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An Oriental Orthodox Approach to Hermeneutics

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A few initial remarks seem to be necessary :

1. In the theological tradition of the Eastern Churches, the problem of interpretation and understanding has always been an important one. But nowhere in the history of these Churches does one find any attempt to turn the hermeneutical process into a specialized academically hermetic activity. *Hermeneia* is always directed to the *oikodomē* of the Church, as St Paul reminds us (1 Cor. 14:5).

2. Biblical hermeneutics is not treated in isolation from the general theological hermeneutical approach of the Church. In other words, the question, "How do you understand the Bible today?" is necessarily related to such questions as, "How do you understand God, the Church, the liturgy or humanity?"

3. While the Church recognizes the special character of the hermeneutic of written texts, it thinks that a hermeneutic of the non-verbal and the non-conceptual envelops and permeates the former in such a way that a rigid distinction between them is often difficult to maintain.

Generally speaking, a hermeneutical problem is constituted by the temporal and cultural distance of the interpreter from the text or the event to be interpreted. The Church had to confront the problem in the very early centuries when the Gospel passed from its Semitic cultural matrix to meet Hellenistic culture and learning. We know how in this encounter, the Greek idea of *Logos* and several Platonic and Neoplatonic concepts became important hermeneutical categories for generations of Christian theologians, both orthodox and heterodox. The problem of interpretation was raised all the more sharply when the question of orthodoxy and heresy came up within the Church. Ingenious teachers began to interpret the Bible and Christian doctrine with the assistance of pure logic, impressive dialectic and with other techniques of sophistry and rhetoric, only to find themselves accused of deviating from the authentic faith of the Church. The Church then had to evolve certain criteria, though not formal, in order to test and guide the process of interpretation. The hermeneutical problem, therefore, is nothing new to the Church. It had to grapple with some of the basic issues in modern hermeneutics long before German scholars started to discuss it in a *wissenschaftliche* manner and others followed suit in a slavish way.

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The hermeneutical approach of the Eastern Tradition was profoundly influenced by the great controversy between Eunomius, the radical Arian theologian and three Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa) in the latter half of the fourth century. The debate centred round two key issues:

1. The question of divine incomprehensibility.
2. The role of language in expressing truth.

Both the questions involved the problem of interpretation and understanding. Eunomius, armed with subtle Aristotelian logic, dialectic and the Holy Scriptures, was trying to accommodate Christian theology to a certain brand of Neoplatonic system. He advanced the thesis that the divine essence (*ousia*), the real nature of God, is perfectly comprehensible to the human mind. To Basil and his friends who rejected the thesis, the Eunomians cited Scripture and argued. Quoting, for example, Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know" (Jn. 4:22), they squarely put the question to Basil: "Do you worship the God you know or the God you do not know?"¹ To the Eunomians it appeared that if one followed the Word of God in a strictly logical way, one would have to agree with their original assumption that the essential nature of God is perfectly comprehensible to the human mind. They would argue it in a somewhat syllogistic way:

Scripture says: we worship what we know.

Scripture is revealed truth.

Therefore we know what God is.

Those who rejected this "Scriptural truth" and affirmed the divine incomprehensibility were impious agnostics. Their confession of ignorance was atheistic in effect.²

The principle of the absolute intelligibility of divine nature which the Eunomians used as a hermeneutical principle in scriptural interpretation and consequently applied to the Trinitarian doctrine is brought in from philosophical sources outside the tradition of the Church.³ Eunomius had accepted the division of all reality into the creator who is *agennētos* (unbegotten) and the creation which is the *gennēma* (that which came to be or the begotten). In Trinitarian doctrine, it meant that the Father alone is *agennētos*, unique and absolutely simple, while the Son and the Holy Spirit belonged to the *gennēma* along with the rest of creation.

Now, Eunomius claimed that *agennētos* is the proper name of God. By rational analysis of the name, we can get back to the *ousia* of God. Every object has its name given by God and the name reveals the reality of the object. Giving of names (*onomatōn thesis*) belongs to God alone. Behind this assertion, there was a classical debate between

¹ Basil of Caesarea, *Epist.* CCXXXIV, 1, 3.

² See Gregory Nazianzen, *Orat.* XXVIII, 5; Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, III, P.G. 45, 602.

³ See J. Daniélou, "Eunome l'arien et l'exégèse néoplatonicienne de Cratyle," in *Revue des Études Grecs*-69 (1956), pp. 412-423.

the Platonists and the Aristotelians about the origin of language. The former argued that words and names are *kata phusin*, that is, given to objects supernaturally and they therefore reveal reality. The latter held that words and names are *kata thesin*, that is, given to objects by convention, by the human mind as arbitrary symbols. Language is a purely human creation. It is valid but it bears the mark of human limitation.

Eunomius represented the former in a radical way and held that the name unbegotten is a revealed name and therefore it gives us the essential knowledge of the Being of God. This name existed before all exercise of human intelligence. The position of Eunomius means that all verbal statements about God based on *agennētos* contain the truth of his essential nature.

The Cappadocians attacked vehemently the position of Eunomius. They held that the human mind's inability to comprehend the *ousia* of God is not a moral defect, but a constitutive character of created beings *vis-à-vis* the infinity of God's nature. Following the famous words of Clement of Alexandria, "We know that God is not what he is," Gregory Nazianzen told Eunomius: "It is one thing to be persuaded of the existence (*to einai*) of a thing and quite another to know (*eidenai*) what it is."⁴ Human comprehension is an attempt to circumscribe its object, and God can never be thus objectified :

God like some great sea of Being limitless and unbounded, transcending all conceptions of time and nature, only adumbrated by the mind, and that very dimly and scantily, not by his essentials but by his environment!⁵

Even if we persist in our attempt to understand the divine nature, "all that we can comprehend is the infinity (*apeiria*) of God."⁶

The Cappadocians argued against Eunomius that language is a creation of the human mind (*epinoia*). Human *epinoia* does not possess any innate idea of God's essential nature.⁷ Language which the *epinoia* invented is a very useful instrument, but is an insufficient tool to understand God. Neither language, nor any other mode of understanding can penetrate or comprehend the divine *apeiria*. At this level if any language is possible at all, it turns negative and proceeds by negation.

The debate with Eunomius made clear to the Church among other things that: (1) the linguistic category is not the only category nor a sufficient one for interpretation and understanding; (2) human mind and language are incapable of fully understanding and articulating not

⁴ *Orat.* XXVIII, 5.

⁵ *Orat.* XLV, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.* E. Muehlenberg has demonstrated the significant relationship between the concepts of infinity and incomprehensibility in Gregory of Nyssa's thought in *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa*, Göttingen, 1966.

⁷ For a discussion of Gregory of Nyssa's brilliant debate with Eunomius and its theological significance see Paulos Gregorios, *Cosmic Man*, Delhi, 1980.

only transcendent realities, but also matters in our sensible world; (3) since the infinity of God and his ultimate incomprehensibility are basic to the theological thinking of the Church, interpretation and understanding belong to an unceasing, dynamic process; (4) biblical interpretation requires more than the principle of reason. The exclusive alliance of logic and Scripture had proved fatal to the Christian faith.

What, then, are some of the categories and principles of interpretation emphasized by the Orthodox tradition as necessary for a right understanding? The following are no formal criteria laid down by any council or declared *ex cathedra* by any Patriarch, but guidelines deeply embedded in the general consensus of the Church.

1. Living Community: the Hermeneutical Matrix

The hermeneutical problem constituted by temporal and cultural distance between the interpreter and the text or event to be interpreted is here approached from the vantage point of the living community. The Church speaks only of a single living community, irrespective of culture and chronology, when it refers to its own life and identity. That means an event of the first century can be present to the twentieth century through the organic mediation of the living community held together by unbroken gathering and celebration. Further, no event or text within this community can be totally objectified by one who stands within it, so as to constitute a real distance between them. As a member of the Church my approach to a biblical text of the first century is bound to be different from my approach to a Roman legal text of the same period. I need two different sets of hermeneutical principles here, because in the case of the biblical text, it is already part of my inheritance through the mediation of the community, while the Roman legal text does not belong to my dynamic inheritance. In the former, I have inherited a sense, while in the latter, the text remains cold, objective and dead. Therefore, even if an outsider wants really to understand the biblical text, he should first "enter into the inheritance" of the community. Otherwise the Roman text and the biblical text remain the same for him and are interpreted using the same principles. Here one has to disagree completely with Bultmann's classical statement that the "interpretation of Biblical writings is not subject to conditions different from those applying to all other kinds of literature."

Interpretation (*hermeneia*) in the Church, as I have suggested at the beginning, is not for a disinterested, objective understanding of the text, but for the *oikodomē* of the community. These are complementary processes. Interpretation builds up; the built up community interprets.

2. Event, the Hermeneutical Source of the Text

In the Eastern Tradition, the event has priority over the text. The event of the death and resurrection of Christ is crucial. The Apostolic experience of this event is being transmitted in the Church

in both written and non-written modes. Therefore in the Orthodox perspective, a hermeneutic of the written word must always be integrally associated with an experimental appropriation of the Word incarnate, crucified, and risen. Since participation in the experience of this event is possible by entering into the life of the living community, the interpretation of the written Word must also take place in the context of this experience in the community. The Church cannot reduce the Christ event to "a linguistic event" or an "acoustical event."⁸ The effort of Eunomius in the fourth century was precisely the same—to reduce Trinity and Incarnation to linguistic "technology."⁹

3. Tradition: a Hermeneutical Category

The modern German philosophical discussion has taken up "tradition" as a significant hermeneutical category, though the word smacks of unevangelical reactionary archaism in many Protestant "traditions." It has now become a commonplace in all human activities whether of science or art or religion. There are unquestionable traditions in objective and exact sciences. The most virulent opponents of tradition gradually constitute a dogmatic tradition of opposing tradition. The human community is sustained by traditions.

Gadamer would put it thus, referring to the subjective assimilation of tradition and to the inevitable pre-understanding (prejudice) provided by it: "We stand always within traditions and this is no objectifying process, i.e., we do not conceive of what the tradition says as something other, something alien. On the contrary, it is always part of us, a model and an exemplar, a self-recognition, which our later historical judgement would hardly see as a kind of knowledge of tradition."¹⁰

For the living community of the Church, tradition represents its unbroken life. Without sharing fundamental prejudices with the tradition one cannot rightly interpret the Christ event or its biblical testimony.¹¹ Instead of speaking about "the fusion of two horizons," we will have to speak here about a single horizon which the tradition provides. It does not mean that all hermeneutical problems cease when we speak about tradition as a single horizon. Tradition itself moves through a sifting and filtering process. Tradition is not any immutable original *depositum*, but a dynamic reality which interprets and is shaped by interpretation at the same time. The verbs *tradere* (to transmit=tradition) and *traducere* (to carry over, to translate=

⁸ Cf. Carl E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, New Directions in Theology, Vol. II, 1966, pp. 138-139.

⁹ The Cappadocians called the Eunomians technologists, because of their unbridled application of Aristotelian dialectic and sophistical techniques to Christian doctrine. See Gregory Nazianzen, *Orat.* XXVII, 2; Basil, *Epist.* XC, 2, *Homil.* XVI, 4; Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunóm.* I (Jaeger, t. 1, p. 38).

¹⁰ *Truth and Method*, London, New York, 1976, p. 250.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

interpretation) are related. Tradition is not simple transmission, but interpretation as well.

Contrary to popular understanding, tradition is not a collection of past events, texts and memories. It is that vital flow that meaningfully relates the past to the present. It is not a simple memory, but a creatively interpreted memory. The memory of exodus from the slavery of Egypt was not a traditional memory for Israel. It was a creative and liberating remembrance transmitted by tradition. In a dynamic tradition, the event, the text and the interpreters are held together in a single horizon of "experiential consanguinity."¹² The tradition as an interpretative process is open and oriented to the future. There is a danger of the formation of false traditions. When a tradition is unable to interpret the original Christ-event in conformity with the Apostolic witness or when its interpretation is uncondusive to the *oikodomē* of the community, or when its interpretation is not creatively future-oriented, it is a false tradition. A simple use of Scripture alone to test its validity is considered insufficient. The Orthodox Churches have experienced the formation of false traditions in their historical life. It is the corporate mind of the Church aided by the Holy Spirit that finally sifts the true from the false tradition.

4. Economy, a Hermeneutical Principle

The word *oikonomia* comes from *oikonomeō*, meaning to administer, to rule (one's home), to accommodate. "Economy" has been used as a synonym of the Incarnation of Christ, and also for the providential plan of God to administer the world.¹³ In the incarnation the Son of God is accommodating himself to our world of senses in order to realize God's supreme providential plan of salvation. In Christ the invisible and the incomprehensible has become visible and comprehensible as part of God's "home rule." Economy is a partial compensation for man's inability to know the essential nature of God. But Christ himself had many limitations in his incarnate nature. The subordinationist Arians had argued their point from Scripture by pointing out that Christ was in the form of a servant, that he was ignorant of God's total plans, that he had no will of his own and so on.¹⁴ The patristic answer was that Christ was a kenotic figure who had accepted all the limitations of sense-bound human beings and who in his earthly life was hiding rather than revealing the essential nature of God which would have been too unbearable for humans in their earthly condition.¹⁵ This hiding was soteriological in nature.

¹² The expression is Bultmann's. Cf. C. E. Braaten, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

¹³ For the various uses of the term in Christian and Greek tradition, see K. Duchatelez, "La notion d'économie et ses richesses théologiques," in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* XCII (1970), pp. 267-292.

¹⁴ See Gregory Nazianzen, *Orat.* XXX, 3, 15, 10 etc.

¹⁵ Cf. Gregory's description of the vision of Moses on Mount Sinai as a negation of the real vision with a soteriological motif. *Orat.* XXVIII, 3. Also see *Orat.* XXX, 6.

Now this implies some hermeneutical principles. All human language (word) about God necessarily bears an economic limitation, as the Word incarnate limited himself for our sake. All human interpretation and understanding are relative with respect to the divine nature. Biblical interpretation also must take into account God's incomprehensible transcendent nature and his own economic self-limitation in Christ: the incarnate Word's self-limitation was for the salvation of the world. The Church's preaching of the Word must bring itself down to the existential condition of human beings and, in spite of its limitation, must be oriented towards their salvific transformation. Interpretation and understanding within the Church are not primarily meant for deeper epistemological and philosophical intelligibility, but are aimed at the salvation of the world.

5. Some Hermeneutical Relationships

(a) *Praxis-Theoria*: In the patristic tradition *theoria* is the highest form of contemplation and knowledge, the immediate experience of God. But the way to it is through *praxis*, rigorous self-purification, self-discipline and through practice of Christian virtues. In other words, the Church insisted on the constitutive significance of the ethical-practical for the cognitive-theoretical.¹⁶ Ethical activity is the mode of right understanding. Theological interpretation is simply vain talk if it is not sustained by *praxis*. (Karl Marx criticized the separation of theory and practice as characteristic of bourgeois philosophy. Marxism also considers practical activity as the right mode of understanding.)

(b) *Word and work*: The human word (language) is always validated on the basis of its relationship with the eternal divine Word (*Logos*). The patristic equation is *Logos-logikos-logos* where the first *Logos* is God's reason or word, the *logikos* is the rational human being, and the last *logos* is the human word or language.¹⁷ Unless this three-fold relationship is maintained, human language loses its value and becomes vain talk. In the Cartesian system *cogito ergo sum*, being (*sum*) is derived from human rationality (*cogito*). In the above understanding, it is the inverse process; human rationality (*logos*) is derived from the divine being (*logos*).

(c) *Speech and silence*: Silence is a hermeneutical category in the Eastern Tradition. An authentic vision of reality creates aphasia. Ordinary language ceases to be operative at higher levels of understanding. A right dialectic between speech and silence is enormously fruitful in interpretation and understanding. "Silence is a gift from God"¹⁸ to be offered back to him. The apophatic silence is creative:

¹⁶ For the close connection between knowledge and ethics in the patristic tradition, see T. Paul Varghese, *The Freedom of Man*, Westminster, 1972, pp. 67ff. The author argues that the cultic, the cognitive and the creatively ethical form a single entity.

¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrept.* 10; Origen, *Comment in Joan.* 1, 42. Gregory Nazianzen, *Orat.* XLV, 2; *Orat.* XLI, 1.

¹⁸ Nazianzen, *Orat.* XXXII, 14.

of meaning. Buddha's flower sermon or Saṅkara's *neti neti* tends to this apophatic silence.

6. Symbol and Celebration: a Hermeneutical Complement

Francis Bacon, a famous modern European painter, was exhibiting some of his more abstract paintings in a Paris gallery in 1977. Since the critics spoke highly about the artist, a French television journalist came to see Bacon for a live televised interview. One of the first questions the journalist asked was: "Mr Bacon, could you explain some of the reasons why you paint?" The artist, without even looking at the interlocutor, said in a low voice: "If I could explain that I don't need to paint at all." Now he would not respond to other questions and the interview was cut short.

The inexpressible and the incomprehensible can be represented through symbolic forms and liturgical celebration. God who has no name can be praised in a thousand names.¹⁹ For the Eastern Christian Tradition, liturgy is the context *par excellence* for interpretation and understanding. Remembrance of the past event and anticipation of the future are brought together in the present celebration in the Eucharistic liturgy. My understanding of the gospel narrative of the resurrection of Christ within the liturgical experience is different from my apprehension of the same text in the academy. In the former, I share the experiential interpretation given to me by the living community and its tradition, bridging the hermeneutical gap between me and the original event. In the latter, the academic tradition I share may not necessarily possess the experiential dimension transmitted through liturgical celebration. It is perhaps this fact that prompted a Lutheran professor like Carl Braaten to say: "The act of understanding occurs as a miracle in the context of worship."²⁰

We are naturally very much concerned with a hermeneutic of the written text. But what about the interpretation and understanding of other forms of human activity like music, painting or dance? Historians of art like Roger Garaudy (formerly a leading French Marxist theoretician, now converted to Christian faith) argues for the non-conceptual mode of understanding as more significant than the conceptual and the verbal. Criticizing the Western Tradition, he says that the West is used, since Socrates, to underestimate everything that escapes our intellectual network.²¹ Qualifying art as a hermeneutical short cut, he deplores the disappearance of liturgical dance from the Western Tradition. In Greek tragedies, the choir used to sing and dance to communicate that which verbal dialogue could not communicate. Referring to the movements in dance Garaudy says there is a *metakinesis*, a direct transmission of the movements of the dancer to the spectator, both being used to a cosmic resonance.²² It is an unmediated

¹⁹ See the *Hymnus ad Deum* attributed to Gregory Nazianzen, *Carmina* 1.1.29.

²⁰ C. E. Braaten, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

²¹ R. Garaudy, *Danser sa vie*, Paris, 1973, p. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

experience of the movement of being, a non-verbal hermeneutical happening. Using gestures, colours, odours, taste and touch in a deeply symbolical way, the liturgy is a hermeneutical alternative to the limitations of conceptual and verbal understanding.

The paronymy between dogma and *doxa* (praise, glory) is very much emphasised in the Orthodox Tradition. Dogma was interpreted in its western medieval sense, as a "doctrinal law" (*Lehrgesetz*) by Harnack in his antidogmatic polemic. Barth understood it as the creeds and confession of the Church and distinguished the Word of God, the dogma, and the Church.²³ In the Eastern Tradition creeds and confession have no value isolated from *doxa*, the liturgical celebration. They are rendered meaningful only when they are incorporated as part of the doxological act of the Church. A credal statement or a conciliar decree does not become dogma by itself.

7. Holy Spirit, the Hermeneutical Guide

Theological hermeneutics is characterized by trust in the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit of truth" is taken in all seriousness as the source and pledge of right knowledge. The Church believes that discursive reasoning alone will not yield truth. You need the creator Spirit to lead you to new and higher levels of understanding. An authentic theological interpretation is, in the words of Gregory the Theologian (fourth century), "offering wings to the Spirit."²⁴ The transparent openness and the ethereal freedom in interpretation and understanding come when we are afloat with the creative wings of the Spirit. Referring to the recourse to the Spirit as the right method of the knowledge and speech of God, the Theologian says:

I opened my mouth and drew in the Spirit, and I gave myself and my all to the Spirit, my action and speech, my inaction and silence; only let Him hold me and guide me and move both hand and mind and tongue. . . . I am an instrument of God, a rational instrument (*organon logikon*), an instrument tuned and struck by that skilful artist, the Spirit.²⁵

This in-death experience of the Spirit has become hermeneutically normative for the Church. The Holy Spirit unceasingly liberates the Christian faith and understanding from becoming dead doctrine or sterile logic, and grants the gift of interpretation to the inspired interpreter.

²³ *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part 1, tr. C. T. Thomas, 1936, p. 308.

²⁴ *Orat.* XII, 5.

²⁵ *Orat.* XII, 1.