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Multi-Faith Europe and Orthodoxy (Part I) (Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



At the beginning of the 20th century many predictions were made that religion would soon die out in Europe. But at the beginning of the 21st century, in tandem with secularization and religious indifference, there has been, on a world-wide scale, a rekindling of religious interest in the Transcendent, in God. A metaphysical quest which is highly flexible.



Some people try to satisfy it with religious concepts of Indian provenance (Hindu or Buddhist schools and so on). So what is often on offer to the unsuspecting public is modified products of different religious theories from a variety of sources, which propose a vague spirituality which, in the end, leads to an undefined void.

But, to a greater degree, the European public has recently been influenced by strange metaphysical ideas. And it is in best-selling children's literature that this is most clearly revealed. For the children of the 20th century one of the favourite heroes was Dickens' Oliver Twist. At the start of the 21st century, that place had been taken by J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter. In the story of Oliver Twist, good and evil are, to a large extent, defined in social terms. In the Harry Potter adventures, they belong to the metaphysical sphere and proceed from fate. In the first instance, the tragedy of life is transformed by the intervention of a noble intellectual. The hero of today's children, on the other hand, takes refuge in the dark world of the imagination, because his visible environment is hostile. The magic wand in his hand changes the image of the world. His intention is to define his environment using the invisible metaphysical forces of the universe.

The astonishing success which these books have enjoyed among a wide reading public in so many countries demonstrates the particular charm which flight into fantasy, into magic worlds, exercises today. But at the same time it reveals the interest in an area which transcends the classical logic on which the European Enlightenment was built, in which absolute confidence was placed in the critical function of rational discourse on all levels.

Religious interests and the communities which represent them continue to play a serious role in modern Europe, which today presents a general diversity. As Yorgos Theotokas noted in his book *Ελεύθερο πνεύμα* (Free Spirit), "Europe is a complex of infinite antitheses. Different and very often opposing psychological dispositions arise in the North and the South, the West and the East... The European spirit presupposes the understanding of the harmony of Europe as a whole... The great value of this whole is that it has managed to unite its constituent antitheses in a higher synthesis"[1]. The antitheses in Europe are interwoven with the metaphysical convictions of its citizens, the principles and traditions which the various religious communities possess.

A. EUROPEAN RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

1. As is well-known, the majority of Europeans are Christian. They have, however, been divided for centuries into different Churches and Confessions. In brief, they belong to three different brackets: the Roman Catholics, who comprise the most tightly-knit of these groupings; the Orthodox, organized into local Autocephalous Churches; and the Protestants, divided into larger or smaller units. All the Christian communities are distinguished by a strong historical self-awareness.

Religion (Religion, religione) is the basic term in use among Europeans. According to the most likely theory, the word denotes, on the one hand, a bond with God and, on the other, the bond which links people who share common religious convictions. At the same time, the term implies separation from something else and the unity between members of a particular community[2].

The second characteristic, the community organized on the basis of religious views, what I would call the horizontal dimension is obvious. The vertical, however, the relationship with God, faith, usually seems to be weaker than it once was. Even though some people unwittingly confuse them, formal confessional identity and authentic faith are not identical. There are many people who declare themselves to be Catholic, Orthodox, Lutherans and so on, who would also say, at the same time, that they do not believe in God. For example, official figures in Sweden record the number of Christians as 91%[3], whereas an older survey, from 1990, reckoned

that the percentage of those who believe in God was 45%[4]. Of course, statistics to do with religious matters are very relative.

2. What is beyond doubt, however, is that, in many traditionally Christian countries, the Christian faith has been eroded by anti-religious propaganda and the general secularization brought on by Modernity. According to a statistic from 1990, an average of 70% of people in 15 European countries declared that they believe in God, but only 61% believe in the soul, 43% in life after death, 33% in the resurrection of the dead and 40% never attend church[5]. Countries where there was systematic atheistic education in the old Eastern bloc show the greatest loss of faith. In the Czech Republic, for example, only 33% would call themselves Christian[6], while in East Germany the percentage is even smaller.

Secularization in Europe is not all of a piece. Three kinds can easily be distinguished: a) mere religious indifference; b) antipathy and opposition to the Christian faith; and c) militant secularism, which seeks to impose its views, to remove religion from social life and to restrict it to a matter of private concern. It attempts, with other arguments, to promote the old Soviet model concerning the restriction of religion[7]. In the well-known process of the drafting of the European Constitution, the fundamentalists of *laïcité* had a major input.

3. At the beginning of the 21st century, the dynamic of Islam entered the stage in an impressive manner. Of course, its presence is nothing new on our continent. Historically, there have been different phases; conflict with Christians, toleration, and co-existence. There have been Muslim communities for centuries, not only in the Balkans, but also in Western Europe. The largest numbers of them today are immigrants, usually from former European colonies. They are reckoned to number about 4 million in France, 2.5 in Germany, 2 in Great Britain, half a million in Holland and as many again in Italy, 300 thousand in Belgium and so on[8].

Recently, especially after 9/11/2001 we can observe two separate trends. On the one hand, among young Muslims, there is a shift towards extreme militant Islam (radicalism) and collaboration with Islamists in other continents in terrorist activities, such as in London and Madrid; and on the other the rise of Islamophobia in many Western societies. Research by the “European Consultative Commission on Racism and Xenophobia”, which reports to the European Parliament, shows that Islamophobia in Europe is on the increase. The number of those who take a negative view of Muslims has risen by 60% in one year[9]. Fortunately, there is no absence of instances of peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians, as in Albania and Greece. Let us hope that these do not prove fragile.

As a player on the global stage, Europe, of course, seems determined to act

decisively. The main concern for Europeans, however, is not merely the battle against Islamic terrorism. As I have been able to note on other occasions, the crucial point for our continent today is that Islam has entered a Europe in which Christian awareness and life have been eroded by indifference and secularization. With peoples who may declare themselves formally to be Christian, but who are not inspired by Christian values, who do not live the Christian faith. This deficit of faith, with all the various gaps it leaves, may cost us dearly in our new co-existence by facilitating the broader influence of Islam. A religious view with faith and enthusiasm has a powerful impact, and this is something denied to a lax religious society which looks for its power primarily to technological equipment.

So the important thing for the spiritual resistance and creativity of Europe is for it to rediscover its heart, the living Christian faith. At this point, the responsibility of Orthodoxy is very great and its contribution must carry weight.

[1] G. Theotokas, *Ελεύθερο πνεύμα*, Estia, Athens 1988, pp. 8-9.

[2] Anastasios (Yannoulatos) *Ίχνη από την αναζήτηση του Υπερβατικού*, Akritas, Athens 2005, p. 28.

[3] *A Handbook of Churches and Councils, Profiles of Ecumenical Relationships (compiled by H. van Beek)*, WCC, Geneva 2006, p. 455.

[4] G. Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 10.

[5] Ibid, pp. 9-10.

[6] *A Handbook of Churches and Councils*, p. 361.

[7] I. Alfeyef, *Orthodox Witness Today*, WCC Geneva 2006. Πρβλ. A. Dierkens (ed.), *Pluralisme religieux et laïcité dans l'Union européenne*, éd. Université de Bruxelles, Bruxelles 1994.

[8] Anastasios (Yannoulatos), op. cit., p 389.

[9] M. Delithanasis, «Θεριεύει η Ισλαμοφοβία στην Ευρώπη», "Kathimerini" newspaper, 14.1.2007.