

DANGERS OF IDEALISM IN THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY *

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*Fear not those who kill the
body, but are unable to
kill the soul (Matt. 10:28)*

These words of our Lord appear at first glance to be more a consolation before the dangers of physical death than a warning. Yet, upon further consideration, one must admit that such words express a serious warning against all spiritual dangers that may ceaselessly threaten our soul. If the dangers for our biological death have increased owing to the evils of modern technology - traffic, electricity, pollution - this does not imply that the spiritual dangers have remained undeveloped. It is a common-place for those who carefully study cultural and spiritual developments, that all ancient heresies always return in modern times with new forms and sometimes under new names.

Roughly speaking, one might say that Christian theology was always faced with two major social and philosophical streams which in principle contradicted its deeper essence: on the one hand, *materialism* and on the other, *idealism*. However, it must be said that, while materialism may easily be identified as a gross enemy of Christian thought, idealism quite often remains the latent driving-force in a variety of attitudes which at first sight could be regarded as coinciding with Christian spirituality in general. It is precisely for this reason that I have chosen to speak on the above theme, in order to clarify certain fundamental misunderstandings which handicap not only our sincere ecumenical endeavours in this century but also our individual moral and spiritual progress.

In speaking about dangers of idealism in theology and spirituality, we indicate that *theology* and *spirituality* are not identical, though by definition they inspire, influence and develop one another. One could perhaps basically express the difference between theology and spirituality by stating that, whereas theology constitutes the reflected vision of the content of faith, spirituality is a form of spontaneously applied theology in all spheres of life.

Having made these introductory remarks, we may now study our topic in the following three areas:

- (a) in the concept of Church as the Body of God Incarnate,
- (b) in the concept of religious inheritance, which we call tradition, and
- (c) in the moral task of the individual within the communion of the Church.

(a) The Concept of Church as the Body of God Incarnate

The prefigurations¹ of the Church as found in the Old Testament

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are, as known, based more or less on the idea of a *covenant* between God and His people. Although this very idea of covenant constitutes the common denominator between the people of God in the Old and New Testaments, it must be admitted that God's Incarnation creates an entirely new basis for the ontological structure of the Church as a *theandric* entity². The climax in this differentiation was achieved by the definition of the Church offered by St Augustine, that the life of the Church is nothing less than Jesus Christ Himself extended through the centuries (*Christus prolongatus*). Precisely this mysterious synthesis of *human* and *divine* in the same entity, deriving immediately from the hypostatic union in the one Person of our Lord, created the reason, or in other words the scandal, for all major heresies in Church history. The *Christological* and *Pneumatological* controversies of the early Christian Church were in this context more the product of an idealistic philosophy, than of a materialistic world-view incompatible with a direct intervention of the material order by the divine nature, Platonic and Neoplatonic idealism distorted the created world not only by stating the principle according to which 'God cannot be mixed with man' but at the same time by introducing a certain immobility and static order between the absolute ideas on the one hand and their poor reflections in the material world on the other. It was this idealistic immobility which formed the remote background for all Arian and Macedonian rejections of the Trinitarian dogma as the specific difference of Christendom. Therefore, the characterisation of God Incarnate as *Logos* in the sense of the Gospel of St John was not merely an effective confrontation with the two pre-existing Greek philosophical streams, namely the Ionian pre-Socratic materialism and the Platonic idealism, but more so a most creative opening of the view on *theology*, *cosmology* and *anthropology*. For *Logos* should no longer be regarded as the impersonal reason of being but rather as the omnipotent, cohesive and personal force of all that is created. And it is very significant that this same personal *Logos* is at the same time the Creator Himself and the foundation of all creation.

The historical Jesus Christ, retaining all the qualities acknowledged to be His as the preexisting *Logos*, has established His Church as the definitive ark of salvation. There is a direct link between Christ as the Son of God and the nature of His Church. This link was solemnly proclaimed in the public discussion between Christ and St Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Matt.16:13ff). To the question of our Lord: "Who do people say that I am?", the Apostle Peter replies on behalf of the Twelve: "You are the Son of the Living God" (vv. 15-16). This precise confession becomes for Jesus the providential opportunity to reveal in the most immediate and spontaneous way the deepest nature of the Church which He was called to establish:

Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I say also to you, that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (vv. 17-18).

In the above scriptural passage, which constitutes one of the most condensed theological statements concerning the self-consciousness of the early Church in its nuclear form, comprising Jesus and His twelve disciples, one must underline two very substantial points:

(i) That the confession of St Peter that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God is not proclaimed abstractly but in the physical presence of the Lord; and, still more correctly, that this confession about the divinity of the Lord is addressed directly to the Master as truly Man in all His historicity and even at the moment when His Being is in question.

(ii) When Jesus manifests the divine nature of His Church, in stating that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it", He by no means excludes its human and historical nature which forms its fragility. This historicity of the Church is clearly implied also in the fact that Jesus uses the future tense to denote its establishment (Matt.16:18).

From all the above, it becomes obvious that although the Church as the Body of God Incarnate is by definition equipped with all attributes in order to be already in this world the eternal Kingdom of God, this does not signify that the *civitas Dei* constitutes an angelic situation in comparison with the rest of the world. On the contrary, the more that sin and fragility of this world are present and admitted in the life of the Church within its historical development, the more its miraculous character is revealed as the final ark of salvation. For the Church is not a purely mathematical structure but a living reality. And just as the truth of a mathematical proposition concerning a circle or triangle is never questioned on the grounds that these cannot be found in their ideal precision in the natural world, likewise one is not permitted to doubt the divine nature of the Church on the grounds of its historical defects. The Church cannot claim to be the Body of God Incarnate if it is not prepared to accept the humiliation and the *kenosis* which God the Logos willingly experienced in order to recapitulate and save the entire creation³

It is precisely for this reason that all images and parables of the Church in scriptural and patristic texts do not present a status of achieved perfection but rather a ceaseless pilgrimage, a dynamic route, even a divine adventure. The very fact that there is a variety and plurality of such images and parables⁴ is an indication that in the historical life of the Church it is impossible to reach the absolute ideal. The various conflicts and defects, so characteristically indicated, for example, in the New Testament parable of the net or of the wheat and tares, will be balanced and brought to the eschatological peace of the Kingdom of God only when according to the assurance of our Lord "at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil.2:10-11).

Having stressed through all the above the fragility and, to a certain extent, also the ambiguity of God's means in the historical life of the Church, one cannot even for a moment doubt the Church's *sacrality*, *finality* and *effectiveness*. The Church Fathers, guided by the Holy Spirit in the Ecumenical Councils, formulated the authentic doctrine

of the Church and clearly underlined all aspects of the Church's eschatological perfection, especially as expressed in the famous attributes of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which characterise the Church as "one, holy, catholic and apostolic". If one reads, for instance, the well-known treatise of St Basil "On the Procession of the Holy Spirit" where the controversies, schisms and diverse conflicts of the contemporary Church had reached a point which could hardly be described, then one must admire the sense of Christian realism and the spiritual courage of the Church Fathers who, only six years after the appearance of Basil's treatise, were able to formulate the four said attributes ("one, holy, catholic and apostolic") for the same Church that St Basil was describing.

Yet one should further inquire as to the manner in which the attributes "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" are really to be understood in view of all known and unknown defects of the historical life of the Church. For it is clear that not only the simple faithful of the Church but even the theologians are at times at a loss as to how to explain the characteristic of *oneness* in light of so many denominational divisions; the characteristic of *holiness* before so much collective and individual sin and failure among Christians; the characteristic of *catholicity* when the great majority of the world's population is still not Christian; the characteristic of *apostolicity* with so many tactics and methods in Church politics which have nothing in common with the spirit of the Apostles.

In order to be able to give a more or less satisfactory answer to the above questions and doubts, we should recall the *transitional* character of all creation - even of the Church in concrete historical conditions, though its sacramental nature allows the anticipation of the *eschaton* already from the present. Thus one might say that the sacramental character of the Church is also expressed in the tension between the reality already given in grace and the eschatological fulfilment which remains open as long as the Church is still on its way (*in statu viatoris*). Therefore, the attributes "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" are at the same time charismata that are given and postulates to be acquired. Yet all this should not be understood merely in the spirit of the *organic evolutionism* already expressed by the famous moral postulate of the ancient Greeks "become what you are", but rather in the spirit of St Paul who, in describing the antinomy of the eschatological being within the misery of this world, was not ashamed to state:

God has set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, both to angels and to men.

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are honourable, but we are despised.

(I Cor.4:9-10)

The Church, then, is not a *societas perfecta* as believed for some time in the West, and it was a great step forward when the Second Vatican Council - this most ecclesiological Council in the entire history of

Christendom - realised this and endeavoured systematically to distinguish the Church on the one hand from the Kingdom of God on the other.⁵ The idealism which was the reason for seeing the Church as a *societas perfecta* could not stand the pressure of Christian realism rediscovered through *biblical, liturgical and patristic* studies. In the spirit of this Christian realism, no local Church - even the most faithful to the origins of the Christian faith - is entitled to condemn other Christian bodies deriving from traditional schisms, but each rather must discuss in patience all possible differences in order to allow love and truth to flourish again. For, in the final analysis, we all need to remember and to share the humble confession of St Paul, that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (II Cor. 4:7). Precisely this spirit should inspire the efforts and ambitions of contemporary world ecumenism, for which every Church and every individual Christian bears a unique responsibility.

(b) The Concept of Religious Inheritance, which we call Tradition

Since the foundation of the Christian Church rests entirely upon the divine revelation, it is obvious that tradition and succession † which are deeply correlated - build the only sanctified channel through which the authentic message of salvation cultivates the generations in time. "The faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) is handed down and received in the feeling of a collective responsibility of all faithful, according to the place which each holds within the entire Body of the Church. This circulation of the revealed goods takes place basically in two forms, namely in *Sacrament* and *Word*, and facilitates the overwhelming experience which is called *the communion of saints*. All this sacramental movement and interpenetration occurs under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and it is known that "the spirit blows where it wills" (John 3:8). However, the supervision and inspiration of the Church life by the unpredictable power of the Holy Spirit excludes neither the *personal contribution* of the individual faithful in freedom and responsibility nor the *natural evil* from the history of the Church. This in other words implies that the historical developments are guaranteed by the Holy Spirit to the extent that they are integral parts of the entire divine economy, but at the same time they are also exposed to the moral and natural evil which may considerably delay the final fulfilment of God's plan. The Christian realism mentioned earlier takes into account all these factors which accordingly collaborate in the whole divine economy. In the framework of this complex cooperation, mathematical predictions are not only impossible but also blasphemous. And it is precisely this which is the main crime of idealism.

In order to render more concrete the dangers of idealism, one should carefully examine two basic subjects which function as the main pillars in the whole structure of the Church: *Scripture* on the one hand, and *Tradition* on the other. Though both measures derive from a common source, namely the Holy Spirit as noted above, usually a distinction is drawn between the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as

containing the original witness of revelation, and all other oral or written testimonies of the Church Tradition. There is no doubt that the Church faced in the early centuries a tremendous task to identify and establish the *Canon* of the Bible. Likewise the Church of all times will always have to confront immense difficulties in its endeavour to distinguish and define the authentic from the false traditions. In both cases, one would be lost without the faith that, in this most crucial decision, the Holy Spirit alone guarantees the truth.

This very complexity of the entire problematic was what led some theologians to seek possible assistance through the creation of certain norms. These norms are in most cases merely speculative definitions which often have nothing to do with life and Church reality. A striking example of this is the famous definition of Tradition by Vincent of Lerins, which became classical for theologians in East and West from the fourth century to this day. This definition reads as follows:

*traditio est quod semper, ubique et ab omnibus creditum est*¹⁶

Although at first glance this definition appears to be a perfect description of the binding truth in the Church, a more careful analysis reveals that here one is dealing with an unprecedented case of Christian idealism. For who could ever seriously believe that Tradition in this sense has been preserved by *all, everywhere, and always*? What is the meaning here of "all", "everywhere", and "always"? Who draws the limits that define these measures? If this were really the Tradition of the Church, then one would be unable to understand the schisms and at the same time the missionary endeavours of the Church to the present day. On the contrary, the truth of faith reaching us in the form of Tradition is always only one among numerous other possibilities against which the Spirit must continually struggle in order to prevail. While the above definition by Vincent of Lerins presents Tradition as a common and absolute measure among *all* Christians and in *all* circumstances, the true story of Church life is that the authentic faith in oral or written traditions was at all times the *small leaven* which had to leaven the entire lump (cf. I Cor. 5:6), just as the people of God was always a *remnant* with the mission to cultivate and lead to salvation the whole of humanity. Furthermore, if one were to adopt more realistic and empirical terms, one would say that faith and Tradition are not static goods but on the contrary they are always in an organic development among the faithful throughout the ages. For who would deny that Christians of the fourth century had a clearer image of the mystery of the Holy Trinity than Christians of the second century?

The same realism should lead also to an analogous evaluation of Scripture. As long as one remains faithful to the historic conditions of the composition of the various books of the Bible, one must realise that not only the variety of the authors but also the extent of time from the book of Genesis to the book of John's Revelation indicate that in this entire holy project there is a cooperation of manifold factors - even of accidental character or of blind natural necessity - and not the personal expediency alone of the divine and of the human factor. In such a com-

plex and mysterious process to expect a development of monolithic character or mathematical regularity would mean an extreme of idealism. This is in fact the situation also where one would understand the word of Scripture in terms of verbal inspiration.

A further idealistic approach of Scripture would be also the belief that one could capture the proper spirit of the biblical message outside the liturgical and sacramental context of the Church Body. Just as bread and wine remain simple elements of the secular world without the *epiclesis* of the praying community, likewise the texts of the Bible will always remain only dead letter without the communion of the entire Tradition of the Church and its sacramental life.

(c) The Moral Task of the Individual within the Communion of the Church

According to the greatest theologians of the undivided Christian Church, God became man out of love in order that man might become God by grace. Thus the ambition of a Christian to be deified is not only a legitimate goal but also an essential moral duty so that the purpose of the Incarnation is accordingly fulfilled.

Having said this, we clearly indicate that mere *justification* would for the Christian be an impermissible minimalism of one's spiritual task. However, the *sanctification* of the human person which ends in *deification* by grace is a way which may be neither predicted nor safeguarded in advance by any human means. The idealism which appears here in the form of *moralism* would of course expect perfection as a necessary result of certain endeavours in the spirit of *activism*. Yet the so-called *imitatio Christi* cannot be conceived as an achievement of the individual which has its value in itself. Rather, it is a participation, that is a sharing in the grace that Jesus Christ opened and worked once for all time on the Cross for the whole of mankind. This is why St Paul exhorts Christians to seek communion with Christ not directly and in an idealistically individualistic way, but on the contrary in a very concrete and realistic manner. Since the historical person of Jesus Christ is no longer accessible, Christians have to encounter Him through His Apostles: "be imitators of me, even as I am of Christ" (I Cor. 11:1) At this point, I would like to narrate a true story concerning a contemporary monk of Mt Athos which shows in a moving manner the sense of Christian realism that monks have, when not spiritually corrupted through intellectual audacity, on their way to perfection. Fr Paisios, one of the most distinguished living saints of Mt Athos, whose formal education was limited to the primary school, was visiting Australia at the invitation of our Archdiocese in 1977. Several weeks earlier, a celibate priest living in Thessaloniki was found murdered in his room, and newspapers expressed the suspicion that it may have been a sexual murder. Having known this priest personally from my time in Thessaloniki, I thought I would ask Fr Paisios to inform me of the true conditions surrounding this tragic death. The reply of this saint was striking. He simply answered: "I don't know anything about the conditions of this death. All I know is that this priest, with his miserable death, has helped me more

effectively than all the saints whose intercessions I invoke in my life. For although I deeply respect the saints, I know how inaccessible they are for me the unworthy; while that poor brother became for me a concrete protective barrier, so that I may never reach such misery”.

Another extremely important point in which the dangers of idealism become quite apparent is the way in which many Christians understand the resurrection of the dead. Although in the Christian creeds the article concerning life after death refers to “resurrection of the dead”, many understand this as a resurrection only of the *soul* and not of the *body* as well. One is tempted to believe that such despising of the body is directly derived from the Platonic idealism according to which the body is synonymous to the grave. It is, in fact, truly surprising how such pagan short-sightedness could survive - even if in latent form - after everything taught throughout the Christian era concerning the sacredness of the body as the temple of God. It seems that Christians who cannot believe in the resurrection also of the body have not yet truly believed that God created this world out of nothing, which is the most radical doctrine distinguishing believers from non-believers.

The dangers of idealism for theology and life are as many as created by the variety and elusiveness of ideas, particularly in our times of confusion and instability. I have tried to present only some characteristic examples from the most neuralgic areas of Church life. Above all, I have endeavoured to clarify that, at least for us Christians, the enemy of the *spiritual* is not the *material* but primarily the *anti-spiritual*. Our confrontation, then, with the prince of this world refers not to a colourless or godless materialism but rather to an idealism that is opposed to God. Yet between the extremes of *materialism* and *idealism* which denote negation, we are always called to preserve alive the Christian *realism* which is the warm and compassionate affirmation of life, and not the desert of phantoms. If I have achieved this, then this address was not a further trap of idealism.

NOTES

- 1 Cf. J. Karmiris, *The Ecclesiology of the Three Hierarchs* (Athens, 1962 [in Greek]) p.7 f.
- 2 The origin of the Church as “theandric entity” must be seen not in the day of Pentecost, as was usually done by theologians in the past, but at the very conception of our Lord and in the hypostatic union of His two natures. See S. Harkianakis, *On the Infallibility of the Church in Orthodox Theology* (Athens, 1965 [in Greek]) pp.25-26.
- 3 Cf. Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis), “The Kenotic Character of Theology as Ultimate Glorification of God and Man”, *Phronema*, 2, 1987, pp.3-14 [originally in German, in *Weisheit Gottes - Weisheit der Welt: Festschrift für Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger*, (St. Ottilien, W. Germany: Eos Verlag, 1987)].
- 4 Monumental remain, among others, the following basic works of Hugo Rahner, *Symbols of the Church: the Ecclesiology of the Fathers* (Salzburg, 1964 [in German]) and *The Church: Power of God in Human Weakness* (Freiburg, 1957 [in German]).
- 5 Cf. S. Harkianakis, *The Constitution “De Ecclesia” of Vatican II* (Athens, 1969 [in Greek]) pp.105-127.
- 6 *Commonitorium* II, 3.