A Contribution to Prof. Larentzakis’ book „The Orthodox Church“

Dear guests of honour, dear Prof. Panagiotis, Chairman of the department, dear colleagues, dear students, and a special greeting from Austria to you dear Prof. Larentzakis where we say „Grüß Gott“!

My institution (and perhaps I may say) your institution, the KPH, the Ecclesiastical University College of Teacher Education in Vienna, has for a long time had an Erasmus-mobility-agreement with the University of Thessaloniki. All the more it gives me great pleasure, that I am allowed to be present at this event held in your honour. I have had the opportunity of meeting you at KPH Wien/Krems several times, and you have also been a guest at predecessor-institutions in former times.

I think it is not inappropriate that people are made more powerfully aware of your book „The Orthodox Church“ (third edition) published in German in Thessaloniki as well. Therefore I’ll take the liberty, to present the book on site -

But first I would like to mention your position as professor at the first Orthodox teacher-training (respectively -education) institution in Austria at the KPH.

Half a million Orthodox Christians live in Austria with a rising tendency. This number increased considerably after the Balkan Wars from 1991 till 2001.

Although an Orthodox curriculum for Religious Education (RE) has been in existence since 1991, enabling Orthodox Religious education at schools for the first time, there has been no Orthodox teacher training for religious teachers in Austria. Not until the foundation of the KPH, the Ecclesiastical University College of Teacher Education in Vienna in the year 2007, which is collectively upheld and maintained by all the Christian churches, were Orthodox religious teachers trained for the first time. They are also taught in non-theological fields together with catholic and protestant students. A speciality namely „team teaching“ has also been introduced in some theological subjects, e.g. spirituality and ecumenism.

It was clear, that this ecumenical project was carried out by Prof. Larentzakis. He taught mainly Introduction to Orthodox Theology, The Apostolicity of the Church, God’s Revelation and monuments of the Orthodox tradition, the dogmatic doctrine and knowledge about icons from the beginning of October 2007 until the Summer term of 2014 at the KPH.

„The Orthodox Church“: An eye-opener with a consequent ecumenical approach

Prof. Larentzakis’s book „The Orthodox Church“ is in any case an important eye-opener for western theologians and students with regard to Orthodoxy, however with a consequent ecumenical approach.

In the preliminary remarks of the third edition (2012) Prof. Larentzakis expresses his joy about the fact that his book will be viewed from two positions: as a source of information and as an ecumenical contribution.

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1 Larentzakis Grigorios, Die Orthodoxe Kirche. Ihr Leben und ihr Glaube (orientalia-patristica-oecumenica vol. 4), Wien 32012; (first ed.: Graz 2000).
However the question should also be posed, whether this role of eye-opener might also be considered vice versa (namely also as an eye-opener for the Orthodox position).

It then raises the question, whether the permanent ecumenical encounter at the academic level (that which is embedded in practised forms of ecumenism), which is the case in the academic teachings of Prof. Larentzakis’ (especially in Austria) will contribute to an outstanding perception of western theology, which has been established as a „theology in motion“(1) since Vatican II.

An investigation might also be of value to see whether a significant movement in theology, a remarkable progress in theological thinking, would be received from without in a sufficiently extensive and synchronic manner.

And yet: Can it be true, that this movement of theology may be a movement towards each other or an effort to find a common ground?

And further: that the perception of this movement will be reflected not only in dogmatic enchiridions and treatises, but also through the practice of faith, in the living day to day ecumenism and last but not least in the actual doctrinal teaching?

Are not ecumenical differences hastily made fast to dogma? For example, does the constant experience of practised collegiality require and allow a different interpretation of the first rank (highest position) in the hierarchy as it appears to be portrayed through the First Vatican Council (namely there as a monocratic governance)?

Will an „increment value“ not emerge in the simultaneity of embeddedness both in western and eastern theology and praxis?

Prof. Larentzakis represents this expertise for the movement of western theology through the Second Vatican Council and documents this in his book „the Orthodox Church“.

After the Second Vatican Council an example (or paradigm) was created for such a „theology in motion“ within western theology through the „joint declaration on the doctrine of justification“: In nr. 41 of the declaration it is stated mutually: „The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration.\(^2\)

This example clearly shows that theology can succeed in letting old controversies appear in a new light. This potential will be increased in Prof. Larentzakis’ book in a consequent manner as shown in the following.

But that does not prevent Prof. Larentzakis stating, that this ecumenical attitude will put further questions to the western theology which has been largely influenced by the name of Augustin, e.g. not only in case of the immaculate-question. (see page 114ff 3rd ed).

In any case, I would place the book under the heading of the preface by Cardinal Schönborn:

„Ex oriente lux“ – light comes from the east: „It is no exaggeration to say, that the monuments for renewal in the west always owe their stimulus to the Christian East which

provides the truth of the old saying, ‘ex oriente lux’ (light comes from the east). So we may hope, that the new introduction to the life and the faith of the Orthodox church, with which Prof. Larentzakis presents us contributes to this renewal, arouses interest in Orthodoxy, imparts knowledge, above all however, also ignites the love of the spiritual treasures of the Orthodox church.” (Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, Archbishop Vienna).

Prof. Larentzakis’ book could be misunderstood as only a mere introduction into the Orthodoxy – probably for western readers, - yes, this is also true, but that which distinguishes the book is its consequent ecumenical approach. This does not prevent him from putting tough, searching questions to the western churches (more further below).

However one may be allowed to ask, whether the service [or: diakonia], which is rendered to the western church and theology will not also become a service/diakonia for the orthodox theology and church: is it not true that I am only truly able to recognize myself in dialogue?

Perhaps this is also one of the reasons that the book appeared in a third edition in 2012.

Are there any differences between first and third edition?

The fact, that theology is embedded in the concrete reality of life, will cause new challenges: these [challenges] are recognized in the book in a consequent manner:

As early as 2012 Prof. Larentzakis had the foresight to recognize and process the coming challenges of 2015/16: For instance the refugees question. As a result he added a new chapter on inter-religious dialogue in the book.

A shift in the perspective from the first to the third edition can also be recognized in the table of contents on the back cover page.

The first edition focuses on the interests and problems of the western church(es) and presents its eastern solution: e.g. re-marriage and celibacy. The third edition focuses more on information, but has added the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Therefore it outlines these also as an Orthodox task and duty. Whether consequences arise in the wake of the Orthodox tradition will be left to the discretion of western and also eastern readers.

At the outset some formal differences will be looked at:

A new layout in the third edition will show a modern presence: Firstly a new cover (Panhagia) from the Museum of Icons in Recklinghausen, Germany (which owns one of the largest collections in the West). Secondly there is also an update of the illustrations: whether the choice of the pictures of 1st edition where Prof. Larentzakis meets the Patriarch and in the 3rd edition the Pope corresponds only to the historical sequence or whether it also represents an ecumenical signal, can only be determined with difficulty: in any case – in the first edition Prof. Larentzakis was portrayed with the Patriarch, in the third edition with Pope Benedict XVI. (p. 92f). However the portrait of the Patriarch can also be seen in the third edition (p. 140f).

(And there may also be current photos for illustrations for a presumably 4th edition: a papal order [„Gregorios“] dedicated to Prof. Larentzakis – pictures with the Metropolit of Austria, Arsenios, and the catholic Bishop Egon Kapellari [from the year 2013]).

But now let’s have a short look at the content in more detail.

In the introduction Prof. Larentzakis dispels possible points of criticism:
courage to incompletism
But simplicity useful for a better comprehensibility

On the one hand he defends the necessity of and therefore the courage to incompletism, on the other hand the utility of a better comprehensibility.

It is not possible to write an all-embracing „introduction“ with ecumenical focus in a short readable style: A comparison with another book that will evidently not be read by students, the „Ökumenische Dogmatik (W. Beinert/U. Kühn, 2013)“ will reveal this truth. Prof. Larentzakis needed 234 pages, Prof. Beinert and Kühn needed 880 pages to outline the main questions!

The outstanding merit oft this book is its consequent ecumenical focus in a readable style! Prof. Larentzakis includes an ecumenical introduction or dogmatics in an intra-personal way – he is indeed able to represent both traditions, the catholic and orthodox – there is no need for two authors!

This might be due to the ecumenical climate in Austria but also to a scientific praxis/tradition and Paradigm in Austria: Theology, especially Liturgy „can only be practiced in an ecumenical way, in consideration of all ecclesiastical traditions“.

If we consider the content, there is a strikingly remarkable point: a completely other weighting than (for example) in a catholic introduction into faith or Christianity:

First the community, then the connex Theology&life, the community of saints, and only at fourth position the actual content of faith – containing the traditional sources: tradition and scripture (notice the sequence!) and the Symbolon. Perhaps this may be a normal way from an Orthodox point of view, but this is/will be a challenge for western Christians. At the last following liturgy and spirituality and Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue:

In detail:
I. Orthodoxy and community 9-33
II. Orthodox theology and life 35-81
III. Fulfilled life: The saints in the church 83-118
IV. The main content of faith 119-163
V. Liturgy and spirituality 164-175
VI. The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism 177-202
VII. [a complete new chapter!] The Orthodox Church and the inter-religious dialogue 203-234

An exemplarily insight into the themes and perspectives will be presented in the following:

A key to ecumenism: familiarity with current theology from encountering denominations

Prof. Larentzakis reveals, that the approach to the themes from the Orthodox (theological) perspective will show an affinity with a new perspective reopened through 2

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4 Meßner Reinhard, Einführung in die Liturgiewissenschaft, Paderborn ²2009, 17.
Vatican theology(&spirituality), in other words: the roots of Vatican theology are merely a regress/recourse to the ancient (orthodox) tradition –

   e.g., chapter II. „Orthodox theology and life“ deals [in the context of sacraments] with the relationship of lay people and [the] clerics, more precisely with the status of the lay people and the common priesthood: For Catholics there is the understanding, that the significance of the whole „people of God“ is actually an old orthodox insight, formulated e.g. more than 100 years before „lumen gentium“ (the document about church from Vat. II): Prof. Larentzakis quoted the encyclica of the Orthodox patriarchs from Mai 1848 (which was a critical answer to the encyclica of pope Pius IX): „The guard of Orthodoxy, the body of the church, that is the people themselves! (p. 70)“.

This regress to the (older) common tradition seems to be a paradigm shift contrary to the catholic tradition of the 19th and 20th century, especially formulated at 1st Vatican council: – may I allow for illustration purposes a comparison of the starting titles of the document about the church from 2nd Vatican, lumen gentium, in contrast to the one from 1st Vatican: 2nd Vatican deals with: the mystery of the church / on the people of God / on the hierarchical structure of the church / the laity5 – in contrast the titles of the 1st Vatican council: The institution of the apostolic primacy in Peter / the perpetuation in the Roman bishops / the primacy of the Roman bishop (jurisdiction) / the infallibility.6 But this contrast should also be considered from the specific political background at the time of Vatican I, the oppression of the Papal States, that means, that the „sharpening“ of Vatican I cannot be understood detached from the concrete political situation.

But: Let’s have another look at Theology and life, chapter 2:

To the balance between practice and doctrine and the spiritual accompanying he emphasizes that which in the west (from the Catholic point of view) seldom is, or perhaps only in the current pontificate from Francis seems to be practised: [quotation page 51]:

„you should know, that in the area of human life and spiritual existence and in
connection with a spiritual accompanying many questions and problems will not be solved by general [global] decisions, orders, canons and receptions, but by a broad and objective information, especially based on love and basic trust resulting in personal contacts and dialogues between the affected persons and their spiritual fathers.“

Larentzakis calls attention to a tendency which outweighs the doctrine/doxa most of all the catholic atmosphere.

I will shorten this with at least four outstanding texts:

Firstly a controversy between Catholics and Orthodox - pointed at the catholic dogmas about Mary (p. 114ff.):

In other words, Larentzakis (in accordance with Bishop Stylianos) mentioned contrary positions within the 2nd Vatican Council (between article 53 and 59)7 and the encycla of


John Paul II, ‘Redemptoris Mater’,\(^8\) – which interprets the immaculate only as conveyed in article 59:

In contrast article 53 declares: “At the same time, however, because she [= Mary] belongs to the offspring of Adam she is one with all those who are to be saved.”

Larentzakis points out, that western Theologians also prefer the interpretation as in art. 53: He quoted the comment of the Theologian Semmelroth to article 53 (p. 115)\(^9\): „This text may the fact, that Mary was in the ‘debitum’ of original sin, indeed not to decide, but points in this direction.”

But John Paul II omitted – so Larentzakis – in encyclica ‘Redemptoris Mater’ the characterizing “who are to be saved” - namely John Paul II said: “indeed, she is one with all … she belongs to the offspring of Adam.”\(^10\)

All in all: Larentzakis mentioned, that an attempt had been undertaken to re-formulate the doctrine of original sin, but the 2nd Vatican Council is ambiguous, confirmed also the dogma from 1854, the immaculate.

Larentzakis asked again critically: if this diversity is true, „What is the authority of the council …“ (p. 116). That is a fundamental criticism!

Second text: Larentzakis outlines, that there is an expectation in the Orthodox church in the question of woman’s ordination: Here he explains, that the gender-difference does not arise from creation, and that with baptism all are participating in the common priesthood (cf. 117) – there is no subordination (against Karl Barth[!]).\(^11\)

Third text: Ecumenism: Harvesting the fruits: Charta Oecumenica (1997-2001)\(^12\)

Prof. Larentzakis may be titled as the „defender of Ecumenism“(cf. p. 193): one of the important results of the second European assembly in Graz (Austria, 1997) is the Charta Oecumenica ... with guidelines for cooperation – and one of these results is the KPH Vienna (2007), which is collectively upheld and maintained by all the Christian churches!

Fourth text: Interreligious dialogue

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\(^10\) The council said (as stated above): „Indeed, however, because she belongs to the offspring of Adam she is one with all those who are to be saved (art. 53).”

\(^11\) This may be underlined by a current headline (from 19.11.2016): „The synod of the Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa has voted to restore the order of female deacons.”: cf. [http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/11/19/%C3%A4gypten_wiedereinf%C3%BChrung_des_fraudiakonats/1273436](http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/11/19/%C3%A4gypten_wiedereinf%C3%BChrung_des_fraudiakonats/1273436) [08.12.2016]

Prof. Larentzakis focusses on the rich experience of Christians and Muslims living together in the Orthodox world (p. 205). He outlines three aspects with regard to interreligious dialogue (p. 210ff):

- The fundament of Trinitarian community (koinonia)
- The fundament of Christian anthropology: community (koinonia) of mankind
- The universality of salvation

Résumé: (cf. p. 234): an open horizon and in consequence a solid and serious development of interreligious dialogue makes sense, is necessary and also possible. This is and has been so since the time of the fathers of the church.

Prof. Larentzakis’ book „The Orthodox Church“ will enable us to move forward on the common path and dialogue process (inter-denominational and inter-religious) with new courage and hope!

Thank you for your attention.

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