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ORTHODOX WOMEN IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION **Some comments from a Greek Orthodox perspective**

I. Orthodox women and theology

Theological education has been defined as the task to motivate, equip, and enable the people of God to develop their gifts and offer their lives in meaningful service. It has been affirmed as „theological” in the term that it involves people in a commitment and ministry, a commitment to the Study of God in the sense of God’s revelation in the life of Jesus Christ and God’s continuous working through the Holy Spirit. The historical, social and cultural situation of the past fifty years has pressed theology to under-go several large-scale or *paradigm* changes. In other words, the ways in which theology understands its tasks, pre-suppositions, sources and methods have shifted; moreover, the ways in which it arrives at metaphysical, logical and existential judgments about truth have also changed in most of the contexts.

Among the various perspectives of theology and theological education, the one that comes from women theologians and feminists sounds quite interesting, especially in the following areas: 1) theological education should be seen in an ecumenical and pluralist perspective. Pluralism is meant in terms of tradition, context, ethnic background, gender etc. 2) theological education cannot be a clergy-based education. It is offered to facilitate theological production and make the latter as relevant as possible, relevant to the community’s faith and relevant to the community’s traditions and to the situation in which the community is living 3) the epistemological foundations of theology should be questioned. Rather than learning historical facts, this involves learning to analyze and reconstruct history; rather than accepting biblical and traditional testimonies without suspicion, re-examining the Scripture and the written Tradition and discovering their andocentric elements 4) the theory – practice relationship should be reinforced. According to Ofelia Ortega: „(...) we need to work for a permanent integration

between theology and life. This involves true integration between theory and praxis and between discourse and pastoral ministry”¹.

A feminist understanding of theology and education also reminds us that our theological methods and processes are full of stereotypes, standardized mental images that are based on prejudiced attitudes or lack of critical judgment. The challenge of modern methods of education should be to deconstruct stereotypical assumptions about women and gender in Christian theological tradition, to examine the ways stereotypes about masculinity and femininity have been imposed on God and explore the interrelation of gender stereotypes and gendered theological symbols.

The discussion on women in the Orthodox Church, especially regarding contemporary issues, is a relatively recent field of research. Feminist theology and feminist history are not, as yet, active and recognized academic fields in orthodox context. While some feminist theological research in the Orthodox Tradition has been undertaken by women scholars, for example in USA, France and Greece, the main focus is biblical exegesis and their work is seldom available in English, with the exception of occasional papers in international journals. However, scholars as Eva Katafygiotou – Topping (USA), Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (France), Leonie Liveris (Australia), Evanthia Adamtziloglou (Greece), Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi (Greece) research and write with an understanding and awareness of feminist perspectives².

In Eastern Europe and the Middle East where, Orthodoxy still constitutes the traditional form of Christianity and in Diaspora where, during the twentieth century Orthodox communities were formed and inculturated in West, Orthodox women take an active role in the life of the Church. Their role in the transmission of faith in the heart of the family, as mothers and educators, has always been essential. But today it largely extends beyond this familial framework. Women either alone or in equal partnership with male catechists, work in religious education. They sign in the choir, a role so important in Orthodox worship and sometimes even direct it. They are members (at least in the Church which originated with the Russian emigration) of the parish and the diocesan councils, like the diocesan assembly that elects the bishop.³ But, the debate on women issues in the Orthodox Church most often takes place outside the community, that is, Orthodox women in ecumenical relationships rather than within the Orthodox community. There is a kind of ‘resistance’ to the ‘women’s questions’ and the feminist movement, which both perceived as the province of secular feminism that is destructive of

¹ *Theological Education*, in: *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, L.M. RUSSEL, J.SH. CLARKSON (eds.), Louisville 1996, 282-283.

² E. BEHR-SIGEL, K. WARE, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, Geneva 2000.

³ D. JAQUET, *Women in Society*, „The Saint Nina Quarterly” 2(1998)2, p.1, 8-10.

tradition and family.⁴ It is well known that in some quarters of Orthodoxy, the term „modernism” is commonly understood as an attempt to promote dogmatic heresy in the church. In this frame, women theologians who are seeking contemporary expressions of the ancient Faith in their own lives are readily labeled as „feminists” and therefore, automatically also modernists, in the most destructive sense of these words. Such ideas are widespread not only among the clergy but among academicians as well.⁵ It is important to take into consideration that women in many Orthodox Churches were not allowed to go to the seminaries or theological faculties since recently. The hope is that through education and training the new generation will understand better its role in the Church and in the theological process⁶. Additionally, the WCC Decade „Churches in Solidarity with women”, the consultations and the Bossey seminars were catalysts for a few progressive minded Orthodox women across the various jurisdictions⁷.

2. Some reflection on my context

The lesson of religion is obligatory in Greece. Orthodox pupils are taught the main principles of their orthodox faith from the third class of the elementary school till the last class of high school (10 years). The same curriculum is followed by both, public and private schools. Pupils who are members of other religious communities or Christian traditions are free not to attend the lesson. Most of the teachers of religion in Greece are women. Many of them are over qualified, holding a Master or a PhD on theology or pedagogic. The paradox is that among the directors, trainers or advisors of theology in the Secondary Educational System (positions that are better paid and earn a higher respect) women are less than 30%.

Similar is the situation at the Theological Faculties. In a revealing article, written by Pr. Dimitra Koukoura in 2001, a realistic description of the contradictory situation is given (seven years later, the situation has been improved but not sufficiently changed).⁸ Female students are the majority in the theological

⁴ L. LIVERIS, *Ancient Taboos and Gender Prejudice. Challenges for Orthodox Women and the Church*, Hampshire 2005, xv.

⁵ CH.S. REIMANN, *Orthodox Women in Theological Education*, in: *Orthodox Women Speak. Discerning the „Signs of the Times”*, K.K. FITZGERALD (ed.), WCC Publications / Holy Cross Orthodox Press 1999.

⁶ T. PIRRI-SIMONIAN, *Authority and community in the church. A personal Reflection*, in: *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church. Reflections of Orthodox Women*, CH. BREABAN, S. DEICHA, E. KASSELOURI-HATZIVASSILIADI (eds), WCC 2006, 131-135.

⁷ See the volume of „Ecumenical Review” recently published by WCC *Seminars on Orthodox Spirituality and the role of women in the Church*, ER 60, 1/2, January/April 2008.

⁸ D. KOUKOURA, *The role of woman in the Orthodox Church and some studies of ecumenical concern*, Thessaloniki 2005 (in Greek).

faculties. Statistics show that they are better and more consistent students. Most of them continue their studies for a Master or a PhD degree. Although they are hard workers during their studies, only few of them finally succeed to find a job as a staff of a Theological Faculty. Women lecturers or professors are less than 30% of the staff, most of them teach pedagogic, history, arts, foreign or ancient languages and only few teach systematic theology, patristic, biblical hermeneutics, that is the core lessons of theology. For example, there is no woman lecturer or professor teaching Old or New Testament, Patristic, Ecumenical or Systematic theology at the Department of Theology of the Theological Faculty of Thessaloniki. Additionally, women are slowly promoted. That is, they stay more years at the first levels of the hierarchical structure and as a result away from the decision making bodies.

Another challenging characteristic of theological studies and education in Greece is the structure, the philosophy and the content of the curricula. Most of the curricula give the impression that theology means „the erudite transmission of a set of information about God and his work in the world, backed by arguments from the Holy Scriptures and the Church Tradition”⁹. Most of the times, curricula do not include the modern theological trends, methods and approaches. One of the main reasons for that, according to my understanding, is that theological education in Greece, although public (state), is still under the umbrella or the influence of some conservative clerical environments.

If, as theologians, we deny to dialogue with the present, we ‘lock’ theology in a specific era. The Church and its theology can not be locked into a specific era, because they demonstrate in every way the immutable truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This means that Church and its theology are dynamic and alive, not static and lifeless. As a result theology can respond to the issues of the time courageously, and this means change. Are we eternally bound to the tyranny of the argument that because it has never been discussed or done before it must never be considered? The Cappadocians did not fear to utilize the language of Hellenism to transmit the faith in a Hellenistic world¹⁰. How is that we so often fear to tread in their footsteps?

We have to stress here that almost in each theological faculty in Greece, two groups of understanding and doing theology can be distinguished: those who considered as the defenders of „the traditional faith” and they associate with a nationalistic understanding of Orthodoxy and the set of traditional Greek values and those who are open, ready to communicate, to dialogue and connect with other voices, with the society at large and with other Christian traditions and faiths.

⁹ PR. DAN SANDU, *Romanian Orthodoxy at the Crossroads: Past, Present in the Higher Theological Education*, www.dansandu.ro/biblioteca/, p. 7.

¹⁰ FR. A. HUGHES, *On Change*, in: „St. Nina Quarterly” 2(1998)2, 13-14.

In this frame, it is important that some Greek Theological Faculties have at least incorporated few elective lessons regarding the role of women in the Church and society in their curricula at the graduate and post-graduate levels of study. The majority of those courses are taught by male professors and unfortunately sometimes they end up as a course exclusively for a few women students.

3. Closing Remarks

In my view, orthodox women theologians should discover ways to contribute further in order „to make theology an essential belief and a creative function in the lives of all, to make the ecclesia a genuine deposit as well as an expression of love, sacrifice and an unselfish struggle for society” (A. Schmemman). They have to find their own model of doing theology, and in doing so they need to begin with one of the key mottos of feminist exegesis, coined by Judy Chicago: „Our heritage is our power.” The ‘female face’ of Orthodox tradition is largely unknown and is still to be explored. We are in the process of realizing that despite the positive and optimistic ecclesiological vision of our Church – what we can describe as „a democracy of heavens” – this vision has been somewhat distorted in the practice.¹¹ As Lev Gillet, a great contemporary spiritual writer, points out: „the Orthodox church is somehow so strange (...) a church of contrasts, at one and the same time so traditional and so free, so ritualistic (...) and so lively. A church where the pearl of great price of the gospel is lovingly preserved, at times covered in dust”¹².

The position of Orthodox women provides a particular striking illustration of the contrasts highlighted by Lev Gillet. The deep contradictions include the liberating message of the gospel which exists alongside outmoded taboos; they include both the spiritual and the personal theological doctrine of humanity which exist alongside stereotypes of gender inherited from patriarchal societies. The universally present icon of Mary, Mother of Jesus, radiates a tender and deep femininity, but the altar is barred to women. The women who brought the spices to the tomb on the first Easter morning were the first to announce that Jesus was risen and are honoured in the Orthodox Churches as „apostles to the apostles”. But the reading of the gospel in the public worship is still limited to male ministers (...).

¹¹ The reasons for this distortion are presented in my article *Authority in Tradition. Reflections on Tradition and the role of women in the Orthodox Church*, in: A. BERLIS, CH. METHUEN (eds.), *Feminist Perspectives on History and Religion* (ESWTR Yearbook 9; Kok Pharos: Kampen 2000), 101-110.

¹² A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Orthodox Spirituality*, Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius, London 1945, 64.

Eva Topping-Katafygiotou suggests that it is now time „to re-examine the androcentric prejudices in Orthodox tradition that have determined attitudes and praxis of the church even in these times”¹³. And Leonie Liveris stresses: „in order Orthodox women to challenge the teaching of the Church that recognize the ‘charisms’ of women but not their intellectual and spiritual equality with men, there is a demand for using „feminist hermeneutics of suspicion” of canon law and scriptural interpretation, and critical analysis of the practices of hierarchy and patriarchy”¹⁴. We are in search of a dialogue between the eastern and the western *Sophia* on theological gender issues. Even more important than listening to the words spoken in the west is the willingness to take into account the experience of western women theologians, their joys and more particularly their sufferings and their open questions. This dynamic encounter will enrich both parts¹⁵.

Kobiety prawosławne w edukacji teologicznej

Streszczenie

Edukacja teologiczna została określona jako zadanie motywowania, wyjaśniania i umożliwiania ludowi Bożemu rozwijania jego darów oraz angażowania się swoim życiem w służbę innym. W ciągu ostatnich pięćdziesięciu lat teologia przeszła swego rodzaju paradygmat zmian.

Wśród różnych perspektyw teologicznych i teologiczno-edukacyjnych interesującym wydaje się być głos kobiet teologów /teolożek/ i feministek. Postulują one, aby: 1/ edukacja teologiczna ujmowana była w perspektywie ekumenicznej i pluralistycznej (w zakresie tradycji, kontekstu, podłoża etnicznego, rodzaju, etc.);

¹³ E.C. TOPPING, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy*, Minneapolis 1987, 127. The same idea is shared among Orthodox women and men from different contexts and realities: see K.K. FITZGERALD (ed.) *Orthodox Women Speak. Discerning the „Signs of the Times”* (WCC Publications: Geneva 1999); E. Behr-Sigel, K. Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (WCC Publications: Geneva 2000); D. KOUKOURA, *What does it mean to Live in the World and for the World?*, in: *On Being Church: Women’s Voices and Visions*, „Ecumenical Review” 53(2001)1, 36-43; I. PETROU, *Die Frauenfrage und die Kirchliche Tradition*, in: „Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift” 1998, 244-259.

¹⁴ L. LIVERIS, *Ancient Taboos and Gender Prejudice*, 137.

¹⁵ E. KASSELOURI-HATZIVASSILIADI, *Recapturing the Sacred: An Orthodox Response to Anne-Marie Korte* στο *Yearbook of ESWTR* 12 (2004) σελ. 37-45.

2/ edukacja teologiczna nie była oparta wyłącznie na duchownych; 3/ poddawać ocenie epistemologiczne podstawy teologii (uczyć analizy zamiast wyłącznie faktów historycznych oraz odkryć w Biblii i Tradycji elementy androgeniczne); 4/ wzmocnić odniesienie teorii do praktyki, integrować teologię z życiem.

Dyskusja nad zagadnieniami feminizmu i teologii feministycznej nie została jeszcze podjęta w szerokim kontekście prawosławia, choć zdarzają się prace nad tymi zagadnieniami prowadzone na Zachodzie i w Grecji. We Wschodniej i Środkowej Europie natomiast sytuacja wygląda odmiennie. Tam kobiety na równi z mężczyznami zaangażowane są w nauczanie katechezy, śpiew i prowadzenie chórów kościelnych, są członkami rad parafialnych i diecezjalnych. Nieobecna jest natomiast teologia feministyczna, którą jest kojarzona z modernizmem jako herezja tak przez duchownych, jak w kręgach akademickich. W wielu miejscach kobietom jeszcze do niedawna odmawiano wstępu na wydziały teologiczne czy nawet seminaria naukowe i ekumeniczne.

W kontekście greckim kobiety stanowią znakomitą większość pomiędzy nauczycielami religii prawosławnej w szkołach. Natomiast jedynie 30 proc. zajmuje wyższe stanowiska, pomimo lepszego zazwyczaj wykształcenia. Podobna sytuacja występuje na wydziałach teologii, gdzie większość studentów to kobiety. W kadrze naukowej stanowią zaś jedynie 30 proc.

W opinii Autorki, prawosławne teolożki powinny wypracować własny model uprawiania teologii. „Kobieca twarz” teologii prawosławnej jest wciąż nieznana – a to powinno ulec zmianie. Nadszedł czas na poddanie ponownej analizie androcentryczne uprzedzenia w tradycji prawosławnej, które determinowały praktykę i postawę Kościoła. Należy przy tym wziąć pod uwagę doświadczenia zachodnich teolożek, ich cierpienia i otwarte pytania przez nie stawiane.

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