
Orthodoxy in Post-Modern Pluralist Societies

Thomas Hopko

“Democracy”, said Winston Churchill, “is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

I agree. As the grandson of Carpatho-Russian immigrants to the United States, I cannot imagine my life in any other society, and I feel extremely grateful for my personal destiny. But as an Orthodox Christian, blessed with higher learning, faith, family, priesthood and theology, I cannot imagine a way of life more insidious to Christian Orthodoxy and more potentially dangerous to human being and life than American liberal democracy.

Corruptio optimi pessima. The corruption of the best is the worst. The most evil vice is always the perversion of the most excellent virtue. There is no better example of this than what has happened and continues to happen to American liberal democratic society, with its capitalist economics, its affirmation of human equality and individual rights and its insistence on total freedom for all persons and communities in their “pursuit of happiness”, qualified only by the imperative that the rights and freedoms of another are not to be violated or denied.

Liberal democracy in the United States today is not what it was in 1947 when Churchill made the well-known remark cited above. Much has changed. The form of society now produced – and exported – by the US is not the kind of democracy Churchill described. Fifty years ago, the “American way of life” was indeed liberal, democratic and capitalistic. But it was not genuinely “pluralistic”. It was white, Western and Christian, grounded in a biblical worldview, primarily as this was understood by Protestants, and a biblical ethic which was held, however tenuously or hypocritically, by the vast majority of the people. Nor was it “post-modern”: the secularized, politicized, subjectivized and carnalized way of life which has resulted from the “deconstruction” of science, metaphysics, theology and art.

Orthodox Christians in North America, Western Europe, sections of the Middle East, Australia and Japan already live, in varying degrees, in the new social, political

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and economic post-modern pluralism whose origins lie in modern American liberal democracy. Those in Eastern Europe are on their way to it with a determination that will not be denied. And those in the so-called third world have already been affected by it in many and complex ways.

A totally new reality

Some Orthodox will respond to this by quoting the Preacher and insisting that there is really “nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). Indeed, birth and death, pleasure and pain, righteousness and sin, peace and war, and the changing of the seasons have always been and always will be. But wise people also know that the ways in which human beings experience, understand and interpret these constant realities are constantly changing.

Others will say that Orthodox Christians in all times and all places are inevitably in the situation in which they find themselves today. The Orthodox on this view have always been a minority within a minority – misunderstood, feared, ridiculed, rejected and persecuted, by spear or by sneer, as Dostoevsky once put it. This was so in the earliest church, they say, when the Orthodox were a small group within the “Jesus movement”, surrounded by gnostics, legalists and fundamentalists of various sorts, as can be seen already in the canonical New Testament scriptures. This was true in the Constantinian age, when the Orthodox fathers and saints usually departed this life defeated and dishonoured while heretics, apostates and plain evil-doers ruled the Christian empire. It was true under the Ottomans and in Holy Russia, not to mention the Marxist horror. And it is true today. So, on this view, things were never really any different from what they are now.

And some Orthodox specifically compare our time to that of the early church, when Christians were divided among themselves in a great variety of groups and movements, with massive confusion and controversy among themselves, and under violent persecution from those around them in a world that was both highly religious and highly carnal yet fully united in its outrage against those who, in their irrational stubbornness, resolutely refused to agree that Jesus was only one of the many religious and spiritual paths available to sensible, tolerant, cultivated people of good will.

But there are radical differences today from all previous times. Orthodoxy today is not a persecuted minority among a plethora of Christian and other spiritual movements in a “pagan” empire whose faithful members are in the fresh fervour of the first proclamation of Christ in the world. Nor is Orthodoxy today the established church of a Christian empire whose persecuted saints are in constant struggle with heretics, apostates and sinners, and even at times with each other. Nor is Orthodoxy any longer a variety of ethnic communities under Muslim or Marxist domination. Nor is it, in “diaspora”, simply a collection of Orthodox exiles in heterodox Christian countries undergoing massive secularization, transformation and change.

Though still a minority church riddled with massive inner confusions, fears, pretensions and divisions resulting from its 2000-year odyssey through history, Orthodoxy today, for the first time ever, finds itself in a “global village”, all of whose diverse peoples are moving in varying ways towards a way of life which has already begun to dominate the planet. This is liberal, democratic, capitalistic, post-modern (and post-Christian) pluralism. It is the way of life which already reigns in what was once called the “first world”.

From modern to post-modern

Remnants of the old “modern” world remain in the US today, and they remain as well in the present world which the US is producing and for which it remains the ideal, no matter how much some may deny, deplore and resist it. Religious toleration, racial equality and minority rights, for example, are still issues of major concern in the US and everywhere else in the political realm. The right to work, equal employment opportunities, safe working conditions and a just wage are still sought and fought for in the economic arena. Universal education and health care, adequate housing and compassionate immigration policies are still matters of critical social concern. And in religious, philosophical, scientific and artistic life, the old modern issues (Kant, Darwin, Newton...) – the relationship between faith and reason, science and theology, critical thinking and fundamentalism, liberty and authority, individual conscience and traditional mores, even orthodoxy and heresy – continue to attract passionate attention and concern. But these issues are no longer viewed and interpreted as they once were. In post-modern pluralistic societies, they are seen in a whole new way, within a whole new context and with a whole new agenda for action.

This new universe of thought, discourse and behaviour is the direct result of modern secularized society’s reduction of Christianity to a privatized, compartmentalized “religion”. The brilliant critique of this in the writings of Alexander Schmemmann can still be read with great profit, especially perhaps in post-Marxist societies. It is a transmutation of the Judaeo-Christian worldview and experience far beyond anything even remotely imagined by Georges Florovsky (among many others) in his critique of heterodox “pseudomorphoses” of Orthodoxy.¹ In modern secularized society, the language, structures, symbols and rites of classical, biblical Christianity remain, while their content and meaning are radically altered. In the post-modern “deconstruction” of the modern worldview – by way of radical personal and cultural existentialism, the sexual revolution, the mystical quest, the politicization of theology and ethics and the explosion of material and spiritual hedonism and avarice – traditional language, structures, symbols and rites are re-created; their original content and meaning are replaced by a whole new reconstruction of reality.

In the post-modern pluralistic world there is no objective truth, right, good or beauty which all human beings are created to discover, know and believe, to which they are called to conform in thought, word and deed, in which they are privileged to delight and rejoice, and for which they are blessed to give glory and thanksgiving to God. There is no such thing as objective meaning and purpose. There is rather a creation of reality, or, more accurately, many creations of a plethora of pseudo-realities, produced by the subjective willings of individuals, parties and “interest groups” in the context of politics, power, self-creation and permissiveness. The tenets of modern liberal democracy become objects of worship and ends in themselves in a politicized, hedonized world. Freedom becomes licence. Acquisition becomes a right. Differences are deified. And happiness, understood as material and pseudo-spiritual pleasure, becomes obligatory for all.

More than sixty years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote that modern American liberal Protestantism taught that “a God without wrath brings man without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross”.² It could now be said that in the new age of post-modern pluralism, divinity without sovereignty brings humans without dignity into an era without responsibility through the exploitation of a god or goddess of your own making without tragedy.

Anyone who considers this a frightful exaggeration should take a closer look at politics, economics, law, education, medicine, religion, entertainment and art in the US today – and then at what is now happening in all countries and regions of the world, beginning with his or her own.

Four unacceptable responses

Four possible responses to post-modern pluralism seem to me to be unacceptable for Orthodox Christians.

The first is to deny that “post-modern pluralism” exists and is rapidly growing throughout the world. To misread what is happening and to underestimate its impact would be fatal for Orthodoxy. Post-modern pluralism is here and, barring a revolution of unimaginable proportions, it is here to stay.

Second, it would be a fatal mistake for Orthodox Christians to think that they and their churches are somehow immune to post-modernism and untouched by its influence and power. We Orthodox are as infectable – and infected – as any, and as easily diseased and deluded. We only need, by God’s grace, to see ourselves as we actually are (which our saints tell us is a miracle greater than raising the dead) to acknowledge that this is so.

A psychiatrist has said that “a great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep”.³ These could be the words of an ascetic saint describing spiritual delusion. This warning is also applicable to us Orthodox today, whose need for illusions and delusions about ourselves, our churches, our histories, our neighbours and our contemporary world seems very deep indeed.

Third, Orthodox Christians must not respond to post-modern pluralism by imagining that we can reject the contemporary world by taking refuge in a world of our own making. To do so would be to yield to the very temptation we are called to expose and resist. That indeed is what post-modernism would have us do – and would defend our right and reason for doing. We cannot create our own realities for our own purposes by subjective *fiat*. We must engage reality as it is, and take responsibility for it before God. We must live in the world which, by God’s providence, is ours.

Fourth, Orthodox Christians must not fall prey to the idea that the post-modern pluralistic worldview is a great new opportunity for humankind, inherently consistent with traditional Orthodox views of freedom, personal dignity, cultural diversity, incarnational theology and apophatic mystical theology, as well as our equally traditional (if sometimes facile and superficial) criticisms of “Western” rationalism, pietism, legalism and moralism.

Orthodoxy and post-modernism

There are several things which Orthodox Christians can and must do in the face of the post-modern pluralistic worldview, particularly in societies where it has already taken hold.

From the start, we must compel ourselves to put Christ, and only Christ and his gospel, at the centre of our concerns, and do only that which “seems good to the Holy Spirit and us” according to the “mind of Christ”. We must work to evaluate the world together in a conciliar manner, finding a common mind and forging a common plan of action as Orthodox Christians. This is no mean achievement in the contemporary post-modern pluralistic world which constrains us to construct our own particular versions

of reality and history on the basis of our own self-determined desires, interests and needs.

Conciliarity, which is Orthodoxy itself, demands more than sacrifice. It demands death. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25). This saying of the Lord applies as much to parishes, dioceses, local churches and patriarchates as to individual persons. It is totally antithetical to the post-modern pluralistic view which in the name of our rights and liberties commands us not merely to love our lives in this world, but to create and deify them, defending them against anyone and anything that would have us do otherwise. How ironic – and unbearably painful – it is to see Orthodox Christians and churches betraying Christ and the gospel, as well as their own real self-interests, in their captivation to the demonic deceit that God himself would have us love, protect and defend "our own" at the expense not only of others but of truth itself.

Orthodox Christians must once and for all abandon the lie that we and our churches can live by Christ's gospel and still retain all the riches and glories of our peculiar national cultures and identities, even using Orthodoxy itself for this purpose. We Orthodox in modern and post-modern pluralistic societies have largely accepted and enacted this deception; and our present pathetic realities reveal the consequences. Orthodox in North America and Western Europe are far along the way to losing both our faith and our culture by fusing them together as if they were one and the same. And our brothers and sisters in post-Marxist lands seem not to have learned much from our experience.

According to Christ's gospel there is only one way to save our lives, and everything in our lives worth saving, for everlasting life in God's kingdom. It is to deny, forsake and even to hate all things in this world for the sake of Christ, the gospel and the kingdom of God. It is to hate our families, nations, possessions and cultures – and even our earthly ecclesiastical institutions – for the sake of the truth (cf. Luke 14:25-26). It is, to use St Paul's powerful words, "whatever gains I had... to regard as loss because of Christ" and "to suffer the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish" because of "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" and being "found in him" (Phil. 3:7-9). These are strong words. But they are true, and we violate them at our own risk. It is the good things in life, not our weaknesses and faults, which are our greatest temptations, for they become our idols and cause us to distort reality, deny truth and endorse deception.

In living solely according to the gospel of Christ, we must also resist the temptation to hypostasize Orthodoxy into a thing-in-itself, an ideology among ideologies, an instrument for furthering our national, political, cultural or economic ambitions and desires. We must abandon what insightful critics of post-modern pluralism call "hyphenated" truths, values, histories, ethics and art. This means that we must not allow ourselves to speak simply of Orthodoxy, or of Orthodox theology, spirituality, culture and morality. We must rather speak of reality itself from the perspective of the gospel and the Orthodox tradition.

The reason for this is that the post-modern pluralistic worldview and rhetoric encourage the conviction that varieties of religions, movements and cultures can and indeed must produce their own truths for themselves. They must create their own

ethics and art, and write their own histories according to their own interests and purposes. There is no such thing as Orthodoxy just for the Orthodox, any more than there is such a thing as womanist history – or homosexual art or Buddhist ethics or Muslim spirituality – possessing the right not only to remain unchallenged by those outside the respective communities, but even to insist on its universal approbation by others as proper and legitimate to the community's members. There is truth for everyone, values for all people, history in which all have their rightful place, art in which all can delight and spirituality in which all can share – none of which has the right of remaining beyond the questions and criticisms of others and the human community as a whole, and all of which have the duty of being open to testing by others of their veracity and validity for all people. Orthodoxy is no exception to this rule. We Orthodox must be ready to be questioned and challenged concerning our claims.

This leads to the very essence of Orthodoxy's witness in the world: the conviction that Jesus Christ is the Son and Word of the only true God, and that he alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life of all people, God's very wisdom and power in the world. Jesus is God's enfleshed image according to which all men and women are made. He is the Head, not only of the church, but over all things (*hyper panta*); the one in, for and by whom all things (*ta panta*) come to be and exist; the one in whom all things (*ta panta*) hold together and consist.

Jesus of Nazareth is not one of many lights in the world. He is the Light of the world itself who enlightens all men and women who sit in lands of darkness and in the shadow of death. He is Life itself, confined to no one culture, tradition or nation, unbound even by the Orthodox church which is "his body, the fullness of him who fills all and in all". He is God's beloved Son, the Son of God's love, and God who is love itself.

Wherever truth is, Christ is there. Wherever wise people find their way, however imperfectly, he is their wisdom and way. Wherever power and beauty exist, he is their origin and end. And wherever there is love, he is its source, content and rule, its definitive bearer and revealer in the world, its final fulfilment, completion and perfection forever. This is Orthodoxy, always and everywhere. It is the evangelical "word of the cross", which perhaps never in human history has seemed more scandalous and foolish than in the contemporary post-modern pluralistic world in which we now live.

Contrary to post-modern propaganda, such convictions need not necessarily lead to the imperialist domination of "Christo-fascists" who use military, economic or cultural means to compel others to accept their dogmas, ethics and versions of history. This can happen and did, indeed, happen in the past. But the Orthodox saints – and indeed the saints of all times and places whom the Orthodox see as inspired by God – have always opposed this even to the point of shedding their blood at the hands of their own earthly powers as well as their enemies.

Whatever the case, Orthodox Christians today must be prepared to tolerate every error and evil while unmasking its falsehood and rebuking its sin. And we must be ready as well, with real rejoicing and without reluctance or regret, to affirm "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious", with anything "excellent" and "worthy of praise", wherever and in whomever these divine realities are found. And we must also be willing to exercise our privilege and duty as Orthodox Christians to intercede before God and to stand as advocates before his face on behalf of all who, wittingly or unwittingly, have been led astray by the devil.

This brings us to another imperative for Orthodox Christians in post-modern pluralistic societies: the calling to evangelize, witness and serve all people without discrimination, domination or condition, and indeed without even the desire to convert or reform – which is God’s job, not ours. We are only to announce the gospel, testify to the truth, serve every person and be ready to suffer the consequences which are surely to come. Though this was always the task of the Orthodox, it was not always our way, or that of our neighbours. It is more imperative than ever that it be our way today in a world in which those who claim to be in any way “orthodox” are suspected and feared – sometimes for good reasons.

To be faithful to that for which we have been chosen and called, we Orthodox must be free ourselves and respect the freedom of others, while proclaiming and proving that true freedom is found only in knowing and doing the truth. Perhaps no ideal and no idol is more present and powerful in modern and post-modern societies than freedom. And perhaps nothing is more misunderstood, misused and abused. Not only democracy, but true Christianity, is impossible without freedom. American liberal democracy in its original form is perhaps history’s greatest proof of this truth, and Holy Russia, perhaps, the greatest example of the tragedy of its violation.

As long as the “American experiment” remained rooted in its Christian soil, it worked. It was truly the worst possible form of human society except for the others. It deteriorated to its present condition not only by sin or, as some say, by ceasing to be overtly Christian (even Protestant). It decomposed when democracy became an idolized end-in-itself and every participant and group demanded its right not only to be respected and tolerated, but to be affirmed and approved without question or condition. It collapsed, and continues to collapse, through the loss not only of basic Christian doctrine and ethics, but also of the conviction that there is any objective truth and righteousness for all people in any form whatever. Because of this, the transformation of modern American liberal democracy into a post-modern pluralistic plethora of hostile and warring interest groups, including some which bear the name “Christian”, was inevitable. And so, too, was its movement towards what Pope John Paul II has called a “culture of death”.

Death, not life, is ultimately what post-modern pluralism is about. It is the essence of its ethos. We are speaking here not merely of the death of the mind and the spirit, but of the soul and body, and of human community and society itself. Dostoevsky revealed the roots of this madness in his radical exposure of “modernism”. Metropolitan John of Pergamon has analyzed it magnificently in his studies on being as communion and communion as truth.

Liberal democracy and free-market capitalism in its “deconstructed” post-modern forms are literally lethal. It cannot be otherwise. There is an ontological law at work here which cannot be violated except unto death. The “Kirillov” syndrome, artistically described by Dostoevsky in *The Demons*, and analyzed philosophically and theologically by Metropolitan John and others, is clearly demonstrated in an existential and historical way in contemporary modern and post-modern North American and Western European societies.

To see once again that this is so, one need only to examine “first-world” political, military, economic and sexual practices; the activity of the media; contemporary entertainment and art; the handling of the AIDS crisis and abortion; and the euthanasia and “right-to-die” movements. What “Kirillov” achieved for the modern alienated, liber-

tarian individual, post-modern pluralists achieve for humankind as a whole. In its most radical and advanced expressions, the “culture of death” not only permits humans the right to demonstrate their freedom by spiritual and physical suicide, but it allows them the liberty to kill others as well.

Orthodox Christians must stand in the contemporary world not only by affirming life against death, but by affirming death in its true light, as the “final enemy” to be confronted, taken up and destroyed. We know that death is destroyed in Christ. It is destroyed not by life-affirming rhetoric, positive thinking and an upbeat attitude in the “pursuit of happiness”. Still less is it overcome by political activity, legal action, economic development, sexual liberation or the will to power. Nor is it conquered by the acquisition of possessions, properties, positions, profits and prestige. It is overcome, defeated and destroyed by truth, justice and love. It is conquered by the refusal to resist evil-doers even unto death in order to remain untouched by their evils.

The paschal proclamation of Christ’s victory over death is Orthodoxy itself. The Lord conquers death by taking up sin, becoming a curse, embracing pain, enduring suffering and being obedient to God the Father even unto death on the cross in unconditional love for evildoers and by becoming their unyielding intercessor and advocate before God the Father. Christ’s disciples are called to do nothing other than what he has done and continues to do through them for the salvation of humanity:

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him... And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil... But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God (John 3:17,19,21).

NOTES

¹ Florovsky first used the term “pseudomorphosis” in a paper on “The Ethos of the Orthodox Church”, presented at a Faith and Order consultation in Kifissia, Greece, in 1959 and subsequently reprinted in *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 12, no. 2, 1960, pp.183-98. The term has since become widely used in Orthodox circles to refer negatively to the ways in which the theology characteristic of Western scholasticism has rubbed off onto Orthodox theology.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, Chicago, Willett-Clark, 1937, p.193.

³ C.W. Socarides, *Homosexuality: A Freedom Too Far*, Phoenix AZ, Adam Margrave Books, 1995, p.234.