

Occasional Paper #6

Greek Philosophy and the Theology of the Greek Orthodox Church

By Dr. John Mavroides

Posted on June 21, 2010 in Op Ed Archive

Editor's note: *How Does Hellenism relate to the Orthodox Christian Church? Now that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has developed the FAITH Foundation to promote Greek Orthodoxy and Hellenism it is legitimate to ask what is the Hellenism that the Archdiocese wants to promote and what is its relationship to the Church? Those of us educated in the days when the liberal arts flourished in our universities learned that Hellenism was the culture, ideals and pattern of life of Greece, as represented in Athens at the time of Pericles. Hellenism gave way to Hellenistic civilization in the 4th century B.C. Hellenistic civilization grew out of the efforts of Alexander the Great to spread Hellenism. The new culture in art, letters and science gave rise to humanism that characterizes classical Greek civilization. This humanism holds that man is the measure of all things and is a basis of Western Civilization. This is a very impressionistic understanding of Hellenism, but is this the Hellenism that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese will promote with the FAITH Foundation? Or is it the idea that the Church should be the lobby for Greek governmental interests, or that Greek folk dancing is part of the educational program of the Greek Archdiocese? Is the Hellenism of the FAITH Foundation about preserving Greek cooking and holding Greek Festivals - that fund our churches - where ouzo power and souvlakia are featured? Who decides what Hellenism means? Who are these revisionists? Is it the donors to the foundation or the executive director? How does all this relate to the Orthodox Christian Church in America and the feast of Pentecost?*

Will we be asked at the great judgment whether or not we preserved Hellenism or whether or not we brought the Good News to our neighbors, and whether or not we fed the hungry, took care of the widows, and what did we do for the least of God's children? Dr. John Mavroides' essay, Greek Philosophy and the

Theology of the Greek Orthodox Church, is a perfect way to begin the discussion of what is the Hellenism that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese will promote. We invite your ideas and reactions to this article. Maybe working and thinking together we can get a better understanding of what the Greek Archdiocese should do with all this money, or maybe the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese should let others promote the idea of Hellenism and concentrate on the development of the spiritual identity of the faithful?

Greek Philosophy and the Theology of the Greek Orthodox Church

By Dr. John Mavroides

Because not much on Orthodox Theology was easily available in English until the mid-1940's, of the emphasis by the Roman Catholic scholastics on Plato and Aristotle, as well as of the emphasis on the Greek language in the Greek Orthodox Church, it is not surprising that some have the impression that the Theology of our Church is derived from Greek Philosophy. Actually this is not the case; most of the Patristic Fathers of our Church, even as early as Clement (150-215 AD), have emphasized that there is absolutely no similarity between God and His creatures. God is unique and can in no way be described by comparison with anything that any creature may be, may know or may imagine. Since God transcends all human concepts, the god of the brilliant Greek philosophers, who thought anthropomorphically, is not in any way connected to the Biblical God and the God of Apostolic Tradition, the God of the Orthodox Church. <1,2,3,4,5>

The third century Church Fathers of Alexandria, Clement and Origen in particular, discussed the marriage of Christianity to the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. But Clement did no more but point out the difficulties that would be involved in doing this. Origen, Clement's student, the first great doctor, the founder of scientific Biblical scholarship, being influenced too much by Greek philosophy, taught among many doctrines a few which were later proven to be erroneous; and so, long after his death he was declared a heretic. Vladimir Lossky calls him a great Christian thinker, praised by many, but "an attitude which was not fundamentally apophatic made this Alexandrine teacher a religious philosopher rather than a mystical theologian in the proper sense to the eastern tradition. With Origen, Hellenism attempts

to creep into the Church". <3,4>

During the golden age of Orthodox Theology, the fourth century, the great theologians of our Church, the Cappadocians, Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and his classmate and friend Gregory Nazianzus; and the Alexandrian, Athanasius the Great, having grown up with the works of Plato and Aristotle, realized very early that the doctrines of the Greek philosophers were inadequate for elucidating the God of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation; therefore they accepted God by Tradition and Faith, and with a knowledge of the earlier ideas on monotheistic mysticism of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (30 BC - 45 AD), they turned to apophatism (negatism) and revelation for their theology, for reaching and understanding God. This is a Mystical Theology. To quote from St Basil, " It is by His energies that we can say we know our God; we do not assert that we can come to the essence itself; for His energies descend to us, but His essence remains unapproachable.", and from Gregory Nazianzus, " It is difficult to conceive God, but to define Him is impossible." <6,5,7,4>

This apophatic theology was emphasized by an unknown writer, probably of the fifth century, thought by some to be a Syrian monk who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite; he wrote a treatise on "Mystical Theology". His book summarized the work of the Cappadocians and also discussed such topics as the Word of God, the Celestial Throne, Archangels and Angels. This Dionysius was, of course, not the original St. Dionysius the Areopagite, St Paul's first Athenian convert to Christianity; however, later in the West these two persons were equated because, to quote the Catholic Encyclopedia, "...of the Western ignorance, intellectual stagnation, and wide unfamiliarity of Greek at that time" (the 13th century).

Dionysius' God is the absolute God, who is incommensurable and beyond human reason. The ousia (essence) of God cannot be attained by the human intellect. That is why the Patristic Fathers counterbalanced positive statements about God (cataphatic) attributing all perfections to Him, with negative statements about Him (apophatic), such as God is inexpressible. The first way (cataphatic) leads to imperfect statements about God, while the apophatic way, the only perfect way to describe God and His unknown nature, leads to total ignorance. It is by agnosia (unknowing), puzzling as it may seem, that we may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge. Apophatism serves as the basis of this Mystical Tradition. <6,3,7>

The concepts introduced by Dionysius were developed in greater detail by Maximus, the Confessor (580 AD), who affirmed also the nature and mode of the Incarnation; in this connection, by daring to maintain that Jesus had two wills, thus contradicting the Emperor's assertion that He had only one will, Maximus lost his tongue and his right hand. In their writings both Dionysius and Maximus discussed the possibility of Theosis, seeing God in a mystical union with Him, by combining apophatism with the Tradition of the Hesychasts, those who prayed silently. Some consider the writings of these two as the Bible of the Mystics of the Orthodox Church.<6>

In Matt. 4:8 of the New Testament, our Lord said, "Blessed are the pure in Heart for they shall see God;" in 1.Thess. 5:17 of the New Testament, St. Paul said, "Pray without ceasing;" and Ps. 118: 145 of the Old Testament (Septuagint) says, "I cried with my whole Heart."

St. Symeon, the New Theologian (948-1022 AD), the greatest of the Byzantine Mystics, described in his Mystical Theology his personal experiences with the vision of the Divine and Uncreated Light which is not a sensible or material Light, but it can be seen by the material eyes of one who is deified since his bodily faculties and soul are transformed. He affirmed the Old Testament nature of man with the Hebrew idea of the "Heart", which includes the whole man, not only the mind but also the will, the emotions and the body, as discussed by St. Macarius (~300 AD); attributed to him also are the details of the Hesychast method of praying with the Jesus prayer," Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner," or the shortened form, "Lord have mercy" ("Kyrie Eleison"). <7>

Thus our Lord demands not only spiritual purity but also bodily purity in order to see God, (Theosis). The Hesychast's prayer of the "Heart" cannot be achieved by his efforts alone, but through God's Grace; it involves fasting and pious behavior as well as prayer. One volume of the Philokalia is devoted to detailed instructions for this Prayer, as given by great Mystics who have been Blessed.<8>

Instead of arguing about God's nature, which is irrational in this case, this Theology is based on personal experience, which is considered higher than the knowledge that can be obtained by human logic. This Mystical Theology was ridiculed in the West. The principal leader of these attacks was the small Calabrian, Italo-Greek Bernado Barlaam, a brilliant and arrogant monk, who was once Orthodox, but later turned Catholic, an expert in Greek philosophy

as well as one of the West's best Greek rhetoricians. Defending the Hesychasts was heavily built Gregory Palamas, a Hesychast monk who had been blessed by God with Spiritual Experience; using traditional Orthodox theology, Palamas pointed out the distinction between the ousia of God and the energeiai of God. What is unknowable is the essence of God, but we can know our God by his energies. No creature has or ever will have the slightest communication with God's nature. But, however remote His essence, God reveals himself to the "Holy Fathers who are filled with the Holy Spirit" and who observe the Uncreated Light which the three disciples saw shining on the face of Christ on Mount Tabor, "that Light which is the Glory of God, without end." To Palamas, the Light of the Transfiguration was uncreated beyond description and perceived not by the senses but by the "eyes of the Heart".<3,4>

Barlaam opposed the traditional distinction of the essence and energies of God; he accused Palamas of either splitting God in two by this distinction, or of having two Gods. Barlaam's definition of God was the simple anthropomorphic one of the Greek philosophers; he said that it was not possible to see God. His creatures could sense His influence indirectly, but only through the Scriptures or the Wonders of Creation.

This religious debate was between two Greek monks: one, the Western Barlaam the Calabrian, advocating the god of the Greek Philosophers, and the other, Eastern Gregory Palamas advocating the God of the Mystics. Although Palamas won the debate in two Synods, there were a number of Greeks who still supported the Greek philosophers and Barlaam.

Finally, ten years later in 1351, at a third Synod, a decree against Barlaam's "Blasphemies" was proclaimed in the Acts which were solemnly placed on the High Altar of the Cathedral of Divine Wisdom, Hagia Sophia; in the presence of the Patriarch, the co-Emperors, and the Bishops it was also decreed that Barlaam be cut off from intercourse with Christians forever.

The supporter of the Hesychasts and Mystical Theology, Gregory Palamas was promoted to Archbishop of Thessaloniki, and eventually was declared a Saint by the Greek Orthodox Church.<6,3,4>

Thus mystical experience, not philosophy, lies at the heart of the Orthodox Church. The early language of Christianity was the Greek language, because it was the universal language at that time - in the New Testament, in words and phrases of the Theology and of the Liturgy; and some of the terms used in

Christian theology were adopted from those used by the Greek philosophers, but the meanings of the terms were different; for example, the philosopher's term "word" (logos) is a principle or force by which god governed the world, whereas the Christian "Word"(Logos) is our Lord Jesus Christ, a perfect God and perfect man, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. Brilliant as the philosophers were, they were only creatures of God, as we all are, and therefore anthropomorphized, so that even the first statement of the Old Testament, Genesis 1, " In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth", would have stumped them, because they would not have been able to figure out how to create something out of nothing. Plato's impersonal god merely re-arranged preexisting material.

The most brilliant of the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil the Great, was struck with admiration at the thought of Genesis 1: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." He devotes the rather long Homily 1 of his Hexaemeron (which according to Photius was the most admired and celebrated of Basil's works) to this single statement. In section 2 of this Homily while discussing the Gentiles, he points out that, "The philosophers of Greece have much ado to explain nature, and not one of their systems has remained firm, and unshaken, each being overturned by its successor. It is vain to refute them; they are sufficient in themselves to destroy one another." And he ends this paragraph with, "Deceived by their inherent atheism, it appeared to them that all was given up to chance." He finally concludes this Homily in section 11 with, "...the most penetrating mind cannot attain to the knowledge of the phenomena of the world, either to give a suitable explanation of it or to render the praise due to the Creator, to Whom belong all glory, all honor and all power, world without end. Amen." <9>

But by the primacy of love over justice, the philosophers influenced, softened, many doctrines of the Eastern Orthodox Church as compared to the legalistic Roman Catholic Church; for example, in the West, sin is considered a violation of the legal relationship between God and man, while in the East, sin is thought of as a diminution of man's ousia, a wound or infection of the original image and likeness of God - who man is and should be. Redemption is not considered restitution of a legal debt, but rather a renewal, perfection and deification of man's being. <10,11>

References (denoted by < >)

1. Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy (New York) 1945
2. Dagobert D. Runes, Pictorial History of Philosophy (New York) 1965
3. Robert Payne, The Fathers of the Eastern Church (New York) 1985
4. Vladimir Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church (London) 1957
5. Karen Armstrong, A History of God (New York) 1993
6. George Foot More, History of Religions II (New York) 1949
7. Timothy Ware, The Orthodox Church (New York) 1987
8. E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer (translators), Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer on the Heart (London) 1962
9. Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol VIII (on the Internet)
10. Ernst Benz, The Eastern Orthodox Church (New York) 1963
11. John S. Romanides, The Ancestral Sin (Ridgewood, N.J.) 1998

Dr John Mavroides spent his early career as an electrical engineer designing sonar equipment for submarine detection and communications at the US Navy Underwater Sound Laboratory; and later as both a researcher and scientific administrator in solid state physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He served in the Navy as a Lieutenant during World War II. He and his wife of blessed memory, Jean, were founding members of St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church , Lexington, MA. He is retired in Okeechobee, FL where his physician son, Christopher, serves the rural communities of Glades, Palm Beach, Hendry, Highlands, and Okeechobee Counties. Dr John in retirement, is a devout member of St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church, Ft. Pierce, FL. His family tradition has included monks living on Mt. Athos, priests, and parliamentary ministers of Greece. He is an advocate of an inclusive multicultural Orthodox Church in North America. His article is developed to encourage a discussion and understanding of the relationship between Hellenism, with the brilliant humanistic philosophers of ancient Greece, and our Orthodox Church. He is a member of Orthodox Christian Laity.

Originally published May 20, 2006