

The Word of God and the Church from an Orthodox Perspective-1 (Petros Vassiliadis)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



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1. I. *Some preliminary remarks*

a. *Word of God and Church.* The relationship between the “word of God” and the “Church” is an issue that became central in the academic and wider theological discussions as a result of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation dialectics “Bible and/or, even over, Tradition”. **Strictly speaking, there has never been a Bible in the undivided Church**, at least not as we commonly think of the Bible as an one volume book we can hold in our hand. Since the beginning of the Church, and more precisely since the beginning of the Church’s liturgical tradition, there has never been a single book we could point to as the Bible. And this is true for the Orthodox Church to this very day; instead, the various books of the Bible are found scattered throughout several liturgical books located either on the Holy Table (the western Alter) itself, or at the chanter’s stand. Not to mention, of course, that the “word of God” **has never been identified with the Bible in the life of the Church. The perennial question for Christians after the Reformation was, and to a certain degree still is: “where does the word of God reside?” or, to put it differently: “is it the Bible or the Church that proclaims in the most authoritative way the word of God?” And to trace this dialectics further: “how and under what conditions can one be saved? Here the answers dramatically differ: “in the *Church* (via the sacraments/mysteries)”, answer most traditional Churches; “when one keeps the *word of God* (preserved in the Bible and acquired individually)” most liberal denominations assert.**



This dilemma was intensified in modernity when most scholars started contrasting the *Liturgy* with the *Bible*, the *Sacrament* with the *Word*, with the Holy Scripture, the Biblical readings, the Sermon etc. representing the *rational* (and therefore accepted in modernity) elements in the life of the Church, and the Sacraments, Liturgy, Prayer etc. representing the *irrational* one (and therefore rejected by modern scholarship). I will come to this important dilemma later.

b. What is an Orthodox perspective? To address the issue of the word of God and its relationship with the Church “from an Orthodox Church perspective” is extremely difficult. In the first place, whenever an Orthodox theologian is asked to speak about the “Orthodox” perspective, he or she is confronted with a difficult task. What can really be an “Orthodox perspective”, at a time when the very attribute “orthodox” is widely understood as having more or less negative connotations?

Secondly, Orthodoxy mostly unknown to non-Orthodox, is normally approached as something “exotic”; an interesting “Eastern phenomenon” *vis-à-vis* the “Western modern mentality”, provoking the curiosity and enriching the knowledge of Western believers and theologians. If this is the case, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, an eminent Orthodox theologian and co-chairman of the Mixed Theological Commission of the official dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics, believes it would be better not to be presented at all. We have played this role for long enough, he added. Orthodoxy nowadays is being understood more and more

as meaning the wholeness of the people of God who share the right conviction (*orthē doxa*) concerning the event of God's salvation in Christ and his Church, and the right expression (*orthopraxia*) of this faith. Everyone is, therefore, invited by Orthodoxy to transcend confessions and inflexible institutions without necessarily denying them. Orthodoxy is not to be identified only with those of us who are Orthodox in the historical sense, with all our limitations and shortcomings. After all, the term was given to the undivided Church as a whole over against the heretics who, of their own choice, split from the main body of the Church. The term "Orthodoxy" is exclusive for all those who willingly fall away from the historical stream of life of the One Church, but it is inclusive for those who profess their spiritual belonging to that stream. Orthodoxy, in other words, has *ecclesial* rather than *confessional* connotations.

A third more important obstacle is that it is almost impossible to deal with Orthodoxy, even in the conventional sense. On what ground and from what sources can one really establish an Orthodox perspective. The Roman Catholics have Vatican II to draw from; the Orthodox do not. The Lutherans have the Augsburg Confession of their own; the Orthodox do not. Thus, the only authoritative sources the Orthodox possess are in fact common to the rest of Christianity: the Bible and Tradition. How can one establish a distinctly Orthodox perspective on a basis which is common to non-Orthodox as well?

To make the long story short, what I am going to say, despite the fact it will be naturally influenced by the long history of my tradition and is inevitably influenced by my "Orthodox" experience, it can perfectly apply to any Christian, with an ecclesial of course self-understanding. Needless to say, of course, that the issue under consideration is a vast one, and what I have prepared to present to you as a humble contribution will not cover but a very limited area and will be given from a very limited perspective.

II. An Orthodox approach to the subject

a. Some "official" Orthodox statements. Despite what I stated above as preliminary introductory remarks, the Orthodox have in fact joined delegates from other Churches in signing agreed doctrinal statements concerning the *word of God*, which under certain theological conditions can lend authority to an Orthodox understanding of it. One such joint statement, from the Moscow Conference held more than a generation ago (1976) between the Orthodox and the Anglicans, summarizes very briefly the Orthodox view:

The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God's revelation of Himself

in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and in the whole history of salvation, and as such express the *word of God* in human language. We know, receive, and interpret Scripture *through the Church and in the Church*.

And more recently, within the framework of *Faith and Order*, the Church was understood as *creatura Verbi* (creation of the Word) and *creatura Spiritus* (creation of the Holy Spirit):

The Church is centred and grounded in the Gospel, the *word of God*... Thus the Church is the creature of *God's word* which as a living voice creates and nourishes it throughout the ages. This divine word is borne witness to and makes itself heard through the scriptures. Incarnate in Jesus Christ, it is testified to by the *Church* and proclaimed in preaching, in sacraments, and in service... Faith called forth by the word of God is brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit. In the scriptures, the Word of God and the Holy Spirit are inseparable.

b. The liturgical dimension of any Orthodox perspective. However, the most authentic Orthodox perspective to any issue, especially the relation between the word of God and the Church, is to be found in the theological documents of the official theological dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics. In these documents, in which the Eucharistic and Trinitarian approach in dealing with the nature of the Church was adopted, it is quite clear that the essence of the Church, in other words the essence of Orthodoxy in its ecclesial (i.e. not in the confessional) sense, goes beyond any theological affirmation. I would dare to say Orthodoxy is a way of life; hence the importance of its *liturgical* tradition. This is why the Orthodox give to the Liturgy such a prominent place in their theology. "The Church, according to a historic statement by the late G. Florovsky, is first of all a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second. The *lex orandi* has a privileged priority in the life of the Christian Church. The *lex credendi* depends on the devotional experience and vision of the Church." [i] Any doctrinal statement, therefore, concerning the authority of the Bible, or the word of God and its relation to the Church, should come only as the natural consequence of the liturgical, i.e. eucharistic, communion experience of the Church.

Post-modernity has challenged the priority of *texts* over *experience*, a syndrome still dominant in modern scholarship. It has even challenged the priority of *theology* over *ecclesiology*. I would even dare to say that it has challenged the priority of *faith* over the *communion* experience of the Kingdom of God; the priority of *the word of God* over against the *Church*. The dogma, imposed after the Enlightenment and the Reformation over all scholarly theological outlook, that the basis of our Christian faith can only be extracted from a certain historical and critically defined *depositum fidei*,

most notably from the Bible (which was believed to contain the *word of God*, and to which sometimes Tradition is added), can no longer be sustained; more careful attention is now paid, and more serious reference is given, to the eucharistic communion experience that has been responsible and produced this *depositum fidei*.^[ii]

Recent scholarship is moving away from the old affirmation that the Christian community was originally initiated as a “faith community”. More and more scholars are now inclined to believe that it started as a *communion fellowship* gathered at certain times around a Table in order to foreshadow the Kingdom of God. Of course this Eucharistic Table was not “lived” as a Mystery cult, but as a foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God, as a proleptic manifestation within the tragic realities of history of an authentic life of communion, unity, justice and equality, with no practical differentiation (soteriological and beyond) between Jews and gentiles, slaves and free people, men and women (cf. Gal 3:28). This was, after all, the profound meaning of the johannine term *aionios zoe* (eternal life), or the pauline phrase *kaine ktisis* (new creation), or even St. Ignatius’ controversial expression *pharmakon athanasias* (medicine of immortality). In short more and more scholars incline to think that it was the *ritual* (i.e. the liturgical and eucharistic worship) that gave rise to *stories* (the Gospels, other “historical” accounts, the written “word of God” etc.), that shaped the faith of the Church rather than the other way round.^[iii]

Any particular issue, therefore, like the relationship between the word of God and the Church, cannot be detached from its *ecclesial eucharistic framework*. Without denying the legitimacy of the Bible’s autonomous status within the world literature or the importance of its private reading, the Orthodox have always believed that the word of God expressed in the Bible acquires its fullness only within this ecclesial eucharistic community.

c. The eucharistic criterion. It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to state that the liturgical – more precisely the eucharistic – dimension is perhaps the only safe criterion in ascertaining the way in which the Orthodox approach the “word of God” and the Bible, the way they understand it, the way they receive, and interpret it, the way they are inspired and nourished by it. Those who have attended an Orthodox liturgy would have realized—perhaps with astonishment or even shock—that normally in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy the Bible is not read but sung, as if the Bible readings were designed not so much in order that the faithful might understand and appropriate the word of God, but in order to glorify an event or a person.^[iv] The event is the eschatological kingdom, and the person, the center of that kingdom, Christ himself. This is one reason why the Orthodox, while traditionally in favour of translating the Bible (and not only) into a language people

can understand, (cf. the dispute in the Photian period between Rome and Constantinople over the use in the Church's mission to Moravia of the Cyrillic script, i.e. a language beyond the "sacred" three: Hebrew, Greek, Latin), are (unfortunately) generally reluctant to introduce common-language translations of the Bible readings in their Divine Liturgy. In the Liturgy of the Word of the Orthodox Church, which is always inseparable from the Eucharistic Liturgy, it is not only Jesus Christ in His first coming, who proclaims the "word of God" through the Scripture, it is the word of the glorified Lord in His second coming which is also supposed to be proclaimed.[v]

Any particular issue, therefore, like the word of God *vis-à-vis* the Church, or the authority of the Bible, cannot be detached from the framework of the ecclesial eucharistic community. Without denying the legitimacy of the autonomous status of the Bible within world literature, the historical process of development of the individual books, their historical collection, as well as the authority attached at a quite late stage to the Bible as a closed composition (canon), but also the famous patristic – even conciliar (ecumenical) – statements, the undivided Church always believed that the word of God acquires its profound meaning, and the Bible its full authority, only within this ecclesial eucharistic context.

[i] G. Florovsky, "The Elements of Liturgy," in: G. Patelos (ed.), *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva 1978, 172-182, see 172; cf. also my *Orthodoxy at the Crossroad*, Thessaloniki 1992, p. 9 (in Greek).

[ii] More on these in my "The Eucharistic Perspective of the Church's Mission," *Eucharist and Witness. Orthodox Perspectives on the Unity and Mission of the Church*, WCC/Holy Cross, Geneva/ Massachusetts 1998, pp. 49-66.

[iii] More on this view in my "Paul's *theologia crucis* as an Intermediate Stage of the Trajectory from Q to Mark," in: L. Padovese (ed.), *Atti del VI Simposio Di Tarso Su S. Paolo Apostolo*, Rome 2002, 43-52; also in: H. Koester (ed.), "Story and Ritual in Greece, Rome and Early Christianity," www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/symposium/story.html.

[iv] Cf. also D. Staniloae, "La Lecture de la Bible dans l'Eglise Orthodoxe," *Contacts* 30/104 (1978) 349-353.

[v] Personally I have challenged quite recently (*Lex Orandi*, Indiktos Publications, Athens 2005 ch. 10) the view which is widely held among some Orthodox systematic theologians, that the *entire* Divine Liturgy (i.e. both the "Liturgy of the Word", and the "Eucharistic Liturgy") is eschatologically oriented, arguing that

there is also an evangelistic character of the Bible readings, as well as of the entire “Liturgy of the Word”. But this is another matter.