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Holy Lands and Sacred Nations: Christian Identity, National Identity and the Claims of Territorial Exclusiveness. An Essay on Christian Delocalization

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The confusion between religious and national identity is related to a very important and serious phenomenon: the claim of territorial exclusivity, which has been, the reason behind many wars, conflicts, and ethnic cleansings, both past and present. In the national narratives of several peoples, this claim to exclusivity is often couched in religious terms, the prevailing one of which is the idea of "the chosen people of God" which, unfortunately, is not absent from any religious tradition, including any "Biblical" or "Christian" people of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. It is equally difficult to imagine ethnic and religious conflicts without an ideology or even a theology of self-justification, without a mentality of spiritual self-sufficiency and introversion, without the cultivation of national pride, the worship of ancestors and exclusivity—all of which lead, very often, to a lack of tolerance toward what is different and to all kinds of ethnic cleansings and conflicts. Yet, wherever stereotypes thrive regarding homeland, religion, tribe, and nation, wherever we have a predominance of praise for the achievements of the ancestors, wherever, finally, various forms of collective egoism, such as nationalism, find refuge—here, then, is the exact place where repentance and self-criticism will be absent; here is where the existential window that makes room for any kind of "other" or "stranger," our neighbor who is in the image of the "Other" and "Stranger" par excellence—becomes an elusive dream.

If we consider then war, violence, all kind of conflicts, even the ones taking place in the name of religion, from a spiritual point of view, in the end, they are nothing but the result of the exaltation of collective egoisms; they only witness to the absence of real repentance, the denial of the Cross. Behind any conflict, we can easily discern an idolization of religion, tribe, and nation, an odd paganism of earth, soil, and homeland, or of the "God-bearing" people and its claim to exclusivity, which is a real temptation.

Precisely this connection of geographical land and national or religious exclusivity is marvelously analyzed by the French philosopher Régis Debray in a paragraph of his book: *God, An itinerary*, bearing this characteristic title: "we are all mammals", since the claim of this kind of exclusivity is brilliantly parallelized by

Debray with the practice of mammals who are trying, through urination, to define, "describe" and ensure the place they wish to occupy and control exclusively! Yet, as we are reminded furthermore by R. Debray, by the apparition of Christianity, terms and realities such as "promised land", "holy lands", are losing their significance. The Christian life is one of journey and constant movement. The body of Christ is now the center, and not "the holy land" or any earthly homelands. This charismatic body is therefore the real territory and the real sanctuary of Christian, the new "land of promise", its' new homeland. All this, of course, refers to an "extraterritorial" God, to a faith that is divorced from "homeland territories" and ancestors, to the disengagement of the Christian faith from the categories of land, country, holy homeland, etc.

Of course, one could argue that this is an approach influenced by Protestant theology and practice, which rejects, among other things, pilgrimage, holy relics and "holy geography". Yet this is a very hasty approach that ignores the deeper sense of Orthodox Christianity. Even one of the great Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, sharply criticized and challenged the custom, already established in the fourth century, of a "religious" pilgrimage to the places where Jesus Christ was born and lived, i.e. the very concept of the "Holy Land," recalling instead that "when the Lord invites the blest to their inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, He does not include a pilgrimage to Jerusalem amongst their good deeds; when he announces the Beatitudes, He does not name amongst them that sort of devotion." Fr. Alexander Schmemann explicated from his side this same critical view regarding "holy land" from a eucharistic/eschatological perspective, and he is not remiss in recalling the practice of the ancient Church when se says that "Early Christians had no concern for any sacred geography, no temples [...] There was no specific religious interest in the places where Jesus had lived. There were no pilgrimages. The old religion had its thousand sacred places and temples: for the Christians all this was past and gone. There was no need for temples built of stone: Christ's Body, the Church itself, the new people gathered in Him, was the only real temple. [...] The Church itself was the new and heavenly Jerusalem: the Church in Jerusalem was by contrast unimportant."

This paradoxical and antinomic position of Christians in the world, which could be called "a unique Christian eschatological anarchism," is that differentiates them from the world, without leading them to a denial of the world. This eschatological distance-keeping, keeps them off from being identified with a particular nation, culture or even from dealing with national identity issues, since the church, the new "chosen people of God" is not based on racial or ethnic criteria, but on faith in Jesus Christ. Its mission is to embrace all humanity, all nations. In this perspective, the church is seen as a spiritual homeland, in which all the divisions of nature (race, language, culture, gender, social class) are overcome and the mystery of unity in Christ and the fellowship of divided humanity is unfolded. Doesn't all this necessitate the relativization of the concepts of nation and earthly homeland, as St Gregory of Nazianzus seems to maintain with such astonishing boldness and clarity in

his work *Against the Arians, and Concerning Himself (Oration 33)*, on in his discourse *To the Holy Hieromartyr Cyprian*?

The Orthodox as well as Christians from other traditions will urgently have to decide which we support and profess: the unity of all and the universal brotherhood of humans, or national particularity? At the time and in the context of a multinational pluralistic postmodern society, Christianity loses its theological and spiritual resources of the biblical, patristic and Eucharistic tradition in the rhetoric of "identities" and in an outdated religious tribalism. At the same time the insistence the insistence of many Orthodox on seeing Orthodoxy as a part of the national identity, undermines every serious attempt to face the challenges that the contemporary world poses to Orthodoxy, and condemns the latter to continue to be trapped in traditionalism, fundamentalism, social anachronism, and the authoritarian structures of patriarchal society. As a result, along with ideological constructions such as "Helleno-Christianity" (or the "Holy Russia-Third Rome," the "Christian" Kingdom of Serbia and the Serbian people as servant of God," "the Latin character and uniqueness of Romanian Orthodoxy," and so on, to recall some other examples), theocracy and neo-nationalism represent the dominant political vision of Eastern Christianity which continues to long for a romantic version of "Christian" society and to dream of the forms and schemes of the Constantinian era.

Nowadays, in the era of globalization, when national identities are challenged by this supranational project, the old dilemma: catholicity or particularism, universality or locality rises again, and asks for an open discussion in the churches. The relationship between Christian identity and national identity, and the subsequent claims of territorial exclusiveness are in the heart of this discussion, while our capacity for forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and peaceful coexistence is to a great extent dependent on the answer we will give to it.