

The Dialogue between Science and Orthodoxy: Specificity and Possibilities

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Abstract

The current study sets out to evaluate the particularities of the rapprochement between science and Eastern-Christian Orthodoxy. As such, the article focuses on the grounds for the existence of certain avenues for dialogue, not only between science and religion in general, or even between science and Christianity, but specifically between science and that which we know as Eastern Christian Orthodoxy. This means that the text focuses on the underlying characteristics of Orthodox spirituality and doctrine that confirm a distinct close relationship to modern science, which cannot be found in other forms of Christianity. Another key claim of the text is that this rapprochement is only made possible by the circumstances of recent developments of the cultural model, in which philosophy has played a major role. I also set out to explore the reasons why such closeness was virtually impossible in the previous horizons of modernity, in particular during the Enlightenment.

Keywords: Orthodoxy, science, culture, interpretation.

Identifying the ways to establish bridges between science and religion has been a constant endeavour in recent times, under the impulse of changes which have occurred in the last century not only in science, but also in terms of how we tend to understand reality. More specifically, this is the result of a certain crisis in the way reality is understood. A new paradigm has been envisioned, in the light of which a dialogue between science and Christianity can indeed take place, as the Christian religion is thought to be able to provide an elaborate explanation of the world's rationality.

However, relatively there has been achieved in terms of exploring the specific avenues for dialogue between Christian Orthodoxy and scientific and especially fundamental research. This has been due to a prevailing view that there are no major differences in how the different branches of Christianity relate to scientific research of reality. Therefore a separate examination was not considered necessary, especially for Eastern Christianity. The spirituality of the East often appeared as old, conservative, and dominated by immobility, to the eyes of the man educated based on the formative frameworks of the past three or four centuries. This impression was particularly prominent in the context of the scientific paradigm of modernity. In the environment created by the Enlightenment, there emerged a doctrine which thrived on asserting the superiority of reason and was hostile to institutional authority – including that of the Christian tradition, as a spiritual or doctrinal heritage.

To advance towards shaping a framework for potential avenues of dialogue between Christian Orthodoxy and fundamental science, it is therefore necessary that we begin with an assessment of the broader cultural context in which this dialogue may occur. The context that may facilitate such dialogue is a key element, as the cultural model always influences, directly or indirectly, the forms of human experience in a certain religious area and the way of conducting scientific research. More specifically, the cultural history of Europe confirms that at certain historical moments, the prevailing mentalities of the age guided human experience in one way or the other. Therefore, the cultural horizon must not be neglected in any analysis of the actions of man as he seeks accuracy and adequate tools of interpretation. The current opportunity to identify avenues for productive dialogue between Christian Orthodoxy and fundamental scientific research is dependent on the state of the present cultural context, taking into account the changes it has undergone of late. In order to highlight the reasons for the current state of the cultural landscape and anticipate future trends, we must first explore the cultural landmarks of modernity.

If we had to point out a defining feature of modernity, it would certainly be the concept of *reason*. The concept had broad currency in the seventeenth century, yet with a different meaning than in the Middle Ages and especially than in the Greek Antiquity. The moderns saw reason as being a privileged capacity of man, a hallmark of being human, while regarding the other faculties as secondary at best. The central tenet of the Enlightenment, the dominant cultural phenomenon at the dawn of modernity, was the confidence in the capacities of the human intellect, which also enabled a most effective rejection of any kind of institutional authority, as Voltaire put it. Engaging reason meant making use of intellectual abilities in order to search proof for or against our potential beliefs. It was believed that failing to engage reason led to constructing beliefs based on non-rational processes in the manner of blind faith and blind obedience to institutional authority.

This orientation, which transformed the European cultural model, was connected with the establishment of the modern concept of science. Galilee provided the original formulation and set the authoritative boundaries of the modern approach to conducting scientific research. The Galilean paradigm of science argued that the act proper to science is the reduction of the sensitive or living qualities of the bodies (qualities regarded as being mere appearance and illusion), and their substitution by the mathematical knowledge of forms and their relations¹. It claimed that forms and the connections between them could be known *only* by means of mathematics, therefore genuine reason was connected to this form of knowledge. The posterity adopted this notion as *the only valid form of knowledge*. Philosophy was also influenced by this interpretation, so the Galilean doctrine turns out to be a seminal source of modernity. It also laid the groundwork for other bolder cultural movements, such as the striking example of Baruch Spinoza's radical version of the Enlightenment.

¹ Michel Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*, Seuil, Paris, 2000,155.

Spinoza, speaking as a thinker and not as a scientist, stated that he was on a search for the "true ideas" about nature and its workings, a search grounded in the possibility to verify cause and effect mathematically. He would adopt a unique notion of scientific rationality, which aspired to be exact and exclusive, and based on it he radically rejected any arguments, beliefs and traditions which were in conflict with the laws of nature. Spinoza described the laws of nature in mathematical terms, based on a mechanistic vision. We must underline that this understanding became the bedrock of a philosophical doctrine, going beyond the strict scope of science. This is an important sign of the tendency towards a more radicalised explanation of the world. Cartesianism had postulated the dichotomy of substance, conceiving reality as being built of two completely separated spheres or sets of rules, one of which was the domain of mechanistic causality. The British Empiricists, Newton and Boyle among others, argued that only that which can be proved to operate according to the laws of mechanics and is verifiable by experiment is confirmed as the subject of cause and effect. Nevertheless, they left room for what was beyond this safe way of evaluation. They accepted that reality was more than what could be described and verified through experiments based on the relation of cause and effect. However, Spinoza and his followers maintained that the mechanistic concepts provided by seventeenth-century science could be universally applied, so that all that exists is subjected to the same set of rules, with no other reality possible outside or beyond the rules of motion governing nature. Nothing may take place in nature that contravenes its universal laws². On these grounds, Spinoza asserted the certainty that science is crucial for acquiring well-founded knowledge and ensuring human self-knowledge, happiness or redemption. Furthermore, he stated that science is essential not only for obtaining valid knowledge and drive away irrational fears and anxiety, but also for improving human life by emancipating the human from the anxieties and pressures deriving from his basic bodily needs.

² Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 245.

The emergence of the mechanistic view of the world, proposed by Descartes and Galilee, and particularly the formulation and refinement of the laws of motion, inspired the establishment of a conceptual antithesis between "natural" and "supernatural" in European culture. This movement was sustained throughout the seventeenth century by the numerous debates held by Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz and Malebranche. Furthermore, Spinoza proclaimed the absolute and irreparable antithesis between the two dimensions (or ways of understanding reality), which would be increasingly regarded as completely distinct, rejecting the supernatural as an exclusive product of imagination³.

The interpretation horizon of modernity until the nineteenth century remained under the ideological imperialism of a single approach to scientific research: Galilean science and its instruments. The ideological character of this interpretation paradigm, which took on the trappings of a belief, was visible in all fields of culture: in scientific research as in philosophy and theology, among others. The reason for this expansion was the practicality of this way of understanding reality, specifically the technological progress. However, at the end of the nineteenth century the limitations of this perspective became visible. Philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey insisted upon the radical distinction between two manners of research and the difference of essence between the sciences of nature and the sciences of the spirit. While *explanation* is proper to the sciences of nature, *understanding* is proper to those of the spirit. The object of the sciences of the spirit is the *experience*, and the only way to understand it is by *recollecting the experience*⁴. Reflecting this trend in the early twentieth century, Henri Bergson proposed the theory of the limitations of reason, arguing that reason cannot comprehend life, while affirming that life is the most important thing in the Universe. Bergson argued that mathematics and physics, sciences in the strictest sense of the word, provide categories

³ *Ibidem*, 254.

⁴ Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2002, 57.

of understanding which exclude life⁵. The spatial relations are quantitative and therefore may be the subject of the process of understanding based on the intellect, but time causes qualitative changes which by principle deny the possibility of investigation. Life, so closely connected to temporality, escapes therefore any explanation, seeing as it always becomes something different. The non-living does not have a history *per se*, because the passage of time does not cause any change of essence to it. The changes it undergoes may repeat themselves. Life, on the other hand, Bergson argued, is a succession of new phenomena. No present state represents a repetition of the past; no future state will represent a repetition of the present state. That is why we may speak of past and future only in connection to life. However, if life is a continuous process of manifestation of new phenomena, this means that it has in itself an explosive force, which establishes a creative power in the Universe. Bergson called this force *élan vital*. Bergsonian thought was a landmark in the separation from the explanatory paradigm formulated by Galilean science. This re-evaluation of the frameworks of rational knowledge was also possible due to the critique levelled at onto-theology by Søren Kierkegaard and his existential subjectivity. The egological interpretation of the being sets subjectivity, the "Ego", as basis and principle of all that exists. Within the Ego, understood as a foundation, the thought and the being are identical⁶.

This attitude towards reality represented, at the same time, a key source for the Existentialist thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century, as they too affirmed the primacy of existence over essence. Theirs was a protest against the Essentialist doctrines inspired by Hegel. During the period, Martin Heidegger wrote a study on the *essence of technology*, in which he highlighted the inadequacy of the modern technical attitude towards nature. Nature, Heidegger argued, is increasingly *challenged to deliver* its resources for arbitrary human ends. Indeed, the critique of the technological character

⁵ Henry Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant. Essais et conférences*, Les Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1969, 82.

⁶ David Kangas, *Abolutive Subjectivity: Kierkegaard and the Question of Onto-Theo-Egology*, *Philosophy Today*, 74, 4, Winter 2003, 379.

of the modern world is an underlying theme of Heidegger's philosophy⁷.

Philosophical hermeneutics, as outlined by Hans Georg Gadamer during the same period, explored another key deficiency of the cultural model imposed by modernity: the disregard of the intrinsic data, specificity and characteristics of individual cultural models and eras⁸. Gadamer stressed the ineluctable difference between the horizon of the author and that of the interpreter, between the horizon and the mentality of different époques. It was precisely the imperialist-ideological attitude of the Classical research paradigm which utterly neglected this distinction. The paradigm of rationality in the Enlightenment asserted that there could only be one perspective on truth and, based on this view of what is true and real, it judged and classified the entire cultural production of the humanity. This led to all kinds of cultural excesses and to recurring attempts at imposing totalitarianism in thought. Seen through the lens of rationalist Enlightenment, the history of the European culture appeared as an inexorable progress of mankind, from the ingenuousness of Antiquity to the superiority of the Galilean model of relating to reality. Instead, hermeneutics restrained the aspirations of the interpreter to what Gadamer called *the fusion of horizons*, as one cannot aspire to fully understand a cultural sign of a different period and must therefore be aware of the limits and historicity in understanding⁹. The awareness of *difference*, in its utter, most concrete interpretation, thus emerged, as did the recognition of what is *intrinsic* to another horizon or author and to the "facts" of a cultural act which does not overlap with our presuppositions or expectations and with our own cultural imagination.

⁷ Paul Livingston, *Thinking and Being: Heidegger and Wittgenstein on Machination and Lived-Experience*, Inquiry, 46, 2003, 324.

⁸ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Continuum, London, 1989, 513.

⁹ Günter Figal, *The Doing of the Thing Itself: Gadamer's Hermeneutic Ontology of Language*, „The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer“, ed. Robert J. Dostal, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 104.

Without doubt, the past century, especially its second half, produced instruments and interpretation paradigms which enabled the recovery of cultural perspectives, especially of a European spirituality, which were based on different assumptions than the paradigm of Modern rationalism. It is the case, first of all, of the Eastern spirituality, which had been ignored for too long, if not downright cast aside by the Western authors of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, a tendency partially visible in the last century too. The historiography of the Enlightenment considered that the Byzantine period was a negative example in history, of cultural immobility and barrenness, an ice age of culture, if not worse¹⁰. Based on this division of history into periods, the Byzantine interval and all Christianity until the 12th century were perceived as a dark age, between two ages of cultural enlightenment, i.e. the Antiquity and the Renaissance. This is why that whole historical interval was called the Middle Ages. This state of things ultimately influenced the Christian attitudes and practices, and even their doctrines. In the 1800s, and even the early 1900s, the valorisation of the evangelic teachings into pietism and moralism was obvious. This attitude, apparently formally correct and a warrant for redemption, exerted great influence even in the Orthodox East, from Greece to Russia, although it had been shaped by Western spiritual movements. This picture of Christianity was in fine tune with the cultural imagination of modernity, which set down strict boundaries between the domains of culture, which meant that philosophy and art, for instance, did not share the object or methods of theology. Instead, theology was closer to morality, in aspects which did not imply the doctrine of Revelation. Whereas pietism psychologises the act of belief, moralism reduces the meaning of the message of the Scriptures to a set of behavioural norms, to an axiological model, that guarantees the "correctness" of faith once fulfilled.

The mid 20th century saw the emergence of Neopatristics, improperly called so, as it did not seek to modernise the patristic discourse, but rather to return to the authentic meanings of Patristics and reclaim it for the modern horizon.

¹⁰ Alain Ducellier, *Les Byzantines*, Seuil, Paris, 1988, 10.

The movement sought to restore certain profound claims of the Patristic era about the evangelical message, in keeping with the true spirit of Christianity. Authors such as Dumitru Stăniloae, Iustin Popovici and Georges Florovsky have described the total dimension of the Christian doctrine, which cannot be incorporated into the descriptive frameworks emerging from the cultural imagination of a single era. Illustrating this thesis, Florovsky stated that the hallmark of Patristic theology is its "existential" character, which means that this type of theology cannot be separated from the concreteness of life. He argued that theology, in this new dimension, could no longer be understood as an "intellectual contour", although this contour cannot be disregarded completely¹¹.

At the same time, philosophy itself became aware of the limitations of any philosophy based on the narrow meaning of morality derived from metaphysical speculations. This renewal of the patristic message occurred in a spirit of openness to the values and the paradigms of the age. Dumitru Stăniloae, in his translation of "Philokalia", quoted Martin Heidegger in footnote references. Such referencing to recent philosophy reflects the recognition by the representatives of Neopatristics of the importance of the change in perspective brought about by existentialism, hermeneutics or phenomenology.

The awareness which articulates the new phenomenological discourse is indicative of a cultural context which is exceptionally favourable to an opening going both ways between the Patristic Orthodox spirituality and the fundamental research in current sciences. This "sensitivity" to the peril of mixing mental constructions which previously turned into ideologies and diverted spiritual exercise and scientific investigation from their true purpose, has given rise to an awareness which modernity lacked until recently. This horizon of possibilities has never been encountered until now, yet it does not automatically represent the guarantee of a

¹¹ Georges Florovsky, *Collected Works*, vol. IV, BUCHER-VERTRIEBSANSTALT, Vaduz, 1987, 18.

fruitful dialogue between the Eastern Christian experience and the world of science. It would be easy to suspect an enforced closeness between these two levels of human experience which focus on different levels of reality. Even after escaping the boundaries imposed mainly by metaphysics on how the religious phenomenon may be received, there remains a long way to go in terms of clarifying how the Orthodox position on Christian experience is understood. The metaphysical doctrines, from early modernity to those of Classical German philosophy, laid down certain conditions which meant that the religious phenomenon could only be accepted as relevant if it obeyed the principle of reason. They imposed the prerequisite that every reality should have a concept and a cause of its own, thus rejecting the full meaning of revelation. There is a difference between the content of the Eastern Christian Tradition and the content imposed by modernity under the name of theology. Theology tended to become increasingly *systematic* in an attempt to satisfy the requirements imposed on any substantive discourse by reason during the Enlightenment. The key aspects of the Christian doctrine needed to be enumerated and arranged according to certain logic, in distinct chapters, beginning with what was considered to be more important towards what was seen as being of secondary importance. This perspective on religion and Christianity in particular, which dominated Western discourse, also had a considerable influence on the modern Orthodox theological discourse. However, this type of discourse is in no way appropriate to the spirit in which the Eastern Christian Tradition was articulated: a mere itemization of the main writings of this tradition is anything but a systematic approach. A frequent occurrence was the fragmentation of writings, into abstracts that condense the meditation on a certain subject. Isaac the Syrian (7th-century author) pointed to this particular habit as a cause of the apparent disorder of writings. This seminal author of Christian mysticism also provided a *justification* of this habit: the order within the presentation of a subject does not derive from formal logic, but from an interior logic or the rationality imposed by experience. In fact, this is typical of the entire textuality produced in the horizon of the Eastern Christianity, which seems to be a sign of

immatureness of this entire spirituality. We, the moderns, must reconsider the interpretations of this sort made about Orthodox spirituality, yet this is only possible if we take into account the fundamental intention that underlay such a manner of writing: far from cataloguing the potential statements on the various articles of faith, this is a question of the way in which the practical experience of an evangelical commandment was articulated, *someone's* concrete experience. This how what we call Tradition was crystallised – by the accumulation of the testimonies of this practical experience. When analysed based on the modern cultural code, this kind of accumulation may not signify more than listing a conjectural and subjective casuistry (even a subjectivising one), which may represent at most the raw material for subsequent adaptation that would offer a coherent and systematic picture of this Tradition. This is precisely what we must abstain from in order to reach the true spirit of this heritage. We need accept not only that our cultural model is not the supreme and complete form of rationality, but also admit the existence in the European culture of at least one other major cultural paradigm. We must recognise that this paradigm established a different kind of relationship between the human capacities of experiencing and understanding. We must not favour a particular description of reason and claim that reason is the utmost human capacity decided the cultural developments of the modernity, all the more so since this radical position itself generated the crisis of the cultural model of today's world.

Fundamental research, especially in physics, has highlighted in the most practical manner possible the limits of the model of understanding based on logical and formal reason. Certain levels of reality, specifically the quantum levels, cannot be subjected to the classical explanation given by the science founded by logical formalism, so that the need arose to resort to alternative explanatory models. Similarly, in philosophy, the theories of existentialism, hermeneutics and phenomenology were the most vigorous reactions to the crisis caused by the Enlightenment paradigm of reference to reality and to human existence. We must recognise and reclaim the

rationality that articulated the European spiritual and cultural model of Eastern Christianity, because indeed it has specificity and difference. It provides a solution to the dead end that the explanatory rationalist model reached, without relinquishing or renouncing reason, but simply rejecting an absolutisation of the part that formal reason plays in knowledge.

There are several defining features of the specificity of this Eastern cultural horizon, among them the notion of *person*. It is Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae's merit to have clarified the importance of the notion of person for the shaping up of the Patristic and the Christian Orthodox discourse. Along with its primary clarifications, Christianity had to elucidate the manner in which the Revelation about God should be understood. As a radical novelty, Greek philosophical language was employed in the description of what we call Ultimate Reality or Existence, or God. As description of the paradoxical understanding of God as Uni-Trinitarian or Tri-Unitarian being was necessary; two synonyms, *ousia* and *hypostasis*, were used to reflect the difference between what is common and what is different within the Trinity.

The meaning of the philosophical exercise from the Eastern Christian point of view is far removed from the meaning it has in modernity. The modern cultural developments in terms of the role of philosophy are based on a distinct anthropological premise, namely the requirement to defend reason from the interference of the senses and implicitly of the body and of the sensitive realm in general. On the contrary, the Byzantine perspective understands philosophy based on different anthropological premises, as it argues that the act of knowledge is the result of the conjugation of all the human faculties, not just the mind, with the body playing an equally important part, as it benefits from knowledge. This explains why Patristics stresses the acts of cleansing the body and the whole of the human faculties through *askesis*. The ascetic exercise has nothing to do with the mortification of the body, as it has sometimes been understood by extrapolation from Indian ascetic practices; instead it aims to prepare man for the experience of the communion with the One Above and Beyond the World, a communion with radical and absolute consequences, not just a simple relation based on

a soteriological desire. This leads us to the idea of a virtually endless possibility of transformation of the inner nature of things and even of the ontological rationality of things, an idea that was best represented by the Palamite hesychasm of the 14th century. In a controversy with Varlaam regarding the misunderstanding of hesychast practices, Gregory Palamas provided a series of extremely important articulations for understanding of the practice and position of hesychia and the silent path.¹² Leaving aside certain other highly relevant aspects, we will focus on Palamas's claim that, at some point in such practice, one can see what is called uncreated energies with the *bodily eyes*. These energies are not a symbol, a mirror image of the divinity, but the appearance of the divinity itself. The uncreated energies are the manifestation of the eternal Trinity, of the Trinity before the creation. The essence of the divinity cannot by any means be contemplated starting from the uncreated energies (a major difference between Eastern and Western Christianity views on the possibility of understanding God). The key interpretation is that they can be perceived with the bodily senses, when these senses are purified by the exercise of *askesis*. In this way the created being opens itself not only to a contemplation of the uncreated, but to an appropriation (as Staniloae says) of the divine in man. Implicitly, there is a possibility of acceding to what is above the normal function of the senses and therefore the senses can undergo changes, although they continue to have the same functionality. The modification is subtle and does not cancel the initial status of corporeality; it does not transform the human in a super-human but rather opens the human towards grasping the deeper rationality of things from beyond things. This openness means not merely knowledge, but also the possibility of exerting influence, an interaction of the person with the created nature. It is what one might call the spiritualisation of matter. It is the ontological dimension of the act of freedom, of the possibility of freedom which is a hallmark of being human.

¹² John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1998, 151.

These elements lead to the assumption that the specificity of the Orthodox Christian spirituality is obviously closer to a certain meaning of science than to the morality and pietism that were more typical of the Western theological discourse. One specific feature of Orthodox practice could be called, taking certain precautions, experiment or, as Staniloae said, *experiation* (because the accent must be laid on the personal dimension of the experience). The rapprochement of theology (and philosophy, as the Eastern perspective sees the two as belonging to the same domain) and science does not seem unnatural and contrived if they seek to comprehend, based on this shared perspective, what is beyond this world and the rationality that governs it.

The contemporary cultural context exceptionally facilitates such proximity between science and Orthodox theology. On one side, the essentials of the spirit of the Orthodox tradition were reclaimed, owing to certain authors of the 20th century who corrected an inadequate trend in theological thought in the East (the Neopatristic movement). On the other side, science has become increasingly aware of the dangers posed by the interference of ideologies and of the rationalist constructions of the Enlightenment in its own development. Also, due to the challenges it has posed to theology over the last century - its spectacular discoveries (from quantum mechanics to the new cosmological vision and the neurosciences) - the borderline research in science has called for new explanations and positions from theology, a positive development which corrected the sterile stereotypy that threatened theological discourse. At the same time, philosophy provided an extremely favourable opportunity for rapprochement through phenomenology. Phenomenology, as reflected by the recent French phenomenological movement, can provide a way of mutual understanding and a discourse that permits a rapprochement of the view on phenomenality of the two paths: the scientific-experimental one and the spiritual and hesychast one. Future research will certainly prove that this course is valid and can produce exceptional results in terms of understanding what we now call the Ultimate Reality. It will succeed to the extent that the cultural context, the

developments of spiritual experience and the powers of human knowledge will allow.

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