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TRAINING ON SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL RIGHTS IN THE
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Bible and Human Rights:
Orthodox contribution to an ecumenical discourse
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*πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος καὶ ὠφέλιμος πρὸς
διδασκαλίαν, πρὸς ἔλεγχον, πρὸς ἐπανόρθωσιν,
πρὸς παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ (Β΄ Τιμ. 3, 16)*

Introduction

First of all, I would like to congratulate the staff of the Church and Society Commission of CEC for their inspired idea to bring up the issue of Churches Voice on Human Rights in this special framework that includes the training on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights in the Euromediterranean region. I would also like to express thanks to the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy for their support for the realization of this meeting. This is indeed the “kairos” that European Churches should respond to peoples need for justice, peace and reconciliation as the necessary conditions for sustaining life. And certainly, Churches do need some training on dealing in the secular framework with Social, Economic and Cultural Rights especially in the sensitive Euromediterranean Region in order to be more effective to their call and mission in the world. As this year (2013) we celebrate the anniversary of the 1.700 years since the Edict of Milan, the Edict of Religious Tolerance, we should remind one of its conditions; that the State expects from Christians to pray for its welfare. Churches voice on human rights might be a kind of prayer and a great contribution for the well being not only for Europe but for all humanity.

Social, economic and cultural rights are topics related to human's life and dignity, therefore they have a certain theological dimension as well as a secular one. Churches need to deal with secular institutions -where and when this is possible- in order to serve the human being as a creature made according God's image. The European Union has a variety of councils and organizations in order to promote human values. These values spring greatly from the teaching of the Gospel. Churches ought to learn and use these organizations as means to reinforce their pastoral work. It is in this frame that my Church, the Church of Greece is willing to participate and contribute with her spiritual and theological wealth.

Bible and Human Rights

Coming to deal with the issue of Bible and Human Rights, it is a presupposition to mark that the Bible is a precious common heritage for Churches as well as for peoples in Europe. At the same time, it is one of the oldest spiritual treasures of humanity¹. It narrates the Revelation of God with the creation of the world and the human being. It assures for God's care for the well being of his creatures (Θεία Πρόνοια - Divine Providence); his special relation to human beings and the divine plan for their salvation and their return to God's arms (Θεία Οικονομία - Salvation History). Christianity continues as the new elected people of God, who live according his will as members of his body, the Church, and follow the way Christ showed them and leads to his Father's Kingdom. The Church is the fore-taste of God's Kingdom; although she lives today, at the same time she experiences the "eschata". This experience motivates her to work hard in order to reveal to the world some characteristics of God's Kingdom, the new heaven and the new earth, living in relation to the Trinitarian God, in love, justice and peace.

The Bible is the common basis and the starting point for the Churches to live and to do Theology. This ascertainment reminds me of a story from the Greek classical antiquity that relates to the great scientist Archimedes (287-212 b.C.)². Archimedes introduced a principle known as the "Archimedean point" or "Punctum Archimedes". According to Archimedes it is enough to be given a point to stand and then you can move the earth! («δῶς μοι πᾶ στῶ καὶ τὰν γᾶν κινάσω»). Could the Bible be a starting point to stand and lift the earth from its foundation? Is it a solid point from where we can have a plain view, a clear understanding and a fresh, genuine conception of life and human being? Could this starting point be common for all people?

These questions are serious and they should be examined carefully before any answer, positive or negative, is given. Certainly, someone, believer or not, could doubt this principle and deny that the Bible has any possibility to offer something or even speak to the world, having as an argument that it is a very old book, a collection of texts that

¹ See M. Konstantinou, *Deciphering the Common Heritage of Mankind*, "Alexander Press", Montreal 2010.

² Archimedes was a mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor and astronomer.

derives from a different socio-economic and cultural context. Besides, one could claim that the issue of human rights has nothing to do with the Bible since it was raised in a totally different concept, in the secular field and at the time of the Enlightenment. One might even say that making the Bible speak on human rights might be an anachronism. On the other hand, one could remind of several biblical texts contradictory to human rights that seem to justify slavery, submission of women, passive attitude towards oppression and injustice. Such abstracts had been used in the past to impose injustices to weak people. Actually, Christianity -to be more exact the spokesmen of Western Christianity- many times have been accused and found guilty for feeding oppression and exploitation of people and creation in general. And it is not only the Old Testament's multitude passages that could be used in order to justify violence of several kinds but it is the New Testament, although at a limited scale, as well. Just to give an example, we read at the 1st letter of Peter:

“Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect,
not only to the good and gentle
but also to the unjust” (1 Peter 2,18)³.

Sometimes a faithful reader of the Bible feels uncomfortable trying to understand such kind of texts⁴. Indeed, there “are some things hard to be understood” (2 Peter 3, 16) and there is always timely Philip’s question “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8, 30-31) as well as people’s wondering “How can I (understand)..., unless someone explains it to me?”. Moreover a hardship is when a biblical text is taken away from its context and is applied to a different situation without following any interpretation principles or -even worst- without taking into consideration the living experience of the believing community through the ages – what is called tradition in the Orthodox Church and it bears the seal of the Church Fathers. However, a selected biblical abstract –a fragment- can never substitute the salvation teaching of Christ⁵. The Orthodox Church considers that the reading of the Bible should take place inside the living in faith and praying community, the body of Christ,

³ See indicatively for the explanation of the 1 Peter 2,18: D. L. Tiede, *An Easter Catechesis: The Lessons of 1 Peter* in “Word & World 4/2” (1984), p. 192-201 at <http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/>

⁴ Cf <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/>

⁵ See the works of the Greek Biblical Scholar Prof. Dr. M. Konstantinou: 1) *The Lord's word is flawless: Narrative texts from the Old Testament*, “P. S. Pournara”, Thessaloniki 1998 (Ρήμα Κυρίου κραταιόν. Αφηγηματικά κείμενα από την Παλαιά Διαθήκη. Θεσσαλονίκη); 2) *Academical Hermeneutics of the Bible and the Church* (Ακαδημαϊκή Ερμηνευτική της Βίβλου και Εκκλησία), in Papers of the 7th Meeting of Orthodox Biblical Theologians, The Gospel of Mathew. (Εισηγήσεις Ζ' Συνάξεως Ορθοδόξων Βιβλικών Θεολόγων), Bucharest 25-30 September 1993, “Artos Zoes”, Athens 1996, p. 344-351; 3) *Biblical Hermeneutics in contemporary Europe: The issue of Paradigm Shift in Biblical Hermeneutics in relation to the Political Changes at a European and Universal level* (Βιβλική Ερμηνευτική στη σύγχρονη Ευρώπη: Το πρόβλημα της αλλαγής παραδείγματος στη βιβλική ερμηνευτική σε σχέση με τις πολιτικές αλλαγές σε ευρωπαϊκό και παγκόσμιο επίπεδο), in Holy Metropolis of Veroia, Apostle Paul and European Civilization, Minutes of the International Scientific Conference, Veroia 1997, p. 197-214.

the “ecclesia”, in order to be rightly understood and experienced⁶. Alongside, biblical scholars from the Orthodox⁷ as well as from other traditions have worked hard to provide us the interpretation of such “burning” passages, to enlighten and deepen our understanding⁸. Meanwhile, there are other scholars outside Church who express a rather severe criticism from their own point of view judging Christianity for ambiguous or prejudicial teaching⁹. Do they have the right to do so? According to the so-called third generation of human rights, which is “the right to development”, the individual has the right to participate in all benefits springing from the common heritage of humanity¹⁰ and as far as the Bible might be considered as such, a scholar is allowed to do so. Anyhow his academic freedom allows him to do so.

At this point a critical question is raised: can and has anybody the authority to speak for Christianity? I will agree with those scholars who claim that the task of interpreting the Holy Scripture of Christianity belongs only to the Church. Of course someone can talk about Christianity, express his point of view about Christianity, but he is not able and he has not any authority to speak on behalf of Christianity or to express the faith that a Christian believer experiences in his/her life¹¹. That brings us to our common task as Christians, as peoples of the living faith to God’s Gospel. We, as Churches have to speak and reveal, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what the Bible says to us and to the world on special issues, such as the human rights. Because

“all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3, 16).

As the deceased father George Florovsky concludes “The Bible keeps its authority not only as a record of the past but also as a prophetic book full of allusions, clues about

⁶ Cf. M. Konstantinou, *Academical Hermeneutics of the Bible and the Church* (Ακαδημαϊκή Ερμηνευτική της Βίβλου και Εκκλησία), in op.cit. (see footnote 5)

⁷ See indicatively the works of M. Konstantinou, *One Thousands Years and One Day. The Symbolic Language of the Old Testament’s Narrative Texts* (Χίλια χρόνια και μια μέρα, Η συμβολική γλώσσα των αφηγηματικών κειμένων της Παλαιάς Διαθήκης), in “Synaxe” (“Σύναξη”, Τριμηνιαία έκδοση σπουδής στην Ορθοδοξία), 67 / July – Sept. 1998, pp. 101-111. Also his work *Old Testament: “History of the Divine Economy” or “Mythology of Hebrews”?* in “Synaxe”, 69 / Jan. – March 1999, pp. 66 – 71. Also see works of S. Agouridis and J. Karavidopoulos.

⁸ Cf. D. L. Tiede, *An Easter Catechesis*, op.cit.

⁹ Studying the moral prescription from the Sermon on the Mount (Math. 5, 38-41) the author questions Christianity for urging people to no-resistance and asks for a clear rational explanation of this text. See Richard Schoenig, *A Problem with Christian Ethics*, “Think”, Vol. 12 / Issue 35 / Autumn 2013, pp. 25 – 37.

¹⁰ In this third generation of human rights are included the rights to peace, communication, humanitarian aid etc. See Philip Alston: *A Third Generation of Solidarity Rights: Progressive Development or Obfuscation of International Human Rights Law?* in “Netherlands International Law Review”, XXXIX, 1982, p. 307-322.

¹¹ M. Konstantinou, *Old Testament and Multicultural Society*, in “Επεστημονεκε Επετηριδα Theologikes Sxoles, Faculty of Theology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, vol. 8 [Παλαιά Διαθήκη και πολυπολιτισμική κοινωνία, στο Ε.Ε.Θ.Σ. Τμήμα Θεολογίας Α.Π.Θ., Τόμος 8 (νέα σειρά), Τιμητικό αφιέρωμα στον καθηγ. Α. Α. Ταχιάο].

the future and the ‘eschata’. The holy story of salvation keeps on”¹². Consequently, it is a great challenge –and a persistent demand- that Churches speak with one voice on this certain matter in order to be persuasive. Of course it is not an easy one. From this point of view the title of this meeting is very well expressed as “Churches Voice” on Human Rights and not voices (in plural).

Orthodox Church and Human Rights - Theological Approach

There are several studies on human rights by Orthodox; Greeks, Russians and other theologians have elaborated some ideas and brought brilliant thoughts, from a theological and even a moral philosophical point of view; Christos Giannaras to mention a modern one and Vladimir Solovyov¹³ to mention one of the past (1853-1900) are only a few. At the decade of the 1990’s after the collapse of the soviet regime there had been many changes in the Orthodox Churches and the issue of human rights was relaunched. Since that time respectful Orthodox voices have been heard as the one of Archbishop of Albania Anastasios Giannoulatos¹⁴. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew often expresses Orthodoxy’s concern for human rights. The Russians, the Patriarch of Moscow Cyril the 1st and the Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev have a significant contribution to this discussion as well. Last years the Church of Greece facing a deep economic and consequently a humanitarian crisis expresses her great concern on human rights and values. Besides, Pan-Orthodox meetings have expressed the Orthodox point of view on matters of the protection of human life and dignity as the 3rd Pre-conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference in 1986¹⁵.

So, what do the Orthodox say on human rights? In general the Orthodox Churches’ perception of human rights is that these are the fruit of the Enlightenment, a development of the West and a part of its own tradition. The Enlightenment had greatly doubted the authority of Christianity and the Church; it made human being the centre of the world instead of God. Such an understanding led to the conclusion that the discussion on human rights belongs to the secular area of the West and it is not a part of the Eastern tradition. Human rights were interpreted in several cases as contradictory or alien to faith and church life (the issue of the ordination of women may help our understanding in this case).

¹² G. Florovsky, *Issues of Orthodox Theology* (Θέματα Ορθοδόξου Θεολογίας), «Artos Zoes”, Athens ²1989, p. 61.

¹³ V. Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, “Cosimo, Inc., 2010 (originally published in 1918)

¹⁴ See A. Giannoulatos (Archbishop of Albania), *Orthodoxy and Rights of the Human Being: With Reference to the Ecumenical Declaration and the Greek Orthodox Tradition* in Anastasios Giannoulatos, “Globalization and Orthodoxy”, Athens 2000, pp. 65-106. (Ορθοδοξία και Δικαιώματα του Ανθρώπου: Με βασική αναφορά στην Οικουμενική Διακήρυξη και στην ελληνορθόδοξη παράδοση, στο: του ιδίου, Παγκοσμιότητα και Ορθοδοξία. Μελετήματα Ορθοδόξου προβληματισμού).

¹⁵ See *Final texts-decisions of the 3rd pre-conciliar Panorthodox Conference (28 Oct. – 6 Nov. 1986)* [Τελικά κείμενα-αποφάσεις της Γ' Προσυνοδικής Πανορθόδοξου Διασκέψεως (28 Οκτωβρίου - 6 Νοεμβρίου 1986)] at <http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/>

For the Orthodox “human rights” sounds like “individual” or even “individualistic rights”. In Greek the word “individual” is *ἄ-τομο* meaning something that is not amenable to cutting or sharing. For a human being living as an individual means that he/she is a totally autonomous, separate and self-sufficient being that can exist by itself regardless its relation to other humans. An “individual” thinks of his/her interests no matter if they are against others. On the other hand, the word “person” in Greek is *πρόσωπο* that means someone who turns his/her face towards somebody or something and exists in relation with someone. Human being is able to see not his own person but others’ faces¹⁶ and that is the way in which he/she realizes his/her own image and identity. Seeing the other’s face, being in relation, the person sees its own face like in a mirror; he/she also sees the image of God (as every human being is made in his image)¹⁷.

According the Orthodox perception, the human being should never be above the community¹⁸. The demand for individual rights that exceed too far the traditional ethos of the community creates a strong reaction because the balance within the community (e.g. marriages of homosexuals) is disrupted. Individuality disregards the community and it greatly harms it. In this frame of human rights’ debate there is always a risk that any individual could claim to legalize every peculiarity of him/her, any preference, any egoistic pursuit (*recently there was a publication referred to the paedophiles claim that it is their “right” to have videos with such kind of content etc for their own use*). The Orthodox Church is displeased to observe such a risk of distortion of human rights in Europe.

Probably the contradiction between “individual” (ατομικά) and “collective” (συλλογικά) rights” is better understood in its roots. This notion is found in ancient Greece where Aristotle describes the human being as a “political animal” and “polis” (e.g. city–state) as a collective entity. Human being lives in relation with other human beings in the city¹⁹ and he/she becomes a citizen. A citizen is related to the community; does not live independently, he/she is not self-sufficient, he/she thinks and acts together with others. The citizen as a member of the community adapts his/her individual will to the will of the community. This leads to a harmonious coexistence of human beings as they can move from their individual ethos to social ethos. This ensures not only their survival and coexistence but a good quality of life as well²⁰.

¹⁶ See more in M. Konstantinou, *Human Person as Social Being*, Paper presented to the Joint Committee of the Bilateral Anglican - Orthodox Theological Dialogue, Novi-Sad, 2013.

¹⁷ More on Theology of the Person in Orthodoxy see V. Lossky, *The Theological Notion of the Human Person*, Chapter 6 of *In the Image and Likeness of God* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press: New York, 1974) pp. 111-123. Also see J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1997)

¹⁸ See also M. Konstantinou, *Human Person as Social Being*, op.cit.

¹⁹ *Politica*, A2, 1253a 3.

²⁰ See more in M. Konstantinou, *Human Person as Social Being*, op.cit.

It is exactly this contradiction that Christos Giannaras underlines in his works. Giannaras is probably the more popular Greek philosopher and theologian in the West. His work “The Dehumanization of Right” (Η Απανθρωπία του Δικαιώματος)²¹ is linked to the theology of the person and claims that the principle of human rights is as cruel as its cause. Hard and hostile to human being socio-political and economical structures, exploitation of human labour, humiliation of his dignity etc led to imply the declaration of human rights. As a cure to a rotten cause, human rights are rotten as well. Human rights abolish the unique identity of a person and shape such kind of relations that nobody is irreplaceable but each one might be a substitute for another. Giannaras does not underestimate the value of human rights but he wants to move beyond and above them. His pursue is not the abolishment but the humanization of human rights: “every action of self-giving and self-offering is life. But any persistence to individuality... is a denial of existence and death”²². Giannaras’ point of view is a significant contribution from an Eastern point of view, but it is neither the final nor the official or the representative one.

Alongside there is the point of view of the great Russian philosopher and theologian Vladimir Solovyov. His conception of human rights is linked to eschatology and the Kingdom of God. More specifically, he claims that the mission of Christians is to work together and transform society from being a chaos and a foretaste of hell to a proclamation of heavenly harmony, a new beginning of the world according God’s desire; it is this world that the human being has to build with Christ’s grace. And it is exactly this work and this mission that do not allow any Christian to neglect the rights as well as the duties he/she has as a citizen of the future kingdom of God and as a member of an earthly state²³.

The consensus of the Orthodox Churches on human rights is nicely expressed at the documents the 3rd Pre-conciliar Panorthodox Conference in 1986. “The teaching of Christianity that the humankind is sacred is an inexhaustible source for any Christian effort to safeguard the value and grandeur of the human person”²⁴ stated the Conference. Indeed, the Orthodox Church’s attitude on human rights is developed in the frame of her anthropology. Anthropology is the key to answer the question and to give the theological foundation of human rights from the Orthodox point of view. However, anthropology is always understood in relation to Christology and Trinitarian Theology where eschatology is included as well. The Trinitarian God is community of

²¹ Chr. Giannaras, *The Dehumanization of Right (Η Απανθρωπία του Δικαιώματος)*, ed. Domos, Athens 1998

²² Chr. Giannaras, op.cit., p. 119

²³ V. Solovyov, *Orthodox Christology towards social problems (Η Ορθόδοξη Χριστολογία για τα κοινωνικά προβλήματα)*, in “Synoro”, no. 40/1966-1967, p. 275.

²⁴ See *Final texts-decisions of the 3rd pre-conciliar Panorthodox Conference*, op.cit. Cf. G. Tsetsis, *Human Rights: Why do they matter for Churches?* in “European Churches engaging in Human Rights, Present Challenges and training material”, CSCCEC (ed. By E. Kitanovic), pp. 17-18 and Vl. Perisic, *Interpretation of Human Rights in the light of the Church Fathers*, op.cit., pp. 33-37.

persons; each one of them exists in relation to the other, “facing” the other. The three persons of the Trinity constitute such an unbreakable unity and communion (*koinonia*) that individualism is absolutely inconceivable²⁵. Trinitarian God has created human being “in His image and likeness”; through the call of God to Adam (i.e. to all humans), human beings are called to relationship and therefore they are free to be in communion with each other and with God, by creating such an unbreakable community that the whole humanity will be like one²⁶. This is the work of the Holy Spirit into the history of humanity and every single Christian’s life separately: to enable people to create a perfect communion of personhoods in the likeness of the communion of the Holy Trinity. Human being has been given the possibility to accept God’s call to become a personhood and it depends on his/her will to accept this call or not. Close relation with God means close relation to fellow human beings and no relation to God means no relation to fellow human being, thus loneliness and sadness²⁷.

I think what expresses more the Orthodox understanding of human rights in relation to the Bible is the Psalm 118 [119] (according to the Septuagint) and its use in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church. The human being made according God’s image prays him to lead his life by teaching him the divine rights.

ΣΤΑΣΙΣ Β΄. Ἦχος πλ. α΄.

Psalm 118 [119]

Αἱ χεῖρές σου ἐποίησάν με καὶ ἔπλασάν με, συνέτισόν με, καὶ μαθήσομαι τὰς ἐντολάς σου. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

Thy hands have made me, and fashioned me: instruct me, that I may learn thy commandments (Psalm 118 [119]:73)
Lord have mercy on me!

Ὅτι ἐγενήθην ὡς ἀσκὸς ἐν πάχνῃ, τὰ δικαιώματά σου οὐκ ἐπελαθόμην. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

For I am become as a bottle in the frost: yet I have not forgotten thine rights (Psalm 118 [119]:83) »»

Σός εἰμι ἐγώ, σῶσόν με, ὅτι τὰ δικαιώματά σου ἐξεζήτησα. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

I am thine, save me; for I have sought out thine rights. (Psalm 118 [119]:94) »»

Ἀπὸ τῶν κριμάτων σου οὐκ ἐξέκλινα, ὅτι σὺ ἐνομοθέτησάς με. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

I have not declined from thy judgments; for thou hast instructed me. (Psalm 118

²⁵ Cf. J. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, T&T Clark, 2006, p. 36. M. Konstantinou, *Human Person as Social Being*, Paper presented to the Joint Committee of the Bilateral Anglican - Orthodox Theological Dialogue, Novi-Sad, 2013

²⁶ M. Konstantinou, *Human Person as Social Being*, op.cit., p. 7. See also M. Konstantinou, *Old Testament Presuppositions of Orthodox Anthropology*, Paper presented at the 1st International Symposium “Orthodoxy and Islam, Athens 15-17.12.1990 (Παλαιοδιαθηκικές προϋποθέσεις της ορθόδοξης ανθρωπολογίας)

²⁷ M. Konstantinou, *Human Person as Social Being*, op.cit.

	[119]:102) »»»
Ἐκλίνα τὴν καρδίαν μου, τοῦ ποιῆσαι τὰ δικαιώματά σου εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα δι' ἀντάμειψιν. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.	I have inclined my heart to perform thine rights for ever, in return for thy mercies. (Psalm 118 [119]:112) »»»
Καιρὸς τοῦ ποιῆσαι τῷ Κυρίῳ· διεσκέδασαν τὸν νόμον σου. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.	It is time for the Lord to work: they have utterly broken thy law . (Psalm 118 [119]:126) »»»

At the first column we can see a synthesis of selected verses of Psalm 118 [119]. This synthesis is a part of the Burial Service in the Orthodox Church. These verses indicate that the rights belong to God. Rights here are identical to the commandments, law, judgment, will and desire of God: human being asks to learn and keep God's commandments, righteousness and good, that provide people **the** peace as a result of God's justice and kindness. All these are the fruits of faith in God and of man's persistence in keeping his will. On the contrary, being far away from God and "his rights", people's behavior turns to evil, they become unfair; their relations and their societies are turned into ruins.

Consequently, it is the faith of the believer that goes beyond the claim for human rights, because faith to God provides human being everything he/she needs. Human rights are weak and insufficient as they are just a human invention; but God's rights are powerful and can ensure human's life and salvation. So, keeping God's rights we ensure our rights as human beings.

***The understanding of Human Rights in different Orthodox environments
With special reference to the Church of Greece***

In general, Orthodoxy approaches the issue of human rights according the historical experience of different churches. The Orthodox Churches who lived under the communist regime have a slightly different understanding from those that lived in countries of the western world. During the so-called cold war the West based its political system on the grounds of individual, civil and political rights whereas the Eastern countries based their structure on collective, social and financial rights²⁸. Recently (2012), a volume was published on "Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights" by the Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, Nijmegen (the Netherlands)²⁹ that contributes to understand the values of Orthodox theology in the contemporary socio-cultural context especially in Churches of ex-communist countries (Russia,

²⁸ R. Muellerson, *Human Rights Diplomacy*, London and New York , 1997, Routledge, p. 225 παρά Γιάννης Θεοφύλακτος, *Δύο κριτικές προσεγγίσεις στα ανθρώπινα δικαιώματα* (G. Theofylaktos, *Two critical approaches to human rights in "Antivaro"* (January 2004) at <http://palio.antibaro.gr/>

²⁹ A. Bruning and E. van der Zweerde (eds.), *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights* (Eastern Christian Studies 13), Leuven; Paris; Walpole, Mass.: Peeters, 2012

Bulgaria, Romania etc). What is noteworthy is the difference between the Western notion of tolerance and the Russian notion of “terpimost” (“patience”). A general conclusion springing from the essays of this volume is that there are slight differences between East and West yet they are not such a great contradiction. The Orthodox Churches in these countries do support the values of human rights, giving a special emphasis in religious freedom as part of their cultural rights - besides, it was what they missed during the soviet regime.

In Orthodox there is always a debate related to human rights as a secular individualistic claim and human rights as the preservation of God’s special creature, the human being. That debate is going on in Greece and it is nicely reflected to the critique Chr. Giannaras expressed towards the social and humanitarian work the Church of Greece offers to people nowadays. Chr. Giannaras accused the leadership of the Church for acting as any secular non-governmental organization offering food to the needy (“soup kitchens”), clothing, medication and other material relief³⁰. In this way, he claimed, the archbishop spiritual mission of the Church is degraded. The Archbishop expressed in several occasions his sorrow because of this critique; he replied referring to the Gospel’s word³¹ and its commandment to care for the needy.

The truth is that the Orthodox Churches realize that many things have been changed in the 21st century. To speak especially for the Church of Greece it is obvious that she has to face great problems: the decadence of the country’s political system, moral and economical corruption, the radical development of racism and neo-nazism, poverty, homeless people, suicides (more than 4.500 according to the official records the last 3 years)³². These are serious threats for the life and dignity of the human person that motivate the Church to initiate partnerships to strengthen the preservation of human rights. Recently, the Church of Greece was brave enough to start a dialogue with political parties of the Left after an initiative of the Faculty of Theology of the Aristotle University (Thessaloniki) and its faculty member the inspired Prof. Dr. Miltiadis Konstantinou. This dialogue has nothing to do with the Christian-Marxist dialogue of the past. It is about a new endeavour for joint effort in order to deal with anything threatens human life and dignity; totalitarian ideologies, racism, poverty and hunger. These are issues of high priority for our Church nowadays. As the deceased Christodoulos, previous Archbishop of Athens, used to say “Christianity is not a teaching for the salvation of the soul unless it is a teaching for the salvation of society

³⁰ Chr. Giannaras in the Greek newspaper “Kathimerini”, 1 April 2013.

³¹ See indicatively Mathew 25, 40

³² The gravity of the problem caused the intervention of His Beatitude Hieronymus (Archbishop of Athens and All Greece), A paternal voice concerning the suicides (20 Oct. 2013) at <http://www.amen.gr/> (Μια πατρική φωνή για τις αυτοκτονίες)

(κοινωνία)³³. Society calls literally for the “daily bread” as well as for the word of God for its survival and redemption.

***Perspectives of Orthodox engagement
in the struggle for human rights in the 21st century***

The Orthodox Church avoiding any kind of exaggeration can contribute as a member of the ecumenical movement and CEC in particular to its fight for the defense of human rights. The Orthodox Church feels that the word of God is above any human claim. She believes that “for the regulation of the person’s relationships there is no need for laws; the willingness of somebody to turn towards the other is the only thing needed”. But she has the discretion to realize that “the regulation of the relations of individuals in a secular society needs the establishment of strict laws and institutions to protect every single human being from the others”³⁴. Unfair socio-political and economical structures that threaten people have to be faced one way or another for the sake of human being. If human rights have to do with preservation of life, freedom and dignity then it is not about a matter of egoistic demand neither of syndicalism or secular or political activity, but it is about God’s creature. In this frame the Orthodox Church does not refuse but supports the principal of human rights, as she did many times in the past.

To conclude, the Orthodox Church accepts the principal of human rights without forgetting that “the human rights are not the way for human being to live. The human being lives only when he/she serves (διακονία), is happy only when he/she offers, because he/she received the grace; so the great right of human being is his resignation from his rights” meaning “its continuous excess”³⁵. Giving the world to understand the word of the Holy Scripture is a great milestone to the struggle of human being to be free, to live in love, justice and peace as God the Creator desired; in other words to become God’s child by his grace.

³³ Christodoulos (Archbishop of Athens), *The Soul of Europe*, Athens 2004, p. 43 (Η ψυχή της Ευρώπης, εκδ. Αλληλεγγύη)

³⁴ M. Konstantinou, *Human Person as Social Being*, Paper presented to the Joint Committee of the Bilateral Anglican - Orthodox Theological Dialogue, Novi-Sad, 2013

³⁵ Christodoulos (Archbishop of Athens), *The Soul of Europe*, op.cit.