

After 'Taliban Catholicism,' now 'Taliban Orthodoxy'?

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 4, 2010 NCR Today

Without really trying, I've generated controversy in some quarters by coining the phrase "Taliban Catholicism" to describe a psychological tendency (as opposed, let the record be clear, to any actual person or group) in today's church. I understand it as the equal-and-opposite extreme from what George Weigel has usefully described as "Catholicism Lite," meaning a kind of supine assimilation to secularism.

"Taliban Catholicism," then, is an exaggerated allergy to anything that smacks of secularism, liberalization, or corruption by modernity — an angry form of the faith that knows only how to excoriate and condemn.

Of course, Catholicism hardly enjoys a monopoly on the "Taliban" instinct, which is more akin to a potential distortion within any religious system. In some ways it may be especially virulent within ultra-traditional and nationalist strains of Orthodoxy, as a recent "Patriarchal and Synodal Encyclical" from Archbishop Bartholomew of Constantinople makes clear.

Traditionally the Patriarch of Constantinople is considered the "first among equals" in the Orthodox world, and Bartholomew has won international acclaim for the way he has used that office to promote ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue, and a keen sense of social responsibility. Among other things, he's known as the "Green Patriarch" for his strong ecological emphasis.

Yet Bartholomew also has strong critics within Orthodoxy, who see his openness as a potential liability — especially as it regards relations with the ancient enemy of Rome. Bartholomew addresses that criticism head-on in his encyclical, dated Feb. 21.

Here are a few choice passages:

"With a sense of duty and responsibility, despite its hurdles and problems, as the First-Throne Church of Orthodoxy, the Ecumenical Patriarchate cares about protecting and establishing the unity of the Orthodox Church, in order that with one voice and in one heart we may confess the Orthodox faith of our Fathers in every age and even in our times. For, Orthodoxy is not a museum treasure that must be preserved; it is a breath of life that must be transmitted and invigorate all people. Orthodoxy is always contemporary, so long as we promote it with humility and interpret it in light of the existential quests and needs of humanity in each historical period and cultural circumstance."

"To this purpose, Orthodoxy must be in constant dialogue with the world. The Orthodox Church does not fear dialogue because truth is not afraid of dialogue. On the contrary, if Orthodoxy is enclosed within itself and not in dialogue with those outside, it will both fail in its mission and no longer be the "catholic" and "ecumenical" Church. Instead, it will become an introverted and self-contained group, a "ghetto" on the margins of history. This is why the great Fathers of the Church never feared dialogue with the spiritual culture of their age — indeed even with the pagan idolaters and philosophers of their world — thereby influencing and transforming the civilization of their time and offering us a truly ecumenical Church."

It is precisely for these reasons that, with the mutual agreement and participation of all local Orthodox Churches, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has for many decades conducted official Panorthodox theological dialogues with the larger Christian Churches and Confessions. The aim of these dialogues is, in a spirit of love, to discuss whatever divides Christians both in terms of faith as well as in terms of the organization and life of the Church.

These dialogues, together with every effort for peaceful and fraternal relations of the Orthodox Church with other Christians, are unfortunately challenged today in an unacceptably fanatical way – at least by the standards of a genuinely Orthodox ethos – by certain circles that exclusively claim for themselves the title of zealot and defender of Orthodoxy. As if all the Patriarchs and Sacred Synods of the Orthodox Churches throughout the world, who unanimously decided on and continue to support these dialogues, were not Orthodox. Yet, these opponents of every effort for the restoration of unity among Christians raise themselves above Episcopal Synods of the Church to the dangerous point of creating schisms within the Church.

In their polemical argumentation, these critics of the restoration of unity among Christians do not even hesitate to distort reality in order to deceive and arouse the faithful. Thus, they are silent about the fact that theological dialogues are conducted by unanimous decision of all Orthodox Churches, instead attacking the Ecumenical Patriarchate alone. They disseminate false rumors that union between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches is imminent, while they know well that the differences discussed in these theological dialogues remain numerous and require lengthy debate; moreover, union is not decided by theological commissions but by Church Synods. They assert that the Pope will supposedly subjugate the Orthodox, because the latter submit to dialogue with the Roman Catholics! They condemn those who conduct these dialogues as allegedly heretics and traitors of Orthodoxy, purely and simply because they converse with non-Orthodox, with whom they share the treasure and truth of our Orthodox faith. They speak condescendingly of every effort for reconciliation among divided Christians and restoration of their unity as purportedly being the pan-heresy of ecumenism without providing the slightest evidence that, in its contacts with non-Orthodox, the Orthodox Church has abandoned or denied the doctrines of the Ecumenical Councils and of the Church Fathers.

Beloved children in the Lord, Orthodoxy has no need of either fanaticism or bigotry to protect itself. Whoever believes that Orthodoxy has the truth does not fear dialogue, because truth has never been endangered by dialogue. By contrast, when in our day all people strive to resolve their differences through dialogue, Orthodoxy cannot proceed with intolerance and extremism. You should have utmost confidence in your Mother Church. For the Mother Church has over the ages preserved and transmitted Orthodoxy even to other nations. And today, the Mother Church is struggling amid difficult circumstances to maintain Orthodoxy vibrant and venerable throughout the world.

It will be interesting to chart reactions to Bartholomew's encyclical within Orthodoxy – and, perhaps, to ponder the extent to which some of the same points might be made with regard to Roman Catholicism.

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