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Theology, Witness, and Spirituality in a Post-Secularized Historical Context

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Abstract: Religion and spirituality are seen to be making a comeback since the 1990s and increasingly thereafter in the European context. However, traditional forms of Christianity are diminishing, while other types of religion take the lead. An increasing number of voices are being raised among Christians, calling for a re-evangelization of society. Nevertheless, there is some skepticism about such activism against the backdrop of plurality, human rights, and freedom, regarding not only issues of political correctness but also considering the question of efficacy. While spirituality abounds, even among conscientious Orthodox Christians, there is still a need for theology. Even among Orthodox Christians, spirituality is mainly linked with a withdrawal from the world, history, and the political, often taking a ritualistic character expressed in religious acts of pietism through habits and customs. This is unfair to the historical and liberating physiognomy of the Orthodox Christian faith, as it does not differ much from other types of new age religious movements. In order to foster Christian witness amidst the desert of post-modern cities, one must rediscover theology. Theology, centered around the Gospel and the patristic tradition, can contribute vital missing elements and does justice to the Incarnation of pre-eternal Logos, to the Resurrection, and to the fulfillment of life. Unless Christians grow in their understanding of theology and the world around us, there will be only mirages of spirituality that take the place of a spirituality derived from faith and its incisiveness and meaningfulness for life today.

Keywords: Orthodox theology; Orthodox missiology; post-secular; spirituality; religion



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1. Introduction

In this paper, we shall examine the transition from modernity to post-modernity and the post-secular paradigm, which was accelerated by the fall of the communist regimes in the 1990s but is rooted in deeper societal and spiritual changes in both the East and the West. We shall discuss the decline of modernism and its paradigm with regard to religion. We shall explore the forms and characteristics of the new religiosity and the new position of religion in the public sphere. We shall then turn our attention to Christian self-understanding amidst this paradigm shift and its implications for Christian witness. We shall focus on the Orthodox while maintaining an ecumenical concern. We shall rethink the issue of spirituality and ways to be missional while remaining respectful of all people and cultures in the light of the Gospel, patristic tradition, and the heritage of the Orthodox Church. Finally, we shall conclude by arguing that the rediscovery of theological authenticity can inspire people to encounter the scandalous but lifegiving News of the Resurrection, bringing hope and opportunity for Christian witness to the world beyond any temptation towards syncretistic, secularized, or fundamentalist approaches. Christian faith is infinitely precious in its own right, and a cultivated self-esteem in the Christian community will deliver it from any need to instrumentalize religion for a gain in resonance.

2. A Post-Secularized Society

With the fall of the communist regimes in the 1990s and disillusionment with the promise of a Paradise on earth—linked to an atheist (Marxist) ideology—many people all

over the world placed their hopes, yet again, in religion. This shift happened fast, in a striking way, as if it had been already gestating for quite a while in the East and the West; people of my generation remember it well. It seems that the tried-and-tested recipe did play its part as an “opium” for the people: even if one might question its healing effect, it could nevertheless alleviate pain and make life bearable. Intriguingly enough, back then, it seemed that Marxist ideology, with its promises of a classless society and a worldly paradise, was also a prime example of an opioid formula, allowing the Soviet regime to last for quite a while and establish a so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat”: a halfway house between capitalist injustice and the Marxist worldly utopia. And that was it. The halfway house turned into an end; it established its own bureaucratic authority, the transient became permanent, and the vision was snuffed out by the darkness. It would be hard for any religion promising a metaphysical paradise to measure up to the ruthless yardstick of history. Although Marxism is not a religion but a secular ideology that proclaimed a vision for a better world, the fall of the Communist regimes brought much disillusionment. People who had placed their trust and inspiration in the revolutionary process were deprived of their sense of meaning. This may also partially explain the acceleration of the process to reinvest in religion.

Preeminent thinkers, however, rightly suggested that religion never ceased to be a significant component of society, in both the East and the West, regardless of its varying position and reception by the state in different countries and at different times. Regarding Eastern Europe and the USSR in particular, beyond oral history, various kinds of narratives (some of a hagiological nature), and “martyrologies” of contested and varying value, the release of State archives has allowed for much more detailed research (Corley 1996; cf. Anderson 1994; Dunn [1977] 2019). In the West, there is more than one model for the relation of Church—or more broadly, religion—and state, and a permanent interest in studying them from different angles. On its official website, a very specialized journal (*The Journal of Church and State* n.d.) considers the topic the “greatest subject in the history of the West.” There is also a European Consortium for Church and State Research (<https://www.churchstate.eu/>, accessed on 27 January 2023) and numerous publications of different types and angles. No matter how Church and state relations are being regulated, religion has deep roots in society. More and more people think that it should not or cannot be squeezed into a strictly private sphere, and is much more suitable to a modern, individualistic understanding of identity (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007; Habermas 2008). Some profound secularists even changed their earlier views, in a much-commented-on “turn” (Berger 1967, 1999; Bruce 2001; Hjelm 2020). Eminent sociologists with their scientific toolkit challenged the notion of secularization overall (Stark 1999). Postcolonial studies contributed with a view quite different from Eurocentrism (Ratti 2013), in particular when they reflected critically on Western scholarship—even the Postcolonial school of thought itself and its own limitations—and recognized their secular European roots, which downplayed the role of religion (Amrani 2022). A similar contribution came from the observations of fringe/migrant social groups facing the digital era (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2014). On a global scale, the resilience of religion is also strongly supported by the Pew research foundation’s quantitative and qualitative surveys (Pew Research Center 2015) and by solid scholarship, including case studies from all over the world (Okeja 2020). The postmodern era, or, for some, Late Modernity (Possamai 2017), is also regarded as post-secular.

3. A New Religious Quest

Nevertheless, postmodernity/Late Modernity is, by definition, inclusive of modernity and somehow coexists with it.

Within the framework of modernity, in Western Europe especially, fatigue with religion has been increasing for a long period of time (Besnier 1998). Since the French revolution and as a long-term aftermath of religious wars, a long atheist or agnostic tradition has taken root in European soil; and this developed further in the 20th century, taking on a pessimistic coloration due to the two world wars, which called into question not only God’s

presence in the concentration camps (Jonas 2016) but also the humanity of humankind (Arendt 1958). It is, however, obvious that when we speak in general terms of religion in a particular context, we are primarily discussing the predominant form of religion in that context (Greschat 1988, p. 9). Therefore, it was from the start that the Christian religion was fiercely challenged and held responsible for most of the evil. Religion [Christianity] was asked to withdraw from the public sphere, in such a way that B. Stanley, a leading scholar in Missiology and World Christianity and also an important Church historian, may be right to compare the French *laïcité* to the militant atheist persecution in communist countries (Stanley 2018, pp. 79–100).

Communist regimes collapsed, as we have said, in the 1990s. Religion was back soon enough, visible and pervasive! There is an obvious change in the spirit of the times, which re-introduced religion into the public sphere after the nineties and in the 21st century. Given that nature abhors a vacuum, new forms of religion are now occupying a previously evacuated public sphere. While traditional world religions and their hierarchies may feel a nostalgia for premodern times, when faith and manifestations of organized religion were incontestable, they fail to understand that this is no longer what is wanted in popular culture, and that the retrospective view is a mere escape from reality. It is like persisting in adoring a rotting corpse.

4. Digging for Our Ancient, Pre-Christian Roots

While Christianity still remains in question, we may note another nostalgic quest for the distant origins of our romanticized past: the ancient religions. In the late 1960s, the revival of forms of neopaganism gained visibility in France with the New Right movement, and it has gained a much broader appeal since the 1990s. A leading personality was Alain de Benoist (De Benoist 1996, 1996; Camus 2019). Worship of the “ancient gods” had never ceased in Northern countries, but it was also reinforced after the nineties (Davies 2011; Bogdan and Hammer 2016). English literature has been a privileged place for a quest for magical meaning, combining new and ancient forms of religiosity and sometimes depriving it of its actual religious content in a transformative way (Wallace 2012; Hernández-Guerra 2015; Walton 2019; Iglesias 2018; Guiol 2021). Hard-core neopaganism was marginal. It revived in the 19th century in the hermetic order of the Golden Dawn, linked with occultism (Regardie 2002). In a mutation, it took a sinister turn with weighty influence, as seen in Hitler’s German Christians (Solberg 2015) and in the more recent political and racist movements of the extreme right, such as the Greek Golden Dawn (a former political party of Nazi ideology, today considered a criminal organization with many leading members convicted and imprisoned) and similar movements all over Europe. Many of these elements played their part in the decline of Christianity, and statistics now show alarming results (Pew Research Center 2015). The daily reality of churches being abandoned, transformed into something else, or sold can be heartbreaking to the communities who are also dying out or cannot sustain the church building any longer. The internet is full of such announcements, but I am aware only of scarce solid scholarship on the matter, and not from a missiological perspective (Ahn 2007; Harding 2018).

5. On the Physiognomy of Religion in Post-Secular New Religiosities

In our post-modern and post-secular era, there is a modern element of paramount importance. It cannot be bypassed or overcome. This element is individualism. It favors personal interpretations of religion, believing in one’s own way or “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994, 1997; Stanley 2018, pp. 102–26). It brings about a new interpretation of the old, known religions, Christianity included, or a new version of religion that is parallel to the retrospective revival of the ancient ones, or simply a new fusion. It is not uncommon for new religious forms to reflect merely a vague spiritual search, partly metaphysical, partly interested in the wellbeing of body and soul, which end up in what is usually called “new religiosity”. A mixture of perennial philosophy with an emphasis placed on rituals of religious or habitual character is often proposed as an essential, superior knowledge for a

successful way of life. A notable abundance of spiritual guides and life coaches addressing these quests shapes an entire market of services and products. Hard on its heels comes an extensive scholarly study of the field (Sablia 2007; Hammer and Rothstein 2012).

Another significant element is also worthy of attention: the phenomenon of people leaving religion. This does not necessarily mean becoming an agnostic or an atheist, but one is nevertheless abandoning the organized vessel of the religion one is born with and exploring different possibilities: moving between religions, switching religion, or shaping a religion of one's own. The need for a more nuanced study of this religious mobility and plasticity—the result of religious disaffiliation, not quite the same as the traditional term “apostasy”—is supported by *The Handbook of Leaving Religion* (Enstedt et al. 2019). In the *Handbook*, the topic is introduced not only as a neglected field but as a very new study area full of potential.

Not infrequently, the search for new religious forms ends up in the building of communal ties in narrow and exclusivist communities with sectarian characteristics.

The communal element is also cultivated beyond small communities, shaping a phenomenally contradictory tension with the simultaneous prioritization of the individual, which has a more popular and broad appeal. This has to do with a collectively orientated and, in many regards, quite instrumentalized version of religion, which usually presents itself as a genuine version of a traditional world religion but is in fact a new and greatly divergent interpretation. What we have in mind is religious fundamentalisms, which are worth examining in more detail.

6. Fundamentalisms

Fundamentalism is an umbrella notion, containing a variety of movements and tensions, that are not to be classified or judged all in the same way (Marty 1996). There seems to be a strong element of choosing to treat religious texts as sources that shape law and dogma and need to be interpreted in a literalistic way, such as the dispensationalist reading of the Bible, rather than experiencing a living faith with all its troubles and merits. This is a trend seen within all religions, as believers wish to stay assured of their own salvation. It also has to do with the written word prevailing over oral cultures, already in Late Antiquity (from 2nd Century AD) with the spread of codices instead of papyrus rolls (Casson 2002, pp. 124–35). In modern times, the term fundamentalism was coined in 1920, linked with an antimodernist coalition in Protestant circles in the USA, which starting in 1910 issued a series of volumes called *The Fundamentals* claiming a seemingly benign desire to rediscover authenticity (Marty 1996, p. 32; Marsden 2006, pp. 118–31; Harris 2008). However, just as if the original sin were repeated, the good intentions brought anything but good results. Fundamentalism developed into a rigid understanding of faith that shaped a rigid community replete with intolerance and bigotry. Even though fundamentalism is of Christian origin, contemporaneous communities reflect one another, sharing the spirit of the age. Through complex and peculiar ways, in which the political played an important role in the formation of new religious trends (Marty and Appleby 1993), they actually ended up imitating each other.

It has been primarily Islam whose fundamentalism has so far preoccupied the 21st century most of all, as it was [a] utilized by the West and [b] developed as a tool of resistance for Islamic communities against Western imperialism (Ali 2002). The roots of Islamic fundamentalism go back to the Soviet era, when the USA supported the Taliban as a means to contain and confront the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979). This brought together two cultures and two militant mentalities in an explosive mixture (Rashid 2010). The fact that Osama Bin Laden followed a path of his own and unleashed an attack in the very heart of the American metropolis—the twin towers in Manhattan, on 11 September 2001—was beyond prediction. However, it reshaped the way the world was seen, security has taken priority over freedom since then.

It seems that the same religious tool used by the West to fight the Soviets was almost, at the same time, reinvented by Muslims to resist the existing hierarchical structures of global

capitalism and Western imperialism. Islamic revolutions burst out, one after the other, with the first being in Iran in the very same year, 1979. Before that, a series of significant secular resistance movements had arisen in the Islamic world which had shaped a modernist tradition. These secular resistance movements, reversed later by the tidal waves of faith-based revolutions, primarily cultivated a national awareness which led to modernization and emancipation from the Ottoman empire and broader Western colonialism, such as the *Nahḍa* (النهضة), the [Cultural] Awakening, 1870–1900) in the Arabic-speaking Eastern Mediterranean, with classical and Roman references as well (Pormann 2006). Already in the late 20th century, however, they were succeeded by non-secular, ultra-nostalgic, religiously defined political movements which were fundamentalist in nature. The latter are based on a sacred understanding of history and the world, claiming an authentic interpretation of the Quran in the form of a rigid ideology. Ever since, successive generations of Islamic fundamentalism and its oblique turn, in many cases even becoming jihadi terrorism, has preoccupied the world; not only the Western World (DeLong-Bas 2004; Al-Azm 2014). Radical Islamist movements even succeeded in founding an Islamic State, which nurtured further violence in a vicious circle as it trained massive generations of new terrorists who, for the most part, turned their skills into a career (Wood 2015; Cottee 2016). After a full decade of Islamic extremism, nevertheless, some signs of hope emerge. It is once again Iran that is leading the way, where the people and women in particular are sick and tired of a long-lived Islamic republic, and they revolt. Yet, at this stage, no one can predict the direction history might take in the future. Not only is the outcome in Iran still very much in doubt as I write, but there are contrary signals in other parts of the world, such as Afghanistan, where we have recently seen a grave setback. History is not linear. Perhaps it is correct to assume that the night is darker before dawn, and to keep up hope. Maintaining hope in despair is also very befitting to the Christian faith, and to the Christian understanding of Resurrection through the tomb. An Orthodox saint of the 20th Century, the Athonite monk St Silouan, used to teach, “Keep your mind in hell and despair not” (Sophrony [1991] 1999, pp. 208–13).

A numerical increase in Islam is predicted overall (Pew Research Center 2015). It is penetrating deep into the Sahel, with its simplicity and clarity, its common sense and adaptability in moral issues, and its emphasis on the *ummah* (أمة): community building. However, its success is also a result of increased financial relations with the countries of the Gulf (Sundkler and Steed 2004, pp. 1035–37). Therefore, one cannot be indifferent to the predominant character of Islam in our times. Keeping up a dialogue is of paramount importance.

At the same time, one should be alert to the development of fundamentalism in Christianity, not only in the West, as implied earlier, but also among Orthodox Christian circles. This is precipitated by a wave of conversions from other denominations, in which people seek authenticity in Orthodoxy yet try to inscribe their view upon Orthodox identity—an incontestable fact and common ground for researchers, despite their varying evaluations of this phenomenon (Kesich 1961; Krindatch 2002; Lucas 2003; Slagle 2011; Herbel 2013; Winchester 2015). The situation is also exacerbated by the broader influence of fundamentalist trends on cradle Orthodoxy in the media era, including in traditionally Orthodox countries; however, that would be a topic for a different study.

Christianity is uncontestedly diminishing in the traditional centre of Christian historical expansion—the broader Western world—but scholars observe different attitudes to the ways and means of reacting to the situation. Some Christians would confront it directly; many would withdraw. In what follows, we shall discuss the views of those who wish to re-evangelize society in contradistinction to those who opt for withdrawal from society, either using political correctness as a pretext or claiming that “spirituality” is enough for Christian witness.

We shall argue that a passive spirituality is neither in accordance with Christian ethos and teaching as it was shaped through the ages, nor is it an adequate response to the needs

of the times. It simply reflects the new religious landscape, incorporating the modern elements of individualism and withdrawal from the public sphere.

We shall conclude by examining a series of problems contained in the notion of re-evangelization *per se*.

7. Dilemmas for Orthodox Christians: Swimming against the Current or Going with the Flow?

Based not only on catholic norms permeating identities, religious identities included, but also from concrete observation, we have established that Orthodox Christians are not impervious to the spirit of the age. Speaking from an Orthodox Christian perspective now, before we concentrate on today's moods and challenges, we need to clear our minds and rediscover our identity and our unity in faith, which is also unity in time. We need to apply ourselves with devotion, diligence, and love to studying the riches of our tradition. If this effort is genuine and sincere, the outcome will be anything but fundamentalist. It will be a reflection and image of a moving, flexible, living faith, an example of following in the path of Jesus, Who is the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14, 6).

When the Christian message was new, the eschatological expectation was very much alive and relevant (maranatha, 1Cor 16, 22). Faith was unexpected, unconventional, and revolutionary. There was a price to pay for the very choice of being a Christian, as it led to partial separation from one's community of origin and could also lead to martyrdom. Apart from the ancient Christian era, the Church generally showed robust signs of adaptation to the new, largely favorable *status quo* later in time. This is particularly apparent in the centuries after Constantine the Great. But even when the *status quo* was not favorable—as, for instance, in the period of Julian (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2022a)—or later, after the emergence of Islam, the direct confrontation with the establishment, the new rule (Griffith 2008; Voulgaraki-Pissina 2020a), has never been the first choice. This was not mere pragmatism or even opportunism. There was a long Christian theological tradition on the subject. Jesus Christ claimed that His kingdom was not of this world (John 18, 36). The zealot movement was disappointed in Him. Very early, since the time of Peter I of Alexandria (300–311) (Canons of the Holy Fathers 1963), there was a canonical prohibition against voluntary martyrdom taken up by the First Ecumenical Council (325), as well as broader theological reservations (Buck 2012). Besides, social change and the overall influence of Christianity on legislation was brought in by the Christian community gradually and quietly (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2016).

Time after time, the Church became in itself a significant component of the *status quo*. This was not only a characteristic of medieval times but also of broader modernity. Relations between Church and state were regulated in a variety of ways, but all of them recognized the utility of the Church and the role it played. This is by no means different to the function religion in general has played in society as a moralizing, unifying, and appeasing factor, as a useful tool for the rulers of society, despite the few exceptional cases when religion proved to be a factor for subversion and change.

It seems, however, that this dependence upon the secular power shaped a special comfort zone and a habit of being passive and taking for granted the fruits of acceptance within society. However, as society undergoes change, the Church, with its traditional thinking and ancient rites and structure, does not always follow at the same tempo. What exists—and furthermore, what existed in the past—is far too good for the Church as an institution to undertake the hard work of reform. It is quite common for the Church (meaning not only the hierarchy, but also a significant part of the people who consider themselves Orthodox Christians and have a sense of belonging to the Church) to develop a backward-looking mentality, a glorification and idealization of the past that may also take on regressive characteristics. Church people are often slow to recognize the needs of times. In narrower modernity, after the Enlightenment and even more so after the October Revolution (1917), there was a clear opponent to see and confront: the emergence and establishment of one or more atheist, secular ideologies. Regarding communism

in particular, in Greece, as in the rest of the Western world, the Church as well as faith-based, private organizations took an active part in combating it, also providing ideological assistance to the secular authorities as well as the market to secure the status quo. In offering this service, the Church and several “Christian” fellowships often went too far. They assisted, beyond any theological or even civil criteria, political power of any kind—including the Greek junta (1967–74). Significant exceptions of isolated priests and lay people who stood up against dictatorship may have somewhat saved the Church from total embarrassment. But the general compliant attitude reduced the appeal of the Church or brought it into direct and sharp opposition to significant parts of the population who had more revolutionary or even moderate centrist ideas and were pleading for justice and social change, or even mere democracy. It seems that through this partiality the Church lost its catholicity, and certainly lost its catholic appeal, as it turned part of the population into enemies. It did not need to necessarily be this way, but it seems there has been an agreement from both sides, with notable exceptions, that the Church is tied to right-wing politics, and the powers of change—the left—are atheists, or very critical towards religion. Christian preaching lost an opportunity to address the whole population, particularly the oppressed masses, and find a meeting point with their concerns, as happened in Latin America with the different forms of Liberation theology and its key representatives (Boff, Gutierrez, Cardenal, etc.). Liberation theology succeeded in becoming deeply rooted in the societies where it originated, but it also has a broad, international appeal to all people striving for justice, including the Orthodox, despite critical notes on the margins (Bouteneff 2012). On the other hand, in a vicious circle, Christian ethics deviated from the spirit of the Gospel and turned towards an individualistic approach, referring mainly to issues of sexual behavior and individual salvation instead of the common vision of the kingdom of God. All this completed the alienation of the Church from its very nature.

In the Eastern countries under the communist regimes, the Church tried to survive by testing different approaches. Direct confrontation with the state was the exception for Christians who lived behind the Iron Curtain. Yet again, voluntary martyrdom had no place, but still it often came to persecution in different forms. For the most part, people chose to witness to their faith while keeping a low profile, and a diplomatic adaptation to the new wishes of the state was the principal line for the heads of the Church, a tradition that has been preserved to this day, as the ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I very recently asserted regarding the leadership of the Church of Russia (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew 2022).

In today’s post-secular times, addressing the fading appeal of the Church in society has been even more difficult for the Church in the West. On one hand, the “enemy” was not very easily discernable, as it was not a rival from without but rather the inability to perceive and embrace change. On the other hand, the Christian spirit of the age already resembled the new religions, insofar as it had already shaped a mentality of esoterism. In the East, quite differently now, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Church tried to make up for lost time at all levels. There was a frenzy of restoration work on churches and monasteries, of catechesis and baptisms, and so forth; yet, at the same time, an effort to regain the preeminent official position of the Church within the state by fervently serving Caesar’s causes was more than striking.

8. From Secularization to Post-Secularization—Of an Easy and Anodyne Kind

While missiologists may be scholarly observers from either within the Church or outside, one needs to be a believer in order to serve mission. Discussing mission, one should start by discussing faith. If one has no faith, then the Church is a decorative element of culture, a support for the status quo, a means to social advancement. Turning faith into an ideology is also a serious handicap. Still, some groups tend to exercise mission in precisely that way, using the methods of ideological propaganda very systematically and with the full range of managerial skills, and often appearing outwardly successful, at least in quantitative terms, with dozens of conversions and baptisms.

Most of the problems Christian mission is facing today have to do with a lack of faith or are linked with major issues in theological understanding and truthfulness to the Gospel.

While secularization is a positive achievement in the Western world, conducive to pluralism, human rights, well-being for all, and peace in society, it may—and in some cases, has—reach a point of programmatically uprooting religion and culture, especially the organized religion of the majority and the common culture, in favor of individualism and by extension smaller minority groups, whose rights indeed also need to be secured. But the strategy of uprooting needs to be openly stated and further studied, because religion is not just a sum of rites and beliefs concerning the individual; it is not only an investment in personal metaphysical (or worldly) salvation, but also a worldview influencing all aspects of life, a common culture, a common language, and a factor for cohesion in society. In these days of totalitarian capitalism, of complete market deregulation, the individual becomes the “new religion”. We may judge the predominant place of the individual as a far more important factor in the efforts to secure religious pluralism by undermining organized religion, compared with the need to incorporate the newcomers in Europe: the growing Islamic communities. I make this strong statement because there are other ways to integrate Muslims and their rights in a primarily non-Muslim society that would be more appropriate to their understanding of religion as well. These ways have been tried and tested over centuries, at least in the Eastern parts of Europe and beyond, producing a very meaningful tradition in these matters which can enrich and inspire today’s action (Khodr 2016; Voulgaraki-Pissina 2020b). To recapitulate, uprooting the religion of the majority is not a policy of inclusion, but a policy of deconstructing all cohesive factors that built social bonds in society for the sake of individualism. This is why new forms of religion and spirituality are more welcome in the West, primarily the Anglo-Saxon world on both sides of the Atlantic, with continental Western Europe close behind. The fusion of select elements of religion into an individualistic dream of wellness, along with the deconstruction of organized religion, brings about the desideratum of human isolation in a space of scattered, partial, fluid ideas and great confusion. Even if we take for granted the popular appeal of this new pervasive religiosity, by its very nature it cannot present itself as a grand narrative that could shape and change society or create cohesive ties and social bonds able to challenge the prevalence of individualism. That which cannot become collective poses no sort of political threat.

9. Understanding Christian Spirituality as a Missional Spirituality

The instrumentalization and ideologization of faith can lead to aggressive missionizing expeditions that aim for a sort of conquest. Something of this can be observed among new converts to the Orthodox faith coming from an ultra-conservative, evangelical background. Manipulative practices or the exercise of power in any form are not acceptable in Orthodox mission, and the kind of “success” such practices may temporarily have is not consonant with the Orthodox missiological tradition. Indeed, it is appalling to all missiologists in the Orthodox world who respect their scholarly vocation. Thanks to historical circumstances, perhaps, Orthodox missions have kept clear of the broad wave of colonialism in its classical form. This does not mean that Orthodox mission never served (or coincided with) expansionist views, and a discussion initiated by Orthodox missiologists to better evaluate Orthodox missions at all times in imperial Russia and in modern praxis, and to exercise a sensible self-criticism is very welcome. But somehow, a holistic Orthodox theology and understanding of mission, shaped very early in the East, makes it difficult for Orthodoxy to fall into mere activism, let alone aggression or exploitation.

Early enough, missionary methodology was shaped around the triptych of prayer, exemplary ethos, and building friendship with the “outsiders”. This term, *ἔξωθεν* in Greek, was introduced by St John Chrysostom, a major Church Father of the late 4th century, in his prolific work. This is his usual term for the non-Christians—the pagans—implying an open invitation and an open door. Those who are “outsiders” are simply invited inside

and made welcome (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2016, p. 44). Prayer, exemplary ethos, and building friendship have thus been a cornerstone for Eastern tradition and theology of mission.

Later, the missionary expeditions of Constantine the philosopher (Saint Cyril) and Methodios the Isapostoloi (equal to the apostles) to the Slavs, were of paramount significance. Although they were sent to Moravia by both the Church and State, their vision was not expansionist. They were responding to a petition by the Moravian hegemon, Rastislav, and the Byzantine policy was to create solid alliances with neighboring peoples, based on a “win-win” concept in which faith and culture, not exploitation, played an important role (Ostrogorsky 1965; Cameron 2017). The basic facts are common ground in research: the two brothers were sent by the state, guided and blessed by Patriarch Photios, an outstanding theological, literary, and diplomatic figure and an important saint of the Eastern tradition, and also sought the blessing of the pope of Rome. They elevated the Moravian people to the status of a civilized state, combated the heresy of trilingualism, invented a Slavic alphabet and grammar, and turned proto-Slavic into a written and rich language through an immense work of translation that also made good use of Greek philosophical terms and abstract notions. The work of Cyril and Methodios is the most organized instance of mission, extensively reported in the biographies of these Saints, and is recognized as a milestone in missiological understanding as it shaped forever the Orthodox missiological tradition (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2021).

The successor of Photios on the Patriarchal throne of Constantinople was Nikolaos Mystikos. A personality devoted to a life of prayer, worship, and contemplation, he continued the missionary tradition of his predecessor, Photios, and initiated further missionary expeditions (Jenkins and Westerink 1973) that have yet to be thoroughly studied.

Some centuries later, Gregory Palamas (14th century), the most renowned representative of mystical theology, also engaged in the social matters of his times and in dialogue with Islam (Russell 2020).

In the West we have similar examples as in the East. One may cite Thomas á Jesu, well known for his mystical theology, who published a first, very significant work on mission theology (Jesu 1610), and somewhat later published a multivolume compilation on mission (Jesu 1613), one of the prime of such texts. Mission work was also addressed to schismatics such as Greeks and Russians (Rohrbach 2015, p. 132). For many centuries, Eastern parts of Europe were primarily considered “mission fields” in the West (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2023). In 1613, Thomas á Jesu also founded the very first Missiological Seminary in a Carmelite monastery for the training of future missionaries (Voulgarakis [1969] 1970, p. 14).

It is obvious from the examples from the East and West recently referred to that Christian askesis is a path that does not ignore otherness but constitutes a further means to exercise love towards the other, the ultimate Christian virtue, in imitation of God (1Cor 11,1), whose very essence *is* love (1John 4,16), and in freedom.

It is established that love may also be displayed in anchoritism. No matter how much distance an anchorite (a hermit) chooses to keep between themselves and others, they remain a magnet. This was a vital model of witness and mission from ancient times, already from the first monastic communities in the Egyptian desert. But it was also the main means of establishing the Christian faith in the Russian North, in Finland, and in Alaska (Smirnov [1903] 1986). The same applies to Greek modernity, given the missionary significance of 20th century saints such as Porfyrios, Paisios, or Gerontissa Gavrilia (Klitos 1995; Yiannitsiotis 2001; Porfyrios 2005; Gavrilia 1998; Isaac 2016; Voulgaraki-Pissina 2022b).

People seek ascetics out with questions and petitions, asking for advice, prayer, and blessings. People rely on hermits, who are often regarded as spiritual guides, staretsi, for all their problems, including family tensions, troubles at work, and health concerns; it is as if they are laying down their problems at the cross of Jesus Christ. Christ died alone on the cross, surrounded by the women and John, and yet he took upon him the sins of this world, becoming a ransom for many (Mt 20,28; Mk 10,45).

Christian ascetic life, even at its most extreme, is a means to an end. And that end cannot be simply the individual redemption of the ascetic, but is harmonized with the

Christian eschatological vision; the Kingdom of God. This is what all Christians pray for in their daily prayers, following the Lord's prayer: that His Kingdom may come and that His will be done on Earth as it is in heaven (Mt 6,9–10).

Nevertheless, spirituality is used by many Christians as a reason for passivity, for denying their historic duties, and for refusing the prophetic calling of the Lord (Khodr [1984] 1994; Voulgaraki-Pissina 2020b).

Some also use lack of spirituality as an excuse in a kind of false humility. People of this sort feel unworthy of important duties, claiming that they are not spiritually ready, or have not received a call from above. Strangely enough, most of them exaggerate the role of a missionary, disregarding the fact that this is a calling for all Christians according to patristic theology (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2016). Furthermore, they do not recognize that mission is *missio Dei*, and we are only workers within His divine plan (Bosch 2011). What is a consensus in modern scholarship on the history of mission is that the expansion of the early church is not a history of a few outstanding figures but the work of the whole Christian community: lay and simple people of all social ranks and educational levels, let alone spiritual levels, whose life had a radiance and whose ordinary personal conversations had a convincing resonance and impact. The example of the martyrs also played an important role, as did the ethos of communal sharing and diakonia, not only in the Church of Jerusalem, but at many times of difficulty including war, famine, plague, or persecution (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2016, 2022a).

To set the record straight and distinguish the Orthodox understanding of mission from older Western paradigms linked with colonialism, many have proposed the term *martyria*/witness as a substitute for mission (Vassiliadis 1998). This is a brilliant idea, also well-accepted within the Christian Ecumene, as Western missiologists too try to reevaluate the relation between mission and colonialism. As to the latter, one must certainly acknowledge that Western missionaries, such as the bishop of Chiapas Bartolomeo de las Casas, stood strongly for the people and against dehumanizing and colonizing powers, to mention just one example. It has not been rare for missionaries to resist the spirit of the age, setting priorities that were not always in accordance with those of the people seeking wealth and power (Neill 1990; Oliver and Atmore 2005; Wild-Wood 2008). A scholarly approach would need to be more nuanced; one cannot accept a crude identification of mission with colonialism, even though in modernity missionary expeditions were linked with explorations and great discoveries and concurrent exploitation, conquest, devastation, and colonialism.

The *martyria*/witness concept, also taken up in the Together Towards Life (TTL) ecumenical document (Keum 2013), links modern missiological understanding with the Eastern and ancient Church tradition (Vassiliadis 2017). It also suggests that there is no room for exploitation here, only readiness for sacrifice—even martyrdom, if it comes to that, as the term suggests. This is mission in Christ's way (Yannoulatos 2010), a way befitting the ultimate goal.

Nevertheless, the human need to stay within a comfort zone may lead to misuse even of this term. It may degenerate into the idea that one can witness to Christ from the comfort of one's couch. This is, yet again, a failure in theology and in the understanding of Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality is not a protective cocoon or a cozy nest.

10. Other Qualitative Issues of the Term Re-Evangelization

G.K. Chesterton, a modern author from the 19th century whose influence never seems to wane, states in one of his Father Brown stories that the Father was able to distinguish a thief pretending to be a cleric, because he “attacked reason” and, as he said, “it's bad theology” (Chesterton [1929] 1981, p. 23).

As the theft of theology is ongoing, it is of paramount importance to sharpen our antennae for bad theology. It would be “bad theology” to separate faith from reason. On the other hand, one cannot restrict oneself to rationalism and confine discussion to plausible argumentation. Respecting reason and moving beyond reason would be a wise way to be

post-modern while, at the same time, honoring the heritage of modernity. A Christian may feel at home in all paradigms, without anxiety about the fate of faith, as God reveals himself to all people, in all languages, and all historical contexts. In fact, there is no transient condition in which God is not present and does not reveal himself in his divine economy for the love of humankind and creation overall: this is the firm conviction of the Christian tradition. Christians may rest assured of it.

At least, as it appears from a historical aspect, there may be more or less favorable times for the reception of God's revelation. Still, there is no time when the possibility of communion with God is annulled. If Christians wish to facilitate this communion, or even simple communication, from their human perspective, a promising pathway would be to regard themselves as simple workers in the field of their Lord and to re-examine their methods, their priorities, and their overall presence in society.

The way the term re-evangelization is being used in Orthodox contexts, mostly by non-missilogists, also gives rise to some reservations regarding the depth of our rethinking of self, which is linked with self-awareness but also with repentance and a readiness to empty oneself of any self-importance or authoritarian posture. Re-evangelization sometimes sounds like a defense mechanism, by no means in tune with missiological openness. It signals primarily an intensive or quantitative effort. Catechesis should be increased, there should be more preaching, the Christian voice should be louder, and Christians (and the clergy in particular) should familiarize themselves with the latest media for communication. Their skills should be improved, and their voice modernized.

One cannot object to any of this, but still, one may remain skeptical. What if people feel deafened by the noise of our preaching? What about the possibility of the medium becoming the message (McLuhan 1994, pp. 7–21)? What about the fatigue from the constant repetition of the same thing?

And then, what about self-reflection on the life of the Church and parish life in particular? If living by example has historically always been the main component of Christian witness, which is common ground in scholarship (Voulgaraki-Pissina 2016, pp. 118–63), there is a limit to the appeal of theoretical constructions about faith, theology, and the Church. In the past, renowned Orthodox have invested much energy and time to presenting the "Eastern" understanding of the Church and the world in a highly romanticized way. I am speaking of the diaspora revival movements in the 1930s, followed by the so-called (in sociological terms) neo-orthodox movements in Greece in the 1960s. This was useful and helpful in the mid-20th century, but societies are beyond this need today. What is needed now is an actual parish that understands itself as a community, where people build bonds of love, respect, receptivity, and solidarity. Virtue, and the greatest virtue of all, love, cannot be experienced in an abstract way. Love, with all its human imperfections and failures, but also with a constant redirection and repentance, is realized only in a concrete, specific way. Love must be seen, smelled, heard, and touched, experienced with the fullness of human senses and mind, in our milieu, just as it was when Christ dwelled among His disciples.

The term re-evangelization seems to draw a sharp distinction between the owners, keepers, or transmitters of the Gospel message by some imaginary divine right, and those who are called to receive (or re-discover) it. However, this is a hierarchical and authoritarian distinction; a one-way street. Humility, vulnerability, and even doubt, were characteristics of Jesus Christ that deeply reveal His humanity and His divinity and point to the reality of incarnation and the path of crucifixion (abandonment, betrayal, fear, pain, etc.) that led to life and Resurrection. If Christian kerygma is a witness of Life and Resurrection, it may follow all the steps of this way.

Substitutes are required when the difficult path is not chosen. Thus, theology can very easily degenerate into fundamentalist ideas and practices or be reduced to a concern for the preservation of an authoritarian *status quo*. This is shocking to people who seek justice and freedom and is quite contrary to the core of the Christian Gospel. Taking the easy path may also lead to a spirit of withdrawal, a combination of ease and arrogance. While pretending to be contemplative, spiritual, and humble, one is in fact unloving, egotistical,

and snobbish. The coenobitic experience of Eastern monasticism offers solid wisdom on these matters. But even secular wisdom and common sense can be enriching, as, for instance, the commonplace but fine observations of William Thackeray on snobbery and its many pretensions (Thackeray 1848) by “one of the snobs”.

Snobbery can readily afflict people of letters, writers, and especially poets, or anyone who considers themselves above average. A poem by the great Greek poet Yiannis Ritsos from *Kapnismeno tsoukali* (Ritsos [1949] 2006, my translation) addresses this in a touching way, equally fitting to poetry or to theology.

And there, my brother, we have learned to talk quietly and simply.
We understand each other now, no more is needed.
And tomorrow I think we'll be simpler still.
We shall be finding the words, those very words that carry the same weight
In all hearts, on all lips.
We'll call the spade a spade.
So that others may smile and say,
“Poems like these we can write by the hundreds.”
That is exactly what we want, too.
Because we don't sing to stand out from the people, my brother.
We sing to bring the people together.

Christianity is still relevant and revolutionary today. It is witnessing to a living God, it is perpetually new, it is the Good News. Christianity, not its counterfeits and caricatures, is the living water. Traditionalism is a parody of tradition; there can be no tradeoff between the two. Everything is allowed if God does not exist, as Fyodor Dostoevsky exclaimed in the 19th century in his mature work *The Brothers Karamazov*, originally written between 1879–80 (Dostoyevsky 2003). In the 21st century, when liberalism is increasingly giving way to authoritarianism, while neoliberalism and totalitarian capitalism, religious terrorism, and war are extending their sway over humanity, we are driven into a dead end by annihilating God. What remains in apotheosis of the *ego*, an insatiable self that respects nothing but its own rule, that knows no limit to its desire, that is willing to kill God, who is conceived as a restriction, that produces nothing but relations of exploitation, an alienation of human nature itself. This is being increasingly recognized in social sciences, as previously stated in the introduction, social anthropology (Headley 2022), and the field of education (Jensen 2016).

This can be observed globally and is very much apparent on European soil. What remains is war, injustice, impoverishment, authoritarian ways, progressive deterioration in the quality of life, and the devaluation of life itself. All sense of equality and justice is being lost, and, in the end, freedom becomes a privilege for the few who trample on the many.

Public declarations of human rights, legislation, and multiple regulations or interpretations of the law are not enough. They only offer a superficial consensus based mainly on imposition. A deeper answer that addresses today's needs is a culture, a code of values that marks a civilization and shapes it, and which interacts with other codes of values. This is necessary to deepen our sensibility, our understanding, and our humanity.

Christians stand on the solid ground of a rich tradition. They simply need to unearth it. It is not an instrumentalization of Christianity that is needed. Efforts and experiments in the terrain of new religiosity are unlikely to last as they are shallowly rooted. Nevertheless, they can tell us a lot about what people need in our times. And we have to take seriously the need for individual self-determination as well as the need to meet with the other in freedom.

The Thatcherite model of the apotheosis of the individual has mutated into tyranny and reached the limit of its appeal. The submission to collective norms defined by some “animals more equal than the others” (Orwell 1945) is long gone. And when it resurfaces in different forms (e.g., in a disingenuous, nationalistic claims of equality within a nation) it will lead once again to submission and exploitation. Is it possible that the notion of the person found in Christian trinitarian theology is what is deeply needed? Is it possible

that what is needed is Christ, the Logos incarnate who emptied Himself to meet with humankind? Is it possible that humans still need their creator as a child needs their mother?

A missiological answer to the above questions is for the Christian community to discover for itself as it goes along. And the Way along which it goes is Jesus Christ. Christians need to rediscover and share, to stand shoulder to shoulder with other people, to listen and talk, to pray and love. If this is the Christian way in mission and evangelism, history will give the answers. We need to empty ourselves to receive humanity and divinity, to receive and to share, to witness to the incarnate Logos, taking our place in God's creation next to other people and other creatures.

In his Preface to the Second Edition of *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Milbank 2006, p. xi) the author John Milbank states that he has gone beyond his earlier conviction that "a theological vision alone could challenge the emerging hegemony of neo-liberalism." As neither he nor other significant Christian thinkers wish to instrumentalize theology except in the sense of living up to the Lord's prayer and the petition that "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", I shall keep the emphasis of needing to meet with others beyond our kin. This may happen in ecumenical dialogue, when we read and study and meet and take inspiration from one another (Skirris 2022), or in religious milieu, in interfaith dialogue seeking for a global ethical consensus (Sharp 2022), when we meet with people who express a secular, atheist, or agnostic culture (Clément 1985, 2004), or when we share joy in art and literature (Steinhardt 2006; Khodr 2016). Syncretism is not what I have in mind, as that would blur together all voices and distort all melody. But if we build harmonious and meaningful relations despite (or because of) our differences, this would bring us back again to Christian spirituality and mission. Humility, simplicity, a dialogical attitude, praising God and giving thanks for fellow humans and the beauty of the world is a form of spirituality that signifies presence in the world and the fulfilment of our prophetic calling, our mission, our witness to Christ's Resurrection which is the very core of Christian preaching. Christ is risen! We may wash our face and comb our hair (Mt 6: 17), so as to go out (Mt 28: 19–20), for He is with us. This era is full of possibilities, provided one recognizes their true nature.

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