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I. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH AND POSTMODERNITY: IDENTITY, PLURALISM AND COMMUNION

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ABSTRACT. The article presents the characteristics of postmodernism and its consequences on issues such as identity, pluralism and communion. As an "unstable" philosophical trend, it interacts with the "stability" and authority of the orthodox teachings, thus resulting in an ideological conflict. The article offers some theological answers to the above-mentioned conflict, as well as to some major issues of the contemporary postmodern society.

Keywords: postmodernity, mission, *protean* identity, emerging churches, postmodern communities, ecclesiology

We often hear that there's nothing new under the sun, and the postmodern philosophy or way of thinking, ideologically supporting the contemporary society, is nothing more than a contextual challenge to which Church will offer an answer, the same way it has always done throughout history. This happened before, in the early days, when the orthodox were a small group of people surrounded by Gnostics, legalists and fundamentalists, as shown in the New Testament. It was also true during the Constantinian era when the Orthodox Saints and Church Fathers led an apologetic life, while apostates and heretics led the Christian empire. Such aspects were also present under the ottomans and in the Russian Empire, not to mention Communist times. Likewise, to some extent, it is true even nowadays. So, in this sense, things have never been radically different from what we witness in postmodernity.

However, as father Thomas Hopko notes, today there are radical differences in comparison to all the previous eras. Orthodoxy is not a persecuted

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minority among a multitude of Christian movements and other religious movements in a "heathen" empire with faithful members touched by the fervor generated by Christ's first proclamation in the world. Today, Orthodoxy is no longer the official Church of a Christian empire with persecuted saints in a constant battle with the heretics, the apostates and the sinners, and sometimes even with each other. Orthodoxy is no longer a variety of ethnic communities under Muslim or Marxist domination. Also, one can no longer find in "diaspora" just an orthodox community exiled in heterodox countries, obeying massive secularization, transformations and changes. Although still a minority Church facing inner confusions, fears, expectations and divisions resulted from "an odyssey bearing over 2000 years of history," the Orthodox Church today is, for the first time, part of a "global village," and its diverse people develop in different ways and seem to adopt a way of life that is about to dominate the planet. This is the liberal, democratic, capitalist and postmodern (and post-Christian) pluralism.[1] It is the way of life that dominates the contemporary world and challenges the Church to give an answer to matters such as identity, pluralism, communion and community, established on brand new foundations.

Thus, the present text is an attempt to provide an orthodox answer to the postmodern hermeneutics of identity, pluralism and communion.

1. Postmodernity and postmodernism

Postmodernity is the name given to a historical period, and postmodernism is the theory that developed in order to explain that period, which began during the second half of the 20th century. The opinions regarding the exact moment postmodernity began differ, the dates ranging between 1968-1973. The year 1968 was marked by the student riots, at the end of the Second World War, riots of a generation that began to ignore the cultural conventions it grew up with and asked for change. The riots did not ask for a specific set of political, social and economic changes, but demanded a complete change, as a general rejection of the old. In 1973 international economy changed forever as a result of the oil crisis generated by the new radicalized organization of the oil exporting countries (OPEC). The oil crisis was provoked by the oil-producing countries, the majority of them being part of the Muslim world. It was a way of expressing their anger towards the continuous support the West offered to Israel, support that proved to be decisive in the Iom Kipur

[1] Thomas Hopko, "Orthodoxy in Post-Modern Pluralist Societies," *The Ecumenical Review* 51, no. 4 (October 1999): 365.

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War. It marked a fundamental change for the economic and political power balance and a dramatic priority shift in the global politics and economy. The social changes that occurred in the West on a large scale are to a great extent a product of these evolutions. There are some opinions according to which, postmodernity could be dated back to the year 1973. Although not everybody agrees on that, there is agreement in terms of how the face of the world has changed since then. Thus, the premises that become the basis for the notion of postmodernity is that the world did not go through formal changes, but through a fundamental transformation of the way it operates, a change that became disadvantageous in terms of predictability, order and rationality.[2]

In this context, *postmodernism* becomes a concept widely used to describe the criticism of modernity within a multitude of fields, varying from architecture, philosophy, politics, sociology, religious studies and even theology. Postmodernism is manifested as a trend that criticizes some of the fundamental beliefs of modern philosophers such as I. Kant and R. Descartes (1596-1650), especially their foundationalism. The claim of foundationalism was that scientists – freed from religious and political prejudices – could experience the world as it "truly" was. According to Descartes, for example, properly acquired knowledge is built upon a unique foundation. In the case of Kant and others, this view on knowledge gave birth to the concept of universal, neutral, autonomous reason as a warrant for the universal truth. This description of the objective knowledge is one of the main targets of postmodern criticism (while the critics of postmodernism often state that anti-foundationalism could lead to relativism). According to philosophers like Heidegger (1889-1976), H. G. Gadamer (1900-2002) and J. Derrida (1935-2004), knowledge is already a prejudice, as our perception of the world is conditioned by our "horizons," and these horizons are in relationship with our particular socio-cultural history. So, there is no universal, neutral, "objective" knowledge, but rather an interpretation of the world. M Foucault (1926-1984) continued this criticism, maintaining that knowledge is, in fact, conditioned by power, and that our prejudices are caused by forces of power and domination. J.-F. Lyotard (1924-1988) defined postmodernism as mistrust towards the "grand narratives." For Lyotard, any view of the world – even the scientific one – in the end, calls for a grand "narrative," similar to a religious narrative or with a "myth." Thus, knowledge is strongly related to faith. For him, a "metanarrative" is not just a story, but a view of the world based on a universal, autonomous motif.[3] A metanarrative is the general intellectual framework

[2] Bill Cooke, "Postmodernism", ed. H. James Birx, *Encyclopedia of Time: Science, Philosophy, Theology, & Culture* (SAGE, 13 January 2009), 1029.

[3] James K. A. Smith, "Postmodernism," ed. Ian A. McFarland et al., in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 399.

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through which we see history. For example, the communist metanarrative presented a progressive and inevitable succession from feudalism, to capitalism and socialism and, lastly, to communism. The Christian metanarrative, in exchange, started with the primordial innocence of Eden, followed by the fall, sin and death, for which Jesus Christ paid the ransom, and it would end when Christ was to return, reward the faithful and judge everyone.[4]

Postmodernists, at least the ones from the continental tradition, believe that metanarratives are no longer necessary, and, in this respect, with the end of the metanarratives comes the end of tyranny of history and of the aggressive domination of science.[5] Thus, postmodernism is presented as an escape from rationality, a way of feeling liberated from the limits and norms socially constructed. Postmodernism aims to divide the truth, the standards and the ideals into what has been deconstructed and what intends to be deconstructed, by denying a priori any new doctrine, theory or revelation and claims the right to replace the abandoned rules of the past. G.B. Smith fundamentally identified postmodernism as a sign of disintegration and faith in what he called the Enlightenment project.

In defining postmodernism, we must take into consideration two facts. A more moderate version of postmodernism claims that we know nothing; we can only interpret, and the interpretations can only express partial and narrow perspectives. A more radical version of postmodernism states that we know nothing for sure and that our claims towards universal knowledge are hegemonic, which means that our ability to interpret only from our partial and narrow perspectives is a liberation from this tendency towards hegemony, as it is clearly reflected in science and rationality.

Behind these differences, hides in fact a political ideology for the most part of postmodernism. This is due to the fact that postmodernism is identified with the political left. The reason postmodernism is eager to write the obituary of the metanarratives is that many of its followers, earlier in their lives, supported variations of socialism and communism, components of the grand metanarrative. After the failure of the German nationalist socialism and the failed experiment of communism, postmodernists were faced to admit that the capitalist system and the supporting metanarratives became triumphant or created a critical system which denied the legitimacy of any narrative. This approach was embraced by postmodernism.

[4] Cooke, "Encyclopedia of Time," 1030.

[5] See Nicolae Turcan, *Postmodernism și teologie apofatică. O apologie în fața gândirii slabe* (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2014), 48.

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It is important to mention that postmodernism also questions the claim put forth by science, namely that it is founded on the objective truth. The metanarrative of science describes knowledge as being accumulated in time, leading to an ever clearer understanding of the universe. The attitudes towards science reveal the greatest divisions between the continental and the Anglo-American schools of postmodernism. The Anglo-American attitudes are articulated in the work of Richard Rorty (1931-2007), as his criticism was oriented towards fundamentalism and towards practices supporting claims that one's theories are founded on the objective truth. The continental branch of postmodernism, once again, got lost in its attitudes towards science. Indeed, this area received the strongest opposition. Having as a framework a relativist epistemic postmodernism, many continental postmodernists regard science as a metanarrative as any other, without any special authority and they believed it deserved additional criticism, mainly because of the authority claims perceived by scientists.[6]

Postmodernism is, therefore, one of the most controversial notions which seeks to put together in a coherent framework the changes that occur in the western thinking regarding the relationship of the individual with himself, with alterity and with the world he lives in. For this reason, it is difficult to give a characterization, since fluidity and the lack of coherence are some of its features. With this in mind, we can discuss some of the specific features of postmodernism that represent a challenge for the Christian witness: relativism of values, self-reference and autonomization; fluid identity, pluralism, omnipresence of the mediatized communication, creation of reality by means of subjective projections etc.

2. The *protean* identity and the Christian identity

The end of the universal/fundamental metanarratives leads to weak, relative narratives. According to these, we cannot speak of a single truth, in fact, we cannot speak of any truth, because everything is subject to continuous transformation. There are no criteria for absolute judgement – everything is relative. This idea is, of course, the postmodernist answer to modernism, to which postmodernism refers to as post, trans or by denying it. This way, if modernism is crystallized and stable, postmodernism is fluid. If modernism is conservative and rational, postmodernism is liberal and does not believe in rationality. Furthermore, postmodernism is focused more on the self and

[6] Cooke, "Encyclopedia of Time," 1029-32.

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narcissistic in its so-called obsession of identity. This, however, does not mean that postmodern identity is well-defined. As everything becomes more fluid and unstable, postmodern identity defines itself as *protean*, a technical term that comes from the Greek god Proteus, who changes his shape.[7] The *Protean* phenomenon has manifested itself in the 20th and in the 21st century and it encloses simultaneously integration and disintegration, with no limits, theories or authorities. That is to say, we no longer speak of a system, but rather of a multitude of subsystems. The protean self must adapt and change, it must be fluid like the world he belongs to. Furthermore, the contextual circumstances can lead to a dilution of identity, when the self is focused on self-image more than on the self, as an ontological or conceptual self. This way, identity becomes more and more grounded in the social roles played, without a defined, stable core.

Thus, postmodern culture generates the changeable and adaptable protean self, but, on the other hand, it causes a dilution of identity, which leads to self and identity crises, correlated with an obsession for identity affirmation.

In postmodern thinking, the lack of a system and the relativist approach were considered a response to modern conservatism, to the cult of rationality and the totalitarian phenomena that evolved from it. Nationalism – an ideology based on modern values – was a great threat after the Second World War. For this reason, an undefined identity seemed like a good idea in a fight against this threat (as the alternative to the fanatic identity, which, in postmodernism, is often identified with the nationalist identity), and would support the claim that everything is relative and that there is no absolute truth in the name of which one would have the chance to repeat the horror of another global conflict. That is why, postmodern identity is afraid of any firm statements and of borders and boundaries in general and is oriented towards cosmopolitanism. This led to the world we know today – liberal, open, based on international agreements and forms of organization such as the European Union. But it can also lead to opposite values due to the dilution of identity, which generates, surprisingly, lack of tolerance, confusion, a search for stability, which, paradoxically, can even lead to a look back into the past, towards an intolerant nationalism.

In the context of a postmodern world, fanatical identities are not in fact grounded on modern values, such as nationalism. The identity fanaticism is often correlated with the loss or the dilution of identity, or with the lack of a nucleus. Precisely because it is a weak identity, it fears the loss of its autonomy, and that leads to alienation and lack of tolerance.

[7] Jeremy Bailenson and Nick Yee, "The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior," *Human Communication Research*, no. 33 (2007): 271.

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The opposite of this weak identity is a strong identity rooted in a strong ego (self-consciousness) as a mediator between the super-ego (the social and cultural world) and the id (the uncoordinated instincts). It presupposes the presence of a nucleus, which allows the individual to play social roles, without losing the integrity of the self. In this case, we have an identity which is not egocentric or ethnocentric, but tolerant towards the others, because it is not afraid to lose its autonomy. Also, the obsession for defining the self disappears, as the feeling of self-integrity is present.

In this case, we must ask ourselves if this kind of identity is still a postmodern identity. On one hand, the protean self can be seen as a strong identity that is capable of adapting itself to changes (in a way, a strong identity should be this way). On the other hand, the postmodern values can generate an identity that is undefined, fluid, relative and without a core. These values are the negation of the modern values, which lead to identity fanaticism. Therefore, a strong identity should rely on other values, not related to modernity. There is a need for a completely different discourse which enables the development of a nucleus and of an ego.[8]

One can note that the problem of identity in general is discussed in terms that couldn't be farther away from the Christian view of identity. Christian identity is based on the scriptural meaning of the self as ontologically given, but also as an ongoing "project."

Thus, from a theological point of view, we can talk about an *identity of the being*: the creation of man in the image of God is a dynamic relation. We are unique creature and our identity is given by the image of God and by the personal effort to be in His image, which presupposes the existence of a relational project. At the same time, we talk about a *fallen identity* about the fragmenting and distorting the initial project, as well as of the restored or *redeemed identity*. The latter is understood as God's healing of the fallen identity, by giving the being a new identity, both *stable*, in the light of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the Embodiment, the Cross, and the Ascension, and also seen as an *ongoing* project, which began on Pentecost, and occurs in the light of entering and living in the Kingdom of God.

There are different understandings of identity from a Christian point of view, but they are all based on the idea that identity is a stable and dynamic ontological given. It is clear that within the realms of these two types of identities, one stable and the other fluid, the premises of conflict are always

[8] "Who Am I? The Role of Identity in Postmodern Culture," *Antropo Logos* (blog), 16 September 2017, http://antropologos.pl/who-am-i-the-role-of-identity-in-postmodern-culture/, http://antropologos.pl/who-am-i-the-role-of-identity-in-postmodern-culture/.

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present. The theoretical idea of a protean identity generates today fluid identities, with effects both at an individual level (gender fluidity) and on a community level (globalism).

3. Postmodern pluralism and confessional pluralism

Pluralism is defined as a doctrine admitting that reality includes several types of existence (principles, essences) or that there are different ways to describe of reality.[9] In the postmodern thinking, pluralism implies that a religious claiming of any ideology is necessarily wrong, respectively incorrect from a political point of view. The only absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth. This philosophy derives from Kant's criticism and its development in mathematics, logic, philosophy, theology and in the hermeneutics of the 19th century. Deconstructivism was generated by the new types of hermeneutics, and these evolutions generated what we know today as postmodernism and multiculturalism.

In modernism it is stated that, in the end, knowledge will revolutionize the world and it will exile God to the periphery of society by constructing a new edifice of absolute knowledge through science. This position was abandoned in postmodernism, and during deconstructivism this modern vision was denounced. According to the pluralist postmodern vision, the objective truth, the goodness, or the beauty of the world that human beings are called to discover do not exist. There is no objective meaning or aim, but rather a construction of a reality or several constructions of a multitude of pseudo-realities, produced by the subjective will of the individuals or by "groups of interest" in a political context. Therefore, the principles of liberal democracy become objects of worship and find their finality within a politicized world and within a world of hedonism. Liberty (in the postmodern sense of the word) becomes a purpose in itself. Differences are deified. Happiness is understood as material and pseudo-spiritual pleasure, becoming the ultimate (and compulsory) objective for everybody.[10]

Pluralism is also encountered in the monotheistic religions, although postmodern pluralism denies its theological foundation. Pluralism and universalism are two types of views that have confronted each other throughout history. In our opinion, pluralism is the result of the failure of universalism to impose itself at a general human level. This can be easily observed in the ecclesial space. The emergence of heresies and their rejection are good examples. The majority of the erroneous teachings, for various theological reasons, perceive themselves as "universal." No Christian community born out of heresy has ever

[9] Ion Coteanu, ed., *DEX* (București: Univers Enciclopedic, 1996).
[10] Hopko, "Orthodoxy in Post-Modern Pluralist Societies", 366.

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perceived itself as a new type of hermeneutics, without contesting the community from which it got separated. For the most part, the new Christian communities were born as a reaction to the old community which, in their view, no longer held the Truth, and the new communities claimed to be the legitimate defenders and inheritors of the Truth. This is how the plurality of the ecclesial communities was born. They claimed to hold the single truth and were in conflict with the original communities and even with the newest communities, which claimed the same thing. From this perspective, pluralism is the result of the "failure" to assume the unique truth homogeneously at the level of the human societies, which would be impossible, in our opinion. "The failure" generated religious conflicts, which in their essence were about a confrontation among powerful and final truths. Thus, there is no surprise that the first time the term "ecumenism" appeared, in a religious sense, was in the correspondence between Bossuet and Leibnitz, for they were against religious wars that stained with blood the European history.[11]

We witness today a "softening" in claiming powerful, ultimate and exclusive truths and the appearance of truths that can be nuanced. Not all truths have an ultimate and absolute character. There are truths and truths and there is the unique Truth and its expression in a hierarchical way. We encounter ultimate, non-debatable, truths, and also truths marked by context, but still expressing the essence in a different way. From this moment on, pluralism becomes legitimate, including in theology. Of course, the way this pluralism is understood and assumed differs from one community to another. For example, in the Roman-Catholic theology we come across a theory of the "hierarchy" of truths[12], or in the orthodox theology, the existence of a theological pluralism which justifies itself in the unity of faith, underlining the fact that, in the true evangelical spirit, one cannot support a theological pluralism as far as substance is concerned, but can accept a formal pluralism.

Therefore, when we talk about pluralism, the orthodox theology acknowledges the existence of diverse means of theological expression, but they are only legitimate for as long as the unicity of the teaching of faith is not altered. In other words, in orthodox theology, there is a balance between what is universal and the plurality of the means of expressing what is universal. Postmodern philosophy, in exchange, seems to regard pluralism as absolute and proposes or imposes it in a radical way.

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[11] Julia H. de Santa Ana, *Oecumenisme-Liberation*, trad. Ana Brun (Paris: CERF, 1993), 10-15.

[12] "Unitatis redintegratio," cap. II. 11, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

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The reaction of orthodoxy to postmodern pluralism

In 1999, father Thomas Hopko warned that there are four attitudes towards postmodern pluralism. The first would be the denial. Some orthodox deny the existence of "postmodern pluralism." To misinterpret what is happening and to underestimate its impact could prove to be fatal for the Orthodox Church. Postmodern pluralism is a reality and without a revolution of great and unimaginable proportions, it will not disappear anytime soon.

Secondly, it would be a fatal mistake for the orthodox Christians to believe that they and their Church are immune to postmodernism and cannot be touched by its influence and power. The orthodox are as affected just as any other people and are as easily manipulated and deceived as the others.

Thirdly, orthodox Christians do not have to react to postmodern pluralism by imagining that they can reject the contemporary world and by finding refuge in their own world. It would be, in fact, what postmodernism invites us to do, and probably, it would protect our right to live in such a world. We cannot create our own realities, we must live the reality as it is and assume responsibility for it in front of God. We must live in a world that was given to us through God's providence.

Fourthly, the orthodox Christians must not be influenced by the idea that a postmodern pluralist vision of the world is a great new opportunity for mankind, in accordance with the orthodox concepts of freedom, personal dignity, cultural diversity, the theology of the embodiment and the mystical apophatic theology, all understood as critical attitudes of "western" rationalism, pietism, legalism and moralism.[13] Although postmodernism is a trend based on the criticism of modernity, it cannot be associated with the orthodox criticism of the western theology. In its structure, postmodernism is a philosophical trend that lacks ontology, and consequently, lacks a "strong" presence of God, Who sustains everything and is the core of the entire human existence.

4. Community and communion in postmodernism

If identities are fluid in postmodernism, when it comes to communities, we see a fragmentation and a hybridization which extended and transformed the meaning of community. According to Erin Sharpe, we can identify the following tendencies in understanding community in postmodernism.

[13] Hopko, "Orthodoxy in Post-Modern Pluralist Societies," 367.

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The community as experience

As more and more social phenomena occur, such as chat rooms on the internet, the conceptualization of the community as associated with a set location extended, in order to include communities that exist in the virtual space. For this reason, the postmodern community is best defined as "an experience, rather than a place."

The communities of interests and emotions

In a traditional way, communities have formed when the individuals were interconnected by instruments and when they depended one upon the other. In the postmodern culture, for a change, people get together when they have common interests and styles. Some theoreticians of the phenomenon call these groups "life style enclaves" or "communities of interests." In a similar way, the idea of "emotional community" appeared and it was described as a group based on feelings, not obligations. Furthermore, their capacity to produce the feeling of community played a central role in assessing the emotional communities. It was characterized by its capacity to make possible the transition from a "contractual community" to a "contact community."

The Christian community in postmodern cultures. The emerging churches

"The enclaves as a life-style" or "the communities of interests" can be found in ecclesiology. If we transfer the idea to the spiritual realm, we observe a postmodern tendency in the ecclesial communities, represented by the so called "emerging churches."[14] The supporters of this movement believe that the emerging churches represent the type of church fitted for today's postmodern society.

The term "emerging" refers to something that is developing, growing and becoming. According to Constantin Ghioanca, the simplest definition of the emerging churches would be "churches in movement." This means that the churches accommodate to culture and develop with it, always open to change for the sake of maintaining their relevance. The change of course occurs both at a formal level and in the doctrine. This phenomenon is visible nowadays in Great Britain, USA and Australia, but the influence can be observed in other places as well.[15] The model of the emerging churches carries the following general features: their cultural context is postmodern and pluralist; the church

[14] Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Baker Academic, 2005).

[15] Costel Ghioanca, "Scurta prezentare a Bisericilor Emergente. Articol in Revista Crestinul Azi," 2010, https://istorieevanghelica.ro/2011/01/26/costel-ghioanca-scurta-prezentare-a-bisericilor-emergente-articol-in-revista-crestinul-azi/.

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services combine the classical form with the actual local styles; their missions are "glocal" (global and local).[16] The communion is created in this context and is motivated by emotions. The continuous accommodation to secular culture reduces the evangelic message to a spiritually motivated artistic form. This way, in "the emerging churches," the communion is built around a cultural construct, with an appearance of spiritually.

The Church and the postmodern communities

According to these images the postmodern communities seem to be an accidental and unfinished construct. They seem to be communities that are "done" and "undone" quickly. Fluidity and evanescence, as well as the capacity to reconstruct are some of the characteristics that help these types of communities to remain new in society. Their capacity to reinvent themselves offers them "the chance" to always be in the beginning.

In this context, the Orthodox Church has the mission to offer the perspective of a stable community, in which the eternal new element is Jesus Christ. If the Church Tradition is creatively assumed, the members of the Christian community are, willingly or not, members of postmodern type communities, and can find in the Church renewed experiences and can experience the emotion of meeting the Living God.

Referring to the emerging churches, as a postmodern phenomenon, we must remember that the ecumenical dialogue has as a purpose the recreation of the unity of faith of all Christians based on the biblical and patristic tradition. Within this dialogue, the Orthodox Church meets other Christian communities, with the conscience that it is the One Church of Christ. In postmodern terms, we are talking about a meeting between a "strong" ecclesiology, and a series of "fluid" ecclesiologies (except for the dialogue with the Oriental Churches and with the Roman-Catholic Church), a meeting where Orthodoxy is the living witness of the apostolic tradition. The dialogue of love would have to lead to the redemptive Truth. Of course, one can say that this position is utopian and the attitude fundamentalist, but only by trying to know deeply the various traditions engaged in an ecumenical dialogue, there is a chance to slow down the dissolution of the Christian community.

[16] Mark Driscoll, "Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church Mark Driscoll," *Criswell Theological Review*, no. 3/2 (2006): 88.

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