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***Between the «Return to the Fathers» and the need for a Modern Orthodox Theology:
The Theological Agenda of the Volos Academy****

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1. The «Return to the Fathers» and its Consequences

In the First Orthodox Theological Conference, which was held in Athens in 1936, Fr. Georges Florovsky, perhaps the greatest Orthodox theologian of the 20th century, one of the co-founders of the World Council of Churches and a major figure in international ecumenical and academic circles, proclaimed Orthodox theology's need to return to the Fathers and to be released from its "Babylonian captivity" to Western theology in terms of its language, its presuppositions, and its thinking. His declaration was quickly adopted by most theologians of the Russian Diaspora and later gathered fervent supporters in traditionally Orthodox countries, such as Greece, Serbia, and Romania. This theological movement became the hallmark of Orthodox theology in the 20th century, and for many its primary task, to such a degree that this celebrated "return to the Fathers" and the effort to "de-westernize" Orthodox theology overshadowed all other theological questions, as well as all the challenges the modern world had posed—and continues to pose—to Orthodox theology.

The consequences of this "return to the Fathers" and the subsequent over-emphasis on patristic studies were, among other things: 1) the neglect and devaluation of biblical studies; 2) an ahistorical approach to patristic theology; 3) a tendency toward introversion and Orthodox theology's near total absence from the major theological developments and trends of the 20th century; and 4) a weak theological response to the challenges posed by the modern world and; more generally, the unresolved theological issues that still remain in the relationship between Orthodoxy and modernity, between Orthodoxy and the modern world.

1) Within the Orthodox milieu, biblical studies had already suffered neglect; now there

* The above text is an oral presentation, which is going to be further elaborated with the necessary additions and footnotes. Its publication on this website in its present form has no other

intention but to contribute to the discussion and record the initial reactions to the ideas expressed.

was a theoretical justification for it. Biblical studies were viewed as “Protestant,” while patristic studies and the rediscovery of the Orthodox ascetic and neptic tradition were considered the truly “Orthodox” subjects. Thus, Orthodox theology completely overlooked the biblical foundations of the Christian faith, the indissoluble bond between the Bible and the Eucharist, the Bible and the Liturgy. And while we based our claims to be Orthodox on the Fathers, we ignored the fact that all the great Fathers were major interpreters of the Scriptures. It was forgotten that patristic theology is *unconfused and indivisible* biblical theology, and Orthodox tradition, as well as Orthodox theology, are patristic and biblical at the same time, and only to the extent that they are biblical are they also patristic and Orthodox.

2) Patristic theology was mythologized, removed from its historical context and approached ahistorically, almost metaphysically. The particular historical circumstances in which the patristic works were written, the Fathers’ continuous interaction and dialogue with the philosophy and outside philosophical trends of their era, their study and free use of the hermeneutical methods of their time — all this was forgotten. And we have not yet adequately considered what appears to be the most characteristic example of the Church taking up elements initially foreign to its own theological and ontological assumptions and fruitfully assimilating them into its life and theology. Today, we have come to regard that encounter as self-evident, forgetting the titanic battles that preceded it. Perhaps we are unaware or fail to notice how difficult and painful it was for primitive Christianity (with its Jewish and generally Semitic roots and origins) to accept and incorporate Hellenic concepts and categories such as nature, essence, *homoousion*, *hypostasis*, person, *logos*, intellect, *nous*, meaning, cause, power, accident, energy, *kath’ holou*, cosmos, etc.

3) Concerned as it was with the very serious matter of freeing itself from western influence and “returning to the Fathers” —dealing, in other words, with issues of self-understanding and identity— Orthodox theology, with a few exceptions, was basically absent from the major theological discussions of the 20th century and had almost no influence in setting the theological agenda. Dialectical theology, existential and hermeneutical theology, the theology of history and culture, the theology of secularization and modernity, the “nouvelle théologie,” contextual theologies, the theology of hope and political theology, liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, ecumenical theology, the theology of mission, the theology of religions and

otherness — all this cosmogony that occurred in the theological work of the 20th century barely touched Orthodox theology. Rather, during this period, Orthodox theology was concerned with its own “internal” problems; escaping “western influence” had become one of its priorities. These theological trends, with the exception perhaps of ecumenical theology, the theology of mission, and the movement for patristic and liturgical renewal, do not appear to have been influenced by Orthodoxy, despite the fact that important Orthodox theologians participated, actively, in the ecumenical movement from its inception.

4) In spite of the theological concerns of Florovsky and other Orthodox theologians who followed him (the Incarnation, the historicity of theology, the openness of history, the catholicity of the Church, which includes both East and West, etc.), and their lasting concern for a creative and rejuvenating engagement of the spirit of the Fathers, the wider historical context of this dialogue —i.e. with modernity and late modernity— is essentially absent from Orthodoxy’s theological agenda. We should remember, however, that for mainly historical reasons, the Orthodox world did not organically participate in the phenomenon of modernity. It did not experience the Renaissance, the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation, religious wars or the Enlightenment, the French or the Industrial revolution, the rise of the subject, human rights or the religiously neutral nation-state. What has been recognized as a central interest of modernity seems to have remained alien to Orthodoxy, which continues to be suspicious of modernity. This uncertainly helps explain Orthodoxy’s difficulty in communicating with the contemporary (post-) modern world, but it raises the question of whether or not Orthodox Christianity and (neo)patristic theology came to an end before modernity.

Modernity and post-modernity (or late modernity) represent the wider historical, social and cultural environment within which the Orthodox Church is called upon to live and carry out its mission; it is here that it is called upon time and time again to incarnate the Christian truth about God, the world, and humanity. Certainly, modern Orthodox theology, inspired mainly by the spirit of the Fathers, reformulated an admirable theology of Incarnation during the 20th century. However, its position on a series of issues involving modernity, as well as the core of its ecclesial self-understanding, have too often left this otherwise remarkable theology of Incarnation ungrounded and socially inactive. The issues, to name just a few, include: human rights, the secularization of politics and institutions, the desacralization of politics and ethnicity, the overturning of established social hierarchies, the affirmation of love and

corporeality and the spiritual function of sexuality, the position of women, social and cultural anachronisms, etc.

2. The need for a new Incarnation of the Word

Theology as the prophetic voice and expression of the Church's self-understanding can only function as part of the antinomic and dual-natured character of the Church. Just as the Church is not of this world, so theology aims to express a charismatic experience and a transcendent reality, over and beyond words, concepts or names. Just as the Church lives and goes forth into the world, so theology seeks a dialogue and communication with the historical present in every age, adopting the language, the flesh and the thought-world of each particular era — of the historical and cultural present at any given time. Theology is not coextensive with history and cannot be identified with history, but neither can it function in the absence of history. More importantly, it cannot keep ignoring the lessons of history. Without this process of unconfused osmosis and reception of the world and history —without this gesture of dialogue, moving toward the world and “witnessing” to it— neither the Church nor theology can exist, inasmuch as the Church does not exist for itself but for the world and for the benefit of the world: “for the life of the world.” After all, God's revelation has always taken place within creation and history, not in some un-historical, timeless universe unrelated to the world. As the late Greek theologian Panagiotis Nellias, founder of the well-known theological journal *Synaxis*, prophetically noted twenty-five years ago: “... it is not possible today to have a true Revelation of God without employing as the material for that revelation today's social, cultural, scientific and other realities. It is impossible for God to motivate man unless He comes into contact with his particular, historical flesh; it is not possible for Him to save man, unless He transfigures his life.” Expanding on this line of thought, we might add that a fleshless theology which refuses to converse with the wider social and cultural realities of its time is inconceivable, whether it is dealing with modernity, post-modernity or late modernity. A theology that does not take to itself the ‘flesh’ of its time is equally inconceivable — just as it is inconceivable for the Church to be insular, refusing to be drawn out of itself to meet the world and history, to evangelize and transform it. Thus, the Church and its theology cannot move forward in the world while ignoring or devaluing the world that surrounds them, just because this world is not ‘Christian,’ or because it is not as they would like it. Similarly, the Church and its theology cannot motivate the people of today, the people of modernity and late

modernity, so long as the modern world continues to be scorned and disparaged by the Church, and ignored as revelatory material and flesh to be assumed.

What is necessary, then, is not a repetition and a perpetuation of the denial and reticence often adopted by the Orthodox in their stance towards modernity, but a creative encounter and a serious theological dialogue with whatever challenges modernity poses. Will the Orthodox Church, faithful to a renewed theanthropism and an authentic theology of Incarnation, and inspired by the vision and the experience of the Resurrection, internalize the tradition, the boldness and the mind of the Fathers and the grand theological syntheses that they worked out, mainly in the East? Will it enter into dialogue and even attempt (why not?) a new synthesis with what is best in modernity, making use of the encounter between East and West?

3. The eschatological understanding of tradition and of the Church-world relationship, and the Theological Agenda of the Volos Academy

With the support of the Holy Metropolis of Demetrias and the inspiring leadership of our Metropolitan, His Eminence Ignatios, the Academy for Theological Studies has tried to address these issues in the eight years since it first began. The Academy functions as an open forum of thought and dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the broader scholarly community of intellectuals worldwide. In its effort to foster interdisciplinary and inter-religious understanding, the Academy has organized a series of studies, international seminars, conferences, roundtables and publications. In order to meet this objective, the Volos Academy has collaborated with numerous other institutions, jointly addressing problems and challenges of our time, in a spirit of respect for each other's differences. Thus, the Academy has collaborated with institutions such as the Boston Theological Institute, the World Council of Churches, the French Institute in Athens, Drury University (USA), the Department of Orthodox Theology at the University of Munich, the Athens Pedagogical Institute, the Association of Orthodox Women in Europe, the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), the Ecumenical Youth Council of Europe (EYCE), the Forum of European Muslim Youth Student Organizations (FEMYSO), the Municipal Center of History in Volos, and a number of journals, academic periodicals and publication houses. As a result of this scholarly activity, the Diocese of Demetrias and the city of Volos have become an international meeting place for encounter and dialogue.

The choice of subject for the first series of lectures and seminars that the Academy organized in 2000-01 signalled the theological direction in which it chose to move, and from which it believes it can best answer modern challenges. It believes, in other words, that from the Orthodox point of view, the key to answering all these questions can be found in eschatology. Eschatology introduces an element of active expectation, accompanied by a future aspect and the renewing breeze of the Spirit — elements so definitive for the life and theology of the Church and yet so lacking in our day, when, in response to the challenge of globalization and cosmopolitanism, the wind of traditionalism and fundamentalism is once again blowing violently through the life and theology of the Church. Eschatology is an active and demanding expectation of the coming Kingdom of God, the new world which we await; as such, it feeds into a dynamic commitment to the present, an affirmation and openness toward the future of the Kingdom in which the fullness and identity of the Church is to be found. In other words, the Church does not derive its substance principally from what it is, but rather from what it will become in the future, in the eschatological time which, since the Resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, has already begun to illuminate and influence the present and history.

In the light of eschatology, even the tradition of the Church itself acquires a new meaning and a different dimension — an optimistic and hopeful perspective. In this perspective, Tradition is not identified with habits, customs, traditions or ideas or in general with historical inertia and stagnation, but with a person, Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory who is coming. As Saint Cyprian of Carthage reminds us, “The Lord said: I am the Truth. He did not say: I am the custom.” Tradition, in other words, does not refer chiefly to the past; or to put it differently, it is not bound by the patterns of the past, by events that have already happened. Strange as it may sound, in the authentic ecclesial perspective, tradition is orientated toward the future. It comes principally and primarily from the future Kingdom of God, from the One who is coming, from what has yet to be fully revealed and made manifest, from God’s love and the plan He is preparing for us, for the salvation of the world and man. So the eschatological understanding of tradition appears as the counterpart to the Pauline definition of faith: ‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’ (Heb. 11:1. cf. Heb. ch. 11; Rom. 8:24), or as analogous to the eschatological or ‘future’ memory as this is experienced in the Anaphora Prayer at the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom: ‘Remembering therefore this saving commandment and all that has been brought about for our sake: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the ascent into heaven, the sitting at

the right hand *and the glorious Second Coming.*' And this is because, according to the scholia on the Areopagitic writings attributed to St Maximus the Confessor (but whom scholarship now identifies as John of Scythopolis), the entire Divine Liturgy represents not some eternal heavenly archetypes or some reality in the realm of ideas, but the eschatological Kingdom which is to come, a reality of the future where the truth of things and symbols is located.

Therefore, just as it is the last things that give being to the first things, and eschatology to protology, so it is the Kingdom of God —the fullness of life and of truth which will come to completion and be fully revealed at the eschaton— that defines and gives meaning to the tradition of the Church. The future is therefore the cause and not the effect of the past,

since, according to Metropolitan John Zizioulas, the reason for which the world came into being is the eschatological Christ as the union of created and uncreated in the eschatological times. The Church experiences this, according to St Maximus the Confessor, in the Divine Eucharist: there that which will come about in the eschaton becomes a reality now, the future becomes the cause of the past. In the Divine Eucharist, we travel through time in the opposite direction: from the future to the present and the past.

Or, to recall the apt words of the late Greek theologian Nikos Nissiotis:

so the Tradition of Orthodoxy [...] is not history but witness; it is not the completed and fulfilled event of past centuries, but the summons to fulfil it in the future [...] Tradition as it has been understood from the very Beginning is the 'new', that which erupts into the world in order to make all things new once and for all in Christ, and then continuously in the Holy Spirit through the Church.

Looked at from this angle, then, tradition is not the letter which kills, a nostalgic repetition or uncritical acceptance or continuation of the past, but a creative continuity in the Holy Spirit and an openness to the future, to the new world of the Kingdom of God which we await.

Faithful to this spirit, the Academy for Theological Studies in her theological agenda attempts not to ignore or bypass patristic thought, but to bring it into dialogue with the difficult and more provocative questions that are posed by modernity and late modernity. Believing that the Holy Spirit continues to give us Its fruits, the Academy attempts also a theological approach to questions that patristic thought did not have—or could not— have raised. Thus, among the topics addressed by the Volos Academy are: *Eucharist, Church, and the World; Islam and Fundamentalism—Orthodox Christianity and Globalization; Orthodox Christianity and Otherness; Gender and Religion—The*

Role of Women in the Church; The Participation of Orthodox Women in the Ecumenical Movement: Past, Present, and Future; Theology and Literature, Theology and Modern Church Architecture; Orthodox Christianity and Multiculturalism; Lay Participation in Ecclesiastical Life; Critical Approaches to the Greek Theology of the '60s; Church and State; Orthodox Christianity and Islam—Islam in Europe; Wittgenstein and Apophatic Theology; Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Peace; and others.

For the coming academic years, the Academy has scheduled lectures, conferences and seminars with subjects such as: *Tradition and traditions; Church and Culture; Theology and Praxis of Orthodox Mission; Patristic and Contextual Theologies; New Hermeneutical Methods and Orthodox Biblical Scholarship; Eucharistic and Hierarchical Ecclesiology and the Corpus Areopagiticum; Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights; Christianity and Sexuality; Religion in Public Space; Greek Religious Nationalism; and more.* Since its theological interests converge with the interests of other institutions, the Academy organizes common activities and participates in the programs of academic, theological and ecclesiastical organizations — including those of the distinguished World Council of Churches. Allow me, before I finish, to highlight three of these programs:

1) *Ecumenical Theological Education in Central and Eastern Europe*: Initially started as the “Volos Initiative for Ecumenical Theological Education in Central and Eastern Europe,” this project is now part of a wider program in cooperation with the ETE/WCC and the Conference of European Churches which aims to promote teaching, exchange and research in the field of Ecumenical Theological Education, with a particular emphasis on Central and Eastern Europe. Seminars and conferences are now being planned for Sambata de Sus/Romania (September 2008), and Volos/Greece (September 2009).

2) *Part-time Consultancy on Stem Cell and Biotechnology*: This project, in collaboration with the Faith, Science and Technology Program of the WCC, will start in September 2008, and its main goal is to promote research and theological reflection through publications, seminars and conferences in the broader field of Bioethics and Biotechnology.

3) *International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) planned for 2011 and the Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace*: In this project, which aims to promote a truly ecumenical peace theology and ethics, theological schools and seminaries around the world are invited to organize seminars on the question: “If we were to write an Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace, what would we put into it?” The Volos Academy

will participate in this process by organizing, in the spring of 2009, a two-day meeting, in which Biblical and Systematic scholars will be invited to discuss “a theology of peace” in the various strands of the Orthodox tradition. The meeting will be open to Master’s degree students, PhD candidates, scholars and teachers of religion. At the end, a working group will prepare the Volos Academy’s declaration on Just Peace.

With these activities and initiatives, the Academy for Theological Studies hopes to open a new way for modern Orthodox theology which combines fidelity to tradition with renewal and innovation, boasting in the Lord about the positive things that Orthodox theology has offered up to the present but also with self-criticism and openness to the future. Primarily, however, it offers free space for open-minded dialogue, where all views can be expressed and considered, with respect for the diversity of “the other,” who is an icon of the Other *par excellence*, God. We don’t claim any kind of infallibility, and for this reason discussion and criticism are perhaps the most fertile way for us to continue our productive work.