THE FUTURE OF TRADITIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

(Originally published in *Theandros: Online Journal of Orthodox Theology and Philosophy*, 2008, Vol. 6, n. 1)

ABSTRACT

Options are needed in the institutional re-ordering of the Eastern and Western Church’s ecclesiastical government. There is doubt that the traditional territorial schemata, that is, the status quo of the ecclesiastical understanding of the East and West can continue as the philosophical understanding that supports them evolves from a Hellenistic to a phenomenological perspective. In the future, the “architectural” form of ecclesiastical government most likely will be replaced by an “organic” form of ecclesial governance. The organic form of governance cannot be derived from any pre-existing philosophical or political principle. Organic governance, which is phenomenologically constituted, is based on the natural inclination of the faithful to remain together forming their ecclesial frameworks that are appropriate to the cultural, traditional and economic contexts of public life. Faith communities, will be constituted as living organisms that evolve. They will not be constructed as juridical philosophical or political structures, based on territory, that are meant to exist for all time. The organic church of the future will present the possibility for a new governance model of the faithful to meet its needs as constituted through a phenomenological philosophy, to meet just as the current architectural government was constructed through a classical (Hellenistic) philosophy to meet the needs of that time.

Contemporary theologians, both Eastern and Western, are beginning to realize that the traditional structure of church government must change. Alexander Bogolepov has accurately noted that for “practical considerations, ecclesiastical districts were established from the very beginning of the Christian era in conformity with the political division of the state: and under the Roman Empire, the Christian assembly became a state church” (Bogolepov, 1963:17). The present political governing apparatus, based on territorial notions, will be an impediment in the future to the ecclesial governance of the church since such territorial notions often do not conform to the lived, that is, existential social conditions of the faithful. Further, it would be a theological error if intellectually and scholarly informed
theologians were to promote, in the name of philosophical evolution, the idea of a universal territorial super-church composed of all the faithful and based merely on the philosophical notions of humanity's universal existential context. We must remember that a universal humanity does not exist but that individual humans do. Thus, our humanity is expressed in a variety of philosophical, political and cultural patterns. In this brief essay, I discuss one contemporary philosophical perspective regarding the future of ecclesial governance in contrast to the current ecclesiastical government.

Since the inauguration of the modern era phenomenological, or continental philosophy, has slowly been replacing classical philosophy as the underpinning philosophy in many areas of civilized human advancement. The Church is one area of civilized advancement where this is occurring. As well, various other areas of civilized human populations, such as governmental, financial and societal, are entering into dialogue with each other on a global scale. It is to be noted that a phenomenological philosophy does not produce the same results as Westernized Hellenistic philosophy. Further, phenomenological philosophers and theologians are not encouraged to leave their ideological homeland, as it were, but, rather, are encouraged to engage existentially their specific cultures and demographic traditions and create a new meaningful philosophical understanding from their experience. However, some contemporary philosophers and theologians, both Eastern and Western, seem to prefer a return to a perceived golden era in scholastic philosophical and theological thinking. Thus, some Latin theologians are abandoning the phenomenological orientation introduced by Vatican II. And, in a similar manner, some Orthodox theologians seem to suffer from the same nostalgia for a philosophical golden age.

Certain local communities, which are culturally identifiable and unified with respect to their ecclesiology, may attempt to present themselves as universally valid models for all the faithful. This approach will fail in practice because a universal identity of the faithful cannot be that of a particular community. In fact, the collective faithful are churchless in identity. The fact is that individual communities of the faithful are culturally and particularly identifiable within an ecclesial (phenomenological) perspective. Further, one must remember that there are as many particular identities as there are cultural communities. Writing from a political perspective, Victor Segesvary
lists particular identities that an individual may possess within a given culture. Such as, being a member of a cult, football club, or a literary circle. One individual may encompass all or only a few such identities. However, Segesvary notes, “an irresolvable problem comes only to the fore when one of the identities is a fundamentalist one, linked to an ethnic group or nation, to a religion, in sum, to a cultural community” (Segesvary, 2003:91). Thus, if one’s ecclesiastical cultural identity is fundamentalist it presents an irresolvable problem.

Phenomenological philosophers and theologians do not accept that the Church universal can integrate the faithful by force or threat with reference to belief, as was done during the Spanish Inquisition, or compel participation in the government of the corporate body of the faithful. Nor can any universal government of the Church, through propaganda, create a religious solidarity among the faithful as a community with truly common interests. Rather, true religious solidarity is achieved through the faithful participating in the decisions about their own affairs in the local parochial and cultural context with a corresponding reduction in universal legislation governing them. Ecclesiastical government, as a hierarchical bureaucracy, is a totally impersonal way of handling and managing the affairs of the faithful. And, the current crisis in ecclesiastical government is of the type that characterizes all bureaucratically organized bodies.

In late modernity, technological advances have increased the opportunities for bureaucratic control over the faithful who live in a secular and Westernized culture. The Internet is a case in point. With the advent of the Internet a new ideology is in the process of being developed with the assistance of technological and digital advancement. Regrettfully, at this point, it is a negative ideology in that the Internet is a de-personalizing forum since there is no need for physical, that is, embodied contact among the users of the Internet. For an insightful treatment of this development see Paul Doy1e’s. Analog People in a Digital World. Within the internet virtual community there is no possibility of a humanitarian incarnation such as is constitutive of real physical human relationships. Virtual reality is the simulated computerized version of real existence which presents many philosophical and theological challenges to our incarnated humanity. But, the notion that the virtual world, that is virtual reality, is a reality to which only humans have access, Dewart suggests needs to be expanded and refined
To my mind, a digital experience cannot support any true human society or community since the simulation by the virtual decision-makers is not the same as the lived experience of true reality. With reference to ecclesiastical government, virtual reality, mediated through the ideology of the Internet, creates incompetent, that is, non-humanized, non-incarnated, identities. This lack of competent, that is, incarnated and humanized identities, or personnel formed merely within the virtual reality of the ideology of the Internet, subsequently creates a lack of competence for the Church's governing structure. It is for this reason, then, that any ambition on the part of philosophers and theologians for government by a church universal, brought about solely by a technological and digital means, should be abandoned as truly unrealistic.

Ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic traditions are transnational ideologies. Of necessity there will be conflicts among groups of the faithful, i.e., parishes and local churches, confessing to these particular ideologies. When cultural variety is ignored, as is the case in our present historical and political context, expectations about a global union of churches, patterned after a world civil government, seems logical to philosophers and theologians. Note that I say, "union," not "unity." In our present circumstances, were this global union to come about the governmental apparatus of the churches would resemble the Western cultural and religious pattern. Our problem, in the governance of the Churches, is that Western cultural education, technologically driven, has given us specialized knowledge about the world. This specialized knowledge, however, lacks an encompassing view of the world. Bits of information from contemporary science and technology can only become knowledge after an individual mentally processes them to produce a coherent whole, or an holistic unity. Further, since individual bits of information do not constitute this holistic unity, or knowledge, a world union of churches would lack the shared beliefs, values, symbols, language, history and customs that make up the various global human and Christian communities. Segesvary reminds us that humanity "as a community is too big an entity to be the bearer of a shared culture, and every culture, since time immemorial, has had to have a community as its bearer. In this respect, our world is not different from the ancient worlds. although we took the bad habit of believing that modernity is different from everything. which preceded it that modern man is an exceptional gift of biological evolution to the universe" (Segesvary 2003:99).
A universal governing ideology cannot be constructed phenomenologically. Phenomenologically, an understanding of others, their civilizations, and ways of life is to be constituted (organized) through dialogue without prejudicially preconceived ideas and without the presumed superiority of the Western philosophical and theological tradition. Our common human biological origin suggests to many philosophical and theological thinkers the need of a humanitarian universalism among human beings. Victory Segesvary (2003:100) notes: “Universalism is a millennia-old dream of humanity from the Stoics through the medieval Church down to modern ideologies like Marxism and liberalism.” It should be remembered however, that universalism is not universality. Universalism is the scholastic philosophical term, whereas universality is the phenomenological philosophical term. Thus, normative universalism would be an ideology which declares that the particular moral and ethical principles arising within a culture, from a specific civilization, should be the universal moral and ethical principles applicable to all peoples and in all times. The fact is, however, that normative universalism would be only the reflection of a local community. In contrast, for the purposes of future ecclesial governance, what is needed is a humanitarian universality that is holistically constituted and based on a common organic, not architectural origin.

The foregoing leads me to this conclusion. From its present status quo, the government of the Church, both Eastern and Western, must move from a classical philosophical ecclesiastical methodology (architectural) to a phenomenological philosophical ecclesiastical methodology (organic) in constituting its governing apparatus. The main obstacles to an organic church governance are the various architecturally constructed civic ideologies that determine modern individualistic cultures. Territorialism, not territoriality, is an architecturally constructed civic ideology with its roots in classical Hellenistic philosophy. By way of contrast, territoriality, has its roots in phenomenological philosophy. The same is true for the notions of Catholicism and Catholicity, nationalism and nationality, historicism and historicity, humanism and humanity, communism and community, etc. The territoriality of a community encompasses an understanding which embraces more than its mere physical location. In adopting a phenomenological methodology with respect to governance dioceses in the future will not be determined by territorialism, but constituted by
territorality. That is, they will be constituted through an experience of residence in a given space on the earth. The experience of residence in this space will constitute a diocesan framework of organic governance, replacing the architectural government that presently exists. Since dioceses will be constituted out of an experiential cultural framework, that is, not dependent on physical or political territory, their governors will lay claim to a limited sovereignty based on an existential understanding of experience and will not be bound by a theoretical or political understanding of civil territory.

In the future, we can expect that multilateralism, as opposed to unilateralism, among the dioceses will become the normative principle. As this happens, the question arises, could communities lose their role if they are unembedded territorially? I suggest that the answer is, “no.” Multilateral communities will be constituted non-spatially and non-territorially, that is, phenomenologically. Such phenomenologically constituted communities will be reinforced by humanitarian communicative technologies, or organizations, which will depend, unlike the Internet, on embodied relationships. The development of multilateral communities suggests that the cultural problems of religion, language, education, administration, etc., could be resolved within an ecclesial community that eliminated the idea of national sovereignty. I suggest that in a new order of organic church governance, co-ordination and cooperation would replace the concept of sovereignty or centralization, which would no longer be needed. This would be so since the ecclesial principle of subsidiarity places the power of decision-making in the hands of those affected by the decision-making process. In contrast, sovereign or centralized bureaucracies take power away from those affected by the decision-making process. To act locally and link up globally demonstrate the dynamic of an organic non-territorial ecclesial order, that is, an order of governance, not government.

I speculate that in the future there will be no universal canon law, but only regional particular canon laws. In a phenomenologically constituted community the constitution of canon law will be self-regulating as it emerges from public and private experience through discussions undertaken by the faithful. In the future, it is likely that there will be no sanctions in canon law but only suggestions for remedial action. That is to say, the constitution of canon law will be such that laws will not be in conflict with one another but, rather, be corrective of personal and corporate behaviour.
In this essay I have suggested that a phenomenologically understood ecclesial community reflects a new ecclesiology that is based on knowledge of others’ experience and suffrage, not on mere territory. And, the organic governance option for the future, in contrast to the present architectural structure, calls for a new ecclesiology, not territorially re-ordered but, phenomenologically constituted,

Works Cited

Bogolepov, Alexander. *Toward an American Orthodox Church: The Establishment of an Autocephalous Orthodox Church*, (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1963),

