

Press Release

International Conference

«Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox theology in a global age»

February 6-9, 2020, Thessalia Conference Center, Volos

On February 6-9, 2020, an International Conference, organized by the Faculty of Evangelical Theology of Münster University, the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” at the University of Münster, in cooperation with the Huffington Ecumenical Institute (California) on the topic «Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox theology in a global age», was successfully held in Volos (Thessalia Conference Center).

The conference, which attended by university professors, theologians, sociologists of religion, and political scientists from all around the world, attempted to critically examine various historical aspects of the issue from the point of view of theology, history and political science (byzantine, Tsaric model, Romanian, Serbian theology, etc.), but also the theological parameters of a fruitful encounter.

In the first session moderated by Dr. Pantelis Kalaitzidis (Director, Volos Academy for Theological Studies) and after the welcoming greetings, Dr. **Hans-Peter Grosshans**, (Dean, Faculty of Evangelical Theology, Münster University, Director of the Seminar of Systematic Theology and Director of the Institute for Ecumenical Theology of his Faculty) referred to the importance of the discussion for Christianity in general and the Orthodox Church in particular. **Dr. Vasilios N. Makrides**, (Professor, Erfurt University) spoke on the topic “Orthodox Christianity in the Context of Postcolonial Studies”. In his presentation Makrides dealt with issue of the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and the post-colonial theories. In his view countries and cultures with a predominant Orthodox Christian population and character (especially those situated in Eastern and South Eastern Europe) have never been “Western colonies” in the strict sense of the word. This notwithstanding, they were exposed to massive Western influences, pre-eminently from the beginning of the early modern times onwards, so that we may rightly talk of a “colonisation” of the Orthodox Christian world by the West at various levels. Interestingly, postcolonial studies can offer useful tools and insights to capture, describe, analyse and explain numerous Orthodox Christian reactions to this kind of colonisation. In general, the latter can essentially contribute to an understanding of the sociopolitical and socio-cultural development of the Orthodox Christian world, not only historically, but also in the context of the present global age.

The second speaker Dr. **Atanas Slavov**, (Associate Professor of Constitutional Law, Sofia University) spoke on the “Constitutional Tradition and Orthodoxy: Values and Concepts” where he described the models of interaction between the Orthodoxy (its fundamental doctrines) and the Orthodox Church with the institutions, values and principles of constitutional democracy (the rule of law, limited government, human rights, justice, equality). The presentation highlighted the major phases of interaction between the Church and the state thus elaborating different political-theological models – the imperial symphonia, Christian Nation, and the contemporary model of cooperation and public engagement, while endorsing some fundamental values as human dignity, personal freedom, justice,

participation. The general idea is that Orthodoxy may endorse the core values and principles of constitutional democracy and yet remaining faithful to its own fundamental teachings (theosis, Eucharistic personalist communion, conciliarity, ethos of engagement and participation in the church, ecumenical witness). At the same time, the eschatological perspective should prevent the Orthodoxy from complete identification with any political and sociological system, thus enhancing its transformative role in society.

In the first morning session of the second day of the conference moderated by Dr. **Vassiliki Yiakoumaki** (Assistant Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Thessaly) speakers included: **Rev. Dr. Filotheos-Fotios Maroudas**, (Advisory Board Member at Applied Philosophy Research Laboratory, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens; Priest of the St. Apostles Greek Orthodox Parish, Dortmund, Germany), who spoke on the “Concept and Theological Context of Byzantine “Synallelia”, “Symphonia”. Once the conceptual differentiation, expressed through the use of terms of symphonia and synallelia, was established, an evaluation of these terms from an ecclesiological point of view followed with regards to the kind of the relationships they describe, and the corresponding authority to which they are assigned. This examination showed that there was a unilateral legislative agreement. A theological approach followed that results from an identification of the three basic common elements that characterize the Byzantine and Old Testament times. Then, the basic biblical points were explained in relation to the beliefs of the time, while a theological interpretation of the equation between the Old Testament laws and the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils was provided. Finally the relations between Church and State in the imperial Byzantium were ecclesologically evaluated and the question of the ecclesologically accepted principles of the concept of democracy in the Church today was also addressed.

Dr. Alfons Brüning, (Professor at Protestant Theological University Amsterdam, Chair of “Orthodoxy, Human Rights, Peace Studies”) reflected on “The Tsarist System”. It was as early as late 15th century that the Muscovite Grand Princes named themselves “tsars”, claiming the heritage of the fallen Byzantine Empire. The “Tsarist system” collapsed in 1917 with the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II. Within these approximately 450 years the political system of Muscovy, and later of the Russian Empire underwent several developments and changes, but at least two pillars remained intact, allowing for a summarizing sketch of this system, and for a presentation of its peculiarities with regard to contemporary questions of church, state and society: One is the position (not the particular person) of the Tsar himself, as inherited from Byzantium, but further endowed with a specific moral profile and – significantly – with a particular religious and eschatological meaning. The other one is the notion of “pravda”, a term almost impossible to be adequately translated into other languages, and equally charged with religious overtones. As has been demonstrated, it is precisely the religious connotations of the “Tsarist system” and its pillars which make a rational discussion of it as just a political system with possible alternatives rather difficult.

Dr. Ina Merdjanova, (Visiting Professor at Coventry University’s Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations & Senior Researcher and Adjunct Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin) spoke on “Orthodoxy under Pressure: Ottoman, Communist and Post-Communist Contexts”. This paper discussed major political contexts in the history of Orthodox Christianity which defined in important and often challenging ways the trajectories of Orthodoxy’s institutional development, social presence and theological responses to important issues such as modernity, secularization, globalization,

religious pluralism, human rights, and gender, among others. The paper introduced the notion of self-colonization and argues that Orthodoxy's responses to adverse historic circumstances, particularly in Eastern Europe, have typically been dominated by a besieged-fortress mentality—a mentality which has entailed a self-imposed institutional and theological stagnation that can be described as self-colonization. Nevertheless, Orthodox Christianity can draw on a significant body of theological doctrines in order to elaborate new positive responses to contemporary challenges and to thus overcome its self-colonization.

In the second morning session moderated by Rev. Dr. **Amphilochios Miltos** (Research Associate, Volos Academy for Theological Studies), Dr. **Nathaniel Wood**, (Associate Director, Orthodox Christian Studies Center, Fordham University, New York), presented a paper on "Orthodoxy and Democracy in Russian Religious Philosophy". The paper examined theological engagement with democracy, broadly conceived, in 19th - and early 20th -century Russian religious thought, focusing on the work of the Slavophiles, Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, and S.L. Frank. The paper then investigated three major themes in the development of Russian Orthodox democratic thinking: the doctrine of the Church's sobornost' and the 19th -century revival of ecclesiastical consciousness, the retrieval of the doctrine of deification as a metaphysical grounding for the unconditional significance and rights of the human person, the creative reworking of the Chalcedonian formula of Christ's two natures as a model for church-state relations. Finally, the paper emphasized how Russian religious thinkers resisted the spiritual dangers posed by modern democracy while attempting to reconcile core democratic values with Orthodox theology, pointing towards the possibility of a distinctively Orthodox theory of democratic politics.

Dr. Branko Seculić, (Lecturer at the University Centre for Protestant Theology Matthias Flacius Illyricus in Zagreb), reflected on "Orthodoxy and Democracy in Serbian Theology and Thought". Close ties between ethnonationalistic representatives and the highest leadership of church institutions in the ex-Yugoslavian areas led to the rapprochement between ethnototalitarian ideology and ethnoclerical aspirations, the crossbreeding of which has given a birth to the phenomenon of ethnoreligianity. The consequence of this phenomenon, once reflected in the sacralization of the politics of ethnic cleansing carried out in the 1990s during the Yugoslav breakup, is today reflected in historical revisionism and self-victimology, through which the glorification of one's own crimes and the contempt for victims of others comes to light. The text discussed the possibilities of speaking about Orthodoxy and democracy in Serbian theology and thought within such sociopolitical conditions.

Dr. Lucian Turcescu, (Professor, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada), spoke on "Orthodoxy and Democracy in Romanian Theology". This paper focused on the Romanian Orthodox Church and its interaction with democracy. He specifically paid attention to the participation of priests and bishops in politics, the support given by the church to various political candidates during electoral campaigns, as well as pronouncements of the Holy Synod on such participation; the protocols of collaboration between RomOC and government; and evolving models of church-state relations RomOC experienced during the past three decades since the collapse of communism.

In the first afternoon session moderated by Dr. **Anne Käfer** (Professor of Systematic Theology, Faculty of Evangelical Theology, Münster University Director, Seminar for Reformed Theology) the first speaker **Dr. Dimitrios Moschos**, (Assoc. Professor, Department of Theology, Athens

University), spoke on “The History of the Idea of Democracy in Contemporary Greek Orthodox Theology”. The position of Orthodox theology vis-à-vis the institutions introduced by the principles of political liberalism, characterized as Republic (i.e. representation, voting and majority principle, etc.) does not constitute a major problem because these institutions were not unknown in Orthodoxy. Rather, the most important issue to be investigated is the position of Orthodox theology against the general framework of the principles of Democracy, such as equality against the law and equality of speech, human rights, freedom of conscience and, in particular, the degree of protection of all kinds of minorities. In this paper the speaker presented the view according to which in modern Greece there is no central body of Orthodox theological thought that is by definition opposed to modern democracy (as suggested by Huntington’s cultural approach, for example) but there are also no profound structural elements of this thought that function as the framework within which these elements can work. Theological thought in Greece is decisively determined by the dispute of the intellectual currents of the last two centuries and constitutes a permanent synthetic function, which highlights the continuing need for theologians to contribute to a response to today’s challenges that undermine democracy and, more generally, the social cohabitation, which could lead to a return to barbarism.

Fadi Nasr, (Secretary General, Orthodox Youth Movement of the Patriarchate of Antioch (MJO), Beirut, Lebanon), spoke on “Orthodoxy and Democracy in Antiochean Theology and Thought”. In the Middle East the issues of governance are not a matter of laws, nor the election of deputies, nor the reconstruction of the legal system. The Lebanese have a degree of reason and a degree of culture that enables them to do all of this, but it is the will to change things and the love for God in an equal amount so that they change their behavior so they can rebuild a great homeland. They do not put the effort and the strength and the amount of work needed so that the Lord will descend from heaven and will be born in the hearts that can build our world. In this paper an attempt was made to describe this impasse and the great obstacles the Lebanese people have. How they talked about Democracy and Human dignity throughout our history and what where the obstacles so they lost the sight of it. This is a process of faith, that is to say, they need to change the reality and they tried but not enough. The paper finally showed how and keep the faith, that the dream will become the source of the new reality and Antioch will become a foothold for the Lord. After that, laws and structures will rise and be blessed by the flood of love from above. Rev. Dr. **K. M. George**, (Director of the Sopana Orthodox Academy in Kottayam, Kerala, India), reflected on the topic “Orthodoxy and Democracy in Oriental Orthodox Thought”, where he referred to the relations of the Pre-Chalcedonian Churches with the principles of liberal democracy, the relationship of church and state with special reference to India and the ancient Malankar Church.

In the last session of the day moderated by **Dr. Aikaterini Tsalambouni** (Associate Professor of New Testament, Faculty of Theology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Member of the Board of Directors of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies), **Dr. Svetoslav Riboloff**, (Professor, Faculty of Theology, “St Clement of Ochrid” Sofia University) spoke on “Church and State in the Orthodox World Today and the Challenges of the Global Age”. The Orthodox world is not a unified space, but of a great variety of types or models of Church and State relationship, ranging from “established church” to “strict separation”. Regardless of their constitutional regime, all of these countries exercise state intervention under unwritten laws in the religious affairs supporting the Orthodox Church in a discreet (democratic regimes) or brutal (authoritarian regimes) manner for political purposes. In May, 2017 was released by Pew Research Center a research on the Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and

Eastern Europe. According to this study, the most of the people affiliated with the Orthodox Christianity do not practice religious obligations. They perceive their religious affiliation as political one and identify religious with national identity. This is a compelling political reality for any government in the region. On the other hand, the influence of anti-democratic ideas and aggressive interventionism on the part of the Russian Federation, through some Orthodox churches, poses serious problems for state institutions. New technologies and electronic media help to spread the false news and extreme religious views among Orthodox Christians. This particular asymmetry in the Church-State relations is the key to a serious crisis in the Orthodox world in the global age.

Rev. Dr. **Cyril Hovorun**, (Assistant Professor, Marymount Loyola University Los Angeles, and Director, Huffington Ecumenical Institute, California), presented a paper on "Pseudomorphosis as Political Theology in Fr Georges Florovsky". Fr Georges Florovsky believed that scholasticism was a western construct, which he called "pseudomorphosis". However, scholasticism is an eastern, not western construct. It is a result of distillation of Hellenism, by reducing its metaphysics to dialects. Hence is the paradox in Florovsky's thought. On the one hand, he embraces Hellenism without proper reservations. On the other hand, he rejects scholasticism, which in fact is a distilled version of Hellenic philosophy. Why such contraction? It is so because Florovsky is ideologically biased. He receives Hellenism in wholesale, because it is "eastern" to him, and he rejects scholasticism, because it is "western." These preferences sound Eurasian. Even though Florovsky rejected the "temptation" of Eurasianism, it left a lasting footprint on his thought. His embracement of Hellenism and rejection of scholasticism is effectively a Eurasian discourse imported to theology. Florovsky's Eurasian discourse in theology is a pseudomorphosis to a greater extent than what he believed about scholasticism.

In the first morning session of the last day of the conference moderated by **Dr. Herman J. Silderhuis**, (President, European Academy of Religion Rector, Theological University of Apeldoorn, The Netherlands), **Georgios Vlantis**, (MTh, Director, Council of Christian Churches in Bavaria, and Research Associate, Volos Academy for Theological Studies), spoke on "Orthodox Theology and Modernity/Postmodernity, Secularization/Post-Secularization". Orthodoxy is a theological quality, but also a term ascribed to a family of Churches, whose relation to modernity/postmodernity and secularization/postsecularisation is being intensively studied in the last decades. The paper questioned both stereotypes about this relation and broadly known Orthodox readings of modernity. It also critically examined the potential of theological epistemology and currents of modern Orthodox thought in general for establishing a positive relation to the modern world. Could the structures of the Orthodox Church contribute to this effort or rather impede it? Is a kind of renewal of the Eastern Church and its theological thinking necessary from a pastoral point of view or endangers identities? May Orthodoxy profit from the experience of its ecumenical partners?

Dr. **Pantelis Kalaitzidis**, (Director, Volos Academy for Theological Studies; Lecturer, Hellenic Open University and the University of Thessaly; Research Fellow; KU Leuven; Member of the Executive Committee, European Academy of Religion) spoke on "Balkan and Eastern European Ethno-theology: Historical and Theological Approach". According to the speaker religious nationalism seems to be the most serious problem facing the Orthodox Church since the fall of Byzantium (1453) and the period of introversion which began with this crucial historic event. Significant aspects of this problem are the identification between Church and nation, Church and ethno-cultural identity, Church and state, and, consequently, the idea and the

reality of national Churches (Greek, Russian, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, each of which identifies the truth of faith with the truth of the nation, while claims for every single Orthodox nation the role of the new chosen people of God), alongside with the “replacement of the history of salvation with the history of national revival.” By assuming this “national” role, and by being involved in the formation of particular ethno-cultural identities, the Orthodox Church faces serious difficulties in confirming its sense of catholicity, universality, and Church unity, while in the context of a multinational post-modern society, is exhausting the theological and spiritual resources of its patristic tradition on the rhetoric of “identities” and on a dated religious tribalism and fundamentalism.

At this point the Metropolitan of Demetrias and Almyros **Ignatios** briefly greeted the conference where he highlighted the relevance of the dialogue between Orthodoxy and the modern challenges of democracy and globalization. Then a special session took place dedicated to a brief presentation of **RESILIENCE**. The panel included: Dr. Herman J. Selderhuis, Dr. Hans-Peter Grosshans, Dr. Nikolaos Asproulis, moderated by Dr. Pantelis Kalaitzidis. The panelists offered a brief overview of the project, by highlighting its scope, goals, and history while a special reference was made to its relevance for the Eastern and Central European countries. **RESILIENCE** (RELigious Studies Infrastructure: tooLs, Expert, conNectiOns and CEnters) will serve the academic community in the first place, and at the same time will, with its impact, extend significantly to the non-academic community: it offers the tools for an innovative approach of religious studies which can be used to build a European response to the challenge of religious diversity.

In the second morning session of the day moderated by Dr. Vasileios Makrides, Dr. **Effie Fokas**, (Senior Research Fellow, Hellenic Foundation for Hellenic and European Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) and Research Associate, Hellenic Observatory, London School of Economics), spoke on “Majority Orthodox states and religious freedom at the European Court of Human Rights”. The paper contended with the public face of Orthodoxy in terms of the reputation of majority Orthodox states as violators of religious freedoms. Based on a 2012 study of violations of religious freedom found by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR or the Court), 79% of claims of religious freedoms violations against majority Orthodox states end in judgments finding violations, whilst the relevant figure for majority Catholic countries is 9%, 5% for Muslim majority countries, and none against Protestant countries. Though the Court’s judgements are not a reliable measure of the relationship of Orthodoxy to religious freedom, they do impact upon public perceptions of that relationship. This paper analysed the Court’s religious freedoms judgements against majority Orthodox states to trace potential patterns across the various cases..

Dr. **Irena Zeltner Pavlovic**, (Academic Councilor, Erlangen-Nürnberg University, Habilitant) presented a paper on “Civil Society and Orthodoxy” where she dealt with Jose Casanova’s deconstruction of the Eurocentric episteme of secularization and reflects upon its relevance, especially with regard to the post-socialist “Orthodoxy”. The paper further delved into a critical elaboration of the localization of religion and religious actors in the domain of civil society, stimulated by the concept of public religion, and seen as part of the intermedial space of a modern, pluralistic society. Finally, the paper outlined a public theology paradigm as a scientific reflection of public religion in the German-speaking spaces. In addition, the Swiss fundamental theologian Edmund Arens’ view of public theology was presented, in which he, following Casanova, underlines the civil society potential religions have for the socio-political integration. The presentation demonstrated how the Orthodox churches in the Swiss diaspora

have of recent been researched within the framework of civil society and social capital. Such an approach has been deliberately chosen to present an intersubjectively verifiable set of analytical instruments, useful in researching of the concrete relationships between civil society and the Orthodox church.

In the first afternoon session moderated by Effie Fokas, Dr. **Nikolaos Asproulis**, (Deputy Director, Volos Academy for Theological Studies, and Lecturer, Hellenic Open University), spoke on “Primacy, Synodality and Liberal Democracy in Orthodoxy: An Uneasy Relationship? Some Methodological Considerations”. This text briefly outlined the context in which the debate takes place (later modernity, secularization, globalization), and then explore from a theological point of view what the methodological premises of this dialogue should be. The purpose of this introductory text was to show that the Orthodox Church at the level of theology is not incompatible with the basic tenets of liberal democracy, but rather its eschatological fulfillment, albeit in the realm of action and history, the life of the Church presents several dysfunctions that cause at least a puzzlement. The Church is democratic in so far as it is a communion (event) par excellence, and not just a society (institution).

Dr. **Kateřina K. Bauer**, (Senior Researcher and Lecturer, Ecumenical Institute, Protestant Theological Faculty, Charles University, Prague) presented a paper on “Orthodox Spirituality in Pluralistic Democracies”. The speaker associated democracy with positive qualities such as liberty, absence of tyranny, human rights and conscience that are at the roots of Christianity. But democracy means not only political structure but the sociological, psychological and cultural milieus that in practice also manifest its illnesses. With the help of two thinkers, the Polish sociologist of Jewish origin Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017) and the German philosopher of Korean origin Byung-Chul Han (Seoul 1959) the paper unmasked some of the illnesses of post-modern democratic life, such as liquidity with no borders, transparency, individualization, hyperactivity and production. Subsequently, the speaker looked for possible appropriate treatments in the sources of Orthodox spirituality. Here she turned her attention especially to the mystic tradition, ascetic and monastic spirituality as well as to the spirituality of space, icons, and freedom. The paper showed how some features of Orthodox spirituality can help to create conditions for democratic structures and help to restore the wholeness and harmony of people’s lives in pluralist democratic societies.

In the last session of the conference moderated by Hans-Peter Grosshans, Dr. **Athanasios N. Papathanasiou**, (Editor-in-Chief, journal Synaxi, and Lecturer, Higher Ecclesiastical Academy of Athens and Hellenic Open University) reflected on “Mission(s) and Politics: An Orthodox Approach”. Mission (the witness to every human context) has a political dimension, as the Gospel gives a meaning to life and inspires decisions. The main pillars of the mission's policy are: 1) Emphasis on the human subject and his responsibility to choose his spiritual orientation (which refers to the concept of citizenship and democracy). 2) The combination of inculturation with social liberation. 3) The refusal to identify the Gospel with any regime and theocracy. The Gospel inspires political attitudes, but also questions every political attitude, including that of the missionary. Today it is hotly debated whether Western democracy is compatible with all cultures or whether it makes no sense in highly hierarchical societies (such as Confucianism). Missionary history provides enormous research material, and mission theology attempts to synthesize Gospel politics with the data of each context (Far East, Africa and Latin America were used here as case studies).

Dr. **Chris Durante**, (Assistant Professor of Theology, Saint Peter's University, NJ, and Fellow of the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics & Human Rights in Rome) spoke on "Orthodoxy and Multiculturalism". During the violent ethno-nationalistic intra-Orthodox conflicts that occurred in the nineteenth century, in 1872 the Patriarch of Constantinople declared phyletism, or tribalistic bigotry, a sin. Unfortunately, tensions involving ethnic, cultural and national belonging continue to plague the Orthodox Christian world. This presentation offered a moral analysis of phyletism and an examination of the socio-ontological and ethical dimensions of ethnic and cultural identity in relation to the Orthodox Christian tradition. Drawing upon political and ethical theory, the speaker placed Orthodoxy in dialogue with contemporary theories of normative multiculturalism as a means of better enabling Orthodox Christianity to come to terms with its own internal cultural pluralism. The paper suggested that, if undergirded by the virtue of xenophilia, a revised understanding of philanthropy can be a counterforce to the sin of phyletism and serve as a part of the foundations of a new form of Orthodox Christian multiculturalism.

The conference closed with the Orthros and Divine Liturgy at the Church of St. Constantine and Helene celebrated by the Metropolitan of Demetrias and Almyros Ignatios.

At the end of each session, the participants were given sufficient time for discussion.