalisms share the belief of the uniqueness and the relational character of the human person, for the importance of the person's dignity and freedom. As regards specifically to Yannaras, one can tentatively observe that his position emphasizes the identification of existential freedom with love, and connects the *person* with the creation of a different community, rather than a contractual *societas*.

persons”, showing that the three hypostases of God were differentiated without impairing the *homoousion*, the essential unity of the One Godhead. As Zizioulas argued, for the Cappadocians ‘the unity of God, the One God, and the ontological “principle” or “cause” of the being and life of God does not consist in the one substance of God but in the *hypostasis*, that is, *the person of the Father*<sup>276</sup>. He “causes” the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit, not because of necessity, but from the outpouring of love. Substance never exists in a “naked” state, that is, without a hypostasis, without a mode of being<sup>277</sup>. It *exists* only in “persons”, and the person is the absolute otherness with regard to the common characteristics of essence<sup>278</sup>. That is why every person is unique, dissimilar, and unrepeatable.

‘Person’ is a referential reality. Since God exists in a community of persons as Trinity, each with its own personal particularity, man is also created (in the image and likeness of God) in his or her own particularity as a person, within the community of human beings<sup>279</sup>. The uniqueness of a person is always defined ‘relatively’, through his/her relations with other persons. In sharp contrast to the ‘individual’, in the notion of the person, the ontological principle is not a common essence, but a relation, a *mode of being*. According to Yannaras, by thinking of man in terms of the “individual”, that is, equating the being of man with his nature, personal distinctiveness is obliterated through the destruction of human freedom. The person is determined by the characteristics of human nature and in fact imprisoned by it<sup>280</sup>. The person certainly represents an individual, but an individual *in relation*, a dynamic actualization of relationship<sup>281</sup>. Since personal uniqueness is only revealed through relationships, “communion does not threaten personal particularity; it is constitutive of it.”<sup>282</sup> To paraphrase a well-known quote, “a single person is no person”<sup>283</sup>. Personhood is always realized in communion and community with other humans.

Thus, the differentiation of the person does not turn him into an autonomous individual. As Guroian noted, “from the religious point of view, human freedom is not autonomy, that is pure self-determination; rather, it is *autexousion*<sup>284</sup>, a graced capacity to achieve full ethical personhood and

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<sup>276</sup> Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 40

<sup>277</sup> Zizioulas, 41

<sup>278</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russel (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008), 17

<sup>279</sup> Daniel Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought: The Political Hesychasm of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001), 242

<sup>280</sup> Payne, 243

<sup>281</sup> Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 5

<sup>282</sup> Zizioulas quoted in Payne, *The Revival*, 243

<sup>283</sup> From the early Christian saying “*unus Christianus, nullus Christianus*”.

<sup>284</sup> Literary meaning in Greek ‘self-governed’; *autexousion* (αυτεξούσιον) is the ability/power of the human being to make choices for himself/herself, and thus to decide to follow God. In other words, the term encapsulates the freedom of will *and* conscience of human.

mystical participation in the life of God.”<sup>285</sup> Personhood, the relational mode of being, implies a transcendence of the boundaries of the ‘self’; it is this self-transcendence and self-offering that leads to real freedom, that is, freedom from natural necessity. Indeed, for Zizioulas, the only exercise of freedom in an ontological manner is *love*. The Trinity is a communion of persons, because the Father as a *person* freely wills this communion.<sup>286</sup> This is also the argument of Yannaras, who repeatedly refers to 1 John 4:7-9: “God is love”. Love is not just something that God has, a divine attribute. God doesn’t merely love, he *is* love. The Cause of All exists because he *freely wills* to exist, and he wills to exist because he *freely loves*. It is not existence that comes first, with love added afterward as a moral behavioral characteristic of the Godhead. This is revealed in his triadic personhood. God *is*, because he is triadic, because he *is love*: the freedom of love *hypostatizes* God as “Father” who “begets” the “Son” and “proceeds” the “Spirit”. This is the archetype of personhood, a personal God.

For Yannaras, personhood can provide politics with an understanding of true freedom. In the Western experience, including liberalism, “freedom is defined as a subjective good and at the same time as objective possibility”; so, freedom is understood in a minimal way, as subjective claims over objective goods, and thus politics must be about the protection and counterbalancing of individual claims, mainly through legal means. On the contrary, personhood understands freedom as self-transcendental love, as liberation from natural necessity. To be a person is to be free from the predeterminations of nature<sup>287</sup>. In the modern representative political systems, the basic task is the utilitarian strengthening of individual rights, assuring their quality of life and protecting their freedom of choice<sup>288</sup>. This turns into a celebration of matter and the body, into individual materialistic eudemonism. Consumerism and the subsequent exploitation of nature are intimately connected with this priority of an individual “easy” life. Religion itself turns into a private matter of choice; it is consumed as a product. This society is far removed from a community of ecstatic loving relationships, and the possibility for a collective realization of human flourishing is diminished.

Obviously, there is a capital difference between this anthropology and that of liberalism. As noted in the beginning of this subchapter, for liberalism, each individual is distinct and defines his/her individuality in terms of separateness from others. If the boundary of individuality is blurred, the individual feels threatened and diminished. In an observation close to Milbank’s conclusions regarding

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<sup>285</sup> Vigen Guroian, “Human Rights and Modern Western Faith: An Orthodox Christian Assessment”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 26,no.2 (1998), 244

<sup>286</sup> Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 45–46

<sup>287</sup> Payne, *The Revival*, 249–250

<sup>288</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, trans. Norman Russel, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008), 13

the (neo)pagan myth of an original violence vs. the original peace of the Christian narrative<sup>289</sup>, Hovey noted that the foundational myth of liberalism is that of an original enmity and competition between humans for securing goods for survival in conditions of scarcity<sup>290</sup>. It is the Hobbesian state of nature, a miserable state of war in which none of the vital human aims is secured and reliably achievable. And even if later liberal philosophers like Locke would adopt a more optimistic view based on the human capability to cooperate thanks to his rationality, still the original state remains a struggle for survival and protection. In the world of an original competition and conflict, the purpose is how to secure a minimum of cooperation and understanding, and then how to strengthen the panoply of the individual in order to protect better his individuality vis-à-vis the incursions of the Other. In this respect, modern liberal democracy has proved the most effective system, not as the best possible polity, but as the “realm of lesser evil”<sup>291</sup>. Sharp is the contrast with Genesis, where the state of nature is a condition of original goodness. This state is re-achievable only if the human being abandons her panoply of protection of the self, in order to undertake the *risk* of establishing a loving relationship, to come in communion with the Other, to transcend or “upgrade” his individuality into personhood.

In sum, Orthodox Christian personhood implies an anthropology different from liberalism: human as person, rather than individual, freedom as self-transcendence, rather than (unattainable) autonomy of the self, society as the arena for personal self-transcendence and self-offering through love, rather than a contract based on self-interest. As such, Milbank’s observation could be used to sum up also the Eastern Orthodox view on liberalism: “what must challenge liberalism is a truer ‘liberality’ in the literal sense of a creed of generosity which would suppose, indeed, that societies are more fundamentally bound together by mutual generosity than by contract.”<sup>292</sup> By elevating the undifferentiated individual into a person, the concept of personhood aims at transcending the individual-community dichotomy.

*ii. Human rights and their orientation*

With the above in mind, it is worth examining from the Orthodox perspective one of the most characteristic expressions of liberalism in a modern, liberal, democratic polity, namely the notion of individual or, as it more often called nowadays, human rights. The issue of rights has been treated extensively in bibliography, and the categorizations of rights are indicative of the numerous debates the issue has raised: natural rights and legal rights, depending on whether the source of a right is nature

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<sup>289</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 278-320

<sup>290</sup> Hovey, “Liberalism and Democracy”, 199

<sup>291</sup> From the homonymous book of Jean-Claude Michéa.

<sup>292</sup> John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 248

itself or legal conventions; positive and negative rights depending on whether a right prescribes a claim and privilege or just removes obstacles to human action; rights that pertain to all individuals versus rights that pertain to members of a certain group (group rights); civil and political rights versus economic, social and cultural rights. For the present analysis however, of main interest is the basic orientation of the concept of “right”: the shielding of the human individual. In this respect, the use of the term “human rights” is equal to the term “individual rights”.<sup>293</sup>

There is an extensive literature in English concerning the examination of human rights or of the concept of the “right” from a theological point of view. In very general lines, most works in the tradition of first-generation political theology (Liberation Theology, Political Theology) tend to assess very positively the issue of human rights and usually underline their rooting in the Christian understanding of human dignity. On the other hand, there are also theologians, typically of the second-generation political theology, whose criticism of modernity is extended to the question of rights. Milbank is such a theologian who is critical of “human rights” which he identifies with the notion of “subjective right” – that is, a right attaching to an individual subject as his property. By tracing the genealogy and historical development of subjective right, Milbank concludes that the concept is historically and logically connected to Hobbes’ social contract theory and ultimately to the nominalism of William of Ockham and is therefore imbued by radical individualism and moral subjectivism.<sup>294</sup> Liberalism’s “subjective right” is an aberration from the ancient and Christian notion of right as harmonious objective “right order”. This happened because liberalism has transmuted the earlier Christian understanding of person that was “a true Western valuing of the individual, derived from the Judaic and Christian valuing of ‘the person’, with its double understanding that the person is shaped through all her inter-relationships and yet as a unique ‘character’ is transcendently of more value than any conglomerated whole”<sup>295</sup>. With liberalism “the irreplaceable ‘personality’ is reduced to an inviolable but inscrutable abstract interiority of negative will” and then “the social manifestation of the individual person can be no more than that of an always replaceable and disposable atom, component of an impersonal machine”<sup>296</sup>.

For Milbank, the promotion of personhood and free association are essential to the defense and revival of the Western legacy. On the contrary, the promotion of the liberalist perversion of “subjective

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<sup>293</sup> Importantly, in his main work on the issue, *Η απανθρωπία του δικαιώματος*, Yannaras systematically employs the term ‘individual rights’, rather than ‘human rights’.

<sup>294</sup> John Milbank, “Against Human Rights: Liberty in the Western Tradition”, in *The Meanings of Rights: The Philosophy and Social Theory of Human Rights*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Conor Gearty (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 39-70

<sup>295</sup> Milbank, 43

<sup>296</sup> Milbank, 43-4

right” as the pinnacle of western political tradition runs the danger to hasten its collapse: “Indeed, because supposed ‘human rights’ are ultimately grounded in self-possession, all specific human rights can finally be suspended in the name of ‘right as such’....<sup>297</sup>”

More recently, Nigel Biggar examined the history of the concept of “natural rights” and of the “subjective rights”. He is less keen to see a problem with the concept of rights due to their genealogy or philosophical origins. He contests Milbank’s genealogy by arguing that Hobbesian radically individualist and subjectivist conception of an original and sole natural ‘right’ to self-preservation remained marginal and did not come to dominate liberal tradition and that “the intellectual tradition stemming from scholastic thought, which happily combined the idea of subjective rights with that of an objective moral order, advanced into the modern era through the advocacy of figures as seminal as Grotius and Locke”, without excluding the possibility that Hobbes’ ideas may become dominant later.<sup>298</sup> Yet, in the end he agrees with the critics of “human” or subjective rights in that “contemporary rights-talk is unqualified by any reference to a larger context of objective moral right does have some force. Contemporary rights-talk – in public, if not in academe – regularly eclipses reference to duties; and the notions that one might have a moral obligation not to assert a right, right, or that obligation to the social good might trump individual rights, are strange and suspect.”<sup>299</sup> Overall, for Biggar, the problem lies in the fundamentalism not of the “modern”, but of the very contemporary rights-talk, because it obscures the importance of fostering civic virtue, subverts the democratic legitimacy of law, proliferates publicly onerous rights, and undermines their authority and credibility. He basically agrees with the critics of human rights that the solution lies in the rejection of this fundamentalism and the revival of a richer public discussion about ethics, as well as about the duties and the virtue of rights-holders.

Returning to the Orthodox theological views on ‘rights’, despite differences in rhetoric, certain Orthodox theologians have voiced concerns over the capability of the notion of (human) rights to express the true nature of human as understood by the Church. For Guroian, the modern concept of human rights contrasts with Orthodox teaching in two ways: first, the idea of human autonomy “contradicts Orthodox insistence upon the theonomous nature of humanity revealed by the divine Word’s incarnate existence”; second, it contradicts the Orthodox understanding of redemption, based on repentance and self-limitation.<sup>300</sup> In any case, he admits that ‘the deepest inspiration of the doctrine of human rights has roots in Christian convictions’, giving overall the impression that the concept could

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<sup>297</sup> Milbank, 46

<sup>298</sup> Nigel Biggar, *What's Wrong with Rights?* (Oxford University Press: 2020), 160-1

<sup>299</sup> Nigel Biggar, “What’s wrong with subjective rights?”, in *History of European Ideas* 45,no.3 (2019), 408

<sup>300</sup> Guroian, “Human Rights”, 243–46



be understood in a different way than it has historically been done in the West<sup>301</sup>. On a more optimistic note, Harakas sees a common ground in the understanding of human rights as respect for human dignity. He also notes, however, that the Orthodox tradition 'emphasizes that love more often than not requires sacrifice of one's "rights" than the insistence upon them', 'tends to focus more on duties and responsibilities', and sees human potential as a result of overcoming sin and of exercising self-discipline, rather than as a right to be granted by others<sup>302</sup>.

Yannaras recalls that 'rights' is a modern invention; In the original ancient Greek democracy, no such notion existed. *Polis* was not just the common cohabitation of individuals, but a 'common exercise/ascetic pursuit of truth'. The modern rights of the individual are designed to protect members of the community from an arbitrary power that is external to them. But in ancient democracies, power was located inside the collectivity. Everyone who was a member of the *demos* partook in the political space of the city, shared its power and automatically held 'rights'. With the destruction of ancient *polis*, Christianity allowed the transfer of this common exercise of truth from the ancient *ecclesia* to the Christian *ecclesia*. As a participant in a community of love, there is no need for rights of self-assurance against the others: all are loved equally as members of the community<sup>303</sup>. For Yannaras, individual rights 'is an indisputable achievement, but an achievement that has not yet attained the primordial and fundamental meaning of politics ... as a common exercise of life "according to the truth"<sup>304</sup>.

The criticism of the notion of rights made by Orthodox scholars should not be seen as rejection. The question is not so much if the concept of individual rights is compatible with Orthodox theology, but whether they are adequate enough to express a social conduct and organization in line with the notion of personhood. It is the individualistic orientation of rights that comes in conflict with the Orthodox understanding of personhood. Yannaras believes that the principle of rights could concur with sociopolitical priorities of social relationship, rather than individualistic priorities<sup>305</sup>. In such a case, instead of being the goal and framework of social coexistence, these rights should be seen as a mere starting point from which the real aim of social coexistence must be sought: the self-transcendence of the individual. In his words:

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<sup>301</sup> Guroian, 243

<sup>302</sup> Stanley Harakas, "Human Rights: an Eastern Orthodox Perspective", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 19,no.3 (1982), 14

<sup>303</sup> Payne, *The Revival*, 251

<sup>304</sup> Yannaras, "Human Rights and the Orthodox Church", 88

<sup>305</sup> Yannaras, *Η απανθρωπία*, 184–89.

...The prioritization of a community of relations — a *communo-centric* anthropology as the basis of the meaning of politics — is not in theory opposed to the principle of individual's rights. The modern manifestations of the inhumanity of the right should not be interpreted as the result of the legal guaranteeing of individual's rights, but as the consequence of an individualistic political anthropology...<sup>306</sup>

How could the critical position of Yannaras be compared to the aforementioned also critical views of Milbank? There is certainly a point of agreement with Milbank, concerning the capital difference between the liberal – or modern – individual and the Christian personhood, although Yannaras seems to underline more emphatically than Milbank the relational character of the human person. They also both agree that the modern notion of rights is at the antipodes of the ancient Greek and Christian view that justice is grounded in a cosmic harmonious 'right order'. The main difference between Anglican Milbank and Eastern Orthodox Yannaras concerns Milbank's genealogy of the gradual aberration of the Christian tradition into modern liberalism. Yannaras would detect the starting point much earlier than William of Ockham, in the historical failure of the Western Church to keep with the commune-centric objectives of the ancient Church that was inherited, although radically transformed, from the ancient Greek *polis*. Indeed, although rejecting modern individualism, Milbank focuses on the ethical baggage of the right; he does refer to "right" as pertaining and contributing to a cosmic order but this falls short of the absolute priority that Yannaras gives on the orientation of rights (individual-centric or communo-centric). For the Greek theologian a communo-centric orientation of rights is possible. This is why Yannaras is not rejective of individual rights *per se*, but deems them inadequate and pre-political.

Whether seen as respect for human dignity, or protection of individual rights, the integrity of each human being and the safeguarding of human life and conscience against violence and arbitrary power represent a non-negotiable standard in today's world, and an achievement-to-be for many parts of the globe. There is no question as to its value and importance for liberal democracy. It is, however, a different issue if every individual — and often instantaneous — choice or desire is granted the status of legally-enforceable or protected "right" e.g. the "right" for the use of soft drugs. If we want to insist on what the original sense of *politics* is — the creation of a *polis*, a harmonious community that reflects the universal *Logos*, not just the distribution of power among the members and parts of a society — the protection and securing of individuality is an achievement but a *pre-political* one: "in relation to the medieval West, individualization represents progress, but it is a tragic regression in comparison to the

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<sup>306</sup> Yannaras, *Η απανθρωπία*, 188 (emphasis added).

historical precedent of ancient Greek politics and a Greek-Christian anthropology centred on personhood”<sup>307</sup>. It can be seen as a basis, a temporal means, but not as an end. Authentic politics starts when the priority is not individual self-certification and protection, but when the priority is a community of relations, where rights (and duties) are signposts that can be eventually transcended by the mutuality of personal relations. The problem of liberalism in modern democracies is that it locks the discussion and the “political game” at the level of which and what degree of rights should form the panoply that protects the self; “unregulated” relations are seen suspiciously, as potentially harming. This is not generally untrue: relations may and do often fail. However, the increase of the arsenal for the protection of individual has not prevented such failures either. One could argue that this arsenal undermines or takes away the need for additional efforts to identify mutually acceptable approaches and solutions. This is the heritage of the original fear of the Other in the liberal state of nature. Having its focus firmly on securing the individual and his/her well-being (whatever this latter means), it leaves limited room for a change in the orientation of rights from the protection of the individual towards the building of a harmonious community.

To the above, one could add also the previously mentioned significance of the specific cultural context. Interestingly, after the post-1989 excessive optimism and euphoria of a global triumph of Western liberal democracy and the alleged ‘end of history’, political scientists — even scholars that are in principle supportive of liberalism — seem today inclined to examine more critically the universal validity of an ever-expanding liberalistic individual rights agenda. For example, political scientist Richard Youngs says that “the prioritization of individual rights has become seen in many parts of the world as synonymous with amorality, excessive individualism, and intolerance for religion. Liberalism is perceived to bring with it attacks on tradition, religion, restraint, and the community. It is increasingly necessary to show that this is not the case and that the core democratic norms are not inextricably tied to any particular social-moral agenda”<sup>308</sup>. This may well sound like wishful thinking and, indeed, the author does not provide more concrete thoughts as to how this may be achieved. Yet, he pinpoints a real issue in today’s globalised idea of democratic governance.

### ***Conclusion***

The breaking down of liberal democracy in its two constituent elements, and the examination of the relevance of Orthodoxy to each one of them separately allows for a more nuanced description. As

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<sup>307</sup> Yannaras, *Η απανθρωπία*, 47

<sup>308</sup> Youngs, “Exploring “Non-Western Democracy””, *Journal of Democracy* 26,no.4 (2015), 147

regards to the democratic element and its emphasis on dispersion of power, community, equality, and participation, the Orthodox Church displays a profound like-mindedness. The principle of conciliarity envisages a decentralisation of power, and participation, without undermining the unity of the community. Regarding liberalism and its emphasis on the individual, freedom, and rights, the Orthodox notion of personhood offers a very interesting qualification: the understanding of the human being relationally, and not egotistically, and the conception of freedom as self-offering and transcendence. This latter lead to a curtailing of the excesses of individualism. In this respect, human, or better, individual rights could be regarded not as a goal in themselves, but possibly as a minimum basis, as an indicator that must be surmounted, in an effort to build true personal relationships and a true community.

Conciliarity and personhood together could allow for a theoretical surpassing of the dilemma of modern political philosophy between individual and community, atomisation and collectivisation. Person and community go hand-in-hand, and a different notion of society exists, one that does not necessarily have a conventional contractual basis, as in a contract among individuals for mutual benefit. There is a great qualitative difference in the meaning of the Greek word *koinonia*, as compared to its Latin equivalent *societas*: *koinonia* is a word that at once meant and still means in Greek “communing”, “(holy) communion” – that is Eucharist – and “society”. It is a concept with a clear transcendental quality that has the achievement of human (inter)relation as its basis. On the contrary *societas*, as Yannaras points out, has a formal and contractual nature, it signifies a cooperation for the achievement of mutual individual benefit, the latter being the main objective. Not coincidentally the word *société* in French means *company, association*. The great Cappadocian Basil of Caesarea (A.D. 329 – 379) constantly repeats in his homilies the adjective *koinos* (κοινός), meaning ‘shared’, and ‘common’, the root of the word ‘society’ in Greek, ‘*koinonia*’ (κοινωνία). God made creation for the benefit of all humans, to be shared. Basil regards the selfishness of human behaviour as a kind of anomaly within creation. He describes those people who live by the rule of competition and private ownership as *akoinonitai*, that is, ‘unsociable’, but also ‘non-communing’. God is calling every person to become a ‘social human being’ (κοινωνικός άνθρωπος), one who understands his or her social obligations and lives in proper relation to his or her neighbor. Sociability is seen not merely as virtuous quality, but rather as a conversion to a new way of being in the world<sup>309</sup>.

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<sup>309</sup> Schroeder, ‘Introduction’, 31–3

## Conclusions

### Curbing individualism, supporting democracy: a possible Eastern Orthodox contribution to postmodern politics

The above certainly non-exhaustive analysis allows for drawing interesting conclusions to the issue of the supposed “Orthodox ambivalence toward democracy”. A recapitulation of the previous chapters supports a negative response to the question of whether the Orthodox Churches have a propensity to align with authoritarian rule, as well as a positive response to the question of whether Orthodoxy is compatible with democracy and liberalism, albeit with a critical view on the latter.

On the issue of an alleged historical predisposition of the Orthodox Churches to monarchical rule, a closer look at the Byzantine era reveals another picture: i) it is today accepted that the old caesaropapist caricatures do not represent the historical reality of the Eastern Roman Empire. At no point was the Orthodox Church in Byzantium totally subordinated to state power, becoming a mere agency of the state. Neither was the role of the emperor, however exalted, the role of a priest, even less of a religious leader. On the contrary, on the crucial issue of faith and doctrine, the Church could successfully resist political intrusions, even if this did not always happen immediately, as we can see in the case of iconoclasm; ii) recent historical research has shown that the Byzantine political system did not possess the authoritarian despotic character that past Western literature had unjustly attributed to it. On the contrary, elements of the republican system that qualified the power of the emperor survived. More importantly, the elective character of the emperor’s rise to power was never formally replaced by the principle of dynastic succession. Absolutism, and the notion of the divine right of kings, was an early modern innovation that departed from the patristic and medieval opposition to the sacralisation of secular power<sup>310</sup>, in the sense of legitimation of the political by the ecclesiastic order; iii) As to the latter, from a theological perspective, two biblical principles –first, that any ruler is *subject* to divine law, and second, that the Kingdom of God is not synonymous or coterminous with the kingdom of the people of God on earth –prevented Byzantine political theory from repeating pagan theories of divine kingship. These principles remain perennially valid and prevented Orthodoxy from ever validating any principle of absolute governance by any earthly ruler<sup>311</sup>.

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<sup>310</sup> Pabst, ‘Against Liberal Human Rights’, in <http://wpfdc.org/blog/our-columnists/adrian-pabst/18807-against-liberal-human-rights?tmpl=component&print=1&layout=default&page=>, accessed 10/10/2017

<sup>311</sup> McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 386

Moreover, it is absolutely imperative to read the references of Byzantine and post-Byzantine authors to 'democracy', 'monarchy' etc. in the right historical context. What appears to modern ears as allusions to certain political systems are in fact more general references to the issue of governance *per se*, with an emphasis on harmony and order, as opposed to arbitrary rule or disorder. The ideal of *symphonia* between the spiritual and the worldly spheres is not to be interpreted in light of modern church-state relations. It expressed a hope that political power and the Church, two elements of the Christian society, should coordinate and cooperate for achieving peace and harmony.

In sum, it seems that historically for the Orthodox Church, the ethos of government took priority over the form of institutions<sup>312</sup>. Her Byzantine past does not bind the Church to prefer a monarchical political system. Any worldly political power may become the 'Anti-Kingdom'. As McGuckin noted, 'it is the biblical sense of the dual potentiality of the king (to be either the servant of the heavenly God or the servant of the beast) ... which is profoundly determinative for Christian thought'<sup>313</sup>. As the prominent early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian theologian Bulgakov noted, on the issue of this alleged pro-monarchical tendencies of the Orthodox Church, "there is no inner and unchangeable bond between Orthodoxy and any particular system of government ... Orthodoxy is free, and it does not exclusively serve any political establishment. It possesses a religious ideal – a political one –of the sanctification of political power."<sup>314</sup> This is not relativism, neither does it implies that the Church is indifferent to the form. The Church cannot accept evil, and it thus cannot be satisfied with the "kingdom of lesser evil" of a liberal democracy. The Church has a very specific standard that has to do with the pursuit of the Truth, and the establishment of brotherly relations of love. What matters is the taming of worldly power in all its forms, so that it serves the real nature of humans. The Orthodox Church cannot accept a self-sacralised political power and has paid a very heavy toll under the tyranny of 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianism, maybe more than any other Church, exactly because it would not accept any kind of worldly power, as a kind of "heavenly kingdom", one fulfilled on earth. The neo-martyrs who suffered for their faith in the hands of the Communist state is the most enduring legacy of twentieth-century Orthodoxy.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> According to ancient Greek philosophical tradition *post* Alexander the Great, the right form was a matter of practical effectiveness, and in the case of an expanded state, as the Roman was, the imperial republican tradition was deemed the most appropriate for the state to survive and its inhabitants to live in peace and prosperity. This was not a theoretical debate on ideals, it was mere facts on the ground. Moreover, neither was there concurrently any real or 'better' alternatives elsewhere.

<sup>313</sup> McGuckin, "The Legacy of the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle", 263

<sup>314</sup> Quoted in Stanley Harakas, "Orthodox Church-State Theory and American Democracy", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 21,no.4 (1976), 408

<sup>315</sup> Valliere, "Introduction", 23

If Orthodox theology and history do not attest to a strong pro-authoritarian stance, does it affirm liberal democracy? A more specific juxtaposition of Orthodox principles to the democratic and liberal elements of the system of liberal democracy decreases the risk of a simplistic reading of the relationship. What is important here is to have a more precise image of what liberal democracy entails. To talk casually and use interchangeably political science terms of a distinct content, such as liberalism, democracy, or their synthesis, can only create confusion.

In the above framework, an attempt was made in the previous pages to demonstrate that the Orthodox Christian tradition is based on principles that are reminiscent of the democratic ideal:

- i. A decentralised, rather than monolithic or monarchical structure that goes hand-in-hand with a tradition of collective decision-making. This is summed up in the principle of conciliarity, which is the Orthodox way of combining freedom and unity, the communal and the individual.
- ii. An emphasis on the assembly, and the council. The word *Ecclesia* itself means a gathering.
- iii. A certain view of hierarchy not as a ladder of competition, but as a chain of service. It is a hierarchy where all participants, by fulfilling their proper role, can achieve equally the personal relation with the divine.
- iv. A distinct anti-elitist and popular spirit that stems from its theology, and in many cases from its history. Despite periods where clericalism was riding high in the Orthodox world, the Church always comprised of clergy and laity together. Councils may administer issues and decide, but at the end no council — even less a higher priest — is above this Church.

So, with every precaution, since Church and political power are two essentially different qualities, it would be reasonable to say that the Orthodox Church is on the whole in accord with democracy.

As to the liberal aspect of liberal democracy, there is a clear difference in the understanding of the human subject:

- i. According to liberalism, despite its variations, humans are *individuals* seeking self-interest. Society is seen as the product of convergence of these interests based on a contract. There is historically a tension between the democratic and the liberal aspect of liberal democracy, having to do with the question of individual vs. the collective.
- ii. Orthodox theology on the other hand is based on the view that the humans are *persons*, that is, a relational quality. They are not just individuals, a similar undifferentiated copy of a common nature, but they are unique and unrepeatable qualities.
- iii. Seeing the human as determined by his/her relations with others is the way that Orthodox thinking surpasses the dilemma of one vs. many, of the individual vs. the community. In other

words, the Orthodox notion of personhood transcends both individualistic and collectivistic understandings of societal organisation.

- iv. This difference of Orthodox theology to the ideology of liberalism is mirrored on the issue individual rights. For Orthodoxy, human freedom is not merely a matter of self-referential free choices; it is freedom from necessity, a matter of self-transcendence and self-offering, literally an issue of love. Rights are not just demands claimed from others, but they must be coupled equally by responsibility. This criticism is not a simplistic dismissal but aims at showing the inadequacy of the concept of individual rights to support a society based on the notion of personhood. Not a “less”, but a “more”.

*Demos* is not an accidental regression of individuals, even one that decided to live together on the basis of a social contract. Every *demos* shares some kind of common history and culture. It is only reasonable that a specific history and culture, a specific tradition is reflected in the arrangements and mechanisms that constitute the representative democratic system of this *demos*. Hence, the great variety in democratic models and of expression of liberalism in different countries. Only a completely linear, Western-centric, and progressivist understanding of human History may claim that some democratic states are ahead of others in the achievement of a “real democracy” (e.g. the USA compared to Greece, or Poland compared to Japan). Political theology arguments like Papanikolaou’s are inadequate because the liberal democratic system affirmed by Orthodox theology is both too abstract (ideal) and too narrow (very close to today’s liberal ideology in the USA). The issue of cultural particularity of a community or a *demos* is also important because, as Richard Bourne noted “the political- and social – critical nature of the truth of the gospel is dependent upon its communal setting”<sup>316</sup>.

The modern political system of liberal democracy is the combination of two elements, the democratic and the liberal. This combination is history and cultural-specific. The question is not what kind of political system Orthodoxy affirms, but what kind of understanding of politics Orthodox Christianity historically implies. Communo-centric and not individual-centric. Conciliarity as the mode of communion, communication, participation and deliberation, is close to the democratic spirit of dispersion of power. Personhood however is at the antipodes of liberal individualism. Orthodoxy theology accepts the liberal protection of individual only as a starting point and as a pre-political

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<sup>316</sup> Richard Bourne, *Seek the Peace of the City: Christian Political Criticism as Public, Realist, and Transformative*, Theopolitical Visions 5, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 13



mechanism. But the achievement of real politics is impossible in liberalism for the latter cannot transcend this pre-political phase and is trapped in a vicious circle of giving to the individual more and more protection that leads to more and more fragmentation. Accommodationist theologians are right to note that human free will must be absolutely respected, and thus liberalism is necessary, but it is difficult to see how Orthodox Theology affirms a system and an ideology that not only allows free will but ends up promoting and enabling human non-communion.

In this respect, criticism towards liberalism by Orthodox theologians like Yannaras is not on the basis that it is bad or contrary to Christianity but that it is inadequate. Characterizing such a position as antiliberal, premodern or anti-Western misses the point, as this political theology does not argue something *contra* the West, but “more than the West”.

As Gvosdev noted,

“The two greatest curses of our contemporary system are relativism and egoism. Both are outgrowths of an excess of selfish individualism. In political life, it is reflected in the belief that there are no absolute truths, morals, or standards, no inalienable laws or rights, that all things are subject to the will of fleeting majorities. In economics it can be seen in a lack of concern for the welfare of others and the needs of the community. Conciliarism, the authentically Orthodox outlook on society, strikes a balance between the individual and the collective.<sup>317</sup>”

“I have idolized myself, letting the passions to harm my soul”, laments the Orthodox hymn of St. Andrew’s Great Canon of the eighth century<sup>318</sup>. The Orthodox understanding of personhood is a cry and a possible antidote against the self-idolization of the individual. It can show a way to the amelioration of the concept, through the delimitation of individualism. In this respect, criticism of liberalism’s individualism should be seen as a call for achieving something qualitatively higher, not as rejection; in Yannaras’ words, “the more (a society of persons, the revealing of personal uniqueness, otherness and freedom through social relations) does not invalidate the less (the legal, institutional and uniformed protection of every individual from the arbitrariness of power).”<sup>319</sup> This criticism is definitely not disqualifying Orthodoxy from being “compatible” with liberal democracy. Neither the argument that the Orthodox Church is inherently sceptical to democracy, as Kalaitzidis implies, nor Papanikolaou’s

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<sup>317</sup> Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections*, 144. In his treatment of conciliarity, Gvosdev incorporates the notion of personhood.

<sup>318</sup> ‘*Αὐτοεἰδωλον ἐγενόμην, τοῖς πάθεσι τὴν ψυχὴν μου βλάπτων*’, St. Andrew of Crete, *Great Canon, Ode d*’, in [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/prayers/service\\_great\\_canon\\_translation.htm#ode\\_4](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/prayers/service_great_canon_translation.htm#ode_4), accessed 1/2/2016

<sup>319</sup> Yannaras, ‘Human Rights and the Orthodox Church’, 88

argument that almost subjects Orthodoxy to liberalism, are justified. On the contrary, given the aforementioned like-mindedness of Orthodox conciliar tradition with democracy, this critical approach towards liberalism can only be considered as a constructive contribution in the current debate on the development of democratic societies. Thus, instead of talking about ‘ambivalence’, it would be better to recall that this is the basic prophetic function that the Church has to play in the framework of any earthly polity.

This brings us finally to the issue of Orthodoxy and modernity, which, as mentioned in the Chapter 2, is the very framework where the whole question of Orthodoxy and modern liberal democracy is placed. I think that the critical approach towards elements of modernity, such as liberalistic individualism, provide possibilities for a constructive engagement of Orthodox theology and thinking with modernity’s problems. The accommodationist call, direct or indirect, for an axiomatic acceptance and adoption of the basic elements of Western modernity by Orthodoxy may lead to two unwanted results: first, at the academic level, it may curtail the already weak Orthodox voice in world’s socioeconomic developments and their related theoretical debates, and blur the questioning of specific aspects of liberal democracy and modernity in the framework of an equal, fruitful and mutually reinforcing dialogue of Eastern Christianity and the Modern West; second, at a practical level, it excludes the possibility that countries with predominantly Orthodox societies may find their own expression politically, fully compatible with the respect of human rights and a democratic system of governance, without being a mere duplication of Western models.

In political science, there are already voices that underline the need for a more organic development of democracy in non-western contexts, rather than a blind imitation of a supposedly final for the history of man political system. Talking on “Non-Western democracy” Youngs mentioned:

Modern democracy has been conditioned by aspects of Western political history that were historically contingent and reflected the circumstances of the times. In the same way, democracy’s future will be shaped by new patterns of power and political trends that are now gathering force outside the West. In this sense democratic variation can and should be pursued in a way that builds upon rather than subtracts from liberal democracy...it does not mean simply more Western liberalism. Rather, it calls for others’ ideas to be taken seriously as a path to ensuring better respect for the core spirit of political liberalism.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Youngs, “Exploring “Non-Western Democracy””, 145

Similarly, in a compelling article, Kurki talks about the need to pluralize and contextualize the concept of democracy beyond the dominant model of liberal democracy, in order to include other possible models and understandings. Kurki is critical of the way democratization theoreticians and practitioners have, over the last three decades, identified democracy solely with Western liberal democracy, in highly normative terms, including not only the institutional framework but also the cultural-specific baggage of western values.<sup>321</sup> In her opinion, promotion of democracy will stand to gain if we also consider extra-liberal, or non-liberal variants, like social democracy, participatory democracy etc., without this spelling relativism. After all, two centuries of democratic theory themselves attest to the fact that democracy has been a contested term, one that was debated, developed, redefined and refined. A possible contribution in the search for new democratic models informed by the Orthodox tradition could find its place in this debate.

There is today the possibility for a self-confident Orthodoxy who can stand firmly on its own tradition, to engage with modernity in a dialogue that is situated both within the Western problematics and coming from a perspective outside of the Western intellectual tradition, as Stoeckl argues. On the modern debate concerning the tension between individual and community, the Orthodox intellectual tradition has two important considerations to offer:

It can, firstly, contribute to a better understanding of what is at stake when we try to conceptualize the human subject as an autonomous and at one and the same time as a communal being. Orthodox thought criticizes the ontology which underlies classical Western metaphysics as essentialist, a criticism comparable to the position taken by post-structuralist philosophy in the West. The Orthodox intellectual tradition can, secondly, sharpen the debate on community with regard to religion through a re-evaluation of tradition and of pre- or counter-enlightenment thought, comparable to the efforts made by communitarian philosophers in the West.<sup>322</sup>

The above is a context where Orthodox contribution can make a difference. This, however, means that Orthodoxy should not be subjected to a supposedly superior modernity, and be judged against a normative framework of modernity where, for example, liberalistic views are taken axiomatically as true and good.

In his introduction of a 2007 published volume on modern Orthodox teachings on law, politics and human nature, Paul Valliere observed:

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<sup>321</sup> Milja Kurki, "Democracy and Conceptual Contestability", *International Studies Review* 12 (2010), 365

<sup>322</sup> Stoeckl, 'Community after the Subject', 137–8

Admittedly one should not abuse the theme of orthodoxy and democracy by implying that the primary vocation of the Orthodox Church is to build democracy. For the sake of its distinctive mission, the church must keep its distance from the powers of this world, including the democratic powers of this world. The distance is healthy not just for the church but for the democratic state because it keeps prophetically open the issue of how the Christian love-ethic relates to the ethics of democracy. This profound question has not yet been adequately clarified anywhere. Democracy is still a relatively new phenomenon in world history, and neither its grandeurs nor its pitfalls have been sufficiently probed. The transcendent love which Orthodoxy serves – the “acosmic love” that so impressed Max Weber in the heroes of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy – has not figured conspicuously in the ethics of democracy. Yet Orthodox Christians are clearly called to witness to this “more excellent way” (1 Cor: 12:31).<sup>323</sup>

The primary role of the Church is not to lend legitimacy to political systems<sup>324</sup>. Nevertheless, as McGuckin said, ‘the church is not merely a “spiritual matter”; it is a sacrament of union, and accordingly an ideal form of how patterns of political harmony ought to be structures in society<sup>325</sup>. And he continues: “[The Orthodox tradition] is not committed to absolutist monarchies at all, as some critics have accused it; but it does have a deep and enduring commitment to the concept of state government as having much to do with establishing the moral and religious sensibility of a people, or, put another way, of the spiritual responsibility of the state for building an enduring and elevated human culture.<sup>326</sup>”

The fact that the Orthodox tradition has so much in common with the democratic ideal may in fact be an additional reason why this ‘acosmic love’ can offer new horizons for the development of democratic societies.

A last observation, stemming from the above, is that there is an urgent necessity to be more careful with the modern use of catch-all terms like democracy, secularism, liberalism, theocracy, etc., whose content is more often implied, rather than defined. It is imperative to find a common language; a mechanistic employment of modern terminology – be it in political theology or political science as it evolved in Western Universities - in order to describe a different culture, like the Eastern Christian

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<sup>323</sup> Valliere, “Introduction”, 23.

<sup>324</sup> This is an observation shared by theologians of different traditions and historico-cultural background. Yoder is such a characteristic example, when he underlines that Christian witness gives no blueprints for a specific political system; See, Bourne, *Seek the Peace of the City*, 216-7

<sup>325</sup> McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 395

<sup>326</sup> McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 396

Orthodox is inadequate. The writer was an eyewitness during a debate between John Milbank and Christos Yannaras, when the first expressed as a major regret the fact that the historically the West stopped at some point reading and understanding the Greek language. As Orthodox history spans for two millennia, there is always the danger of using terms and notions that are irrelevant to the context. Prodromou rightly reminds us of the Weberian dictum on understanding each religion on its own terms, a task that, as she adds, requires the use of an analytical lexicon faithful to Eastern Orthodox theology rather than one adapted from Western Christianity, as well as a careful examination of the political factors that help explain the Orthodox Church's historical performance under non-democratic regimes<sup>327</sup>.

This adaptation is crucial when social sciences speak on the Orthodox cultural context. Moreover, this adaptation may well be a first step towards the injection of a new meaning in today's worn modern terms<sup>328</sup>. Modernity seems to be trapped in impasses stemming from the signification, the attributed meaning of specific norms. What the above critical approach offers is not proposals in the same vicious circle, but another point of view, another signification of terms, such as freedom, human rights, well-being, democracy, welfare and solidarity.

Finally, a special note on the question of political theology should be added. Any version of political theology, including Eastern Orthodox ones should start from a specific understanding about what politics is. Even if this is not explicitly expressed and defined, a specific notion of politics is implied and taken for granted. The western civilisation has managed through the last centuries to achieve an unprecedented progress in the material living standards of humanity. Through struggles and conflicts, it has consistently tried to find the most effective and utilitarian way for responding to the basic needs of the individual. Politics for this civilisation was and is still understood as an art, a procedure, and mechanisms for the distribution of power, benefits, costs in a given society. It presupposes competition, even if it is presented as the means of cooperating in an originally antagonistic environment. The *telos* of politics, especially in the era of liberalism, has not the establishment of a specific society, but it is oriented towards the securing and the affirmation of the individual.

A political theology that understands politics as a procedure for the distribution of power, wealth, justice etc., and as the art of governance of the secular, will be sooner or later obliged to

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<sup>327</sup> Prodromou, "Paradigms, power, and identity", 128

<sup>328</sup> For the importance of the signification of terms, as a first step towards a more socio-centric understanding of politics see Yannaras, *Η απανθρωπία*, 232, 250–1

“align” with this or the other modern political ideology: it may be coined liberal, or conservative, pro-Marxist, leftist or rightist. The proposal for an Orthodox political theology like the one proposed by Yannaras, based on an original understanding of what *politics* means can surpass the above ideological categorisations and adopt a consistent critical and prophetic stance vis-à-vis modern politics, the impasses of modern liberal democracy included. Such a critical understanding of modernity and modern politics is not merely a nostalgic of premodern realities, neither it is an atavistic Orthodox anti-Western stance, it is, as I noted, not contra West, but “more than the West”. In any case, the addition of Orthodox political theology voices in can only benefit the development of a robust Christian theopolitical vision on the question of human existence and co-existence.

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