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The Gender Factor in Contemporary Orthodox Biblical Research: A Presentation of the Greek Orthodox Context

In Orthodox theological research, studies on the role of woman in church have been few; only in the last decade has there been an increased interest in the issues presented. In addition, very few Orthodox women are willing to write for either public or ecumenical forums, or, in particular, to take up issues raised by feminist theology or feminist scholarship in other disciplines. From the study of contemporary contributions the following points can be made:

1. Theological attempts at presenting the position of woman in the Orthodox church could be classified into two categories (although this division does implicate certain risks):
 - a) studies which attempt to present and explain the Orthodox tradition and teaching of the Fathers on questions of women without any wider speculation and reflection;
 - b) studies which examine the issue from a critical viewpoint of Orthodox tradition and of *orthopraxia*.
2. Despite a continuous battle between history, cultural reality and eschatology, the teaching of the Fathers continues to influence the views and approaches of many contemporary Orthodox theologians. The Fathers of the Eastern Church, unlike Thomas Aquinas and the other medieval scholastics never attempted to substantiate the inferiority of woman theologically. Here the formal teaching of the Orthodox Church has never changed. This is very important, considering the latent temptation, particularly in certain monastic surroundings, of a Gnostic dualism in which sin itself appears in the form of a woman. This gives the impression, as Paul Evdokimov has correctly observed,¹ that salvation focuses only on men, and that those who wish to be saved must first of all be saved from women. These views can

¹ Paul Evdokimov, *La femme et le salut du monde: Etude d' anthropologie chrétienne sur les charismas de la femme* (Casterman: Tournais-Paris 21979).

be understood in the context of the kind of ecclesiology that prevailed from the third century and which influenced the views and practices of the Orthodox church and its spirituality.²

3. It has been stressed that the issue of women's ordination, which began in the context of ecumenical dialogue, does not concern the Orthodox church at this moment of time. The fundamental argument referred to here is that of Tradition. The World's Council of Churches has taken the initiative in organizing a series of meetings of Orthodox women to consider this question.³ The general trend in the last decade to redefine some basic Orthodox theological views has produced a number of doctoral theses and articles which argue that there is no theological impediment to the ordination of women.⁴ The revival of the institution of women deacons naturally concerns Orthodox churches also. The theological trend here is mainly directed towards the more active participation of the laity, and therefore to the active role of women in the life and work of the Church.⁵ The 24th conclusion of the Conference in Rhodes is characteristic: "While recognizing the facts which witness to the promotion through the Church of the equality of honor between men and women, it is necessary to confess, in honesty and with humility, that, owing to human weakness and sinfulness, the Christian communities have not always and in all places been able to suppress effectively ideas, manners and customs, historical developments and social conditions which have resulted in practical discrimination against women. Human sinfulness has thus led to practices which do not reflect the true nature of the Church of Jesus Christ".⁶

² Petros Vassiliadis, "Holiness in the Perspective of Eucharistic Theology", in: S. T. Kimbrough Jr. (ed.), *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (SVS Press Crestwood: New York 2002), 101-116.

³ Meetings in Agapia, Konstantinople, Damaskus e.t.c. See more details in: Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald (ed.), *Orthodox Women Speak. Discerning the "Signs of the Times"* (WCC Publications: Geneva 1999).

⁴ Constantinos Yiokarinis, "The Priesthood of Women. A Look at Patristic Teaching", in: Karidoyanes FitzGerald (ed.), *Orthodox Women Speak*, 167-176. And his dissertation in Greek: *The Ordination of Women* (Epektasis: Katerini 1995).

⁵ Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, "Orthodox Women and Pastoral Praxis", in: *The St. Nina Quarterly* 3/2 (1999), 1-6; Valerie A. Karras, "Women in the Eastern Church", in: *The St. Nina Quarterly* 1/1 (1997), 1-4.

⁶ Gennadios Limouris (ed.), *The place of the woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women* (Tertios: Katerini 1992), 29.

4. The last twenty years, Orthodox women have been speaking and discerning the “Signs of the times”. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel was one of the first. Although her views were initially regarded as too extreme and radical and were attributed to her non orthodox background, they were later acknowledged as timely and substantial.⁷ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel has written of the need for Orthodox women to break the silence imposed on them, not by the genuine tradition of the church, but by social customs and convention. Nearly twenty years later, she appealed once more to Orthodox women “to widen their horizons beyond the bounds of the narrow parochialism within which they are often tempted to remain”.
5. The work of Deborah Belonick is probably the first attempt at dialogue with Western feminist thought. Belonick presents the problematic of feminist theology, as it was expressed by the first generation of feminist theologians.⁸ She sketches feminist views on Christology, spirituality, the Holy Scriptures, and the historical Jesus and attempts a brief evaluation, which draws the conclusion that the questions posed by feminist theology should also be of concern to the Orthodox church. Later, and on the same track, came the work of Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, who saw the understanding of feminist theology, its principles and demands as a prerequisite for the meeting of the two worlds.⁹ Although it is now clear that there can be no talk of a common feminist theological thinking, there are some basic principles that one ought to consider before undertaking any serious study or even an evaluation. Finally, the contribution of Eva Catafygiotu-Topping evaluates woman’s presence in Orthodox worship and spirituality, sharply criticizing certain concepts survive, perhaps with a different tinge, and still blemish the liberating message of the Gospel.¹⁰ She challenges Orthodox

⁷ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel & Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (WCC Publications: Geneva 2000).

⁸ *Feminism in Christianity: An Orthodox Christian Response* (Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, Syosset/New York 1983).

⁹ “An Orthodox Assessment of Feminist Theology”, in: Gennadios Limouris (ed.), *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women* (Tertios: Katerini 1992), 287-312.

¹⁰ Eva C. Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy* (Light and Life: Minneapolis 1987), 127. The same idea is shared among Orthodox women and men from different contexts and realities: see Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald (ed.), *Orthodox Women Speak. Discerning the “Signs of the Times”* (WCC Publications: Geneva 1999); Elisabeth Behr-Sigel / Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (WCC Publications: Geneva 2000); Dimitra

- women to re-examine the androcentric prejudices in Orthodox tradition that have continued to determine the attitudes and praxis of the church even today.
6. An important change is the creation of a theological current which refers to a more general renewal of theology and the church based on the ecclesiological eucharistic vision. This takes into account the realization of what Behr-Sigel refers to as the typical temptation of the West: to neglect or forget the vision. The temptation of the Orthodox, on the other hand, is to avoid the effort needed to apply the vision creatively in the current situations.

Basic principles and starting points of Orthodox hermeneutics

The practice that has prevailed in the hermeneutic approach to biblical texts about women seems to have overlooked the two basic starting principles of Orthodox interpretation. These texts were used as an authority, where woman was associated with impurity and with sin, a view which stems largely from the interpretation of Genesis and Leviticus and which is enforced by a unilateral interpretation of Paul's passages about silence on behalf of women.¹¹ This has contributed to the downgrading of women's role both in the public sphere and in the life of Church.

Three further factors in the field of biblical studies have enforced the above situation:

- a) the more stagnation in biblical research, especially in Greece, which results from a broader underestimation of the role and importance of a modern interpretation of the Bible;
- b) a noticeable reluctance in biblical studies to tackle questions and problems of the church's life and organization; and
- c) the presence of a traditionalism which reveals itself in a thoughtless and mimetic use of the Fathers, leaving biblical scholars no room for a free and more creative involvement.¹² Moreover, the historical critical method was introduced into Greece and other Orthodox countries only very late, after the 1970s, at a time when its limits had already begun to be realized in

Koukoura, "What does it Mean to Live in the World and for the World?" in: *On Being Church: Women's Voices and Visions* (The Ecumenical Review 53/1; 2001), 36-43; Ioannis Petrou, "Die Frauenfrage und die kirchliche Tradition", in: *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 88 (1998), 244-259.

¹¹ Veselin Kesich, "St. Paul: Anti-feminist or Liberator?" in: *St. Vladimir's theological quarterly* 21/3 (1977), 123-147.

¹² Savas Agouridis, *Hermeneutics of Holy Texts* (Athens 2000), 8-9 (in Greek).

the international biblical studies and when new methods of interpretation had begun to appear. Contemporary Orthodox interpreters rightfully maintain that there is a hermeneutical problem, since the interpretation of the Bible demands not only a strict historical critical analysis, but also deep knowledge of history and human experience. The Bible is above all Gospel, the revelation of God's plan for the salvation of humanity, and an invitation for participation in the gift of God's love to all people, women and men.

Since the 1970s, a systematic attempt of a Eucharistic approach to all aspects of theology has begun, which reflects the fact that the Eucharist is the center of Orthodox theology.¹³ The Eucharistic approach is based on two fundamental principles: the sense of *koinonia*, and the *eschatological dimension* of Church. The former is connected to pneumatology, as opposed to a global ecclesiology which is based on Christology. This theological trend is gradually beginning to prevail in contemporary Orthodox reflection, and has been an important influence in the ecumenical dialogue. For the Orthodox, Eucharist and Bible express the same thing: the salvation of the people of God in a course that has past, present and future. Any other way of looking at it would convert the Bible from the book of the Church to private religious reading.

The second important principle of Orthodox interpretation is the relation between *history* and *faith*. The dialectic between history and faith has never been expressed with acrimony as it developed in some parts of the Western theological reflection. The danger in Orthodox theology arose not so much from their dissension but from their being too close. The basic theological view that diffuses Eastern theological reflection is that the God of the Bible and of the Eucharistic community is the same God as the one of the human history. Through the history, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the people commune with revealed God and express this experience in their lives, through texts, symbols, practices and cultural realities. This communion and relation takes material shape in ways of life and forms of relationships, transforms human realities, shapes the relationships between persons, with society and

¹³ John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition. Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World* (St. Vladimir's Press: Crestwood / New York 1978), 15; John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in the Personhood and the Church* (St. Vladimir's Press: Crestwood / New York 1984), 143-169; Gennadios Limouris, "The Eucharist as the Sacrament of Sharing", in: *The Ecumenical Review* 38/4 (October 1986), 401-415.

the whole creation. As can easily be understood, all these take place in specific time-spatial contexts that include both contemporary reality and the incorporation of timeless experience.¹⁴ The texts themselves are not the truth but an imprinting of the experience of the truth; at the same time, they provide an answer to specific time-spatial problems and situations.¹⁵

Understanding of biblical texts about woman on the basis of the first Christian eucharistic ecclesiology, independently of its later expressions and interpretations and of the history-faith relation, has only recently begun to be stressed in Orthodox biblical research.

A dialogue between Orthodox and feminist hermeneutics

Despite the occasional criticism of its “non-objective” approach, even the most conservative scholars have now acknowledged feminist hermeneutics as an approach that has a good deal to offer modern biblical studies.¹⁶

In Orthodox biblical interpretation today, the historical critical method still forms the basic tool of a primary approach. However, Orthodox biblical theologians have begun to move into new areas and to enter into conversation with new hermeneutic approaches. The fundamental positive contribution of the new approaches and methods is considered the fact that the Bible is understood polyphonically. This polyphonicity of interpretations is not foreign to Orthodox tradition and it can be useful on many levels. At a scientific level, it encourages resistance to exclusive approaches, favors dialogue, and highlights progress in biblical research. On a social level, the Bible can once again become a source of vision and inspiration.¹⁷

In Greece, the first systematic presentation of Pauline theology on woman and feminist hermeneutics was offered by Evanthis Adamtzoglou. Her doctoral dissertation, *Woman in the Theology of Apostle Paul. A Hermeneutic Analysis of 1 Cor 11:2-16*,¹⁸ presents a new hermeneutic approach to

¹⁴ Petros Vassiliadis, “The Canon of the Bible: or the Authority of Scripture from an Orthodox Perspective”, in: Jean-Michel Poffet (ed.), *L'autorité de l'Écriture* (lectio divina; Édition du Cerf: Paris 2002), 113-135.

¹⁵ See Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, 15.

¹⁶ See the text of Vatican Biblical Committee, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), 66-69.

¹⁷ See Daniel Patte (ed.), *Global Bible Commentary* (Abingdon Press: Nashville 2004), esp. introduction: xxi-xxxii.

¹⁸ Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 1989 (in Greek). See her article in this volume.

1 Cor 11:2-16. This text includes the first Pauline ideas about the equal accession of woman into the life of the community with an active role next to man and participation in prayer and prophesy, but has been used hermeneutically to devalue and subordinate women. An investigation of the social, religious, philosophical and ecclesiological presuppositions of Paul shows that the position of woman is a delicate meter of his theology which distinguishes him from contemporary rabbis. Besides the hermeneutic analysis of the text, Adamtziloglou's dissertation includes a first brief presentation of feminist theology and hermeneutics.

Her second book, *There Were Many Women...*¹⁹, is a collection of biblical and theological studies on woman in three parts. The first part presents woman in biblical creation. It gives an account of her androcentric understanding, then traces the "inclusive interpretation" of the Eastern tradition which accords to God's image the creation of both genders; it closes with an interpretation of the creation narratives based on modern methods of interpretation. The second part examines woman in the New Testament. The first article refers to 1 Cor 11:3, analysing the meaning of the term "head" and attempting a Christological substantiation of the equality of women rather than their subordination. The second refers to the problem of language in the New Testament, as it was highlighted by feminist theologians: the language used by the writers of biblical texts is influenced from their patriarchal background and thus does not include many female meanings and is used as a means of exclusion. On the basis of these data 1 Thess 2:7.11.17 and Gal 3:26 are analyzed. The second part closes with a discussion of Matthew's understanding of the position of woman in the ecclesiastical community, illustrating the difficulty but also the importance of such research. The third part includes studies of a purely theological character, which seek to answer the question of the relationship between feminist theology and Orthodox tradition and explore the possibilities for dialogue.

Adamtziloglou's third book *Neither male nor female... The royal charismata of the two sexes*²⁰ investigates interpretations of Gal 3:28c in the light of Gen 1:26-27, not only in the late 20th century, but also in the classical patristic tradition, considering both Greek and Latin literature. It shows the ways of interpreting the verse in the theological reflection and the life of the church. Adamtziloglou suggests that the interpretation of the verse is linked

¹⁹ Simpo: Thessaloniki 1997 (in Greek).

²⁰ University Studio Press: Thessaloniki (1998) (in Greek).

with royal charismata which are attributed to both genders. She emphasizes the weighty contribution of Orthodox tradition to the specific understanding of the verse.

More recently, Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, one of the authors of this article, has attempted an extended presentation of feminist hermeneutics with reference to the history of the trends and interaction of feminist hermeneutics with other hermeneutic methods and approaches in *Feminist Hermeneutics. The Gender Factor in Modern Biblical Hermeneutics*.²¹ The author argues that Orthodox women theologians have learned a good deal from Western feminist theologians about gender stereotypes and the different voices in the Bible. Building on this knowledge, Orthodox women theologians have to find their own model, and in doing so they need to begin with one of the key motos of feminist exegesis, coined by Judy Chicago: “Our heritage is our power.”

Finally, there have been publications in feminist hermeneutics in a series of articles published in Greek and international journals. These show a developing interest in Orthodox hermeneutics for new methods.²² Moreover, they demonstrate an inclination towards the use of tools that modern biblical studies offer for the explanation of the text, whilst at the same time stressing the necessity of relating the message of the text to the specific audience to which it is addressed. New interpretations arise in new situations, the present is given meaning by remembering and the future is given a monumental form.

Every “context” involves a different “history with the Bible” which has shaped that context and which has influenced, and will continue to influence, the treatment of biblical texts.²³ In order to “discern the signs of the times”, much more research and more commitment is needed by Orthodox women theologians. The “female face” of Orthodox tradition, which is deeply biblical, is largely unknown and is still to be explored.

²¹ Pournaras: Thessaloniki (2003) (in Greek).

²² Ioannis Petrou characteristically mentions: “Many times there is simple reference to the Bible, so that different choices are justified, which in reality are nothing more but an adjustment to the social status of their time. In modern times it is essential that the conclusions of biblical research and the modern understanding of person and his/her relationships be taken into account and not traditional interpretations and choices be thoughtlessly used without being understood within their cultural environment...”, cited from: “The woman’s issue and ecclesiastical tradition”, in: *EPEPTHS* 10 (Thessaloniki 2000), 221-237 (in Greek).

²³ Silvia Schroer / Sophia Bietenhard (eds.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Sheffield Academic Press: New York 2003), 1-17.

Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi und Georgios Hatzivassiliadis stellen die wichtigsten Ansätze feministischer Bibelhermeneutik in der zeitgenössischen orthodoxen Theologie und besonders in biblischen Forschungsarbeiten in Griechenland vor. Neben Dissertationen und Büchern konnten verschiedene Ansätze feministischer Bibelhermeneutik in Artikelserien in griechischen und internationalen Zeitschriften veröffentlicht werden. Dies zeigt, dass es im orthodoxen Bereich ein wachsendes Interesse für neue Methoden und speziell für den Gender-Aspekt in der theologischen Forschung gibt.

Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi et Georgios Hatzivassiliadis présentent les principales tentatives d'herméneutique biblique féministe de la théologie orthodoxe contemporaine, notamment dans le domaine de la recherche biblique grecque. Outre des thèses de doctorat et autres ouvrages sur le sujet, divers travaux d'herméneutique biblique féministe furent publiés dans une série d'articles de revues grecques et internationales. Cela prouve l'intérêt croissant, dans le champ orthodoxe, pour les nouvelles méthodes, notamment pour l'aspect du genre dans la recherche théologique.

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