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OF CHRISTIAN INDIFFERENCE IN THE MODERN SOCIETY

A b s t r a c t

This article examines the moral crisis facing contemporary society with the alienation of European political thought from Christian values; a dictatorship of indifference which is paralleled in the struggles of the Cappadocian Fathers, faced with religious factionalism. Although St Basil and St Athanasius responded to religious matters, political exigency is revealed by the careers of Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Similarly, modern religious leaders often fail to address political issues. The Church today requires a unity of faith and needs renewal rather than modernization. Orthodoxy requires greater transparency in accommodating the ethical norms of the Holy Fathers and faces challenges in its organization of pan-Orthodox structures.

**Key words:** Secularism, Moral Crisis, Cappadocian Fathers, Patristics, Modernity, Indifference, Orthodoxy.

PREAMBLE

The contemporary world faces a profound moral crisis. The unfortunate mutations occurring, especially in recent decades, in the domestic, social and religious field, have led to unnatural relationships between people. Traditional moral principles have been replaced with ethical surrogates, religion became a personal issue, and not for Community, and God and Church two “terms” that can’t find themselves a place in European political society. Christian, spiritual and social balance has been replaced by uncertainty and worries that can lead to despair overshadowing the joy of life. Two thousand years after the emergence of Christianity man continues to live the mystery

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of death,<sup>1</sup> with unconsciousness when he is young, nostalgia and fear in adulthood and old age. Who can understand the true spiritual height of the martyrdom, the most profound witness of Christ in the world? Today the existence of such an attitude regarding death seems inconceivable. Who can imagine a faithful person, who regularly attends the church, ready to give his life to defend the faith of his birth? Has the attitude regarding the great existential problems of mankind changed? Or does the evolution of society itself, in the cultural, technological and scientific fields, ensure that its spiritual dimension has moved to the background?

These are questions that nobody can answer with certainty because there is no generally valid prescription. Temptations of the times we live affect all, intellectuals, people of culture, or simply faithful, less familiar with biblical exegesis and theological speculation. All categories, even though in a different way, are facing with the problem of getting away from Christian values that the Church has grown along the centuries and implicitly with a superficial understanding of salvation.

#### CULTURE OF INDIFFERENCE TO CHRISTIAN VALUES

The current situation of the Christian message reception in contemporary European society is similar in many ways to what was happening during the period of the Cappadocian Fathers, when the spirit of religious freedom, due to the measures of the Emperor Constantine, was in confrontation with the

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<sup>1</sup> Christianity emerged in a confused world, divided between masters and slaves, in which lie, calumny, conspiracy, lechery and imposture were found together with truth, honor, honesty, virtue and integrity. It was a world of darkness in which hardly any signs of normality could be found. Humanity lived a paradoxical situation: a conglomerate of nations united under the banner of the same empire, where death lurked in the shadow. The desire for power, money and dignity was so great that the son killed his mother, he became friend with his father's murderers, suspecting anyone dared to oppose and sent him to death without trial, just under a simple accusation. [It was the same in the case of Nero, who killed his mother and brother, Britannicus, and his mentor, Seneca, even with his father's murderer, Tigellinus]. Crime was a way to live. Life had no value. Despair was the status quo of a population which was in a major identity crisis; nothing seemed to make sense, and the future was shrouded in uncertainty and insecurity.

Therefore, the message of Jesus Christ was slightly humorous for *some of them*, because they did not believe in the power of uninterested sacrifice and in transcendent itineraries, they simply lived the harsh reality of their existence, while *for others* it was the only hope to reconcile with their own destiny, acquisition of the certainty of a happiness that is an equivalent of their unhappiness which they lived in this world.

factions of Christian communities produced by the actions of his sons. Now we can no longer speak of a royal dictatorship which is trying to rule the conscience of the representatives of the Church according to the personal interests of the imperial camarilla. We speak about a dictatorship of *indifference to the Christian values* and to the history of European culture and civic development which has Christian roots.

#### Dictatorship of Indifference in front of the Patristic Confession

In his time, Saint Basil the Great could not ignore the socio-politico-religious context in which he was obliged to carry out his mission. He did not understand the tests he was subjected to, as a divine refusal but rather as a blessing. Therefore, despite the opposition of the emperor Valens, the obtuseness of a few from his “colleagues” in the church life and of the society from Caesarea of Cappadocia that was plunged into a morass of religious and social inequities, he found enough inner resources to seek salvation through the *ministry of the neighbor*. He lived a true Christian sentiment, embodied by disinterested love, by self-sacrifice. He burnt on the altar of love and remained conscious of forever and everywhere Christians as a symbol of sacrifice for the others, model as well as the Supreme model, Jesus Christ. Therefore he replaced the pagan individualism and the sentiment of alienation due to differences in social class, in religious, ethnic or political affiliation, with that of real, practical Christian solidarity.

Nowadays we stop talking about dictatorship, but we talk about democracy, or rather, about a *dictatorship of indifference*, where the Christian sentiment is replaced by that of *indifference*. God is no longer part of our lives. He is exiled somewhere, far away from everyday concerns. Life seems to be a gift which man makes it for himself, not God’s gift.

Churches are increasingly empty, although no one “hunts” Christians any longer. We are at the stage where we want a *confrontation on Christian doctrine* to check if there is such an interest!

The Cappadocian Fathers had serious confrontations with the heretics, directly or indirectly supported by the imperial authorities, with the thought of salvation. Today there are no confrontations, but no desire for salvation. Everything has been relativized. Then there was an attempt to design the image of Christ and His Saints in the consciousness of the inhabitants of the

Empire, now there is a distorted image of His Face and a total disregard to the Christian values of Europe, which is paradoxically the basis of its development. Without the Christian principles Europe would not have existed.

In the fourth century, while the Church of the East was facing serious internal problems, being crushed by the Arian plague (in its various manifestation), the incompetence, ignorance and duplicity of some bishops, placed in high positions by the greatest of the time to protect their interests, but also by the lack of belief and attitude of many citizens of the Empire; Saint Basil did not find anything discreditable in sending letters to his colleagues in the West, through which he sought their help to restore the peace, unity and stability of the Eastern Church,<sup>2</sup> for which he became “unofficially a leading man of the Church” following the decision of Saint Athanasius the Great to withdraw from the turmoil of doctrinal battle because of his old age. He truly believed in the reality of *unity of faith* between the two major Christian traditions. Basil addressed those from West, just as if they were like brothers "united by the bond of the Spirit ....., one body in harmony."<sup>3</sup> His approach, however, remained unanswered. Political, economic or military problems were more important than religious ones, and egos have clouded the minds of those who had to seek the light of Christ.

#### SOLIDARITY IN INDIFFERENCE

Nowadays we need a rethinking of relations between Eastern and Western Church, in their various manifestations, so that, they give together a common witness of Christian values in contemporary society, which is concerned with material wealth rather than the spiritual. Unfortunately there are still internal communication problems that call into question the sincerity of the Christian message, or at least the manner of its transmission in a world more indifferent than hostile.

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Basil the Great is proving to be a visionary. He is not stumbled by prejudices. Church unity is more important than the assertion of provincial or imperial hierarchies. This attitude of the Holy Father apparently surprising, if we take account of its pleadingly-imperative tone, hide on the one hand the assumption of a huge responsibility, to preserve orthodoxy within the Church, and on the other hand the affirmation of the capital role which East had, in emergence and development of Christianity in the world from end to end. (See Stelianos Papadopoulos. *Life of Saint Basil the Great*. Trans. C. Coman [Bucharest: Byzantine Publishing House, 2003], 246-248).

<sup>3</sup> Saint Basil the Great. “Letter 90” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 8. Ed. Philip Schaff (1894, reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 176.

On the one hand, Orthodox Churches, although they have the same doctrine, the same ritual, are organized synodal, have failed to meet a pan-Orthodox synod, largely because of national or even personal pride of their leaders.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the church, in its traditional double dimension, Western and Eastern, is faced with the indifference, apathy and negligence of her children. The Christian identity has no longer any importance, is a decorative element that stands out only when a person goes through moments of great intensity, either of joy or sadness.

Therefore, the appearance of a great number of Christian denominations, parties, groups, associations and pseudo-Christian brotherhood, instead of increasing the unity of the Church, the One of Christ, rather deepens the spiritual crisis through which humanity is now passing. Especially as some religious leaders today are quite reserved when they need to decide about the big issues that people are facing, from the Third World poverty and environmental crisis to political issues and terrorism, instead, they are quite active when it comes to strictly religious controversy, especially those in which they are not directly involved and, therefore, does not pose major risks. They are more aware of the mistakes of others, than of the correction of their deficiencies, ready to accuse a less conventional approach, but indulgent when it comes to their interests. The power of sacrifice, of oblation is often measured not through the uninterested sincere love for the one in need, but rather through the satisfaction of personal vanity, profitable for one who is concerned, but, most often detrimental to the community. Those who are genuinely committed to their mission, who do not expect honors and glory, are categorized as naive and inexperienced in pastoral and religious diplomacy. And thus, how it is reflected the culture of a man or an era, during the journey to salvation?

#### AUTO-EXILE OF THE CHRISTIAN CONCIIOUSNESS

There was always a different attitude of leaders, whether they were religious or political, when it was a danger. Some of them remained strong in

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<sup>4</sup> See inter-Orthodox forum in Rhodes, 19-21 June 2008, from which Russian Orthodox Church delegation withdrew, arguing that they can not participate at the preparatory meeting of a future pan-Orthodox council with representatives of the Estonian Autonomous Orthodox Church, the Church officially unrecognized by the Moscow Patriarchate, but under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

the decisions that most times, represented the will of God (or coincided up to the last detail with the interests of those who were cared by them), while others were willing to any compromise to save their social position or reputation.

While Saint Athanasius the Great placed his life in danger, staying vertical in his five exiles, others, colleagues of the Episcopal and common generation, diplomats and ministers, were interested only in intrigues and denunciations that they made together with people from the imperial court, or they were hiding in the shadow of ambiguous decisions, for convenience and personal interests. Let us remember only two of his contemporaries with the same name, Eusebius, of Caesarea and Nicomedia. First of them, *historian in his career*, but versatile in attitudes, glorifies the acts of the Emperor and his sons, but oscillates when it comes to the question of Arianism. He did not live in fear of imminent exile but only with regret that he never had the courage to tell his opinions in public. He preferred a comfortable life, instead of one filled with religious and political traps. *The second, a master of moral "disguise"*, was the one who supported (and used) Arius, not because he would fully embrace his opinions, but because he needs this state of conflict at the church, to satisfy his pride of being close to those with higher positions in the empire and therefore, to have a control upon decisions in religious matters.

Nowadays *exile* can be translated into *self-isolation*. In other words, to live in this world, but to completely ignore what actually happens in it. Whether you voluntarily assume this attitude, or you are required by a subtle maneuver of inoculation of infallibility. Distortion of truth is part of the arsenal of any despot, regardless of the society in which he lives or dignity he possesses. He believes that he is never wrong, that his decisions are the best. He is interested in the opinions of others only if, at the end, they will have the same decisions as him. He is more important than God because he ignores God. He claims that he love and obey Him, and that everything he does is in His name, but actually, he feeds his own fantasies and desires of vain glory. For him others do not exist. He does not know their problems and is not interested in knowing.

Theophilus of Alexandria hated Saint John Chrysostom, not because he believed him unable to deal with a worthy position in Church, but because he thought that the seat of bishop of Constantinople is rightfully belonged to him. Moreover, he was even obliged to install him and to mimic reconciliation, although everything he did afterwards revealed that he has never man-

aged to overcome this moment. He turned hate into a state of normalcy and, although he was endowed with exceptional qualities, Theophilus remained in history not as an ascetic and prominent leader of the Church of Alexandria, but a small man, worn with obscure interests, who loved only himself.

Out of proportion self-love does not lead you to salvation, but to condemnation. *Salvation can not be associated with arrogance*, despotism, self-sufficiency, even imposture. Can we achieve salvation by means other than truth and sincere faith? Can duplicity and lies be placed in the equation of the human union with God to the detriment of love?

Now, just as it was during the age of the great Cappadocian Fathers, what we need is love, which alone can overcome all the misunderstandings, as was in the case of the two friends, the Saint Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian, when the first, an unmatched strategist of unity of faith in times of heavy testing, puts the latter in high position, almost without consulting with him, as a bishop of Sassima.<sup>5</sup>

Love for God does not lead to division and hatred, but to forgiveness and indulgence, it makes the enemies to become friends and friends to become angels of peace and Christ's servants.

#### MODERNITY AND TRADITION

The term of “modernity” in itself (like modernism or post-modernism) may be understood in a different way, both by individuals, but also by groups or ethnical and religious societies from different places. In Eastern Christianity *modernity* seems to be naturally in the opposition with *tradition* and consequently often raises serious controversies between the two cultural concepts. Modernity is understood as a product of *secularized culture*, the only one guilty for introducing some considerable mutation at the cosmological, social and human level. *At a cosmological level*, secularized culture has introduced the theory according to which there is a world separated from God, closed in its own immanence, the only role conferred to God being that of creating it, because afterwards it developed and governed itself alone. *At the social level*, it operates with the separation between public and private, that eventually leads to the exclusion of God (and faith) from the public

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<sup>5</sup> N. Dumitrașcu and C.Voicu. *Patrology*, (Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, 2006), 179.

sphere and to its isolation in the private one. As the public sphere belongs to science (which admits no authority but that of facts') faith remains only a personal option issue, not a community issue; *At the human level*, it supports an individualist conception enabling man to take the place of God, becoming the absolute master of earth. Due to the incredible progress in the recent years in the field of science and technology, man acquired a considerable power over nature, but, at the same time, caused a planetary ecological crisis, with serious consequences not only for the world, but also for himself.<sup>6</sup>

It is true, however, that our modern society passes through a very serious moral crisis in which the living Tradition of the Church is contested in many ways, to the detriment of an "explosion" of information, both theological and non-theological, through the modern mass-media (especially the internet), but it is also true that there is a great necessity for knowledge in what concerns the patristic authentic spirituality, a philokalic one, in particular.<sup>7</sup>

There is a tendency to intellectualise a modernist (but also very convenient!) trend according to which the encounter with God (in order to avoid using the expression *the knowledge of God*, or even the term "salvation") takes place in a more "abrupt" way, just by reading the Holy Scriptures, without having the most elementary notions of biblical exegesis or, on the contrary, by reading the works of certain Fathers and church writers or remarkable theologians, without a preliminary "ABC" of faith, and some of them reach excellence in one field indeed—due, undoubtedly, to their capacity of analysis and assimilation—, but they are extremely superficial in the others.<sup>8</sup>

We will discover, therefore, experts in liturgical and spiritual life, who never experience themselves the liturgical communion, or the life of fasting and prayer, that the authors they quote strongly recommend, and without following their teaching in any way. It is as though the Holy Fathers had attempted to change the world, without having them first improve themselves spiritually on a permanent basis. Unfortunately, such a phenomenon, regarded in particular in its practical sphere, can be found as well among clerics.

One cannot skip the stages, because instead of a real authentic Christian

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<sup>6</sup> D. Popescu. "Credință și Modernitate (Faith and Modernity)." *Almanahul Bisericesc* (Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, 1999), 70-71.

<sup>7</sup> Still, there is a risk to confuse true faith (saving faith) which presupposes action in communion, with an office-like intellectualist theology, which is rather individualism and isolationist, although nobody denies "the positive aspects of secularized modern culture" (Ibid).

<sup>8</sup> Th. Hopko. "Educația Teologică și Modernitatea (Theological Education and Modernity)." *Studii Teologice* 4-6 (1994): 91-100.

experience, we would come across an intellectualist Gnosticism (or agnosticism) which cannot possibly lead to God. As, no matter how much we wish that, *faith does not come out of philosophy*, although there have been cases of Christian philosophers which could undermine this supposition. Any religion has also a philosophy, but this is its lower step. Especially in the case of Christianity, where mysticism is its own philosophy that cannot be reached but in a single way: through prayer.

#### MODERNITY AND RENEWAL

Any attempt of change in the church world is regarded with a lot of suspicion by those who consider themselves “the custodians” of the true Christian Tradition and faith, especially when the term *modernization* is used.<sup>9</sup> That is because the Church, is above all, related to traditions, customs, conservation and maybe, the least willing to have a “social dialogue with the modern world.

Therefore, I would rather talk about “renewal” than “modernization”, precisely to facilitate the discovery of a possible continuity between the old image of the Church and her new face, under which she could respond to the unprecedented challenges of a supertechnologised world, in which individualism tends to replace communitarism on a permanent basis.

Actually, sometimes it is quite hard to know what is new and what is old, because, what is new today might be nothing than “a new articulation or expression of truth having been already known and believed.”<sup>10</sup>

More concretely, „what seems to be new is nothing else but a rediscovery and restoring of something old that has been lost, forgot, gloomy or misunderstood. And what is new is sometimes really new in a temporal and historic sense. It is something that has been unknown previously about God but now has been discovered for the first time. In such situations, reality itself is not new, nor old; it is simply known in more detail, because the time of its discovery has now come.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The real modernity has been brought to us (once and for all) by Jesus Christ through the death of the old man and His rebirth in a new one. And the apostles, the disciples, the Fathers of the Church did nothing but follow Him by word and by deed, preaching his Gospel in all times and all places. And if we remain in the spirit of His teaching, the renewal is only beneficial.

<sup>10</sup> Hopko, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Renewal is compulsory, but not in the essence (dogma) but in the structure, not necessarily in the ritual but in its transparency, not in the leadership, but in its accommodation with the ethical norms of the Holy Fathers.<sup>12</sup> Renewal does not mean necessarily the abandoning of certain church norms (in the ritual or social dialogue) only for the sake of a so-called "up-dating", but the discovery of other means of expression, in concordance with the level of understanding and expectations of those who are the members of ecclesial communities today. In order to reach this objective, on the one hand, there is a need for an extensive re-catechization of the members of European society, and, on the other hand, a greater transparency from the part of the local church leadership, and the creation of certain flexible bodies, able to collaborate efficiently both with local authorities and the representatives of different national and international companies, the academic world, and last but not least, the other religions. An activity performed only "at a declarative level" would do nothing else but maintain the suspicion and the distrust of most people in the power of Church to be totally involved in their lives<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, it seems inadequate to talk about a renewal of the world and the Christian life without a profound change in the people's mentality, especially the clerics, who have to be, above all, the "mediators" between the Church and the society.

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<sup>12</sup> Hopko says that the Church, in her human part, has undergone a continual change throughout the time. More concretely, "Church changes the form of organizational structure, liturgical service, doctrinary formulation, worship practice and the relationship with the secular powers in order to remain faithful to herself and her mission: the preaching of Gospel, the confession of truth, and the testimony of God's love in a fallen world, in a permanent change, in which the Church exists only as a presence full of grace of God's kingdom" (Ibid. 93)

<sup>13</sup> Church servants must be consistent in all their statements and actions. Their word is listened to with a lot more attention than *that of others*, and the *expectations* are greater. An unkept promise, an improper word, a contemptuous and defying attitude of a *cleric* will create not only suspicion, but also distrust, which will be transferred from the individual to the institution.

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PRAWOSŁAWNA INTERPRETACJA KULTURY  
CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEGO INDYFERENTYZMU  
W SPOŁECZEŃSTWIE WSPÓŁCZESNYM

Streszczenie

Artykuł rozpatruje kryzys moralny, który napotykają współczesne społeczeństwa wraz z wyalienowaniem europejskiej myśli teologicznej z myśli chrześcijańskiej; dyktatura indyferentyzmu, która ilustrowana jest w zmaganiach Ojców Kapadockich, staje wobec religijnej faktografii. Choć św. Bazyl i św. Atanazy odnoszą się do spraw religijnych, w karierach Euzebiusza z Cezarei i Euzebiusza z Nikomedii ujawnia się polityczny wymiar. Podobnie, współcześni przywódcy religijni zaniedbują odniesienie do zagadnień politycznych. Dzisiejszy Kościół wymaga jedności wiary i potrzebuje raczej odnowy niż modernizacji. Prawosławne wymaga większej przejrzystości w akomodowaniu norm etycznych Ojców Kapadockich i stawania wobec wymagań odnoszących się do organizacji struktur „panprawosławnych”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sekularyzm, kryzys moralny, Ojcowie Kapadoccy, patrystyka, modernizm, indyferentyzm, ortodoksja.