

TOWARD A SOCIAL ETHOS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH A NEW DOCUMENT OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE



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In January 2020, the Ecumenical Patriarchate approved a social document crafted by a theological commission that was charged with formulating general parameters and guiding principles for the role of the Orthodox Church as well as the responsibility of Orthodox Christians in the modern world. In his letter of

endorsement, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew welcomed the collective achievement of the commission for addressing “the complex challenges and problems of today’s world, without at the same time overlooking the favorable potential and positive perspectives of contemporary civilization.” For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church was published online (on the Facebook page of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the official website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America) on March 27, 2020, in the heart of the Lenten period for repentance and reflection. In May 2020, it also appeared in book format (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 121 pages).

For the Life of the World imparts general guidelines and principles toward a much-needed social ethos for Orthodox Christians struggling to navigate modern-day challenges. It follows a liturgical thread and adopts a pastoral tone, opening with the fundamental contours of an Orthodox Christian worldview and concluding on a prayerful anticipation of transformation and a positive aspiration of hope. It comprises a sustained, albeit sensitive pastoral approach to critical and controversial issues including racism and poverty, human rights and bioethics, as well as technology and climate change. The specific contents address the role of the church in the public sphere, the course of human life, the challenge of social justice, the tragedy of war, the importance of ecumenical dialogue, and the relationship between science and religion.

The reflection of a dozen scholars throughout the world, the document is in itself an unmistakably collaborative “achievement,” which is how the Ecumenical Patriarch describes it in his endorsement. The commission members deliberately and studiously refrained from incorporating personal positions in their effort to articulate pastoral perspectives on issues encountered by Orthodox

Christians in communities of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This was a document initiated by leaders and theologians of the Church, informed by hierarchs and faithful of the Church, and intended for clergy and laity of the Church. Indeed, as the tangible result of extensive hierarchal consultation—there was direct input from dozens of Orthodox Metropolitans and Archbishops throughout the world and theological review by renowned Orthodox Hierarchs—and ultimate synodal commendation, it is a virtually “pentecostal” and verily unprecedented fulfillment of “a complicated, not to say contentious undertaking,” as the editors describe it in their preface.

The text, which runs to 33,000 words, seeks to delineate the profile of an Orthodox ethos:

It is impossible for the Church truly to follow Christ or to make him present to the world if it fails to place this absolute concern for the poor and disadvantaged at the very center of its moral, religious, and spiritual life. The pursuit of social justice and civil equity—provision for the poor and shelter for the homeless, protection for the weak, welcome for the displaced, and assistance for the disabled—is not merely an ethos the Church recommends for the sake of a comfortable conscience, but is a necessary means of salvation, the indispensable path to union with God in Christ; and to fail in these responsibilities is to invite condemnation before the judgment seat of God. (§33)

The document is equally judicious and perspicuous on controversial issues, such as wealth and the refugee crisis, as well as science and climate change:

Among the most common evils of all human societies—though often brought to an unprecedented level of refinement and precision in modern developed countries—are the gross inequalities of wealth often produced or abetted by regressive policies of taxation and

insufficient regulation of fair wages, which favor the interests of those rich enough to influence legislation and secure their wealth against the demands of the general good. (§35)

The developed world everywhere knows the presence of refugees and asylum-seekers, many legally admitted but also many others without documentation. They confront the consciences of wealthier nations daily with their sheer vulnerability, indigence, and suffering. This is a global crisis, but also a personal appeal to our faith, to our deepest moral natures, to our most inabrogable responsibilities. (§66)

And the Church encourages the faithful to be grateful for—and to accept—the findings of the sciences, even those that might occasionally oblige them to revise their understandings of the history and frame of cosmic reality. The desire for scientific knowledge flows from the same wellspring as faith's longing to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of God. (§71)

None of this, however, is likely possible without a deep training in gratitude. Without thanksgiving, we are not truly human. This, in fact, is the very foundation of the Church's Eucharistic understanding of itself and of its mission in the world. When humanity is in harmony with all of creation, this thanksgiving comes effortlessly and naturally. When that harmony is ruptured or replaced by discord, as it so often is, thanksgiving becomes instead an obligation to be discharged, sometimes with difficulty; but only such thanksgiving can truly heal the division that alienates humanity from the rest of the created order. (§74)

This groundbreaking document has special significance given the historical background of Orthodoxy. In recent years, the Eastern

Church has been allergic, even aversive to social statements. This is arguably the result of a struggle to understand its place in the world in long periods of isolation or persecution of many traditional Orthodox homelands, particularly behind the Iron Curtain. The church has always grappled with its place and role in the world. Whether speaking of heaven in relation to earth, or of the world in relation to the kingdom, it has covered the full spectrum from identifying with the world to becoming estranged from it. The standard tension of the church being “in the world” but not “of the world” (based on the words of Christ before the Passion) was variously petrified into either a retreat to some blameless past or a retaliation against a corrupt present.

At some point on the lengthy Byzantine excursion, Eastern Christianity stopped dealing with questions related to the present and started focusing on the reiteration of answers from the past. The church was equipped for handling otherworldly or sacred things, whereas the state was entrusted with worldly or secular things. This understanding of a clearly defined role for the church in relation to the clearly designated responsibility of the state shaped and sharpened the Eastern approach to social justice. In fact, it was the sin of Byzantium was precisely its arrogant conviction that the institutional church could identify with the divine nature of Christ.

As a result, issues of politics and policy (especially as they relate to power and corruption), even economy and science (especially as they relate to poverty and prosperity), were reduced and relegated to the scope and concern of Western Christianity. In fact, the West excelled in these domains. By contrast, matters of personal maturity and spiritual integrity became the principal interest and mystical investment of Eastern Christianity. Moreover, these issues came to be seen as the exclusive propriety and distinctive prerogative of the

East, which became all the more disengaged from interest and involvement in matters of the world. The truth is that the church not only disregarded its social principles, but largely also dismissed its social priorities.

Yet it wasn't always this way. The early and Byzantine church had a bold voice on social justice. A cursory reading of fourth-century writers like Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom reveals the prominence of the social core of the gospel teaching in the minds and ministry. Certainly Basil the Great forcefully disapproves of any retreat by Christians from the world. Any eschatology that galvanized escapism from time and place was denounced as heretical and hazardous. Over time, however, an emphasis on monasticism (as the silent withdrawal into the heart) and mysticism (as the spiritual enchantment of the heavenly) provided justification for disengagement from the world in the Christian East with diverse ramifications for its ecclesiology, liturgy and ethos. Even the conventional safety-valve of Orthodox Christian ethics—namely, the relationship between spiritual elder (almost exclusively male) and spiritual disciple—is frequently a way of evading a universal commitment to principles and surrendering to the personal discretion of an individual. Despite the promise and potential of transcending the limitations of institutional clericalism, in reality the relationship with a charismatic authority is a phenomenon that has increasingly tended to stifle individual freedom and development in the last decades.

More recently, the social doctrine was further reduced to an emphasis on nationalism as the means of survival in times of persecution and oppression. During such periods, the church instinctively identified with the early martyrs and invariably internalized a negative criticism of external ethics and evangelical

mission. While there may be some merit to a criticism of Christianity that merely seeks to be “useful” in a world of competing promises for security, the alternative does not need to be a Christianity that is predominantly “useless” in an age of pluralistic choices of fulfillment.

In this regard, Orthodox theologians should remember that the lack of critical or systematic thought is not always virtuous or advantageous. The emphasis on apophatic thought does not signal a lack of response or resolve. And eschatology should be perceived neither as imminently apocalyptic (a convenient pretext for indifference, inaction and irresponsibility) nor as naively optimistic (a superficial dismissal of sin, evil and struggle). Being “in the world” but not “of the world” suggests an uneasy, unresolved and unending contention with the world. The tension between the “already” and the “not yet” commands contention with the social challenges of our time and of our world. By the same token, the incompleteness or imperfection of our engagement with the world is what arguably shapes the beauty and dignity of our struggle to respond to the Christian gospel.

Nonetheless, a further reason why Orthodox Christianity has abandoned or avoided articulating a clear social vision over the centuries is the tendency—frequently a temptation—to denounce or dismiss all things that resemble or reflect Western Christianity. Thus, beyond any philosophically apophatic and apocalyptic dimensions, there is the purely apologetic aspect of an approach to social challenges in Eastern Christianity. However, in 2000, the Church of Moscow published “The Basis of the Social Concept,” a preliminary, albeit admirable attempt to outline the social principles of the Orthodox Church in Russia after an extended period of suppression and defining its role in an otherwise

anomalous and antagonistic world. Within this context, the overall approach of that document was critical, if not cynical toward the world, which it regarded as a threat to be defied and defeated. Such a defensive posture may survive and thrive under conditions of confessional isolation, but often dwindles and dissolves in the context of ecumenical exposure.

In contrast, from the middle of the twentieth century, it was an openness to other traditions and cultures through an encounter with other confessions and religions—in many ways, the first time that the Orthodox were brought into close contact and critical conversation with the modern world—that at least partly inspired and impelled the worldwide Orthodox Churches to embark upon the long and arduous process of convening the Holy and Great Council. Meeting in Crete for the first time after almost a millennium, Orthodox patriarchs and hierarchs—along with a handful of consultants, clergy and laity—issued a formal decree as well as an encyclical message on “the role of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world.” In this sense, the current document complements and completes the work of the extraordinary Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church that convened in June 2016 and may be considered as part of the process of its reception.

While the crafting this document was historically unparalleled as a process of transparency and unprecedented as a collaboration between the official hierarchy and theological scholarship, the readiness and openness of the church to involve and inform the laity in matters related to doctrine and polity still falls far short of the ideal and appropriate for chipping away at the hardened nucleus of clericalism. Nonetheless, the fact that Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew commissioned, entrusted, and endorsed this social document is a welcome and refreshing shift in mentality and

priority for a church traditionally associated with the past and alienated from the present. The Orthodox Church should no longer settle for mere survival.

For the Life of the World should be received as a step toward reflection on the social ethos of the Orthodox Church and consideration of the role of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary world. It provides a roadmap for reconciling contemporary issues with the wisdom and beauty of the Orthodox spiritual tradition, while initiating a conversation with parishes and congregations, schools and seminaries, as well as ecumenical circles and the broader community.