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Christian Orthodox Church and State in Greece: Will They Never Walk Alone? A Scientific Approach

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Introductory comments

The issue of State-Church relations should be examined carefully and in detail, so as to reveal why the Orthodox Church and the Greek State are two sides of the same coin in Greece. Looking back at the country's recent past, we can see that the relations between these two institutions were never cloudless.

For many centuries, both the Greek Orthodox Church and State have been the pillars of social

cohesion in Greek society.

State and Church: definitions and related notions

According to the Greek Orthodox faith, the Orthodox Church is: a holy organization founded by Jesus Christ so as to save and bless the faithful, which includes all people that have faith in Jesus Christ as God and Savior of the world, spiritually linked to each other in one body with the Lord being its head, sharing the same Orthodox faith in communion of the same immaculate mysteries. The Church functions through the clergy blessed with the mystery of priesthood, and through its people. The Church is run by the bishops who communicate the values of Christianity by teaching the Apostles and through them the word of Jesus Christ (Mouratidis, 1982).

This definition is actually dogmatic, making reference to the nature of the Church and diachronically describing its visible side (the clergy, the people) that exists and fights by our side, as well as its invisible side that triumphs in Heaven (our departed fathers, brothers and sisters).

On the other hand, the concept of the State is much simpler. The State is a society of people who are established in a country that exercises sovereign and independent power on its members assuming the form of a legal person (Dimitropoulos, 2004).

The concept of the State has been frequently discussed by the great Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Solon etc.) and other philosophers and thinkers of the modern times (Rousseau, Machiavelli, Locke etc.), who used different terms and definitions in their attempt to approach this concept. The State has been an object of political thought and politics from the Greek Antiquity to the Renaissance. Thus, apart from the definition provided above, which is based

upon the theory of the state's legal personality, several other definitions have attempted to reflect other theories on the State's nature, which however are beyond the scope of the present paper.

However, according to another interesting definition: A State is the entire organized administrative system of a country, including its instruments, citizens, elected leaders and the laws pursuant to which the State operates (Mpoutas, 2008).

At the conceptual level, one may claim that Church and State are two clearly distinct, individual and autonomous institutions, responding to different human needs both at the spiritual and the practical level. As a matter of fact, this twofold nature of human existence has been disregarded throughout the course of human history, resulting to negative results for social life, by either overstressing material needs or exalting human spirituality.

A brief presentation of Church-State Relations

The issue of the relations between the State and the Church in Greece is following a steady course (since the outburst of the 1827 revolution and certainly as from 1827 until today) without fluctuations. There have been some periods of tension, when the issue has been an object of political discussions, causing deep social and mostly ideological conflicts, as there have been periods of calm when such issues were only discussed by experts like legal scientists, theologians and historicists.

However, when this issue attracts the attention of politicians and journalists it has great intensity and leads to rather hot-blooded views. The oldest example dates back to the conflicts for the autocephaly of the Greek Church (which begun in the period 1833-1850). Two more recent examples include the 1987 conflict on Church property and the 2000 conflict regarding the indication of religion on Greek identity cards.

This is quite natural, given that State/Church relations encompass some of the fundamental self-determination issues of the Greek society: its relation to important historical events, to the diachronic nature of the Greek civilization and especially to Ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire, as well as its relation to the West and the western cultural model in combination with the Near East.

However, what is more important is that these issues are not examined independently but in relation to the European average, the European development model and generally the western institutional models of the Constitutional State (Tsaousis, 2001).

The issue of State/Church relations can be approached in many ways, either as a bilateral interaction among the Greek State and Church or as a bilateral issue between the Greek State and the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, or finally as a tripartite interaction among the Greek State, the Greek Church and the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate. One may find that these three approaches have significant differences (Venizelos, 2000).

As regards the Greek History, relations between the State and the Church have been shaped throughout three distinct stages: the Byzantine era, the Turkish occupation period and the period of the sovereign Greek State (Pantazakos, 2002)

Finally, the issue of these relations should be approached wisely and calmly by Greek governments who should respect the History, habits and customs, traditions and mostly the

Greek Constitution, the provisions of which will be analyzed below.

Delimited relations between the State and the Orthodox Church

Theologically (Based on the Orthodox Faith)

Separation between the State and the Church has its origins in nations experiencing an intense presence of Protestant values and is inherent in Protestant theology, according to which both the Church and the Government/State are man-centered organizations that draw strength from the citizens.

On the contrary, according to the Orthodox Church, both powers share a common origin in the Threefold God. According to Apostle Paul: *“You are also members of another society, which disregards Christ. I write to you on how to behave/present yourselves within that society. Each man shall submit to the civil authorities. Because the State and its authorities agree with God’s plan, who has created man to experience life in society. Consequently, each power comes from God. High authorities that exercise power have been appointed after God’s decision or acceptance”* (New Testament, to the Romans, Chapter 13, verse 1st)

However, there is differentiation as regards the essence and the boundaries of this power. The church is perceived as the body of Christ: *“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock where you confessed your true faith, becoming the first stone of my spiritual construction, I will build my church, and death and the gates of hell will not overcome and will not defeat the Church, which will be eternal and immortal”*. (New Testament, Gospel of Mathew, Chapter 16,

Verse 18th).

On the other hand, the Government/State is a finite mundane organization: "*Jesus knew their hidden thoughts and said: each kingdom divided in opposing sides/parties, waging war against their own, shall fall and disappear*" (New Testament, Gospel of Mathew, Chapter 12, verse 25th).

The Orthodox Church is an element that differentiates Greece from other member-states of the European Union and relates it to countries that are part of the wider European Area, which on the one hand do not form part of Europe's closed circle and on the other hand have experienced socialism (Giannaras et al, 1998).

The issue of the tradition and History of the Greek nation is also quite significant since there are many differences as compared to other peoples of Europe (e.g. that have experienced the Caesaropapism and the crimes of the Middle Ages). The Greek Orthodox Church never attempted to obtain civil powers in the Greek nation or intervene in high-level political decisions. For one thousand years in Greece, apart from isolated cases, the State and the Church have walked side by side with an amazing relation of solidarity and understanding, according to the teachings of orthodox theology (Archbishop of Miros, 2005, p.5).

Constitutional

Greece's constitution provides a specific framework for the recognition of the roles, relations and competences of the Orthodox Church towards the Greek State/ Government.

More specifically, article 3 of the Constitution which defines Orthodox Faith as the main prevailing religion, is only one of many constitutional dispositions which regulate the relations

between the State and the Orthodox Church. According to renowned Greek constitutional expert E. Venizelos, this disposition is not regulatory but complementary, which means that the relations between the State and the Church (and generally the relations between the State and other Churches/ religious organizations) will continue to be constitutionally regulated even in case of a Revisory Parliament (Veniselos, 2000).

However, it is worth mentioning that the constitutional framework of the Greek state, pursuant to article 13 par. 1 of the Constitution, defines religious freedom as a fundamental individual right, protecting different religions and avoiding the abuse of article 3 of the Constitution, which refers to the existence of one prevailing religion.

The issue of State-Church separation

When reading or hearing the views of those who support separation, it is clear that there is a lack of substantial arguments. These people often relate State-Church separation to the establishment of obligatory civil weddings, civil oath taking, civil funerals and burials, as well as cremation, or even to the abolishment of the dispositions on blasphemy against divine symbols and the restriction of conversion and religious sects. They even relate State-Church separation to the abolishment of prayer, as well as to changing the catechist nature of religious education, i.e. abolishing the lesson of religious affairs at schools. This means that they are not aiming to a simple separation but to a marginalization of the Church (Archbishop Miros, 2005, p.4).

Conclusions and proposals

The coexistence of State and Church in countries of the European Union, as defined by their Constitutions, may be classified in several ways ranging from total disregard to an organic connection between the two, through the implementation of several criteria related for instance to the degree of the Church's dependence on the State, the impact that the Church has on the State and the general participation of the Church in the country's political, financial and social life (Foundedaki, 2000, p.3).

The European Union founded upon the principle of subsidiarity and adopting the open coordination method in the European Lisbon Summit (May 2000), is continuing its course to integration with more solidarity and mutual support. Thus, our country needs to follow this orientation of European development and consequently regulate the issue of State-Church relations. The nature of these relations in Greece may differ, as mentioned above, but can coexist with the European reality. Up to now, no European partner or supranational organization has ever requested the separation of the State and the Orthodox Church, as part of Europe's integration. Furthermore, there is no EU directive referring to the issue of State-Church relations in Greece or requesting their separation. Hence, it is quite clear that this issue should be managed within Greece by the Greek governments, i.e. it is an issue that should concern elected representatives of the Greek people.

A number of issues, such as education, still remain under the authority/responsibility of EU state-members. As a matter of fact, the principle of subsidiary provides for the preservation, safeguarding, partial rationalization, maintenance and transfer of moral values, traditions and habits among the nations and peoples that are part of the European Union.

There is an imperative need for supranational cooperation to address the issues faced by European nations, such as the financial crisis that affects Europe (and not only) in the past four years, without eliminating the existing particularities among member-states. It is actually this pluralism of characteristics and mentalities and the multicultural nature of Europe that give life and color to the Democratic political systems found within the European borders.

Consequently, Greek governments, in representation of the State should always abide by the provisions of the Greek Constitution and respect and protect the rights of different religions and religious organizations, apart from the prevailing religion as defined in article 3 of the Constitution.

The Greek government should not apply the aforementioned article in disregard of article 13 par.1 on religious freedom. On the other hand, it should not condemn or “uproot” through laws and dispositions, an institution which is constitutionally regulated and indissolubly linked to the History of the Greek nation. As Greek institutions, both the State and the Orthodox Church should steadily continue the effort to smoothen their relations by preserving their independency within a framework of harmonious coexistence.

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