

Failure of Orthodoxy: a political theology and Orthodox Christianity

Trajce Stojanov,
Faculty of Educational Sciences,
University Goce Delcev – Stip
trajce.stojanov@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract

From Schmitt's first use of the term in 1922, political theology has become a very potent topic not just for the theological analyses, but for political and philosophical as well. A number of thinkers from Catholic or Protestant space, have written a lot on this topic, trying to highlight this relation of the Christianity and politics. But, as far as we are familiar, there are not a lot of studies on Orthodoxy and politics. Just in the recent years, a several studies were published tackling this relation.

In this paper we would try to deal with this relation, and to offer a plausible answer why Orthodoxy couldn't provide satisfying political theology, or why Orthodoxy wasn't interested in social, cultural and political reality, as that was the case with Catholicism or Protestantism. For that reason, the paper will use historical approach, tracking the origins of the current situation in modern Orthodoxy back in the antient history of Christianity, but in the history of philosophy, as well. We will try to offer an answer to the obvious question posed by numerous researchers before – why Orthodoxy couldn't produce social, cultural and political reality, as that was the case with western Christianity? While Western Christianity not only became „politicized“, but also managed to create a specific social and cultural *ethos*. Even more - it managed to create cultural products, derived from their specific confessional space. Tracking back the historical circumstances in Orthodoxy, our conclusion is that it is due to the inherent mysticism of Orthodoxy that doesn't allowed faith to be „secularized“ into political realities. This paper will also examine the different approaches in East and West Christianity. Actually, this difference will be our main focus, so through it we can strengthen our thesis more firmly.

Key words: political theology, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Catholicism, culture, religion, society, politics

Introduction: sacred and profane

Theorists have repeatedly discussed the relationship between religion, politics, culture and society in general. Durkheim, Weber, Malinowski and others are the undisputed authorities in this area. But, in the light of modern constellations, this relationship requires continuous new thinking. Rethinking of this relation in today's society can bring new insights into politics and political life.

Maybe Clifford Geertz is right when he argues that modern studies of this relationship are still "living on conceptual capital" (Geertz, 2007, 90), left by these authorities. And really, more recent studies, in one sense or another, may be associated with these authorities. Even Geertz's study itself is on Max Weber's theoretical line. Geertz is attached to Weber's legacy too.

In this spirit the modern researchers: Peter Berger, Robert N. Bellah, abovementioned Clifford Geertz and others, began to increasingly focus on *symbolism* and *meaning* as key categories that refer to the relationship between religion, politics, society and culture, and which can essentially be related to the categorical apparatus of the aforesaid authorities.

Anyway, all this research has contributed to our deeper, but also empirically more detailed insight into the relationship between religion and the world, the relationship of sacred and profane. "Maybe it is strange," - says Robert Wuthnow - "to take everyday life as a starting point in the quest for holiness" (Wuthnow, 2003, 14), but modern interest focuses exactly on the relationship of sacred and profane. Especially after Peter Berger's inspiring study *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of Sociological Theory of Religion* (Berger, 1967), where this ratio is also considered in the context of the afore-mentioned categories of symbolism and meaning. For Berger, the religion is a symbolic universe which imposes meaning on the overall world order and life in general.

Culture, on the other hand, stands for "historically transmitted pattern of meanings, embodied in symbols, a system of inherited concepts expressed in symbolic forms, through which people preserve, transmit and develop their knowledge of life" (Geertz, 2007, 92); so, the importance and role of religious symbols that convey meaning in culture and people's lives is obvious. Moreover, for Geertz sacred symbols function in such a way that "they synthesize the *ethos* (italics – T.S.) of a people (which means – the level, quality and character of its life, of moral and aesthetic style, mood and its point of view)" (Geertz, 2007, 90). Culture, for Geertz, is made up of the *meanings* people find to make sense of their lives and to guide their actions, and social science is an attempt to engage those meanings. And what can provide more meaning than religion? Symbols, as synthesized ethos, on the other side, were something that Schmitt connected with religion and politics and state. And all the modern state symbolism he saw as religious (Schmitt, 1993)

"The ethos of a people" - it is the same concept Webber speaks about when he says that ascetic Protestantism created ethos in accordance with the rational modern capitalism. For Webber's this ethos is a direct consequence of Protestantism (Webber, 1989). Motivation, focus of life, desire for success ... that make capitalist spirit by Webber's opinion derive from the Calvinistic doctrine and they are inherent primarily to Calvinist Protestants.

We have no intention to elaborate on this Webber's well-known position, we will quote only the position of his study, which we share, and that is a good foundation for our further elaboration:

"On the other hand, however, we have no intention whatever of maintaining such a foolish and doctrinaire thesis as that the spirit of capitalism (in the provisional sense of the term explained above) could only have arisen as the result of certain effects of the Reformation,

or even that capitalism as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation. In itself, the fact that certain important forms of capitalistic business organization are known to be considerably older than the Reformation is a sufficient refutation of such a claim. On the contrary, we only wish to ascertain whether and to what extent religious forces have taken part in qualitative formation and the quantitative expansion of that spirit over the world. Furthermore, what concrete aspects of our capitalistic culture can be traced to them, In view of the tremendous confusion of interdependent influences between the material basis, the forms of social and political organization, and the ideas current in the time of the Reformation, we can only proceed by investigating whether and at what points certain correlations between forms of religious belief and practical ethics can be worked out. At the same time, we shall as far as possible clarify the manner and the general direction in which, by virtue of those relationships, the religious movements have influenced the development of material culture. Only when this has been determined with reasonable accuracy can the attempt be made to estimate to what extent the historical development of modern culture can be attributed to those religious forces and to what extent to others" (Webber, 1989, 19).

So, it is obviously that according to Webber, Protestant spirit influenced capitalism, or shaped capitalistic ethos in a great deal. Weber was maybe the first that investigated the relationship between the spirit of capitalism and the ascetic ethic of the Calvinists and other Puritans. In this influential study of Max Webber, we see how the capitalistic spirit is entrenched in Protestant Ethics. Of course, this was not the goal of Protestant religious reformers, but their cultural impact was unforeseen and maybe undesired, and yet, managed to change the western cultural identity forever.

Eastern and Western Christianity

In this paper we will also try to explain how religious beliefs affect modern culture, not only on the Protestant example, but in a broader historical context of Eastern and Western Christianity. Especially, we will try to see Orthodox Christianity and its relations to political. Finally, we will try to answer the question, why has Eastern Orthodoxy not developed a full-throated political theological voice? This relationship - Eastern Orthodoxy-politics - is very rarely touched by modern researchers, so we distance ourselves at the very beginning from the ambition to give a detailed analysis of the subject, not only because of space constraints, but also because of the complexity of the problem, which requires not only a fundamental theoretical elaboration, but also a detailed empirical verification.

That is why this work is more a sketch of future investigation, rather than a rounded exploration with definitive results. We, like Webber, are aware that the explanation of the cultural ethos of a people cannot be attributed solely to religious differences. Such a thing would be an inadmissible simplification without scientific justification, given the many-sided historical, social, political and other complex circumstances that determine culture.

But nevertheless, we will try to see what the world of Orthodoxy looks like. "Specific preference of rationalism" that Webber attributed to Protestantism, situated in a broader historical context, is significant for our topic. Specifically, it is this tendency that seems to be the result of some other tendencies in the history of Christianity, and the history of human thoughts in general, that are much deeper. Exploring these tendencies will lead us to the answer of the question why Orthodoxy didn't synthesize specific ethos, despite its inherent „nature“ to do that. Namely, „one of the main

features of Eastern Orthodox theology and liturgical experience is its vision of the catholic/holistic transformation and salvation of the whole creation, of the cosmos and humankind, and therefore the transformation of history, which has been assumed in the deified flesh of the son and Word of God. Just as Christ assumed the whole human person and the entirety of human nature, so should the church seek to assume –and then to transform and save– the whole human (body and soul, spirit and matter), as well as every aspect of his or her life (including the political, social, and economic aspects of this life, not just the spiritual or religious“ (Kalaitzidis, 2012, 9). But obviously this isn’t happening. Or, as Kalaitzidis (2012, 9), continues: „But this is not always the case when we come to the Orthodox Church, which, primarily for historical reasons, could not provide an adequate public witness of its eucharistic and eschatological self-consciousness, of its experience of the active expectation of the reign of God, and of the implications this expectation has for the “political” realm, viz. the Gospel commandments for social justice and solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, and the victims of history.“ So, this proposes to examine the reasons for which Orthodoxy –with few exceptions– has not developed, not just a political theology, but rather political reality, or to put it in cultural terms, specific cultural realm, ethos?

A very brief history of Christian ideas

To try to answer this question, we need to start from the period when the Church was one. This will reveal the dual state of the very nature of Christianity. In fact, back in the early days of Christianity two contradictory tendencies rooted - *rationalism* and *mysticism*.

Early Christianity will, among other things, build its physiognomy on the foundations of the ancient, Greek heritage. For our purposes, we will start from the two most prominent figures of antiquity: Plato and Aristotle. It being understood that Christianity incorporated other learning and ideas as well - stoicism, for example - but not just for the purposes of our research, we will exploit the ideas of these two philosophers, but also because their ideas are crucial for formation of Christianity. „The systematic Aristotelian discourse and the Platonic dialogue contributed significantly to the evolution of Christian views and Byzantine dialectics“ (Lamprou, 2017, 127). And even more than that – Plato and Aristotle are representatives of two philosophy-types, two different mentality-types. This inherent division of human nature to rationalist and mystics, reflected in their philosophy.

Plato divided the world into the ideal and the material, locating the *being* out of matter. He declared direct, mystical insight, contemplation, to be higher than rational. These attitudes culminate in Neo-Platonism; Neo-Platonists brought this idea to extreme religious consequences. Hereby mystical (irrational) aspect was established in Christianity.

That was one side of human mentality, one side of the essence of human nature – the mystical one. This mystical psychological type produced corresponding philosophy. On the other side, there is another psychological type, opposite of the mystical one – the rational one. And that type was incarnated in Aristotle. And what else could have been the founder of logic, except rationalist.

Aristotle is a researcher, an investigator, not a creator of myths and theology as Plato. His rational spirit of research will also be permanently incorporated into Christianity.¹

Rationalism and mysticism will start their battle at the very beginning of Christianity. All crises, all disputes, until the final separation of the Eastern and Western Churches, will basically have this division that as a stuck bolt tears the tissue of Christianity. "Christian world" - says G. Florovsky (1993, 31) - "is polarized. Christian history is taking place in the opposition of Empire and desert" The major and crucial clash - **iconoclastic crisis** - is the result of this duality between rationalism and mysticism. No doubt that the defending of the icons, primarily by St. John of Damascus is based on Neo-Platonism. "The whole concept of 'archetype' and 'image' was Platonic" (Florovsky, 1993, 99).

However, during the years before the fall of Constantinople, there was an intense nostalgia for the revival of ancient Greek and Platonic philosophy. The leader of this movement was Georgios Plethon Gemistos (1355/1360 - 1452/1454), one of the most renowned philosophers in the late Byzantine era, and a chief pioneer of the revival of Greek scholarship in Western Europe. He even re-introduced Plato's ideas to Western Europe during the seventeenth ecumenical council recognized by the Catholic Church, held between 1431 and 1449.

The opposition of Platonist and Aristotelians will reach its peak in the fifteenth century through Pliton, Visarion, Scholarios (Gennady). Rationalism and mysticism as opposing tendencies in Christianity will receive their systematic form, in the West in the person of Thomas Aquinas, and in the East in Gregory Palamas. Although, Palamas was not Platonist, maybe even on contrary, he might be even treated as Aristotelian, nevertheless, his personal spirit, or at least his philosophy was Platonic. Maybe his preference for Aristotle might be just because one and only reason – „Palamas deemed him less dangerous for the church“ (Lamprou, 2017, 127). Gennadius Scholarius (1400 – 1473), the first patriarch of Constantinople after its fall, was on the opposing side against Georgios Plethon Gemistos as the frenetic supporter of Aristotelian thought. He praised Palama's admiration for Aristotle (Lamprou, 2017, 128), before Plato, which might suggests that Palama preferred Aristotle before Plato. „It is not surprising that in Palamas' works there is an extensive use of philosophers, such as Aristotle (Metaphysics), Plato (Timaeus, Phaedrus, Apology) as well as several classic writers, such as Homer, Sophocles, Pythagoras, Plutarch (Ethics, Parallel Lives, Nikias), Xenophon (Memorabilia), Hesiod (Theogony, the Shield of Hercules), Pindar (Olympian Odes), Xenophanes, and others, a fact that points towards his complete literary knowledge“ (Lamprou, 2017, 129)

Eastern mysticism

However, Saint Gregory Palamas was one of the most prominent fathers of the Eastern Church in the 14th century, who, when he got into a dispute with Barlaam of Calabria and his followers, Akindinus and Nicephorus Gregoras, summarized and codified patristic theology of the previous centuries based on the authority of Scriptures, previous patristic tradition as well as his personal

¹ (This abbreviated rendition of Plato and Aristotle's influence on Christianity is far from satisfactory and convincing, and it seems as an unacceptable simplification. For a deeper insight into all aspects of Christian reception of ancient thinking refer to: Volfhart, Panenberg (2003)).

experience. This summarization of previous history of Christian tradition in defending of the hesychasm decisively determined the final physiognomy of Orthodoxy.

On the other side in the West „the study of Aristotle from the 9th century onwards turned theology into a strict system of truths“ (Lamprou, 2017, 127). Aquinas adapts Aristotle and puts him in the function of dogma, while in Palamas' teaching Plato's mystical spirit triumphs, adjusted to dogma. The culmination of the collision, and thus the definitive demarcation of the spiritual physiognomy of the West and the East, happens in the so called *hesychia dispute* between Varlaam and Palamas and their followers. In the West intellectualistic realism will dominate, while in the East it will be mystical realism; the West will prove God, the East will experience Him through **hesychia**.

The fact that the East definitely decided for the authority of mystical insight, rather than for the authority of rational knowledge of the West, is crucial for the fate of East Christianity. The decision in the East for mystical contemplation instead of for rational cognition, distanced it from the path taken later by the West - Renaissance, church Reformation and Protestantism.

Peter Berger also insists on opposing tendencies in Christianity as its immanent characteristics.² Judaism, claims he, rejected magic and mysticism. This, together with ethical rationalism, took over Christianity. But, he says, Christianity made a step back at the very start by re-introducing a level of mysticism and elements of magic and sacred secrets. The rationalist line, which culminates in Protestantism, "largely rejected the sacrament and ritual elements of the Catholic faith" (Berger, 1967, 322).

Conclusion

Thus, all of this, defined final physiognomy of the Western and Eastern Christianity, first with the Reformation, and later with secularism, will essentially define the physiognomy of Western and Eastern cultures. Paradoxically, the Reformation (1517), which was actually supposed to mean reinforcement and strengthening of faith, had scattered the seeds of secularization (XVII century). Rationalism reached the culmination in the West. *The dominant rational element began to build the specific ethos of the Western culture by the process of secularization*. Secularization, in this case, does not mean the abandonment of religious symbols, rituals, beliefs, but rather their *adaptation to the secular*. In the process of secularization in the West religion is not lost – what is lost is the difference between social and religious. Religious beliefs, ideas, symbols and meanings are secularized, transposing in the secular, cultural space. What happens is the *antropologization of religion*, its descending in to immanence. Institutions are becoming a reflection of God's will; rights, sovereignty, legal freedom, and other modern concepts are based on the secularized notions and concepts of religion. That's why the above-mentioned Karl Schmitt, in his work *Political theology* directly claims: "All pregnant notions of the modern doctrine of the state represent secularized theological concepts." (Schmitt, 1993, 48).

While this process of formation of modern states that defined their cultural physiognomy by the process of secularization was happening in the west, the East was not given such a chance - in 1453 Constantinople fell under Ottomans. At the time when this particular church spirituality should have articulated and produced specific cultural ethos - it did not get a chance. The processes of secularization didn't happen in the East. That's why, Eastern Christianity never got its secular

² For this aspect of Berger's analysis refer to: Hamilton (2003, 322-325)

articulation. In essence, it is the sole and final conclusion of this paper. If given the opportunity, the East would be profiled in a specific mystical, cultural environment.

Today's perception of Eastern cultures, as more or less Oriental is the result exactly of that mystical element in them, although these cultures failed to create specific cultural products on the basis of that mystique. *Sacred (religious) symbols, Geertz would say, in the East failed to synthesize a specific cultural/secular ethos and to create one "holy firmament" that would rationalize cultural experience.*

Religion is an unavoidable reality that calls for cultural materials; that is filtered through the symbolically constructed reality of a person and the interaction of individuals. Such cultural materials, such cultural ethos, have never been created by the East. Easterners became aware of their uniqueness in the last several decades when they try to articulate that uniqueness as a cultural ethos. Whether they succeed and how that articulation would look like is not known by anyone at this time.

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