

# Orthodoxy in Post-Modern Pluralistic Societies

Very Reverend Thomas Hopko

It may have been Winston Churchill who said that American liberal democracy is the worst form of government ever devised, except for all the others. Whoever said it, I fully agree.

As the grandson of Carpatho-Russian immigrants to the United States, I cannot imagine my life in any other society except with gratitude for my personal destiny. As an Orthodox Christian, however, a "liberated peasant" blessed with higher learning, faith, family, priesthood and theology, I also cannot imagine a way of life more insidious to Christian Orthodoxy and more potentially dangerous to human being and life.

"Corruptio optimi pessima." The corruption of the best is the worst. The most evil vice is always the perversion of the most excellent virtue. Sin is always misuse and abuse. 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 another's rights and freedoms be not violated or denied.

## Post-Modern Pluralism

American liberal democracy today is no longer what it was when Churchill (or whoever it was) called it the worst form of government except for all others. Much has changed in America since these words were spoken. The form of society now produced and exported by America is not what our commentator praised in his clever remark. For when this comment was made, the American way of life was indeed liberal, democratic and capitalistic. But it was not pluralistic. It was White, Western and Christian, grounded on a biblical worldview, primarily Protestant, and a biblical ethic which was held, however poorly or hypocritically, by the vast majority of its participants. Nor was it the secularized, politicized, subjectivized and carnalized way of life which it is today through its "deconstruction" of science, metaphysics, theology and art into a society which we now call "post-modern."

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 and economic post-modern pluralistic world 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 once-called "third world" have already been effected by it in ways too numerous to consider and to complex to unravel.

## A Totally New Reality

Some of us Orthodox say, quoting the Preacher, that there is really "nothing new under the sun". In a sense this is true. 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 of us say that Orthodox Christians in all times and places are inevitably in the situations in which we all find ourselves today. The Orthodox 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 witnessed already in the canonical New Testament scriptures. This was also true in the "Constantinian" age when Orthodox fathers and saints usually departed this life defeated and dishonored while heretics, apostates and plain evil-doers ruled the Christian empire. It was true in Ottoman times and in Holy Russia, not to mention the Marxist horror. And it is true today. So, some say, things were never really any different than they are now.

And other Orthodox today 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 see Jesus as but one of the many teachers and gods, and Christian faith as but one of the many religions and spiritual paths available to sensible, tolerant, good-willed, cultivated people.

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 fervor 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 Moslem or Marxist domination. Nor is it, in "diaspora", simply a collection of Orthodox exiles in heterodox Christian countries undergoing massive secularization, transformation and change.

Orthodoxy for the first time ever -- though still a minority Church riddled with massive inner confusions, fears, pretensions and divisions resulting from its 2000 year odyssey through history -- now finds itself in a "global village" whose diverse peoples in varying ways are all moving toward a way of life which has already begun to dominate the planet. This is American 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 contemporary America, and they remain as well in the present world which America is producing and for which it remains the ideal, however some may deny, deplore and resist it. Religious toleration, racial equality and minority rights, for example, are still issues of major concern in America 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 - to continue our example - are still matters of critical social concern. And in religious, philosophical, scientific and artistic life the old modern (Kantian, Darwinian, Newtonian, Marxist, ...) issues such as the relationship between faith and reason, science and theology, critical thinking and fundamentalism, liberty and authority, individual conscience and traditional mores, and even orthodoxy and heresy, continue to capture people's passionate attention and concern. But these issues, though remaining in power, 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 behavior is the direct result of modern secularized society's reduction of Christianity to a privatized, compartmentalized "religion" so brilliantly criticized by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann whose writings can still be read with great profit, especially in post-Marxist societies. It is a transmutation of the Judeo-Christian worldview and experience far beyond anything even remotely imagined by Fr. Georges Florovsky (among many others) in his critique of heterodox "pseudomorphoses" of Orthodoxy. 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 recreated to the point where their original content and meaning no longer remain at all, but are replaced by a whole new reconstruction of reality.

In the post-modern pluralistic world there is no truth, right, good and 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 meaning and purpose for all. There is rather a creation of reality, or rather, 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 now 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, now understood as material and pseudo-spiritual pleasure, becomes obligatory for all.

If more than a half century ago H. Richard Niebuhr could say that in modern American liberal Protestantism "a God without wrath brings man without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (The Kingdom of God in America, 1937, p. 193), it can now be said that in the new age of post-modern pluralism divinity without sovereignty brings humans without dignity into an age without responsibility through the exploitation of a god or goddess of your choice without tragedy.

If any think that this is a fearful exaggeration unfounded in fact, I would invite them to look at contemporary American politics, economics, law, education, medicine, religion, entertainment and art. And I would also ask them to look at what is now happening in all countries and regions of the world, beginning with their own.

#### Four Unacceptable Responses

Four possible responses to post-modern pluralism are in my opinion unacceptable for Orthodox Christians.

The first is the denial that "post-modern pluralism" exists and is rapidly growing in clarity and power in all parts of 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 proportion, it is here for the duration.

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

A psychiatrist describing the homosexual movement in America, and its place within the contemporary American ethos as a whole, has said that "a great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep" (C.W. Socarides, *Homosexuality: A Freedom Too Far*, p. 234). He sounds like an ascetic saint describing spiritual delusion (plane, prelest). Is this warning not applicable to us Orthodox whose need today for illusions and delusions about ourselves, our churches, our histories, our neighbors and our contemporary world are apparently very deep indeed?

Thirdly we 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 surrender to the very aberration and temptation we are called to expose and resist. It would be the very thing that post-modernism would have us do, and defend our right and reason for doing. We cannot create our own realities 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.

And finally we must not fall prey to the post-modern pluralistic worldview as some great new opportunity for humankind which Orthodox Christians should welcome as being inherently consistent with traditional Orthodox views of freedom, personal dignity, cultural diversity, incarnational theology and apophatic mystical theology; and 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 we Orthodox 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 center of our concerns. We must do only that which "seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us" according to the "mind of Christ". We must work (as we are now doing) to evaluate our world together, in a conciliar manner, finding a common mind and forging a common plan of action. 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. "Amen, amen", the Lord says to us, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn 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 it is, and how unbearably painful, to see Orthodox Christians and churches betraying Christ and the gospel -- and 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 -- a deception which we Orthodox in modern and post-modern pluralistic societies have largely accepted and enacted. Our present pathetic realities reveal the results of such false belief and behavior. We 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 learn 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 (Lk 14:25-26). It is to "count everything as loss for the sake of Christ", to use St. Paul's powerful words, and "to suffer the loss of all things and to count them as dung" for the "surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus" and being "found in him" (Phil 3:7-9). These are violent words. And they are true. We violate

them at our risk. The good things in life, not our weaknesses and faults, are our greatest temptations. It is they which become our idols and cause us to distort reality, deny truth and endorse deception.

In living solely according to the gospel of Christ, we Orthodox Christians must also resist the temptation to transform Orthodoxy into some sort of hypostasized 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 Orthodox tradition.

The reason for this rule, which may seem to be simply a matter of semantics, or of packaging and marketing, is that the post-modern pluralistic worldview and rhetoric encourages 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. Just as there are no such things as womanist history or homosexual art or Buddhist ethics or Moslem spirituality possessing the right not only to remain unchallenged by those outside the respective communities, but even to insist on their universal approbation by others as proper and legitimate to the community's members, so also there is no such thing as Orthodoxy just for the Orthodox. 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 have 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 the testing of others as to 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. He 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 fulness 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 fulfillment, completion and perfection forever. This is Orthodoxy, always and everywhere. It is the evangelical "word of the Cross" which perhaps in the whole of human history has never been more scandalous and foolish than it is today 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 by "Christofascists" who compel others to accept their dogmas, ethics and versions of history by means of military, economic and cultural domination. This can happen. And it has, alas, happened in the past. But our Orthodox saints, and indeed the saints of all places and times whom we Orthodox see as inspired by God, have always opposed it 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 honorable, 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 (Phil. 4:8). And we must also be willing to exercise our privilege and duty as Orthodox Christians to intercede before God and 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 domination, discrimination 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 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 neighbors. It is more imperative than ever that it be our way today in a world in which, not without reasons, both just and unjust, those who claim to be in any way "orthodox" are suspected and feared.

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 to all and proving by our that true freedom is found only in knowing and doing the

truth. Perhaps no ideal and 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 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 all others. It deteriorated to its present condition not only by evil and sin, or as some say, by ceasing to be overtly Christian, and even Protestant. It decomposed when democracy became an idolized end-it-itself and every participant and group demanded its right not only to be respected and tolerated, but to be affirmed and approved without condition or question. It collapsed, and continues to collapse, not only through the loss of basic Christian doctrine and ethics, but through the loss of the conviction that there is truth and righteousness for all people in any form at all. 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 toward 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. Dostevsky revealed the roots of this madness in his radical exposure of "modernism". Metropolitan John of Pergamos 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 onto condemnation, judgment and death. The "Kirillov" syndrome, so brilliantly described artistically by Dostoevsky, and so brilliantly analyzed philosophically and theologically by Metropolitan John (and others) is as brilliantly demonstrated existentially and historically 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, libertarian 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 liberty by spiritual and physical suicide, but it guarantees them the freedom to kill others as well.

Orthodox Christians must stand in the contemporary world not only 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 and 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 evil-doers and by becoming their unyielding intercessor and advocate before God the Father. Christ's disciples are called to do nothing other than what Christ Himself has done, and continues by the Spirit to do through His saints for the life of the world and humanity's salvation.

"For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved. ... and this is the judgment, that light has come into the world, and human beings loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ... but the person who does what is true comes to the light that it may be clearly seen that his works are wrought in God" (Jn 3:16-21).

This article was published in a revised form in the Ecumenical Review 51 no 4 (1999), p 364-371.