

Theological Education and Modernity

“Let your light shine forth : Orthodox Theological Education in the modern world”

Vth International Consultation of Orthodox Theological Schools,
Halki Theological School, Turkey, August 14-20, 1994

Archpriest Thomas Hopko
St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary
Crestwood, New York

The task of Orthodox theological education is basically two-fold. It is to affirm and explain the Orthodox Christian faith, and to assist believers in applying and practicing this faith in their daily lives.

Orthodox theological education has two basic requirements. The first is "the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4), for which we Orthodox regularly pray in our liturgical services. The second is the ability to "test the spirits" and to "discern the signs of the times" (cf. 1 Jn 4:1; Matt 16:3).

Knowledge and Discernment

We who work in theological education must be engaged in a constant effort to discover the truth, particularly in regard to our specific educational tasks and pedagogical duties. As we struggle to pray and to be purified from our sinful passions, we must continually study the Church's authoritative witnesses to Orthodox Christian faith and life: the holy scriptures, the liturgical rites, the decrees of the universally received councils, the canons, the icons, the writings of the church fathers, and the lives and teachings of the saints. And we must continually increase our knowledge and develop our skills in the particular academic and pastoral disciplines for which we are personally responsible.

We, Orthodox theologians and educators must also struggle for the ability to test the spirits and interpret the signs of the times. We must be aware of the realities of the world in which we live and work, acquiring eyes to see what is happening around us, ears to hear, and minds willing to understand. We must resist the temptation to flee into fantasy worlds of our own making. We must be delivered from all forms of delusion (*plane, prelest*). We must be engaged with our world without being enmeshed in it; and detached from our world without being contemptuous of its questions, indifferent to its desires, insensitive to its sufferings, and insensible to its need for salvation.

To accomplish the ascetical feat (*podvig*) of theological education is not merely difficult; it is humanly impossible. It becomes possible only with God who gives the grace of discernment (*diakrisis*) to those who struggle to know and love Him, and to know and love the people and places which He knows and loves and gives to those with whom He works for good in all things, who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

Faith in the gospel, knowledge of the truth, the gift of discernment, freedom from delusion, competence in one's scholarly and pedagogical discipline, and a dispassionate identification in love with everyone and everything for the sake of enlightenment and salvation are essential qualities for the ministry of theological education in the Orthodox Church. Our modern, post-Christian, post-Communist (and, as some in the West now say, "post-modern") world demands these qualities from Orthodox pastors, theologians and teachers with an urgency perhaps greater than ever before in human history.

Modernity and Post-Modernity

"Modernity" and "post-modernity" are understood differently by different people in different places. The terms which are used to describe our present human condition and approach to reality may also be understood differently by Orthodox educators in the same place, and even in the same country, church and theological school.

I suggest that we do not attempt to define "modernity" or "post-modernity", in our present discussion; nor try to discover its origins, describe its characteristics, delineate its possible meanings, or enumerate the countless questions which it raises for Orthodoxy. I suggest rather that we reflect on five issues with which all of our Orthodox churches and schools must deal in the midst of "modernity" or "post-modernity", whatever our particular setting, and however we understand and use the terms.

Our five topics for discussion will be 1) permanency and change, 2) individuals and authority, 3) persons and communion, 4) unity and diversity, and 5) the communion of men and women. I will reflect briefly on each of these issues, and offer some personal thoughts as a beginning to our conversation.

1. Permanency and Change

Our modern world is a time of radical change and relentless novelty in all areas of human life. It challenges Orthodox Christians with a plethora of new and unprecedented issues, questions, and demands, as human persons and institutions experience the most rapid transformations and dramatic mutations in thought and behavior in human history.

Our modern world is also a time when virtually all Orthodox churches and communities are experiencing a breakdown of the Church's living Tradition while also experiencing an explosion of information about Orthodox theology, history, liturgy and spiritual life. This ironic situation has produced a loss of balance and integrity in Orthodox

thinking and activity. For example, some people know the scriptures well, but know little about liturgy and the spiritual life. Some have read Boulgakov and Berdiaev, but have never read the Bible. Others are experts in the *Rudder*, or the *Typikon*, or the *Philokalia*, but have never had basic biblical teaching or catechetical instruction. And those with even a little education are among the learned few who immediately become teachers in church-appointed or self-appointed positions. And this is occurring at exactly the moment when those within and outside Orthodoxy are demanding that Orthodox pastors and educators distinguish clearly between what is permanent and essential in Orthodox faith and life, and what is temporary and non-essential, and therefore changeable and dispensable in Christian belief and behavior.

When we look to the Bible and church history seeking insight about permanency and change in the Church, we see that the Church's human form has been constantly changing through the ages. The Church changes in history, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann used to say, in order to remain the same. The Church changes its forms of organizational structure, liturgical worship, doctrinal formulation, devotional practice, and relationship to secular powers in order to remain faithful to itself and its mission: to proclaim the gospel, confess the truth, and witness to God's love in the fallen, constantly changing world within which the Church exists as the gracious presence of God's kingdom.

When we look to the Bible and church history we also see that the Lord Jesus Christ, with his prophets and apostles, were killed for being innovators. Many of the church fathers and saints were also bearers of new things for the Church, and also suffered for their teachings. They brought new experiences of faith, new formulations of doctrine, and new forms of worship. This is true of the Cappadocian fathers, for example, and St. Gregory Palamas and his fellow hesychasts. And in more recent times it was true of St. Paisy Velichovsky and the Optina elders, St. Tikhon the Confessor of Moscow, and St. Silouan of Mt. Athos. That the Lord Jesus Christ, the first Christians, and many Orthodox teachers and saints were accused of being innovators, and truly were so, does not mean that all who bring new things to God's people are holy and true. Many who have introduced errors and evils into the Church, and created heresies and schisms, were also innovators. Their new things were not of God, but the devil.

On the other hand, we also see that those who preserve old customs and teachings in the Church are not necessarily free from falsehood and sin. St. Cyprian of Carthage said many centuries ago that antiquity is not truth (*antiquitas non est veritas*), and that ancient custom may be nothing more than ancient error. Many who are mistaken, and create schisms and heresies in the Church, may be "conservatives" who mindlessly repeat the good words of the scriptures, councils and saints while they distort the content of the teaching and fail to live by its truth. They thereby find themselves fighting against the truth when it comes in new forms, in response to new questions and needs. The iconoclasts were such people, for example, as were those who opposed the holy hesychasts.

The issue of what is changeable and unchangeable in Christian life and teaching has really nothing to do with antiquity or novelty as such. It is not about what is old-fashioned or modern, traditional or innovative, conservative or liberal. For as Christ has said, "...every scribe who is made a disciple for the kingdom of heaven is like a man who is a householder who brings forth from his treasure things new and old" (Matt 13:51). The issue of

permanency and change is rather the more radical issue about what in the Church's life and teaching is right or wrong, true or false, edifying or destructive, of God or of the devil.

Much that is considered to be new in the Church is often not substantially new at all. It is rather a new articulation or expression of a truth which has always been known and believed. Sometimes what appears to be new is also nothing other than a rediscovery and recovery of something old which has been lost, forgotten, obscured or misunderstood. And sometimes what is new is indeed truly new in the temporal and historical sense because it is something of God previously unknown which is seen for the very first time. In such cases the reality itself is neither new nor old; it is simply newly known because the time has come for its showing.

Orthodox theologians and educators must make a careful and dispassionate study of the Bible and church history to learn how change occurs in the Church. We must come to see how Orthodox Christians remain faithful to Christ while receiving new knowledge, answering new questions, and formulating new expressions of doctrine and worship. We must learn how the Church throughout history has refashioned what needs refashioning while ridding itself of unacceptable teachings and practices which have crept into the body. We must come to see how things which are merely temporal and temporary are permitted to pass away as peacefully and painlessly as possible. And, of course, we must learn to protect ourselves from new things which are not of God. Our times, perhaps more than ever, require that we make these efforts and acquire these gifts.

2. Individuals and Authority

How do Orthodox theologians and educators discern what is to be preserved or changed in the Church, welcomed or resisted? How do we answer new questions, meet new demands, and respond to new needs while remaining faithful to ancient and eternal truth? How do we protect ourselves against erroneous and evil innovations, while ridding ourselves of old deviations and distortions? And how, in a word, do we determine what is right or wrong in Church and society, true or false, good or evil, acceptable or unacceptable, of God or the devil?

The modern world often tells us that our real problem is that we persist in raising such questions, thinking that they can be properly answered. It tells us that such questions and answers, especially in areas of religion, theology, spirituality and ethics are no longer objectively possible, necessary or welcome. It tells us that there really is no right and wrong, true and false, good and evil in a metaphysical sense, surely nothing that we can know and prove, even if, for whatever reasons, we may still believe in God and spiritual reality.

In the modern view (with its roots in Cartesian and Kantian philosophy, Protestant theology and piety, and various Enlightenment versions of reality, particularly social and political), each human being is an "individual". And everything theological, spiritual, metaphysical and ethical is a matter of individual choice, subjective decision and private belief. The only ethical boundary to an individual's belief and behavior is that they may not directly harm another individual, nor curtail his or her rights and freedoms in any way. (This is why, for example, in the modern debate about abortion it is critical to determine whether or not a fetus is an "individual".)

Even in churches and theological schools, individuals are free to pick and choose. They have the natural, some even say the "God-given", right to do so. They rely on a democratic state constitution to protect their liberty and sovereignty. They can think what they like and do what they want, taking from their "education" what they choose, and leaving the rest. They have their private reasons for implementing their self-designed agendas, satisfying their self-determined desires, and fulfilling their self-identified needs; and the inviolable right to do so.

It is important to see that just as all heretics are not necessarily "liberals", neither are all who accept the modern individualistic approach to reality. Some modern individualists are in fact quite "conservative", perhaps even reactionary. It just happens that "conservative" individualists have a taste for old things (like, for example among the Orthodox, medieval piety; or clerical styles of the Turkish period, or unrevised calendars, or ancient languages, or outdated liturgical practices.)

While being totally "modernistic" in their attitude and spirit, which they would usually violently deny, conservative individualists curse things "modern" because they prefer things old. And even if they do not identify what they like from the past as eternal and divine, nor insist that it be followed by all others, they insist on their individual freedom and right to think and do as they please. And they insist as well, just like "liberal" modernists, that no "authority" in church or state has the right to tell them, or make them do, otherwise.

Individualists basically recognize no authority other than themselves. Not being anarchists, they usually admit the need for civil and ecclesiastical "authorities", but they seek those which agree with them and enforce their opinions and desires. When such people are religious they follow the god of their choosing, whom they may even call the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And when they go to church, even to an Orthodox church — even as pastors, monks, professors or teachers — they go to the church (or jurisdiction) of their choice, based on their subjective opinion and desire of what the "true church" and "true Orthodoxy" are, and should be. And they interpret the authoritative witnesses to the Church's faith and life through the lenses of their predetermined and prejudiced predilections.

A tragic condition occurs when those in authority have become infected — consciously or unconsciously — by the individualistic spirit. And still more tragic is when they deny that they are so poisoned. For then their thoughts and desires become commingled and identified with the teachings and activities of the Church itself. In such instances these bishops, priests, teachers and elders victimize their disciples with an "Orthodox" theology, liturgy and piety of their own making. They may have great "zeal for God", as the apostle Paul once said of some others, "but it is not according to knowledge" and so they substitute for God's righteousness a righteousness of their own (cf. Romans 10:2-3).

The radical individualism which has blossomed in the modern world has produced a reaction which is also a characteristic of our times. This is the reactive and reactionary flight of many in our modern (or post-modern) world into romantic reconstructions of the past. Those making this flight often create or join cultic communities in which they hope to fulfill their fantasies. They surrender their personal freedom and responsibility, and blindly follow the commands of leaders, or appoint themselves leaders, who guarantee safe and secure

protection against the evils of the modern world. Many who take this flight are burned-out refugees of radical individualism who have over-dosed on individual choices, decisions and actions. Some of them come to the Orthodox Church looking for such an escape from reality. And sometimes, alas, they tragically find what they are looking for; sometimes even creating it themselves.

Orthodox pastors, theologians and educators must deal with the modern individualistic approach to reality, whether it is openly admitted or delusively denied, and the various reactions that people may take to it. Our first duty is to discern its presence among us and to free ourselves, by God's grace, from its insidious power. Then we must work to organize and administer our schools and carry out our educational ministries according to Christ and the Church as they really are, and not according to our subjective interpretations, or the imaginations of the fantasizing cultic leaders to whom we have sold our minds and surrendered our souls.

Orthodox educators must also learn how to care for those who have been gravely wounded by modern approaches to reality, both individualistic and reactionary. Our churches, schools and monasteries are filled with spiritually, psychologically, emotionally and even physically wounded people, some of whom need professional medical assistance and psychological counseling — which bring still more issues of "modernity" for us to evaluate and resolve. In dealing with the therapeutic problems which are now an unavoidable and necessary part of educational work in Orthodox theological schools, we are compelled to begin with ourselves. For we who lead and teach are hardly unscathed by the modern world in its many forms and varied effects, both of capitulation and reaction.

3. Persons and Communion

Those who teach and study in Orthodox theological schools today, together with the bishops, trustees and administrators of our educational institutions, must discover the narrow path of exercising personal freedom according to Orthodox Christian faith within an ordered ecclesial communion of mutual respect, responsibility and accountability. This "narrow way which leads to life" is generally incomprehensible to the modern (and post-modern) mind. A radical change of mind (*metanoia*) is needed for this saving way of traditional Orthodoxy to be found and followed even by us Orthodox believers who have lost it through centuries of tragically complicated ecclesiastical, political, cultural and spiritual processes.

We who serve in theological schools and institutions must be capable of teaching our students, by word and by deed, the way of personal freedom exercised in an ordered ecclesial communal setting. We must create the conditions where all may speak and be heard in a common search for God's truth by reference to the authoritative witnesses to Orthodox Tradition: the Bible, liturgy, councils, canons, icons, fathers and saints. Our theological students must learn how to "do theology" (as we now say in the West) not only by academic study combined with liturgical worship and spiritual striving. They must learn by observing how our schools, as well as our parishes, dioceses and local churches, are organized, governed, administered and financed, and by participating in the actual life and operation of these ecclesial institutions.

There are basically two alternatives to the traditional Orthodox way of personal freedom in ordered communal and conciliar life in the Church. There is the way of authoritarian, dictatorial tyranny which occurs when ecclesial leadership is separated from authentic ecclesial communion and conciliarity. (Fr. Alexander Schmemmann labeled this sickness "ecclesiastical bolshevism".) And there is the way of chaotic anarchy which is inevitably produced when ecclesial conciliarity and communion, by design or neglect, are detached from authentically authoritative hierarchical order. In such instances the church, diocese, parish, or school degenerates into clusters of competing parties, interest-groups and even isolated individuals, each pushing for its own peculiar form of teaching and practice.

A strange combination of tyranny and anarchy results when church members, both leaders and disciples, fail to make common reference to the authoritative witnesses to Orthodox faith and life in an atmosphere of personal freedom, mutual trust and common responsibility. This "tyrannical anarchy" or "anarchical tyranny" appears when leadership defends its authority against communion and conciliarity in the name of a power demanding unquestioning loyalty and obedience; and where such paranoid defensiveness is opposed by "democratic" forces defending individual demands and party interests under the guise of personal freedom and ecclesial communality. We in North America can testify to such an anomaly. And we see its coming to parts of the world where it has yet to make its painful appearance.

4. Unity and diversity

A devastating aspect of the modern (and post-modern) world is the tendency to separate and isolate, to disintegrate and fracture. The spiritual and material are divided from each other, as are the metaphysical and existential, and the theoretical and practical. Faith and knowledge are opposed. Theology and piety are divorced. Freedom is put in opposition to authority as the individual person - or parish, province, tribe or region - is placed against, rather than within, the larger community of family, church, society, nation and world. Prophet is opposed to priest, charismatic to institutional, individual to corporate, private to public.

An essential task of Orthodox theological education is to expose this literally "diabolical" approach to reality, and to teach and demonstrate in action the proper relationship between unity and diversity in all areas of human life and activity. Orthodox theological schools and institutions, like the Church itself, must find the royal way of maintaining its essential unity with the diversity which true unity requires for its being and actualization in life.

Unity and diversity in a theological school will exist between the academic and the pastoral dimensions of the educational program and process. It will exist between scholarly work and practical application. It will also exist between the educational process as a whole and the work of the separate pedagogical disciplines: scripture, liturgy, history, patristics, dogmatics, languages and the various courses of pastoral theology and practice. It will ensure the freedom of objective scholarship in proper relationship to the Church's received Tradition which is guided and guarded by the Church's episcopal authority in communion with the faithful believers. And it will also hold together the diverse elements essential to a full and

complete program of Orthodox theological education: academic study, liturgical worship, spiritual formation, practical field experience, and community life and service.

Orthodox theological schools must be structured to ensure unity in diversity, and diversity in unity. Crucial to the structure is the mechanism for an obligatory ongoing communication among and between all those involved in the process: rectors, teachers, students, administrators, trustees, and the bishops, priests and lay people of the Church. When such communication is not mandated by the institution's organizational and operational structure, the educational process will fail, as it will when any of the constituent bodies in the process are excluded from appropriate participation.

The structure of a theological school must be voluntarily accepted by all involved in its life and work. It must be implemented as carefully and purposefully as possible. It must be open to question and change. There must be clear procedures for its adoption, application, amendment. And all participants in the process must be willing to compromise and cooperate on practical issues for the sake of the common good and the ongoing effectiveness of the mission.

5. The Communion of Men and Women

Especially acute in Orthodox theological education today is the issue which many consider to be "modernity's" most critical and crucial issue: the communion of men and women.

This general theme includes countless questions about human being and life, human sexuality, marriage and celibacy, family life, the bearing and raising of children, and social and political behavior. It raises basic issues of biblical interpretation, church doctrine and practice, and personal, legal and medical ethics. It reaches to issues concerning the very nature and naming of God. It forces a radical examination of the relationship between Orthodox Christian Tradition and the claims of modern philosophy, science and human experience in a way which makes it a perfect "case study" for virtually every issue which the modern world presents to Christian Orthodoxy.

What we teach about the communion of men and women in our Orthodox churches and theological schools, and how we live out this teaching in our academic, pedagogical, sacramental and spiritual activities, may be the greatest single expression and example of our Orthodox engagement with the modern (and post-modern) world. It reveals what we think, say and do about virtually all contemporary questions concerning divine and human being and life. And it does so in response to the ways in which these questions are posed and answered, or not posed and not answered, in the many modern (and post-modern) situations in which we live and work.

In dealing with the issue of the communion of men and women in our churches and theological schools, we are dealing with the issue of permanency and change in its sharpest existential form. We are compelled to examine our teachings and practices about human sexuality in order to determine what in the Orthodox view is of permanent significance and value in human life, and what is not. And we are called to explain our convictions in ways

which will inspire and enable contemporary men and women who are willing to understand and believe in Christ's gospel to do so.

We will be successful in this task only when we learn to deal properly with issues of freedom and authority in the Church, and in Christian life generally; when we become capable of finding and fulfilling ourselves as persons within a hierarchical and conciliar communion in which the truth and love of the Holy Trinity are made accessible to our participation and imitation; and when we gain the ability to discover and affirm the unity of human being, belief and behavior together with the countless ways in which this unity is expressed and actualized by creatures through the gracious good-pleasure of God in whose image and likeness all men and women are made.

In fulfilling the task of Orthodox theological education as it concerns the communion of women and men, subjective individualism and authoritarian domination must both be rejected. Those in authority must foster free and open investigation and conversation on all issues in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Church leaders must resist premature conclusions on disputed questions. All of Christ's baptized and sealed members who participate in the Eucharist must be permitted to speak and be heard on every question, striving to make their case by reference to the authoritative witnesses to Orthodox faith and life. And all must be seeking "the mind of Christ", desiring only to defend "the faith once and for all delivered to the saints" (cf. 1 Cor 2:16; Jude 3).

For Orthodox Christians responsible for theological education this means that the Church must be rediscovered as Christ's living body and bride, the "pillar and bulwark of the truth", the "fullness of him who fills all in all" (cf. 1Cor 11; 1 Tim 3:15; Eph 1:21). The Church as a living mystical and communal organism must become the subject (and not the object) of theology and theological education, the place within and from which (and not simply about which) theological investigation, reflection and education are conducted.

Orthodox theological education will occur in the Church, even in the midst of "modernity" (and "post-modernity"), when we who are responsible take up our task with humility and courage. It will occur when we fully accept, with faith and love, the time and place where God has put us. It will occur to the measure that we attain to mature personhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, to the glorious liberty of the children of God (cf. Eph 4:13; Rom 8:21). It will occur when we are freed from the complications and complexities of this world - ancient, medieval, modern or post-modern - which "lies in evil", whose "prince" is the devil, and whose "fashion is passing away" (1 Jn 5:19, 12:31; 1 Cor 7:31).

Theological education will occur, ultimately, when our efforts are guided, protected and empowered by the grace of God which always and forever superabounds in the midst of abounding sin. *Ou de epleonasen he hamartia, hypereperisseusen he charis* (Romans 5:20).