

International Meeting in Oslo,
on the Orthodox Theology and the Human Rights

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A particularly interesting meeting took place in Oslo, Norway, on December 13-15, 2013. Internationally known Orthodox theology scholars and professors from Greece, USA, Canada, Norway, Russia, Sweden and Finland, contributed with high academic level presentations and talks as well as with fruitful discussions to the success of the International Seminar: *The Orthodox and the Other*.

The Seminar was part of the Project: [New Directions in Orthodox Christian Thought and Practice](#), which is implemented by the [Norwegian Centre for Human Rights](#) of the [Faculty of Law](#) of the [University of Oslo](#)) and the International Network [Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), an initiative of N.C.H.R.

The meeting framework included the detection of new directions of the Orthodox thought with respect to the multiple challenges that emerge in the contemporary relations between the Eastern Orthodox Christians and the faithful of other Christian denominations or other religions. The background of this framework is localized in the diachronic, throughout the history, experience of the Orthodox Church presence –both as a minority and a majority- in societies both hostile and favourable to it. In all these circumstances, Orthodoxy has faced the Other, persons and cultures of different Christian faith or religion.

In significant periods and places, the Orthodox Church has enjoyed the status of privileged religion in major empires, governed according to the ideal of symphony between church and state and with strong restrictions on heterodox believers. Faith in the Orthodox truth was here combined with a political realization of the religious community that was often conceived as a God-willed anticipation of the eternal Kingdom. This politico-religious ideal is seriously questioned in a world characterized by the political developments of democracy and human rights.

Despite a positive approach to otherness articulated nowadays by leading Orthodox theologians, it seems that there are still outstanding issues, and that Orthodox Churches are facing great challenges as they address constitutional freedoms in their own thought and practice: How can one maintain that the Orthodox Church offers the Truth and the Salvation of all humankind, and at the same time accord to non-Orthodox minorities the liberty to practice and believe a heterodox religion, and to individual persons the freedom to choose their religion or no religion at all? On what legitimate grounds may these freedoms be restricted? How important can be the contribution by contemporary Orthodox Christian scholars to religious freedom and Otherness by addressing these problems from within the tradition?

In this framework insights were discussed by the invited speakers, attempting to cover sufficiently, to the extent it was attainable, many aspects of the above questions.

Archimandrite Gregorios Papathomas, Professor of Canon Law at the Faculty of Theology of the State University of Athens, presented the Canon 8 of the VII Ecumenical Synod as a prototype of Human Rights within the Church. He underlined the essential difference between the ontological unity of the Church and the ecclesiastic pluralism throughout the Church history. He located the need for Human Rights into the decline of the Christianity of the 1st Millennium and the increased Ecclesial Confessiocracy in the 2nd Millennium. Importantly, he ascribed the nowadays-observed phenomenon, that people do not need Christianity and they turn to Human Rights instead, to the non-solvency of contemporary Christianity.

Aristotle Papanicolaou, the Archbishop Demetrios Professor in Orthodox Theology and Culture at the Fordham University in the US, remarked the existence of a sort of schizophrenia in the contemporary Orthodox theology with respect to the Other, since on the one hand it affirms the irreducible uniqueness of the other as person through relations of love and freedom; on the other hand, the Other, especially the Western Other, is negated toward the realization of a pure form of Orthodox self-identification. As he claimed, this tension can be resolved only by an Orthodox theology of personhood, in which the Other is an event of irreducible uniqueness and ecstatic freedom and as such precludes a form of self-identification vis-à-vis the negation of the proximate Other.

Dr. Michael Hjalms, Dean of Sankt Ignatios Theological Academy in Sweden, shared with the conference participants his experience from the presence of the Orthodox Church in Eastern Scandinavia and showed how identity and learning, if they coexist equally and harmoniously, as the two main pillars of ecclesiastical emancipation, can lead to the realization of Otherness.

Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, researcher at the Yale University in the US, built his argument on the concept of *civil religion* as it has been developed by the American sociologist Robert Bellah. He referred to the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in the 4th century and underlined that it resulted in formation of a 'Christian Roman' civil religion. He showed how states living within modern post-totalitarian context, such as Russia, Romania, and others, develop, with the collaboration of the church, a kind of civil religion. He remarked that this religion features a high degree of intolerance toward what does not fit the 'credos' of the civil religion. Therefore, it threatens both the normativity of the Christian tradition in these countries and the religious pluralism.

Dr. Pantelis Kalaitzides, Director of the Volos Academy of Theological Studies, referred to the position of the Orthodox tradition on the borderline between heresy and otherness. He expanded the diachronic challenges emerging from the pluralism of the Church and pointed out those necessary presuppositions for the search and establishment of the dialogical ethos of the Church with respect to the Otherness.

Dr. Paul Ladouceur, Professor of Orthodox Theology at the University of Toronto, Canada, focused on the presence of the Orthodoxy in Romania and its relation with the Otherness. By referring to the crucial geopolitical changes of the country throughout the 20th century he pointed out the varied transformations of the political regimes: monarchy; liberal governments; conservative and fascist regimes; communist period; democracy. He did not omit to mention that the Romanian Orthodox Church has often seen itself as the champion of the

Romanian nationalism and that it sought to ally with whatever regime was in power. He argued that the frequent close association of Orthodoxy with Romanian nationalism has coincided with restrictions on ethnic and religious minorities and even outright oppression and persecution. He observed an incongruity between contemporary Orthodox theology of personhood, which emphasizes the uniqueness of the other, relations found in love, and respect for the freedom of the Other, and the actual policies and actions of Romanian Orthodoxy in its relations with the «Romanian other».

Fr. Mikhail Zheltov, Professor of Liturgy at the Moscow Spiritual Academy, concentrated on three schismatic groups: the Old Ritualists (Old Believers), those following the Russian revolution (among others the Renovatist Church, or Living Church), and those emerging after the fall of communism (of which pretends to be the continuation of the Catacomb Church of the communist era).

Fr. Vladimir Shmaliy, archpriest of the Russian Orthodox Church, Secretary of the Holy Synod Biblical and Theological Commission, expounded the basic teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church on dignity, freedom and the rights of the human being. He mentioned that, conflicts often raise between ideas appearing within human rights and the teaching of the Church. He underlined that human rights insights and their application in human life have to be evaluated by the Church, according to the Holy Scriptures and the Church tradition.

Andrey Shishko, PhD candidate of Theology at the University of Amsterdam, discussed the presence of Buddhism in Russia. He explored the springs and the origin of Buddhism in the country. He focused on the spread of Buddhism in the Russian territory after the fall of communism and traced the modern tensions emerging within different buddhistic Sangha. He also discussed the role of the Russian Church in the ban on the visit of Dalai Lama the XIV to Russia.

David Heith-Stade, PhD candidate of Canon Law at the Lund University, Sweden, analyzed the status of non-Orthodox persons in Eastern Orthodox canon law and ecclesiastical law. He remarked that the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism as well as the antithesis between heresy and orthodoxy in the development of Christian doctrine made the theological idea of universal church (*καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία*) explicit. The *communicatio in sacris* was viewed as the manifestation of this idea.

In addition to the speakers and organizers, participants in the seminar were Norwegians from the Oslo Coalition, church organizations, academia and human rights community. This fact underlines the active interest and sensitivity the Norwegian society shows to issues related to the human rights, religious freedoms and cross-cultural dialogue. Moreover, it reveals a little-known aspect of the multi-level international role of Norway as a Nordic country – model: that of providing opportunities of expression of the Orthodox Christian tradition and offering a forum for discussions between Orthodox Church and other Christian Churches and non-Christian religions of the modern world.