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## The Challenge of »Posteriority« and Pluralism

*Izšiv »posteriornosti« in pluralizem*

**Summary:** *The history of misunderstandings and prejudices between Christianity/Christian theology and modernity/modernism is long and complicated. If one wanted to point out the basic characteristics of modernity, one would consider three main phenomena that contribute to characterizing modernity: the secularization of the socio-political sphere, a belief in progress (resulting in the ideology of progressivism), and the concept of individual freedoms and human rights that are expressed in various »liberal« tendencies and in the idea of a pluralistic society. All three properties of modernity were under a strong attack by Christian theologians and clergymen. In the twentieth century, when it became impossible to ignore or simply denounce them, the theological narrative shifted to theological articulation and, often, glorification.*

*An interesting case in this respect is Orthodox theology, which has only recently entered into a serious theological dialogue with both modernity and post-modernity, and some of their distinct features. In this paper I aim to analyse the characteristics of modernity and to explore to what extent a dialogue between Orthodox theology and modern and contemporary culture could be mutually beneficial.*

**Key words:** *Christianity, pluralism, posteriority, modernism, secularization*

**Povzetek:** *Zgodovina medsebojnih nesporazumov in predsodkov med krščanstvom oziroma krščansko teologijo ter modernostjo/modernizmom je dolga in zapletena. Če hočemo izpostaviti temeljne značilnosti modernosti, menim, da moramo opozoriti na tri glavne pojave ki so poleg drugih značilni za modernost. To so: sekularizacija družbene/politične sfere, vera v napredek (ki vodi v ideologijo progresivizma), in pojem svobodin posameznika in človekovih pravic, ki se izražajo v različnih »liberalnih« težnjah in v ideji pluralistične družbe. Vse tri omenjene lastnosti modernosti so bile tarča ostrih napadov s strani teologov in duhovščine različnih vej krščanstva. V 20. stoletju, ko jih ni bilo več mogoče ignorirati ali zametati, se spremeni ton teoloških besedil in omenjene značilnosti postanejo predmet teološke artikulacije in včasih celo poveličevanja.*

*V tem pogledu predstavlja zanimiv primer pravoslavna teologija, ki je šele v zadnjem času vstopila v resen teološki dialog z modernostjo in post-modernostjo ter nekaterimi njenimi pojavnimi oblikami.*

*Namen razprave je analizirati te značilnosti modernosti in preučiti obojestransko koristnost dialoga med pravoslavno teologijo ter moderno, sodobno kulturo.*

**Ključne besede:** *krščanstvo, pluralizem, posteriornost, modernost, sekularizacija*

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to address the need for dialogue between Christianity (in particular Orthodox Christianity) and contemporary culture. I also want to briefly reflect on the need for an authentic dialogue between different Christian denominations and their theologies, as a necessary condition for a successful dialogue between Christian theology and contemporary culture.

When I say »contemporary culture« I am obviously using a rather broad and not very sophisticated concept. However, there are a couple of phenomena that, more than others, characterize the culture we are living in, and have a direct impact on our daily lives.

In my opinion, one of the most distinct phenomena typical of the post-1989 global integrations era is posteriority. This phenomenon, which Wilhelm Schmid described in his article *Auf der Suche nach einer anderen Moderne* (1992), encapsulates other important phenomena that contemporaneity inherited from, what some would paradoxically call, classical modernity, such as individualism, pluralism, or the quest for democracy. These concepts have been the subject of many debates and misunderstandings between Christian theologians and proponents of modernity.

Since, in my view, posteriority is central to contemporary culture, I will first describe its genesis and its rootedness in some of the fundamental concepts of modernity.

### 1. Modern or Contemporary Culture?

The dialogue between Christianity and modern or contemporary culture must take into consideration the long history of misunderstandings and mutual hostility between mainstream (institutional) Christianity and aspects of modernity. However, in this paper I do not want to lament the evils that inhabit the contemporary world, where *evilness* consists of the fact that many aspects of these, real or alleged, *evils* are different

from what we can consider a Christian understanding of the world. It is, of course, easy to find such examples. But it is equally easy to find examples of evils that characterized »Christian times« or »Christian societies« and cultures. Historically speaking, in the social and political realm mainstream Christianity does not have much to be proud of. My claim is that authentic Christianity is and has always been on the cultural and social margins; it has been, and it must be, subversive in respect to all systems of government, established dogmas and ideologies, if it wants to stay faithful to itself. Another conclusion that can be drawn is that authentic Christianity can never be identified with the mainstream Christian ideologies and the institutional Church. In other words, to accuse particular ideologies and societies of evils they are directly or indirectly responsible for, is an easy and obvious way of not addressing the issue at hand. It is harder to establish a mutually beneficial dialogue between Christianity and contemporary culture. This paper attempts to contribute to the reflection on how that dialogue can be structured.

Modernity in the Western context can be traced back to the Enlightenment. It is a very complex and ambivalent concept, which escapes a single description of the ideological basis of modernism and modernity. Modernity can be defined through the following three phenomena:

- 1) The process of *secularization* of modern societies, which aims at a clear separation between religious institutions and the state, as well as the conceptual differentiation between, on the one hand, religious teachings and dogmas, and, on the other hand, the political and judicial sphere.
- 2) *Progressivism*, a modern ideology, which is related to the basic rationalistic belief that human beings are capable of understanding and changing the world around them. One dimension of the same faith is the belief in human creative potentials as an affirmation of the human personal identity.
- 3) Faith in human individual rights and freedoms, which finds its expression in different liberal ideologies and in the idea of *pluralistic* society and the modern idea of democracy.

All of these phenomena that have been criticized by many Christian theologians and representatives of the institutional Christianity,<sup>1</sup> are in fact nothing else but a reflection of some of the original Christian ideas and values, although neither official Christianity nor most of the protagonists of modernity were aware of that at the time. In other words, these phenomena contain basic elements borrowed from Christian ontology and anthropology, although many Christians may have difficulties in recognizing them. Of course, these phenomena in their modern form are emptied of their eschatological dimension, and in that sense they are strictly *secular*. However, Christianity itself, in its institutional manifestation, has been diligently obscuring its eschatological dimension since the fourth century onwards, if not even earlier. This is how and why the conceptual framework of modernity, with its secularized but nonetheless basically Christian concepts, became the »judgment« of historical Christianity (to employ Hegelian conceptual apparatus).

If the ideas of progress, change, personal initiative and pluralism are some of the dominant characteristics of modernity, and if these characteristics are still relevant for our contemporary times, does this mean that there should be no fundamental misunderstandings or significant differences between Christianity in general (and Orthodox Christianity in particular) and contemporary culture?

## 2. Posteriority or The Constant Need for New Stimuli

The problem is that in the course of history generally positive and acceptable programs and ideas very often diverge from their original form and purpose. Sometimes they even turn into their opposites, such as the modernist focus on change, innovation and progress. These ideas that contributed to the tangible developments and growth in many areas over the last couple of centuries (such as scientific and technological improvements, better healthcare, education etc.), gave birth to something we can call a »malign progressivism« in the twentieth century. This is a progressivism without teleology, in which the hypertrophy of the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Encyclical *Minari Vos* by pope Gregory XVI (1832). In this encyclical, the idea of separation between church and state is strongly criticized (»It is certain that that concord which always was favorable and beneficial for the sacred and the civil order is feared by the shameless lovers of liberty.«), together with freedom of expression (»freedom to publish«) and freedom of consciousness (»absurd and erroneous proposition«).

desire for change and news becomes purpose in itself. We find the metastasis of this progressivism in the »logic of late capitalism« (to borrow from Frederic Jameson, Cf. Jameson, 1991). Following this logic, marketing techniques and consumerist logic constantly demand new things, new contents, and seemingly new appearances. With the new information technology, the consumer, which became the prototype of a »good citizen«, is constantly exposed to new, attractive and seductive aesthetics of the multimedia images. The purpose of these aesthetics and images is to create the need for new stimuli that should, as much as possible, passivize the consumer, turning him into a passive spectator and an object of social processes.

The unbearable thirst for »news« and seemingly fresh and innovative narratives, results in what Wilhelm Schmid called the »era of posteriority«: »Nichts soll noch länger als drei Tage über uns herrschen. Und egal, wer den Mund aufmacht – was er sagen will, soll schon veraltet sein, bevor es ihm über die Lippen kommt.« (Schmid 1992, 55)

As Jean Baudrillard already detected in his famous aphorism that »we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning« (Baudrillard 1997, 79).

A good contemporary illustration of the »era of posteriority« is the logic of *social networks*, which is embedded into their very medium. *Facebook* and *Twitter* function as machines that produce and display posteriority. The old is not only what was posted a couple of months or weeks ago, something posted a couple of days or couple of hours ago is considered »ancient (hi)story«. The medium of social networks lives only insofar as it accommodates always new posts, that are rarely something really new« just as our media of mass information (or, more accurately, media of mass disinformation) live based on the constant production of news in which there is very little new content. The result is that modern progressivism, once it enters its malign phase characterized by the consumerist delirium and demand for new stimuli, turns into its opposite. It becomes deeply conservative and impotent, incapable of generating a real change. This negative conservatism is not primarily of metaphysical but rather very utilitarian character. It is precisely this absence of a real change what brings profits and secures existence and expansion of the actual power structures. What really matters - dominant

ideological narratives and power structures - remains stable, as long as there is a persistent illusion of change and newness.

Similar developments can be noticed in respect to the ideas of a pluralistic society and democracy that, in spite of many important achievements in the past, simply become ideological phrases, emptied of any real content. In fact, very often they also turn into their opposite.

Is there something relevant that Christianity could offer to the challenges of the contemporary times? What could be an authentically Christian response? Is there a way to open a dialogue between Christian theology, and Orthodox Christian theology in particular, and pressing cultural and social issues of our time? Alternatively, is there something that Christian theology can learn from these cultural phenomena, enriching its understanding of the world and the human being?

The type and range of possible answers depend primarily on the way we understand Christian anthropology and Christian metaphysics.

Many Orthodox theologians do not really see why Orthodox theology should even attempt to engage in a serious dialogue with contemporary culture and these particular questions. Many object that these issues are simply not theological in their nature, and therefore theology should not bother analysing them.

I suppose that the character of our approach to these questions is largely defined by the way we understand the relationship between the Kingdom of God and this world. My approach is based upon two premises: 1) that Christians are responsible for this world, and 2) that it is not necessary to always give theological meaning and significance to utilitarian social structures and their ends, which, however, does not mean that there should be no reflection upon those structures). In fact, this has historically been a tragic mistake that many theologians, up to the present day, have repeated.

Another important thing that should coincide with the dialogue between Christian theology and contemporary culture, is the dialogue between different Christian theologies. One of the reasons for establishing a dialogue is that we can always find many useful approaches to a variety of questions posed by our contemporary culture in other Christian denominations and that dialogue can enable us to discover

our own traditions. What becomes apparent, with the increase of communication, and a more vibrant exchange of theological ideas that are not limited only to confessional theological departments anymore, is that Orthodox theology is not written only by Orthodox theologians, just as the Roman Catholic theology is being written both inside and outside the institution of the Catholic Church and catholic theological schools. It is not a surprise anymore to discover very »orthodox« positions and arguments in the works of Roman Catholic or protestant theologians, and *vice versa*.

When we become aware of the complexities and the lack of coherency or rather existence of *artificially* constructed coherences within our own traditions, the inter-Christian dialogue can help us articulate our own theological metaphysics and the anthropology that would be capable of offering more apt answers to the challenges of our contemporary culture. At the same time, Christians should not forget that for better or worse, Christianity is also a part of our culture, not an extra-terrestrial body, which in its infinite philanthropy descends upon the sinful world.

Thus, main points of a mutually beneficial dialogue between Christian theology and contemporary culture include:

1. The re-examination of pluralism. It seems important to raise the awareness that based on the historical experience of modernity it is not possible to ground pluralism in the socio-political sphere without thinking it ontologically as well. Christian theology can benefit from modern ideas of plurality (especially Orthodox Christian theology), rethinking its own ontological views.
2. The re-examination of the anthropological paradigm, questioning our understanding of what or rather *who* the human being is. What are those fundamental properties of the human being that should be affirmed and developed in our society, through the system of education for instance?

There is room for Christians, and especially for Orthodox Christians, to affirm a specific anthropology, in which the human being is conceived primarily as a relational being, a being of communion. However, this must be done in a way that will be comprehensible to contemporary listeners, and legitimate in the broader cultural discourse. This is also a

chance to offer different, if not opposite logic, to that proposed by the logic of posteriority

3. The re-affirmation of creativity. Christianity can bring the issue of creativity as a fundamental human capacity back into the focus of our culture. Creativity in this respect should not be understood as a particular property of extraordinary individuals, but rather as a universal and one of the most fundamental capacities of each human being.

A dialogue among Christian *theologies*, and a dialogue between Christian theology and contemporary culture and society is, in my view, a sign of affirmation of the Christian responsibility both for themselves and for the world in which we live.

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