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The Church and Postmodernism*

Abstract: Today Orthodox Church is being pressed between two cultures: the culture of tradition and the culture of the (Post)modern. They represent both her challenge and her temptation. The entire culture of tradition draws water from the past, and this also applies to religion. The Postmodern is employing everything at its disposal to induce Christianity into becoming a natural religion, into becoming Christianity without Christ, into becoming a system of prohibitions and sanctions. The Church of Christ is not faced with a choice between the traditional and the postmodern, but with the eternal choice between good and evil, between Truth and falsehood, between Christ and the false gods of this world. The Church is required to live in the world, which is now the world of the Postmodern, but it is called to transcend that world at the same time.

Key words: Church, Postmodern, culture, tradition, religion, society, nationalism.

At the close of second and the beginning of third millennium the Church is being confronted with a completely new world, and, as genetics would have it, perhaps even with a transformation of human nature. According to the *Atlas of the Future* (Macmillan) and its most learned contributors representing different areas of research, it is predicted that:

- a) by year 2010 a whole series of artificial human organs will be created: heart, fingers, ears, hands, pancreas, etc.; cloning technology will be able to produce human blood cells and nerves;
- b) by year 2030 there will be artificial brain cells, lungs, reproductive organs, kidneys, liver; medical drugs will help prevent memory loss;
- c) by year 2050 artificial eyes and peripheral nerves will be created, as well as whole sections of the brain which would be replaceable;
- d) by year 2030 it is predicted that it will be possible to connect human brain to the computer, and from 2035 computers will be able to replace large segments of the brain; some predictions say that computers will have their own personality by 2040; computers will independently open, create, and send electronic mail; they will be able to understand and write all types of texts, and communicate with each other using human speech; by 2015 computers will be capable to think analogically just as human beings do, and they will have feelings similar to those that humans have.

* Translated into English by Petar Šerović.

e) by 2035 artificial human brain will be available; it is planned to put six billion people under biometrical supervision by year 2013.

Christian societies and Christian nations have all but disappeared. Church no longer standardizes public and social life. Christians are now a minority in those regions where, until only recently, they used to form a clear majority. Church is not entering the third millennium in triumph, but with a consciousness that she is being stalked by new great temptations. The Gospel gives us no motive to conclude that the future of both the world and the Church will become any brighter, more just, or more Churchlike – on the contrary.

It would be an intricate effort to judge and evaluate preceding Christian epochs from the standpoint of present-day values. However, it would not be difficult to understand Church history to this day as “the tragedy of sin and the mystery of salvation” (G. Florovsky), as a history of great successes and great accomplishments on all levels, but also of great downfalls. It is a history of the struggle for and against Christ. Church history saw its beginning through the authority to serve others on a voluntary basis (the authority of ministry). As time went on, the authority of ministry had more or less gone through a transformation turning into the authority to rule others, which became the greatest abomination to the world, finally causing the Church to lose its social influence. Fortunately, there have been, and there still are to this very day, such individuals within the Church who have managed to resist this pernicious temptation thus continuing to reveal Christ to the world by way of their own personalities.

The new epoch the Church is now facing some call the *postmodern* age, others call it post-Christian, while some others see it as being post-historical and post-political. This new epoch is a mortuary of great ideas and ideologies of the past two centuries. Great social utopias, which have only until recently attracted great masses of people, are now being extinguished. Man seems to be embracing isolation turning into a self-sealed monad, a tough competitor, and a cruel professional. The Postmodern denotes a crisis (perhaps even the end) of all the myths and divinities as created by the Modern, these being: reason, science, progress, democracy, nation, human rights. Men are no longer prone to acknowledge theoretical or abstract thought. They prefer to play with superficial notions. The picture is more important than text, the sound is more important than music.

Postmodernism has its own special values which are supposed to be accompanied by the inner feeling of leisureliness, excitement, and contentment. These values are: comfort, humor, youth, cosmopolitanism, and mobility. Man no longer feels that glory, dignity, and exaltation are of any importance to him. It is important to be seen as being likable, powerful, fascinating, seductive, always emphasizing one's own significance. It is also important to have an aversion towards war and violence, towards warrior ideas and nationalism. But this aversion is more an expression of hedonism rather than being an expression of a sincere conciliatory attitude towards others.

The Postmodern is being accompanied with an imperative for constant change and constant novelty. It is rapidly breaking all ties with the past or simply giving

it an archeological significance. The Postmodern presumes full personal independence of each human individual, and as J. Jukic would say “a privatization of human decisions”. The process of a full conversion to hedonism has been completed. In his book *The Defeat of the Mind* French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut says that a democratic man sees his own self as an independent being, as a social atom; being simultaneously isolated from his ancestors, his contemporaries, and descendents, he, above all, desires to satisfy his private needs, and to be equal with other men. The individual is above the society and the community. The cult of a “multicultural” and a “multi-religious” loner is being formed, where both the multicultural and the multi-religious characteristics denote a “richly garnished dish”. An intellectual of the Postmodern shows obedience towards the desire for power as expressed through show business, fashion, and advertising. Initially, individualism used to symbolize a demand for equality among human beings, and, in its own way, a statement of resistance to all hierarchical inequality. Individualism and individual freedom are the greatest values of the Postmodern. There is nothing which surmounts the freedom of the individual, or limits him in any way. Freedom towers above solidarity and duty. Man invests in himself, his looks, attractiveness, health, body, beauty, independence, and individual freedom. He is narcissistic, and he has almost transformed his own self into a religion. Food, money, and fame – the three temptations always used by the devil to lure man – paralyze in him all love towards Truth, goodness, and justice.

Hyper-individualism can not stand communion or the spirit of communion. It necessarily requires *pluralism* on all levels. Postmodern pluralism does not only represent a great multitude of people that have different skin color, religion, language, customs, behavior, or culture; it represents, above all, a variable state of mind (consciousness) which is capable, without any difficulty, to accept differing ideas, opposing values, and contrasting objectives. This state of mind is mostly being sponsored and promulgated by the media. In each and every corner of this planet the media makes present the entire world in its full diversity, thus shattering religious and nationally homogenous regions and worlds on a global scale.

Apart from individualism and pluralism, the third essential characteristic of the Postmodern is secularization. In spite of being an ambiguous concept, it essentially denotes “a decline of the social significance of religion” (Wilson, Mates). Upon excluding the Islamic world, we might say that faith and religion still have some individual meaning and significance, but that they have no influence as far as formation of social or national identity is concerned. The Postmodern is not anti-religious, but it is anti-ecclesial to a great extent, because the Church is an explicitly social phenomenon. It even creates and nourishes its own religion which lies in contradiction to classical forms of religiousness. In its character, religion of the Postmodern is syncretistic, esoteric, and occult. It is a *civil* religion or the *new age religion*. As a counterpart to pluralistic thought and freedom of choice, we have, on the religious plan, religious syncretism, “religion without affiliation”, religion without any articulated and established dogmas, canons, and institutions of its own. Man is free to choose anything which personally suits him from any

religion, but he accepts no religion in its entirety, including Christianity. Essentially, he creates his own religion. Civil religion – “religion without God” is essentially a system of beliefs and rituals which is a means by which contemporary societies sacralize their own worldly complexities, and support common devotion to the social order of the civil society.

Contemporary societies function independently in relation to Church authorities, religious dogmas, and canons. The world is not permitting the existence of God as a subject of history. The Church has no influence on human behavior or on human social life. Contemporary man does believe in some god, he believes “in something”. This can even be the Christian God, but the contemporary man refuses to accept Church institutions, or to allow the Christian God to interfere in the domain of his social and political life. He rejects Church institutions in favor of the principle of individual freedom and independence, or because he regards them as being excessively archaic and bureaucratized. Men have taken the path of freedom without frontiers. Individual piety has taken the place of Church experience. Christianity has become “a seasonal faith”. It has been mainly reduced to four rituals: baptism, matrimony, breaking of the Slava cake**, and funeral service. There is some movement and dynamics within the Church, which is being characterized as a revitalization of faith, but there is no movement and dynamics of the Church herself. It is sometimes possible to gain impression that her life depends on the failures and inadequacies of others, and on folklore and national traditions which have become permeated with religion.

Western societies have long ago put a market value on faith, or had it reduced to individual pleasure. Post-communist societies of the Christian East have put religion in service of “the secular religion of nationalism”. Today in the West, *being Christian* means being a decent and a law-abiding honest who regularly pays his taxes and who is reasonably mindful of philanthropy. On being asked if he prayed, one of the most significant protestant theologians, Paul Tillich, answered: “No, I meditate”! As far as Orthodox Christians are concerned, being Orthodox often means being Serb, Russian, Bulgarian, or Rumanian. It is as if Christians have become tired of being Christian. Western Christians accept the world of individualism, pluralism, liberalism, and secularism (together with their accompanying values) as being their world. Orthodox Church puts up with the values and the objectives of the Postmodern, but does not accept them in their totality as yet. Folkloristic Christianity has weakened the prophetic role of faith. There are plenty of Church parades and rituals on TV, but there is very little faith. Faith is being accepted in words, but not in deeds. It is as if Christians have sterilized the Gospel; there is essentially no difference between the everyday life of a Christian and the life of an agnostic or a non-Christian.

Today Orthodox Church is being pressed between two cultures: *the culture of tradition* and *the culture of the (Post)modern*. They represent both her challenge and her temptation. The entire culture of tradition draws water from the

** Part of Serbian Orthodox tradition (*translator's note*).

past, and this also applies to religion. Men of tradition are turned to the past and to the memory of the past. They are prone to an idealization and even a sacralization of past generations and epochs, and their forms of life. As far as they are concerned everything from the past is good, and everything in the present is bad. This type of mind and mentality gives precedence to order, social order, and an eternal repetition of the same. They are always inclined to impose and deify those forms of life which have already gone by. Since religion has become closely tied to tradition, many, including a great number of Christians, see the Church today as the guardian of national tradition and ideology. Contrary to her, the culture of the (Post)modern appears as a constant change, a constant novelty, and a total brake with the past. Protagonists of the culture of the (Post)modern unceasingly demand of the Church to keep bringing its entire structure up to date. This mainly applies to her institutions and organizations. Such demands often stem from within the Church also.

Traditionalists see the Church exclusively as “the memory of the past”, while others see her as “the memory of the future”. While some identify her with history, others strive to banish her from history. As far as the Church is concerned, both positions are equally dangerous to her. Christians are in the world, but not of the world. The Church of Christ is both “the memory of the future”, but also “the memory of the past”, “the memory of that which has occurred for our sake”. Christians can not bring back Christian past, “the good old times”, but they need to respect them; Christians need to encompass the past, the present and the future, both through and inside their own persons. They can not change and reform the world, but they can change and reform themselves. Change of one’s own person is simultaneously the change of the surrounding world. Changes in the external structures of the world do not necessarily cause personal and real changes to the better.

The Postmodern is employing everything at its disposal to induce Christianity into becoming a natural religion, into becoming a christianity without Christ, into becoming a system of prohibitions and sanctions; and, which is most tragic – to induce it into a non-acceptance of others. Christians are expected to resist this temptation. It is not up to them to rectify forms and institutions of contemporary societies; they should be constructing “the new society” which is the Church; they should be living out the permanent Christian antinomy of *being in the world, but not being of the world*. It is up to them to reveal to the world Christ, the true God and the true man, through their manner of life and to be weary of religious individualism and faith without good deeds.

The power of love and ministry is the power of Christ. Accepting the other, and habituating to the other to the point of identification with him/her, is the very essence of the Christian philosophy of life. If the power of ministry should triumph over the power of ruling others (to which the Church showed partiality, and especially so during some periods of her history), then the world would be right to hope for a better and a brighter future. Christian faith needs to be lived as *the freedom* in the Holy Spirit. Biblical-Patristic personalism on all levels,

together with the Church spirit of communion and community, present the only hope for the postmodern world which is finding itself in death agony. Modern and postmodern myths see “systems”, “ideas”, and “programs” everywhere, but the Gospel of Christ sees living persons everywhere. The Church of Christ is not faced with a choice between the traditional and the postmodern, but with the eternal choice between good and evil, between Truth and falsehood, between Christ and the false gods of this world. Unless she desires to betray her own self, she needs to reject *the Manichean* and *the magical-idolatrous* association with the world, since they are both equally dangerous to her. The Church is required to live in the world, which is now the world of the Postmodern, but it is called to transcend that world at the same time.

Orthodoxy is no longer only “eastern”. Today it is oecumenical, universal – not only in the geographical sense of the word, but also essentially and content wise. This is why it needs to hold back the psychology of the tribe and genus which has been imposed on it by centuries of its enslavement, while working on the spirit of catholicity, on the development and maintenance of the universal and the pan-human mind; it needs to cultivate care, emotion, and love. All this has to be done in history or, as some might prefer to say, in post-history, or in the age of the Postmodern.

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Црква и постмодерна

Аутор анализира основне елементе савремене културе, места и улоге Цркве у данашњем друштву, преиспитује актуелне „слике“ Цркве што се скрива, отварајући могућности плодног сусрета са постмодерном, која је изазов и искушење на које Црква мора одговорити, уз преображавање датости историје. Црква не бира између традиционалног (традиционалистичког) и (пост)модерног, већ између Христа — истине и лажних модерних богова.