SPIRITUALITY AND POLITICS:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN THE RE-INTEGRATION OF EUROPE

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First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the organizers of this year’s conference of the State of Europe Forum with the very optimistic general title “HOPE IN TIMES OF CRISIS”. I was a little hesitant at the beginning with such an optimistic title in a very pessimistic period of crisis, experienced more dramatically in my country. What an ordinary academic, and especially a theologian, can tell to such a distinguished and diverse audience beyond the usual, banal and trivial recommendations of a kerygmatic character? Especially when he is asked to speak about spirituality and politics? After all, there is a very rich tradition in the State of Europe Forum, with extremely insightful recommendations: “The game is not over...yet!” it was suggested two years ago in Copenhagen, Denmark (May 9, 2012), underlining the fact that, “if Europe wants to have a future, it needs a soul”. Or its Congress on Values Economy, one month later in Brussels, Belgium, insisting that “Europe’s economy needs a new paradigm” (June 7, 2012), and its Seminar few weeks later that examined Europe’s values in a ‘Post-Secular Europe’ (June 27–29, 2012). The common denominator of all these events is undoubtedly last year’s conference in Dublin, Ireland: “Europe in Crisis: What can we do?” (May 9-10, 2013).

Trying to answer this very honest question I decided to embellish the title I was given with my understanding of the role of religion within a gloomy situation of a foreseeable disintegrated Europe. I will invite you, however, to notice that I speak of a re-integration rather that the future of an already united Europe. And furthermore, I concentrate on the importance of religion, rather that of Christianity, despite my conviction that the founding fathers’ vision of Europe was that of “a community of peoples deeply rooted in Christian values”. Almost 10 years ago the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, speaking on a similar topic (“The Role of Religion in a Changing Europe”), remarked that “it is surely disquieting that, in the proposed Constitutional Treaty, despite protest from many religious leaders, there is no explicit reference to the contribution made by Christianity to the formation of the European heritage.”

As for myself, I propose to take this unfortunate development (i.e. the denial of the Christian contribution to the European culture) as a settled issue, and for granted, that multiculturalism, and especially secularism, have won the battle - hopefully not the war; in other words to leave behind the stubborn resistance of the secularists not to
include in the preamble to the new Europe’s Constitution Treaty any reference of Christianity in the overall shaping the European culture. And I say this with confidence, because “religion is far too important for human existence to be excluded from politics,” especially in our dis-integrated and without a “soul” Europe. I propose to show how such a development, namely a reconciliation between religion and modernity, can be a real hope for Europe, provided of course that religion will be able to “exercise its tremendous potential and power to bring back moral values, and if recreates, and originates new images of what it means to be human in a just, peaceful and sustainable universe”.

But before doing this, it is important to specify the ambivalent relation between religion and politics. Politics is the theory of an on-going exercise of power, of coercion that includes legitimized violence. Politics also addresses religious issues and makes a religious statement. But on the other hand, religions very often take up political stance and engage in political action. After all, most religions – and Christianity in particular – integrates the private and the public. But although some people expect from religions – especially from Christianity - not only private views, but also final solutions to shared problems; and although they anticipate from the Church not only affirmations of conscience but also some sort of acts of power; the Church’s role – and by extension of any authentic religious body – is of another dimension, the real nature of which I will attempt to describe later. This is why spirituality, rather than religion, was chosen in the title to interact with politics.

Europe in our days - more than any other continent in our little planet, I would add – is shaped by multiculturalism, by an obvious lack of a guiding spirit, and by pluralism. Pluralism, however, and especially religious pluralism, i.e. the acceptance of all religious paths as equally valid and able all to promote coexistence, is definitely related to, and for most scholars is the result of, “modernity”, the most tangible outcome of the Enlightenment that prevailed in Europe and dominated in all aspects of public life of our after the disastrous religious wars in the 17th century, that ended with the famous peace of Westphalia in 1648 c.e. One specific aspect of modernity, and an equally important outcome of the Enlightenment, was the development of the democratic values and institutions in dealing with social life, the most prominent of which was tolerance, and Parliamentary Democracy; which little by little replaced a governance of the society vindicated in the name of God (cf. e.g. the 'eleo theou' monarchy), by dealing with public affairs legitimated by, and exercised in the name of, the people. In other words Parliamentary Democracy and religion were by definition somewhat a contradiction in terms. Even the so-called “Return of God” in the last decades of the previous century was either deplored or even demonized, being considered as a threat that would question or even overthrow the “secular condition”!

In order, however, to properly understand this phenomenon, namely the importance of religion in a modern society, and its return in the public domain, despite the opposite starting points and the different agendas between religious and secular institutions, it is necessary to briefly refer to the contrast and the successive stages of pre-modernity, modernity and post-modernity.

In the pre-modern world, the sacred cosmic stories of all religions provided, each for its own culture, the most certain public knowledge human beings believed they had about reality. After the Enlightenment, i.e. in modernity, the secular science replaced religion as the most public and certain knowledge that human beings believed they had of their world, whereas the religious stories were reduced to matters of personal belief and opinion. The ideal stance of modernity with regard to religion was, and in some cases still is, the separation of the religion (in Europe Christian institutions) from the state, and if possible its marginalization in the society at large, its relegation to the private
or personal realm, and the declaration of the public realm as secular, in other words free from any religious influence. That is why all religions (Christianity included) were always reserved, if not hostile, to both pluralism and the principles and values of modernity, at least in the early stages.

Post-modernity is an ambiguous term used to denote first of all a time of transition in history. It is important to underline that post-modernity had its beginnings in the emergence of the social sciences, namely the science that at its earlier stages undermined the authority of religion and their public presence, and contributed to the secularization of society. When, however, the same methodological principles of sociological and historical criticism were finally applied to science itself, including the social sciences, it was discovered that there was no scientific knowledge without a possible alternative or counter knowledge, and in some cases some previously considered uncontested conclusions were to a certain extent also imaginative interpretations of the world. For some, this affirmation was as shocking as the discovery that the earth was not the centre of the universe. Suddenly, all our worldviews, including the so-called scientific ones, were relativized. This made people aware that their respective (modern) views of the world could not automatically be assumed to be objective descriptions. All these, together with other developments brought again religion back into the public domain.

Having said all these, it is important to reaffirm what sociologists of knowledge very often point out, i.e. that modernity, counter (alternative) modernity, post-modernity, and even de-modernity, are always simultaneous processes. Otherwise, post-modernity as a worldview can easily end up and evaporate to a neo-traditionalism, and at the end neglect or even negate all the great achievements of the Enlightenment and the ensuing democratic institutions. The rationalistic sterility of modern life, has turned to the quest for something new, something radical, which nevertheless is not always new, but very often old recycled: neo-romanticism, neo-mysticism, naturalism, etc. There, in my personal view, can one find the roots of the rising euro-scepticism, some violent intolerance, even nostalgic or militant to Nazi period behaviour. At the same time, I firmly believe that no religion can meaningfully and effectively exercise its mission in today’s pluralistic world without a reassessment of the present context, in other words without a certain encounter with modernity. If today this encounter is possible, and even desirable – despite the tragic events of Sept 11 – this is because of the undisputed transition of our culture to a new era, the post-modern era that brought with it the resurgence of religion; and this is undoubtedly both a threat and a hope. It is a threat if the fundamentalists manage to assume uncontrolled power. However, it is a hope if religion is willing, or allowed, to exercise its tremendous potential and power to bring back moral values, and if recreate, and originate new images of what it means to be human in a just, peaceful and sustainable universe. Europe must embrace religious values, instead of being indifferent, allergic or even hostile to them. The alternative would certainly be a far-right-wing fanaticism. And this is something that we experience across the European Union.

It was for this reason that my Orthodox Church unanimously endorsed, albeit critically, such an encounter. In a recent statement in 2008 it is mentioned that “Efforts to distance religion from societal life constitute the common tendency of many modern states. The principle of a secular state can be preserved; however, it is unacceptable to interpret this principle as a radical marginalization of religion from all spheres of public life.”

Similar affirmations were on the ecumenical agenda of Christianity, even in its most conservative and traditional section, the world Christian mission. As early as 1963, in the World Mission Conference in Mexico, Christianity replaced the negative assessment to modernity by a more positive one. Since then most of the earlier models of
evangelization of the whole world, with so many negative effects in history, most notably in the tragic events of the Crusades, were completely abandoned. The new understanding of Christian mission is not any more limited to such terms as Christianization, verbal proclamation, evangelization, conversion etc. in their literal and exclusive sense; they were replaced by a variety of much more inclusive terms, like witness or martyrdom, public presence, inter-faith dialogue, liberation, etc. 

And what I consider as the most optimistic development in religious history, the Church – in collaboration with other religions – began to address the human sin in the structural complexities of our world, and started ministering the socially poor and marginalized of our societies in their contexts, what we describe as the “global South.” Above all, Christianity entered into a constructive dialogue with pluralism and at the end of the road with modernity and/or post-modernity, thus making its presence more visible in the society at large.

Speaking again for my own Church, on the basis of “the economy of the Holy Spirit” we believe that God uses not only the Church, but many other powers of the world for God’s mission (mission dei) for the salvation of humankind and the entire creation. After all, God’s Spirit, the “Holy Spirit”, who is the “Spirit of Truth,” “blows wherever He/She wills” (Jn 3:8, leading us to the “whole truth” Jn 16:13), thus embracing the whole of cosmos. According to the Biblical magna carta (Mt 25), God judges humanity with criteria other than the conventional religious ones. With the “Economy of the Spirit” the narrow limits of all world religions, or in the case of Christianity, the canonical boundaries of the Church, are widened, and all cultural (and religious) superiority syndromes and arrogant missionary behaviour give their place to a “common witness” and a humble “inter-faith dialogue”.

In the recent New Mission Statement, entitled Together towards life: mission and evangelism in changing landscapes, it is clearly stated: “The church lives in multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts and new communication technology is also bringing the people of the world into a greater awareness of one another’s identities and pursuits. Locally and globally Christians are engaged with people of other religions and cultures in building societies of love, peace and justice. Plurality is a challenge to the churches and serious commitment to inter-faith dialogue and cross-cultural communication is therefore indispensable.”

God in God’s own self is a life of communion and God’s involvement in history (and consequently our religious responsibility) aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God’s very life. This ultimate expression of koinonia (communion) and love through this kind of “inter-faith” encounter is transferred to the whole world not as doctrinal statements (dogmas) or ethical commands, but as a communion of love. This openness toward the faithful of other religions, or the “other” in general, any “other”, including the most militant atheist, is also reinforced by the unique Orthodox anthropology, expressed in such terms as theosis or deification. The human nature is not a closed, autonomous entity, but a dynamic reality, determined in its very existence by its relationship to God. Determined by a vision of how to “know” God, to “participate” in His life, and of course to be “saved” neither by an extrinsic action of God nor through the rational cognition of propositional truths, but by “becoming God”, this anthropological notion, developed in our religious tradition, is much more inclusive to “others”, to non-Christians, even to non-believers, and much more relevant to the social, economic and environmental issues, than the old conventional missionary attitude.

To sum up: The inter-faith-dialogue, and the dialogue with modernity, from a Christian point of view does not simply aim at decreasing the enmity and the hostilities between people of different religions - this is what the secular powers in the world are
interested in, but just for the stability of the present world order and status quo; nor even make the “other” a real partner in, and not just an “object” of, mission - this is a purely inner theological development. The inter-faith dialogue, and the dialogue with modernity, is currently being promoted and with full determination pursued, at least from the ecumenical perspective of my faith, in order to build upon what is left unfinished in modernity by the so-called “secular condition”. And the area where the “modern paradigm” failed to succeed was “spirituality”, in a sense that includes both the spiritual and the material welfare of the people; in other words the last fortress of humanity against degradation in social and moral values. And here I am referring to modernity’s inability to enforce a lasting just peace on earth, its unwillingness to preserve the natural environment, and its surrender to the rules of the dominant world economic system, which – allow me to remind you – has caused enormous pain to my country.

To these aspects I will limit myself in the remaining time, making use of the most recent collective statements, which in one way or another I was personally involved in: one was issued by my Orthodox Church, two by the wider Christian ecumenical community, and the last one by an inter-faith initiative.

This failure or shortcomings of modernity in justice, peace, the integrity of creation, i.e. the environment, and the world economy, is to a certain extent the result of individualism, one of the pillars of modernity, and the ensuing absolute, unconditioned, uncontrolled freedom of the individual in all aspects of life (sexual freedom, legally protected freedom in accumulating wealth etc.), heralded as the new faith after the Enlightenment. Looking at the ambivalence of modernity many Christian theologians and activists (and many Muslims or faithful from other religions, I suppose) insist that there must be a criterion to judge what should be saved from the values and achievements of modernity and what should be overcome. For with the free-market economy, especially in its latest neo-liberal form, the argument goes on, the power balance changed and modernity from a midwife of human rights became their murderer. On the basis of the old principles of modernity, the present world economic system is increasingly falling back into totalitarian trends. Only if the world listen again carefully and gleans from the shared wisdom of religions and other ages-old ethical traditions, can the positive values of the “modern paradigm” be renewed and revitalized, and thus be accepted by the faithful. This, and only this, can save Europe from its dis-integration, or even worst, from the avalanche of fascist behaviours and the nightmare of Nazism. It is for this reason that from all religious quarters we speak of liberation of modernity.

The most tangible aspect of this liberation has to do with the most revered in the West document of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In view of the last breakdown of the International Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen few years ago, it became clear – at least in religious circles – that human rights are awfully ineffective, if they are not accompanied by “Human Responsibilities”. The people of faith nowadays believe that the values and principles that form part of a common world ethic need not only be publicly declared, they also require an international legal endorsement; they should be more effectively integrated into the work of the UN system and major international legal institutions, even if integrating such values and principles requires significant reforms to leading organs and agencies of the UN. And this battle must certainly start in Europe.

The inter-faith document, Initiative on Shared Wisdom (ISW)—Thought and Action for a Sustainable Future, produced by the most serious global movement initiated in Asia, with strong Muslim participation, and inaugurated at an international conference on Faith, Shared Wisdom, and International Law, insists that “a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities that would stand beside the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” is a sine-qua-non for a just, peaceful and sustainable universe. Action has already been taken
that the Secretary General of UN “acts to advance acceptance of a statement of shared ethical values and that the document be introduced into the General Assembly for debate and adoption”. And the document goes on: “To this end religious and other ethically based institutions should work with legal and political authorities (and I cannot see another place in the world than this can start except in Europe, and the EU in particular)… in order to develop a higher level of public understanding and awareness of commonalities in values between the major religious and ethical traditions, while fully respecting religious, ethnic and cultural diversity”.

At this point I would like to underline that the struggle of Christians and faithful of other religions to promote a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities is not just a diplomatic initiative aiming at introducing in the world agenda religious or moral values at the expense of the values of modernity and the democratic achievements of the Enlightenment. It came out of pressure by prophetic and charismatic figures and theological movements for social and ecological justice from a faith perspective. “Economic justice” is a concept developed by the Churches and the ecumenical movement towards achievement of global justice through advocating for equitable sharing of resources and power as essential prerequisites for human development and ecological sustainability. Long before a universal concern (political, scientific etc.) and advocacy for the dangerous effects of the climate change was developed, theologians from all religious quarters put a critical question to their own religious institutions: “Will the Churches have the courage to engage with the ‘values’ of a profit oriented way of life as a matter of faith, or will they withdraw into the ‘private’ sphere? This is the question our Churches must answer or loose their very soul,” declared a WCC consultation of Eastern and Central European Churches on the problem of economic globalization at the dawn of the 3rd millennium.20 And if the Churches, especially the European Churches, lose their “soul”, surely no “soul” whatsoever will remain for Europe!

Therefore, the Christian Churches slowly, but steadily, started being concerned about two interrelated aspects of globalization: ecology and economy, both stemming from the Greek word *oikos* (household), and both carrying inherently the notion of communion (*koinonia*), so dear and revered in all Christianity, but definitely rooted stronger in my Orthodox tradition. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise the immediate response by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and Patriarch Bartholomew in particular, who has become known all over the world for his sensitivity for the environment, God’s creation, and the universally appreciated activities, like the series of the international ecological conferences, for which he was given the nickname the “Green Patriarch.”

On a theoretical level, however, the most significant and crucial decision, shared now by all religions, was the conviction that from a faith perspective *economy and ecology cannot be dealt with in isolation from each other*. This interrelatedness is in line with a similar conviction in the ecumenical movement, which for almost half a century had been examining justice and peace as inseparable entities, even at a time when the superpowers during the cold war stubbornly were prioritizing them in differing and opposite ways.21 In the wider ecumenical movement Christians came to the conclusion that “various aspects of climate, ecological, financial, and debt crises are mutually dependent and reinforce each other. They cannot be treated separately anymore.”22 The people of faith “discern the fatal intertwining of the global financial, socio-economic, climate, and ecological crises accompanied in many places of the world by the suffering of people and their struggle for life. Far-reaching market liberalization, deregulation, and unrestrained privatisation of goods and services are exploiting the whole creation and dismantling social programs and services and opening up economies across borders to seemingly limitless growth of production.”23
For two decades now the wider ecumenical movement, in cooperation with their partners in the inter-faith dialogue, developed a lasting process, bearing the acronymic Greek name AGAPE (Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth), the latest stage of which was a program focusing on the ethical imperative of the eradication of poverty. This program critically challenges the well established in society tradition of wealth accumulation as an evil, being the offspring of the deadly sin of greed, placing at the same time first in its agenda the safeguarding of the ecological integrity. Basic principle in the program is the understanding that Poverty, Wealth, and Ecology (PWE as the program is called) are integrally related. The PWE program engaged in on-going dialogue between religious, economic, and political actors. Participants included ecumenical leaders, representatives and leaders of churches from all over the world, interfaith partners, leaders of government, and social service organizations, and represented a rich variety of the world’s regions and nations. Regional studies and consultations took place all over the world, with a Global Forum and AGAPE celebration in Bogor, Indonesia in 2012, issuing a “Call for Action”.

This call for “Action” is addressed not only to the member-churches of WCC, to Christian religion worldwide, and to the people of faith in general; it is also a “call” to all partners from the secular establishment (political, social etc.), who share the common ethical values. Needless to say that faithful from all religions must join forces to this end, and not fight one another. Hostility between them is a betrayal of religion itself. And the battle for achieving a legally established Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities cannot be won unless it is fought by a united front of people of faith, together with all people of good will. If all religious leaders take actions similar to the ecological initiatives of Patriarch Bartholomew, a new and better world will certainly rise. A new Europe can appear again as a moral player in world affairs, a united and re-integrated Europe, worthy of its great legacy.

To return to Patriarch Bartholomew’s previously mentioned address – and with this I will end my presentation – “freedom, respect and the dignity and integrity of each human person (and the entire creation) are our (spiritual) vision of a United Europe.”

This religious “spiritual” and “political” project that I have presented is neither a naïve, unrealistic outcry of some visionaries with no sense of the reality, nor a biased intervention in the old struggle between centralized socialist and free-market capitalist economy; it goes beyond this old divide, because it focuses not on the process of production and fair distribution of our planet’s material wealth, but on its source and origin. All three Abrahamic monotheistic religions are convinced that “the Earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (Psalm 24: 1).25

3 Ibid.

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3 Ibid.

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argument that derive their origin in the pre-modern era. To play a significant role in the public life, without being either absorbed or alienated by it, with the simple World Religions for Ecology, the World Economic System, and the International Law.

Muslims (!) from Constantinople and its surroundings they accused the Orthodox of “being too tolerant toward the Crusaders in the middle ages launched that dreadful campaign to liberate the Holy Land, while passing that there is a long history of peaceful co-existence between Orthodox and people of other religions. When 1988, 75 (2000), pp. 25-35 (in Greek). W. Welsch, Unsere postmoderne Moderne, VCH Acta humaniora: Wenheim 1988, ssl. 7."  

Postmodernity’s responses and reactions to the modern project of the Enlightenment to ground knowledge or “reason” as a timeless, universal construct, immune from the corrosive forces of history, has very seldom gone to the extreme. The enduring dream of modernity should not be minimized or dismissed out of hand, and the many achievements it has realized, such as a concern for universal human rights, a concern for justice and equality, all deserve commendation and praise from religions.

10 Cf. my recent book Unity and Witness: A Handbook on Inter-Faith Dialogue, Epikentro Publishing: Thessaloniki 2007; and its predecessor Postmodernity and the Church. The Challenge of Orthodoxy, Akritas: Athens 2002. By and large, there still exist a aloofness between religion and modernity, which is caused not only by the former’s rejection of the latter, and the negative attitude toward the whole range of the achievements of the Enlightenment; but also by the obstinate persistence of the adherents of modernism – and of course the democratic institutions that come out of it – to allow historic and diachronic institutions, like religion, to play a significant role in the public life, without being either absorbed or alienated by it, with the simple argument that derive their origin in the pre-modern era.

11 § 7 of the Message of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches, disseminated urbi et orbe by the ultimate authority of the Orthodox Church, namely the Synod of the Primates of the independent (Autocephalous) Orthodox Churches, issued on 12-12-2008.

12 If one surveys the diverse religio-cultural contexts of various Orthodox Churches, one can observe that there is a long history of peaceful co-existence between Orthodox and people of other religions. When the Crusaders in the middle ages launched that dreadful campaign to liberate the Holy Land, while passing from Constantinople and its surroundings they accused the Orthodox of “being too tolerant toward the Muslims” (!)

13 This is not to say that Christian churches no longer organize evangelical campaigns or revival meetings; in fact, many Christians are still asked to take up conversion as their top priority mission. We must confess, however, that the traditional terminology (mission, conversion, evangelism or evangelization, christianization) still have an imperative validity and are retained as the sine qua non of the Christian identity of those Christian communities which belong to the “evangelical” stream of the Christian faith. What I mean is that all churches on the institutional level are coping in one way or the other with the questions of many contexts, many religions, many cultures and systems of values – what we call pluralism or the effects of globalization. Rather than proclamation alone, the Christian churches are now exploring in their own ways a different understanding of “Christian witness”.


15 § 9 of the document with the above title of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), fully endorsed in September 2012 by the Central Committee of WCC.

16 Viewing the faithful of other religions as co-workers in God’s mission, the Christian synergetically assists in the realization of the work of the Holy Spirit for a new world reality, a global communion of love, which transcends his/her personal as well as cultural and ethnic ego.

17 See above n. 11.

18 The first one is the new mission statement produced by CWME and recently adopted by the C.C. of WCC with the title: Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes; and the second a Call for Action, prepared by the committee “Poverty-Wealth-Ecology” of the AGAPE process focusing on eradicating poverty and entitled: Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call for Action.

19 Faith Shared Wisdom and International Law.


21 Only last year, during the 22nd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva, a symposium was organized by the WCC in collaboration with other Christian organizations,
interfaith networks and civil society groups. It was moderated by Dr Guillermo Kerber, WCC program executive on Care for Creation and Climate Justice, who in his concluding remarks called action for climate justice an “ethical and spiritual imperative”. From this perspective, he said, the WCC, other faith-based organizations and a broad coalition of non-governmental organizations are calling on the HRC to establish a Special Rapporteur on human rights and climate change.

22 § 10 of the Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call for Action.
23 Ibid.

24 Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “The Role of Religion in a Changing Europe,” In the World, Yet not of the World, p. 120.