

What are the positions of the Orthodox Church in a « Modern World »¹?

Your eminences, your excellences, dear Fathers, Brothers and Sisters, Ladies and Gentlemen!

First of all, allow me to express my gratitude to the supervisors of this conference for inviting me here as one responsible for the website *Orthodoxie.com*, which has been serving the Orthodox Church in its activity among Francophones for nearly ten years. Founded in 2005 by Father Christophe Levalois (a priest in Paris, a journalist by profession, as myself), our website displays more than 12,000 articles and notes, translated from seven languages (English, Russian, Greek, Romanian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Arabic) and 360 videos (reports, interviews, - among them by such persons as the Patriarch of Russia, the Patriarch of Georgia, Mgr. Stephan of Tallinn and other Orthodox personalities), plus materials of conferences and concerts. Our articles are published again by the major mass media in France, and in the world at large (AFP, La Croix, Reuters, Interfax, Ziarul Lumina). We are also the privileged partners of the French Catholic TV KTO and radio Notre – Dame. For further development of our informational activity, in 2012 we opened an Orthodox *Book fair*, which conducted its second exhibition on the 25th and 26th of April 2014 in partnership with Mutually *Saint-Christophe* insurance company, with the publishing house of *Le Cerf*, and the bookstore *La Procure de Paris*.

One of the results of our activity is the publication of the book by Father Christophe Levalois *Prendre soin de l'autre* (Caring for One's Neighbor- The Christian vision of communication), issued in the collection «Orthodoxie»

¹ Lecture at 1st International Conference on Digital Media and Orthodox Pastoral Care (Athens 7, 8, 9 May 2015) co-organised by www.pemptousia.gr, www.myocn.net, www.bogoslov.ru

(publishing house Le Cerf), which I edited together with Dominican Father Hyacinth Destivelle. In the opinion of the French Orthodox theologian Jean-Francois Colosimo, this book is « the element of novelty, the unprecedented panorama in which most vital questions are discussed. It should be mentioned that this book was already translated into Italian, and is undoubtedly worthy of being translated into other languages.

The title of my report *what are the positions of the Orthodox Church in a « Modern World »?* may indeed seem to be too ambitious because of the depth and complexity of its subject matter, and also because other speakers may present other aspects of the problem under discussion more vividly.

What are Orthodox mass media in the modern world? This will be the main issue, that I will deal with, and it will consist more in giving things to think about, rather than giving final answers

But first I will try and outline the essence of the modern world, which in its utmost development is presented in western societies, which, in their turn, consider themselves to be the universal model of human communities; then I will comment upon the Orthodox mass media in the modern world. And also how these media may serve the Orthodox Church.

Today's world, which is sometimes called "postmodern", is characterized, first of all, by a new attitude towards the notion of time. We witness great changes in the perception of time and place; "premodern" generations relied upon tradition, while contemporary people have lost former grounds, and rely only upon the present moment.²

The era of Prometheus is over,³ we are now in the time of Dionysus. The main values of the past (such as the idea of progress, labor and ratio) are

² Michel Maffesoli, *L'instant éternel, L'Instant éternel. Le retour du tragique dans les sociétés postmodernes*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2003

³ <http://e-south.blog.lemonde.fr/2008/10/07/postmodernite-et-culture-numerique-une-contradiction-dans-les-termes-conversation-avec-michel-maffesoli-universite-paris-sorbonne/>

substituted by other values, - among them: present moment, creativity, imagination and other popular totems. It seems that we are no more than ordinary items in the notebooks, musical bands, chat rooms, reality shows; hat matters (for the world today) is what is seen HERE and NOW, and this is MY TRUTH that is equal to the truths of others.

Most characteristic of the postmodern world is the following change: the search for the Ultimate Truth, which was the highest Value in premodern world, is now substituted by other values, such as: the cult of the Present, the desire of well-being; a good management of the emotional sphere, both private and professional. This transformation is most characteristic of the present world.⁴ The intensity of life is concentrated in the present moment, both in personal and professional affairs. And so the key word now is «to live in the present moment». As a result, life becomes «liquid», as stated by the Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman⁵: life is an incessant flow of movement and speed, the triumph of consumption. Young people no longer project themselves into the future.

They live only for the present instant, which is defined by the French historian Francois Hertog as «presentism». They live in the present moment, which is simultaneously euphoric and tragic.

The second characteristic feature of postmodernism is the disintegration of the individual. The human being is split the same way society is split into fragments, groups, and communities. The human being is placed between opposite entities: «a banker in the daytime, a raver in the evening», «a businesswoman in the morning, a perfect housewife in the evening». A person is not a separate atom, and does not exclude “multi-identification”, he sometimes

⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, *Les battements du monde. Diagnostic sur le temps présent*, 2003, *Was zählt, kehrt wieder*, 2004

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *La vie liquide*, Pluriel, 2013, p. 7

tends to indulge in what is defined by Michel Maffesoli as «nomadism»⁶, and connected to the notion of community. In his book « Notes of Postmodernism» M. Maffesoli justly states that communication as such and the process of interrelations, supported by mass media, stimulate the dynamics of social intensity among people, on the Earth at large and in everything that surrounds them. Communication and, to be precise, new media, become the sign of identification, besides being a sacred element, which forms communities, and promotes their vital existence. In short, it is the main structural element of post modernity.

At last, postmodernism means a new type of social and economic relations between partners. Thus, effectiveness replaces legitimacy; management replaces politics; direct control plays the role of property. Human action is reduced to the mode of adaptive behavior; human thought is dominated by the consideration of profit and risks; human relations are conditioned by the rules of competition and rivalry. Mass media obey the law of fashion, they function in the manner of some show or performance, and are judged with the criteria of entertainment.⁷

The era of post modernity is marked by the loss of great stories.

Their function is occupied by various advertisements; whose language mostly fulfils social needs.

In this disillusioned, disintegrated and « liquid» world, where people desperately seek - again and again - the unique ONE, - Christians are called, as always, to appeal to all nations to be baptized in the Name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.⁸

In view of whatever was said about the current world, the mass media that are the most adapted for interaction with that world, as we had described it, are

⁶ What is called nomadism is the career of the subject going through different relational experiences that confer him forms.

⁷ <http://www.revueargument.ca/article/2005-10-01/332-de-la-postmodernite-a-lhypermodernite.html>

⁸ *Mt.* : 28: 19 « Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost »:

those, which cover different platforms and Internet services: websites, blogs, forums, discussion groups, Facebook. As we all know, Internet with its immediacy, has the ability without the medium of any authority, to quickly build relations, and thus it creates impression of creating real communities. As from today, the future of communications belongs to Internet.

According to Pew Research Center⁹, since 2010 in the USA, Internet, more often than printed press, has been used as the main source of information. According to the same source, in 2013, 63% Americans watched new online videos.¹⁰ The study by Forrester Research, published in May 2011 and entitled «Understanding the changing needs of the European online consumer» showed, among other things, that young Europeans in the age of 16 – 24, spent an average 13.6 hours per week on the Internet against 10.5 hours in front of TV. We have a similar situation in France! Thus, according to one study, in 2012, French teenagers (13-19 years) spend more time on the Internet than in front of TV, to be precise they spent 12 hours 20 minutes per week on the Internet, against 11 hours 30 minutes in front of TV and 5 hours 30 minutes listening to the radio.¹¹ The same tendency is observed in the rest of the world: «Just like in the US, adults in Pacific Asia spend a lot of time online – from 13 hours a week for Japanese adults to 21 for metropolitan Indians».¹²

Although we agree with Mgr Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, who, in his speech «communications and technologies», delivered at the 2nd Youth Congress in Istanbul, organized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in July 11 – 16, 2007, noted

⁹ Cf. : http://www.lesechos.fr/15/03/2011/LesEchos/20890-134-ECH_les-americains-s-informent-plus-sur-internet-que-dans-les-journaux.htm : «Fully disturbed, the information industry in 2010 experienced a major turning point: for the first time, Americans informed themselves on the Internet rather than in the printed press, according to the annual study "The State of the News Media 2011 "Pew Research Center. "

¹⁰ Cf. : <http://www.journalism.org/files/2014/03/News-Video-on-the-Web.pdf/>

¹¹ Cf. : <http://blog.hi-media.com/les-adolescents-francais-passent-plus-de-temps-sur-le-web-que-devant-la-tv/?lang=fr>

¹² CF. : http://blogs.forrester.com/reineke_reitsma/13-03-13-understanding_the_changing_needs_of_online_consumers_in_china_india_and_japan

that this contribution of digital technologies cannot replace direct and specific contact, manifested in «natural communications», where all feelings of a man take part, and which allows «face-to-face communication»¹³. Therefore discernment, as reminded by item 15 of the «Conclusion» of the abovementioned congress, is required: «In the age of communications and information society, Christians are called to use with care and trust, all the possibilities, provided by the new technologies for the propagation of the Gospel word, always striving to turn impersonal trajectories and forms of contact, into the opportunity for face-to-face communication and mutual enrichment. In the chaos of information, the Gospel of the Incarnate Word of God, [...] invites us to a life of true face-to-face communication, which alone can satisfy the spontaneous requirement of man to enter into communications with other people, which is always welcomed by the presence of the Triune God».¹⁴

In any case, Internet is the digital Agora, where the Christian message must be delivered today. Being a «cross-media» platform, Internet gives the opportunity to combine different tools: audio, video and text communication with the world. This predicative communication, although going through these new mass media, has three aspects, the same as from the times of origins of Christianity.

The first is to inform, viz. kerygmatic¹⁵ dimension of evangelical communications. To inform both Christians and Non-Christians of what the

¹³ CF. : <http://youth.ecupatriarchate.org/messages/days.php?id=125&lang=1> - quoted by Fr. Christophe Levalois in *Prendre soin de l'autre – une vision chrétienne dans la communication*, Collection Orthodoxie – Editions du Cerf, Paris 2012. p. 74

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 75.

¹⁵ The term "κήρυγμα" meant the first proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians. Subsequently, the new disciples of Christ enjoyed a deeper doctrinal teaching. See Jean DANIELOU, « Le kérygme selon le christianisme primitif », dans HENRY Antonin-M. (éd.), *L'annonce de l'Évangile aujourd'hui. Rapports du quatrième colloque de « Parole et Mission »* Paris, Cerf, 1962, p. 67-86.

Church is, of what happens in a Church. To inform well, is nothing but the interpretation of events, and this must be done on an impartial basis (check sources), with responsibility (be aware that information implicates the Church and not only the informer) and constructively (information shall offer pastoral vision and be part of the context of salvation, since Truth alone saves). Another aspect of this information is the language used in Orthodox mass media. We share the analysis of Antoine Nivière, university teacher and chief editor of the Orthodox Press Service (SOP) in France, delivered in his speech entitled "Orthodox Ethos and ethics in journalism"¹⁶ at the International Conference in Volos, Greece in May 1999: «Messages and official speeches, or even press releases of the church bodies are still quite often written in rhetorical style, using stylistic and lexical forms, which do not touch the modern reader, who is always in a hurry, a lover of simplicity». This is especially true for online communications.

The second aspect of orthodox communications is the «didascalie» [didactic] dimension; the first, kerygmatic dimension was there to announce and inform, and the second consists in awareness and training. Access to digital information can be created or provided through computer and Internet connection, through search engines, hyperlinks, and domain names, databases, websites, blogs, providing all patristic texts, liturgical and pastoral texts, and audio and video podcasts of sermons and lectures. Sometimes websites are the result of individual initiatives of ordinary believers or clergy, who voluntarily invest their time and skills; sometimes it is part of a communication policy in a formative structure. In this context I should commend the faculties and theological institutes of the Russian Orthodox Church, which made sustained efforts to provide online wealth of Orthodox teachings not only in the Russian language. We can give the example of the website of the Moscow Ecclesiastical Academy Bogoslov.ru,

¹⁶ Cf. : http://jean.square7.ch/wolfcms/public/SyndesmosTexts/Text_08_Niviere_1999.pdf

which publishes articles also in Greek, German, English and Spanish. The example mentioned here, reminds us of the financial aspect of communications too. Financial resources are similarly required for effective and stable communications. If in countries with Orthodox traditions local churches have finances required for creating institutional websites and salaries of journalists and video operators, the situation is different in non-orthodox countries. Allow me to mention our own situation: whatever we have been hosting online since 2005, is the product of the voluntary work of Father Christopher Levalois, of your servant, and of two employees. We do not get any assistance or grants, neither from Church authorities, nor from civil authorities in France and abroad. We started an online subscription for some articles and videos, but the number of subscribers is insufficient for further development of our activity. Orthodox Internet users in France, and probably all Internet users as well, do not understand that this work has its price, and free Internet is an illusion. Therefore, we are looking for a solution.

The third dimension of Orthodox communications is the dimension of connection in communications, the creation of communities or simply «ecclesiation». Personal blogs with the possibility of placing there comments, announcements, Facebook, Twitter, forums and discussions are channels of these communications. Orthodox Christians are present there, but their presence should be well advised and responsible. In our opinion, the training of Orthodox «community managers», should be required, to ensure exchanges in agreement with Church ethics and principles.

In conclusion, I mention a quotation from the book by Father Christopher Levalois «This is based on primary intention, arising from everyone's heart. This shall lead to cognizance of the other person, not for pulling him over to oneself, but for the construction of a genuine «we», by sharing what each one has. Thus each one gets assistance so as to enter, in his turn, into this transfer, which is simultaneously acceptance and transfer, from The One Who is True Life, or to

continue to grow in Him and for Him (1 John 1: 3)... It is important to take care of each other for this purpose. The main idea is a decisive and transformative action. Communication shall then become, at least a desire for communion, thus striving at achieving the common etymological basis of these two terms. It is completely achieved in the *face to face* and relation from person to person».¹⁷

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www.orthodoxie.com

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 156

¹⁸ Fr. Jivko Panev, born in 1961, a teacher, an Orthodox priest and a French journalist. Teaches canon law and the History of local Churches at the Saint-Serge Institute of Orthodox Theology. In January 2005 he created the site Orthodoxie.com, "one of the most often cited in the field of actual Orthodoxy (...) very often visited by journalists, university teachers, diplomats and religious authorities, among them Catholics." – quoted from La Croix (the director of the publication). He has often delivered speeches at the Ecole supérieure de journalisme de Lille. From 2010 he has coordinated the collection "Orthodoxie" at the publishing house in Cerf.