

Church and Fear

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Abstract: The position of the Standing Holy Synod resulting from the Agreement on Common Law Marriage brings to light the development of a certain legal morality within the Church. As the Church's theological discourse is based solely upon intimidating configurations (sin – punishment), the essence of sin is downgraded to the status of a breach of divine law [pp. 141–143]

The rationalization of theology, which was established by way of scholasticism, has detached morality from spiritual life and led to the development of a legal morality,[1] a nominalism[2] which has distanced the Church from its eschatological vision and secularized it.

For Christian metaphysics and theology, however, rationalization does not entail an 'abandonment of rational thought, methodological rigor, [and/or] critical thinking'.[3] On the contrary, it implies that the secularized church incorporates, or blends, with essentially 'secular' elements, such as authority and wealth, thereby setting aside some of its primary principles,[4] but mainly its spiritual discourse.

The Hellenic church, therefore, in line with the intention of the state to provide institutional recognition to relations which, despite not being legally irrelevant, remained unregulated,[5] has expressed its concerns regarding the matter, either in reference to isolated instances and in a spirit of prominence, as illustrated by the position of

Archbishop Ieronimos who ‘respects people’s choices who want something different from the church’,[6] or in more official and intimidating terms, as in the position of the Standing Holy Synod (SHS) which characterized all forms of extra-marital relations as prostitution, whilst also making a point of referencing holy Canons.[7]

The Church’s holding of such a position, however, highlights a strictly institutional, as opposed to transformational, function of the Church.

The reference to prostitution as detached from its theological content and the simultaneous appeal to divine law, indicates that the Church perceives its spiritual role as limited, by way of the fear of sin, to the preservation of powers and of its congregation of followers. However, life in Christ is a life of freedom, which can bear no relation to a life under the state of fear.

The ‘in our likeness’, namely the potential for man’s divination, equally presupposes both free will and a real possibility for decision.

Consequently, sin must not be interpreted narrowly and within a strictly legal scope, as a breach of some moral or religious law. According to the eastern orthodox tradition, sin constitutes no more than a misjudged decision, with the ontological, nonetheless, consequence of the distancing from God and God’s oblivion. It constitutes a disease which, the more it afflicts man, the more it estranges him from the source of life.[8]

However, for non-Christians, although the act of sin begets the same ontological consequences, it nonetheless constitutes another, personal decision of man, and is, therefore, entirely respected.

The paradox here lays in that the orthodox Christian church, of which human freedom, the right to decision, and/or self-determination,[9] constitute its primary theological

foundations (its ‘anthropology’), exacts the ‘only available’ decision from all (members or otherwise), by means of authoritative discourse.

In theological terms, we would say that it attempts to create Paradise without the forbidden fruit.[10] In periods, then, where man is in need of spirituality, modern ecclesiastic discourse stresses the moral weight of the consequences of sin, simultaneously appealing to the Canonical law of the Church.

This way, however, the true content of the Canons is overseen, as they do not constitute a tool for deterring or intimidating, but a guide for life, or ‘live index’. In other words, the Canons do not constitute barren legal provisions, but a proposal for a way of life. The appeal thereto should occur in a spirit of love, and not as a legal stand-in for total authority.

The principle of economy, namely the permissible deviation from the Holy Canons, is not applied only in exceptional cases, but runs through the totality of Canonical justice, since the goal is man’s salvation.[11]

The SHS’s recent references as well as a segment of the priesthood, regarding the Agreement on Common Law Marriage, unfortunately confirms the legalistic understanding of the holy Canons, and bears witness to the lack of inspired theological discourse regarding matters of both human relations[12] and the close embracement of all things secular by the church, as, in order to maintain its powers, the church resorts to the reassertion of the fear of punishment, and downgrades the meaning of sin to the level of a breach of divine law, protector and guardian of which is the Church itself.

However, does the Hellenic Church in this manner ultimately anticipate, or accept, the fear which bears no relation whatsoever with supreme love?[13]

Endnotes

1. G. I. Mantzaridis, CHRISTIAN MORALITY, (Thessaloniki; Pournara), (1995),p. 48.
2. Al. Smeman, THE CHURCH'S MISSION IN THE MODERN WORLD, (Athens: Akritas), (second edition), p. 32.
3. Chr. Giannara, 'RESURRECTION AND MISPRONOUNCED TAUNTS', 'Kathimerini' newspaper, April 26 – 27 2008, p. 19.
4. I. Petrou, CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIETY, (Thessaloniki: Vantias), (2004), p. 173.
5. See Memo from the Minister of Justice regarding the Agreement on Common Law Marriage,<http://www.ministryofjustice.gr/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=1083>. To access the full text of the draft and the essay accompanied by comments from Th. K. Papachristou see Chronika Idiotikou Dikaiou, March 2008, pp. 282 – 286.
- 'Archbishop Ieronimos kept his distance' ['Κράτησε αποστάσεις ο αρχιεπίσκοπος Ιερώνυμος'], 'Eleftherotipia' newspaper, 14th March 2008 at http://www.enet.gr/online/online_hprint?q=%E1%F1%F7%E9%E5%F0%E9%F3%EA%EF%F0%EF%F2&a=&id=62632968.
7. See Press Release of 17.3.2008 of the SHS, at http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/holysynod.asp?id=996&what_sub=d_typou.
8. Archimandrite G. Kapsanis, PASTORAL MINISTRATION ACCORDING TO THE HOLY CANONS [Η ΠΟΙΜΑΝΤΙΚΗ ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΟΥΣ ΙΕΡΟΥΣ ΚΑΝΟΝΕΣ], (Piraeus: Athos Editions), (1976), p. 131.
9. See N. Matsouka, DOGMATIC AND SYMBOLIC THEOLOGY II [ΔΟΓΜΑΤΙΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΣΥΜΒΟΛΙΚΗ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑ Β'], (Thessaloniki: Pournara), (1992), p. 207.
10. In the relevant Biblical passage, the forbidden fruit activates self-determination through the existence of the possibility for decision.
11. See, for example, Canons 102, Quinisext Council and 2 Great Vasilios.
12. For a theological inspection of the subject of intimate relationships see Phil. Faros, THE NATURE OF LOVE, (Athens: Armos), (2000).
13. A` Jonathan 4,17-18.