The majority of the Orthodox churches, living in liberal democratic societies, are free to worship God and live the fullness of the Orthodox tradition in its diverse ethnic and cultural expressions. However, the freedom that liberal democratic societies ascribe to their citizens generates an unprecedented pluralism of voluntary communities and lifestyles, which has challenged the central role that the Orthodox Church played in moral formation in traditional societies. The attitudes and sensibilities that the Orthodox churches are called to develop within the contextual realities of liberal democracies are highly contested issues among Orthodox theologians today. Some face the new contextual realities with an alarmist attitude, fearing the capitulation of the Orthodox Church to liberal sensibilities. They adopt an adversarial, activist posture against the modernizing liberal societies, proposing defensive demarcations of radical separation between Orthodoxy and other Christian churches, other religions, and liberal democracy in general. They seek to construct the identity of the Orthodox Church in opposition to all who are not Orthodox, espousing a stringent, hierarchical, authoritarian, and exclusivist vision of what the Orthodox Church should be, in order to maintain the purity of Orthodoxy. Others perceive the changing social realities of liberal societies as opportunities to reconfigure and communicate the Orthodox faith and tradition without compromising the Church’s particularity. Still others, for the sake of relevance and ecumenical collaboration, may have unconsciously surrendered the particularity of the Orthodox tradition, reducing the Church to a cultural agency that legitimates for its members the prevailing social realities.
Generally, this debate expresses the fear and the anxiety of some about the possible loss of the unique Orthodox identity and its capitulation to the pluralistic culture of liberal democracy as well as the strong belief of others that the Orthodox ethos can be embodied in and through different socio-cultural delineations, aspirations, and achievements. Formally, it can be argued that the Orthodox churches, despite the objections of the traditionalists, through their active participation in the ecumenical movement and interfaith collaboration have signaled the abandonment of attitudes of stringent and defensive demarcation, rejecting sectarianism and focusing their attention on the task of witnessing God’s love for all.¹

In this essay, I will focus on the challenges that liberal democracy poses to the traditional understanding of the Church’s mission and witness in the world and how it has already affected the life of the Church and its structures of authority. Furthermore, I will explore the role of the Orthodox Church in public life once it has critically accepted the intrinsic pluralism that liberal democracy generates. Perhaps this paper is an exercise in theological and moral imagination reflecting not where the Orthodox churches actually stand in relation to liberal democracy, but how they should understand their place guided by the fullness of the Orthodox faith, its eschatological orientation, and the Eucharistic experience that decisively shapes the mind of Orthodoxy.

**Freedom in Liberal Societies**

In liberal societies, personal freedom has priority over social unity, regardless of whether this unity is imposed by tradition or modernizing institutions and ideologies. The individual is free to act in ways that are impossible in traditional societies. He can collaborate with others to form freely chosen communities, without the constraints of ethnic, religious, or class identity, or choose life-goals that go beyond the boundaries of traditional expectations and norms. In that context, he can fashion and practice diverse patterns of life that express individual creativity and aspiration. He may choose from a range of possibilities that may have been denied to him by a traditionally prescribed social order. Freedom in liberal societies is interpreted purely and exclusively as absence of constraint on the possibilities of seeking self-fulfillment and self-discovery. It might lead some to a rejection of all traditions, while others might be led to a free appreciation
of tradition as a resource for the development of communal life based on mutual respect and affinity.

Citizens in liberal democratic societies are free to pursue their self-interests, and choose to relate to other persons only for the purpose of gratifying their own desires. The notion of self in such an attitude can be expanded to include a particular group of people, which acts like a selfish person in relation to other groups, defining and claiming the common good at the expense of others. In such relationships the others are reduced to objects of use, often expressed by economic exploitation and commodification, in acts of psychological and emotional manipulation, or in their reduction to objects of sexual gratification. These domineering and exploitative relationships tell the negative story of liberal societies, in which individual freedom becomes a license to exploit others. Freedom, however, provides another possibility to the citizens of a liberal democracy that leads to the recognition of discovering the importance of relationships as indispensable elements of human identity. It leads them to the recognition that it is only in life-sustaining and transforming relationships of love that human fulfillment can be experienced. Such relationships are not relations of domination and consumption, but relations formed primarily for the sake of a shared life. There is a sharp contrast between these two possible ways of exercising freedom: The one views the individual self as seeking its own goals, so that relationships have a purely instrumental character, and the other considers the self as willing to allow its own goals to be transformed through a commitment to a relationship distinct from those individual goals.

Is it possible to give a critical but positive interpretation of this shift of focus from the community to human autonomy, while simultaneously adhering to the importance of relations that lead to communion? The philosophical and sociological insights of Charles Taylor can be illuminating in developing a positive, but critical appreciation of the turn to the self in a culture that emphasizes relationships as constitutive of a healthy community. He argues that the culture of subjectivity is neither to be rejected nor to be uncritically endorsed as it is. The way to address the culture of subjectivity is to enter sympathetically into the culture’s animating ideal and to try to show what it really requires. This can be done by demarcating the higher and nobler ideals of subjectivism from its malignant practices and using these positive and motivating ideas to critique its negative expressions.
Such a posture presupposes an engagement in the work of persuasion, being in conversation with the prevailing cultural realities. He believes that people are not so locked in by the various social developments that condition them that they cannot change their ways, regardless of strong arguments concerning atomism and instrumental reasoning.³

Taylor acknowledges that in liberal democratic societies, subjectivity has become a unique source of significance, meaning, and authority. “Good life” human flourishing is identified with living one’s life in full awareness of one’s state of being; in enriching one’s experiences and finding ways of handling negative emotions; and in becoming sensitive enough to find out where and how the quality of one’s life—alone or in relation—may be improved. The goal is not to follow established paths, but to forge one’s own inner-directed, subjective life; not to become what others want one to be, but to “become who I truly am.” Thus the key value for the mode of subjective life is an authentic connection with the inner depth of one’s unique life-in-relation. People have the potential to choose what they wish to be and with whom they want to associate.

Taylor proposes that in the cultural conflicts over subjectivity, instead of taking a position either for or against we need to persuade people that self-fulfillment, so far from excluding unconditional relationships and moral demands beyond the self, actually requires these in some form. It is in the nature of their increased freedom that people through their choices can sink morally lower, as well as rising higher. In liberal democratic societies, the higher forms of self-responsible moral initiatives and dedication will coexist with debased practices. Taylor argues that

the best can never be definitively guaranteed, nor are the decline and triviality inevitable. The nature of the free society is that it will always be the locus of a struggle between higher and lower forms of freedom. Neither side can abolish the other, but the line can be moved, never definitively but, at least for some people for some time, one way, or another.⁴

Taylor advocates that, through winning hearts and minds, social action and political change, the better forms of collective life, can gain ground, at least for a while. This perspective, in his view, breaks quite definitively with the prevailing cultural pessimism. Taylor considers that cultural pessimism is not only mistaken; it is also counterproductive.
Some Orthodox theologians, because of the corrosive effects that the primacy of freedom has upon all forms of communal life, consider liberal democracy to be incompatible with the basic ethos of Orthodoxy, without meaning that they do not recognize the contribution of liberal democracy in affirming the dignity and the freedom of all human beings against oppressive and alienating social structures. Orthodox tradition is incompatible with the negative aspect of liberalism that threatens all forms of communal life, but it provides invaluable resources in forming moral habits that enable freedom to be expressed in ways oriented to community rather than domination or gratification. In Orthodox theology, commitment to community is not about the stifling of individual freedom but the fulfillment of the self in interpersonal relationships.

The communal pattern of life that the Church espouses through the anthropological implications of the Trinitarian faith and the experience of the Eucharistic life is a distinct contribution of the Church to the world, a prophetic reality that challenges or inspires the world to be in the process of social transformation and openness to God and others. Freedom by its very definition may lead either to a transcendence of the limitations and the necessities of nature as well as of history or to an unconditional subjection to them. The task of the Church is not to be the advocate of the eradication by secular force of those practices of freedom that lead to human alienation and abuse, but to be an authentic communion of people who actively participate in the ongoing dialogue in the civil society that aims to strengthen human solidarity, justice, and peace as well as openness to a future that transcends the oppressive realities of the present. In the public space of civil society, the Orthodox Church may discover that other Christian churches, religious communities, and secular movements may operate with similar anthropological understandings through their commitment to society, or even humanity, at large. Such commitments in advancing human solidarity, compassion, human dignity, and rights enhance human welfare and generate a high degree of cooperation in pursuit of common goals. Such commitments and relationships, either explicitly or implicitly, are open to the love of God in their recognition that the fulfillment of human life lies beyond the self as self-referential goal.

The Church is called to communicate its theology of personhood that, in my judgment, can redress the harm caused by distorted theologies of self-abnegation and invite the citizens of liberal societies to allow personal
relationships to flourish through commitment. The Kingdom of God, as it has been disclosed by Christ and continuously lived in the Church, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, must be communicated within liberal societies as the life of communion and communication that espouses relationships of respect and love marked by justice and peace. The coming of God’s Kingdom is embodied in the active involvement of Christ in the life of the world, in collaboration with God’s Spirit, disclosing the love of God for all creation. God’s goal of bringing life to the world through the advent of His Kingdom defines his mission; for the realization of this mission, Christ is subject to death, without abandoning or modifying His proclamation of the Kingdom, or avoiding confrontation with the powerful.

The Church, in the context of liberal societies, should contribute its own theological insights and witness on the nature of human freedom as the fundamental potential for community and creativity, rather than as a destructive self-assertion. The Christian faith’s own understanding of freedom, as a response to God’s gift of life and love, can serve and nourish all expressions of freedom in liberal societies that are oriented to mutual respect and just relationships. For Orthodoxy, the fullest expression of this free self-disposition is in the realization of personal existence through relationships of mutual commitment, relations with God as the source of human life and with other persons as the essential context for personal fulfillment. Freedom is understood as the possibility of fulfillment through relationship, rather than, as in the secular liberal conception, the absence of any warrantable and justified claims on the individual autonomy.

How does the primacy of the self over the community affect the inner life and structures of the Orthodox Church? Focusing now on how liberal society has affected the ethos of the Orthodox people in the United States, I want to argue that the Orthodox churches in this country have already opted to develop their identity by using their religious and cultural tradition as a resource rather than a constraint. The profile of the Orthodox communities in this country has changed dramatically because of the social upward mobility of Orthodox people, their progress in education, and above all their daily encounters and interactions with people of different religions, races, cultures, and ethnicities. Most especially for Orthodox young people, neither ethnicity nor differences in religion or cultural background can be an obstacle to uniting their lives with those of their loved ones. Second- and third-generation Orthodox prefer the language of their
birth country over that of their parents’ home country, and they speak English better than Greek, Arabic, Russian, or Slavonic. They view their Orthodox identity in a very different way than either their parents or their peers did only two or three decades ago. They are decoupling the Orthodox faith from its cultural embodiments, and they are in the process of recasting it into what is seen by them as a “pure” religion, based on isolated religious markers and American sensibilities. The principal authority in crafting their identity is the sovereign self. They are distrustful or have already moved away from the organizations, institutions, and causes that used to anchor their religious and cultural identity and behavior. Each person performs the labor of fashioning his or her own self, pulling together elements from the various aspects of Orthodoxy, ethnic heritage, existential quests, and present cultural sensibilities, rather than stepping into an “inescapable framework” of identity. Community is a felt need, even a real hunger for some, but it is, in my judgment, subordinate to individualism.

The individualization of the Orthodox faith and its decoupling from its traditional ethnic, cultural embodiments lead to the development of multiple orthodoxies within the Orthodox Church. The pluralization of Orthodoxy is a threat to the Church’s unity, since the institutional aspects of Church life have limited capacity to persuade those who have embraced or crafted an individualized version of Orthodoxy about the need to correct, enhance, or recraft their particular orthodoxy. Perhaps the Orthodox churches in liberal democratic societies must learn not only to accept the prevailing pluralism of the public realm that freedom generates, but also to live with an internally differentiated Orthodoxy—multiple orthodoxies—that maintain their unity in the Apostolic faith, the Eucharist, Scripture, and diakonia. Acceptance of the pluralistic nature of liberal democratic societies inescapably invites the Orthodox churches to come to terms with the nature and the limits of pluralism that tradition-as-resource generates within the life of the Church, most especially on issues of ethics and morality.

The Orthodox Church must recognize that while, in traditional, culturally and religiously homogeneous countries, it was inevitable that the personal search for human fulfillment led most of the people to the Church, in liberal societies people have a range of options for exploration of personal meaning. In traditional settings, the Church relied primarily on the process of socialization for the purpose of communicating and passing on the practice of faith, neglecting the question of personal religious conversion.
Once it is recognized that the process of socialization in the present contextual reality no longer necessarily leads to a faith commitment and that the range of options for human fulfillment is multiplied, the social expressions of the Orthodox faith need to be recast with the aim of communicating, through dialogue and persuasion, a personal faith that fulfills the perennial human existential quest for meaning.

The Orthodox Church in the Public Sphere

In reflecting on the presence and participation of the Orthodox churches in the public life of liberal societies, it is important to avoid all forms of reductionism that limit their role either to serving the poor or operating only in the subjective and private realms of life. Generally, the role of religion in the public life is much more than “faith-based boosting” of efforts to contribute to material betterment of individual lives and mending society’s safety net. This kind of understanding misrepresents the capacity of the religious communities to carry the burden of social welfare for disadvantaged people, families, and communities. And furthermore, it misrecognizes the identity and priorities of the religious communities in the public realm, such as increasing moral and spiritual capacities, inspiring citizens to serve neighbors, building relationships across barriers of race and income, and providing a vision of what kind of community people are called to be.

For the same reasons, we must argue against “dogmatic secularism” that devalues the effects of faith practices on the vibrancy of civil society and democratic life by considering them to be simply subjective and private phenomena with no public significance. Dogmatic secularism dismisses the beliefs and values of a significant number of people who have chosen to shape their identity through the values and virtues embedded in the narratives of their religious communities. This prevents liberal societies from responding adequately to the global surge of growing religious pluralism. Most importantly, it deprives them of opportunities to give renewed strength and vibrancy to the moral values, principles, and virtues needed for democratic participation and civility. Dogmatic secularism, however, should not be confused with a functional secular ethos that allows all citizens of liberal societies (secular, religious, agnostics, indifferent, or unbelievers) to withhold the full range and depth of their convictions in order to maintain mutual respect, cooperation, and civility in public settings. Dogmatic
secularism wrongly equates a public ethos of tolerance and civility with the absence of religious commitments.

The Orthodox Church, based on her distinctive ethos, understands her public role in liberal societies as an agent of reconciliation that promotes human solidarity (communion), justice, and peace through the totality of her life and in collaboration with other Christian churches, religious communities, secular movements, and people of good will. Such collaboration, as we have already noted, is feared by some on the grounds that it might gradually render the distinctive stance of the faith secondary and inessential or conceive the ethical principles and values of Orthodoxy apart or independently from their theological basis. Others refute such arguments, advocating that not to be involved in such movements means that the Church would pay less attention to the ideals of human rights and dignity and focus on its own internal life. In essence, it is feared that these options may lead either to a dissolution of the Church’s identity or a withdrawal from the moral challenges and potentials of the secular world.

The justification of the Church’s participation in the public life of liberal society should not be guided by secular ideals and principles but based on the fullness of the Orthodox tradition and life. It must not be a matter of political expediency, but it should reflect the will and the love of God for the world. What God has granted to the world most especially through his incarnate Word and the sending of the Holy Spirit is what the Church offers to the world. The primary task of the Church is to be an icon of God’s Kingdom, the new creation, in which all in their particularity are united with God. This is experientially lived in the celebration of the Eucharist that constitutes the Church. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church becomes the living presence of Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit. An indispensable aspect of the Church’s being in the world is to witness the coming reality of God’s Kingdom beyond herself and to live in solidarity with all those who strive to realize, however imperfectly, the principles and the values of God’s Kingdom in various ways and historical contexts.

Orthodox theology in its ecumenical dialogue has been criticized on the grounds that its Eucharistic ecclesiology is susceptible to the danger of leading to ecclesiolatry, limiting God’s presence and operation only within the canonical boundaries of the Church and more specifically among the baptized faithful. In response to such criticism, Orthodox theologians have developed the notion of “liturgy after Liturgy,” wishing to maintain
the normative role that the liturgy plays in constituting the Church and at the same time to acknowledge that the experiential relationships of love that they have in the Eucharist with God, humanity, and creation must guide the life and the witness of the Church. The danger of escaping from the challenges and conflicts of history to an eschatology that justifies ethical indifference—although it need not be thus—is a real challenge that Orthodoxy continues to grapple with.

The recognition that the celebration of the Eucharist demands an ethical response from the human side does not mean that God’s presence in the world through his Church somehow depends on fallible human responses and actions. The Eucharistic ethos excludes all forms of messianic ethics that imply that human efforts and actions can establish and advance the Kingdom of God in history. Human efforts independent of God’s Spirit and apart from Christ cannot bring humanity and the world into God’s Kingdom. Yet the Kingdom, by virtue of Christ’s resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit, is already an active presence in history without being contained or absorbed by it.

The Church lives in and communicates to the world the eschatological gift of hope that God has bestowed to his beloved creation. This hope goes beyond history and cannot be satisfied or exhausted by anything in human history. Whatever the outcome of human history or the fate of particular historical communities, God’s eschatological gift of hope cannot be destroyed. Human history cannot fulfill that hope, nor can it abolish it. Phenomenologically, it is in the nature of hope to be able to see the future, despite the possibility of horrors, disappointments, and failures, as an open possibility: a future in which human beings can persevere in their historical existence and pass on their hope to succeeding generations. A belief in the openness of the future to human striving implies a confidence that the future will, in some way, be hospitable to human aspirations. It expresses human confidence that human achievements will have some lasting value despite the risk of being corrupted and perishing because of their historical contingencies. At the same time, a detachment from these achievements, a sense that they are not the ultimate manifestations of what humans beings are capable of being, is essential to the human sense of independence from history. This is the sense that human beings can transcend past failures and begin anew, that their essence has not been exhaustively poured out in one fragile historical project. Such a vision is at home in the Orthodox
conception of human existence in the sense that the future is in God’s hands and that human worth will not be measured by the success of human projects but by the virtues that informed and motivated their efforts. In theological terms, the sense of the openness of the future has its ultimate source and meaning in the Kingdom of God, and the independence of human personal worth from historical vicissitude is given an eternal foundation in the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. All that is good in human efforts prepared in some way for the Kingdom of God, yet human destiny is never determined by the success or failure of human efforts. Nevertheless, Christians are called to solidarity in history, to achieve a bond with their fellow human beings that is forged and strengthened within history. It is in the historical circumstances of their lives that they come to know God through his image in their neighbor and use their freedom to help make God’s Kingdom visible in sign and anticipation.

In the history of the Christian tradition, we can identify three inseparable and equally important modes of unity with God that have shaped the identity of the Church and need to guide her life and mission: unity through the word of God as it is found in Scripture; unity through the celebration of the Eucharist; and unity in serving the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. While the word of God transforms the human sense of reality and the Eucharist unites all with God in the risen Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, serving the poor is a sign of recognizing in them the suffering God, who awaits healing and comfort by our love and compassion. In the active love of the victims of history and empathy for the most vulnerable ones, the Church becomes a sign of witness of the inbreaking of God’s Kingdom. Aspects of God’s Kingdom can be found in the world and in all human beings through the prayers, the mission and the witness of the Church and the unceasing operation of God’s Spirit who moves all in mysterious and still incomprehensible ways into unity in truth.

The recognition that the new creation is already an active reality in the world as a gift of God implies that Christians exercising discernment must identify and affirm what is of God that reflects in imperfect and multiple ways signs of his presence. Each of the noble quests and struggles for greater justice, peace, and advocacy of freedom, dignity, and human rights for all despite their inherent weakness and corruptibility is not alien in all respects to God’s purpose and love. The Church discerns in them the human quest
for God’s Kingdom, which is the fruit of God’s Spirit. Thus, in the functional secular public space of liberal society, all life-sustaining and life-transforming principles and values such as human dignity and rights along with freedom can constitute the common realm in which followers of different religious creeds and ideologies along with secular people can meet and dialogue, contributing dialogically to the common good. Dialogue creates the necessary space in which citizens and communities can meet one another and deliberate about how the common good might be embodied in policies that regulate their political life. Dialogue in such a pluralistic setting aspires as much as possible to resolve conflicts discursively, not manipulatively, coercively, or violently. It transcends not only the skeptical view that there is no point in continuing to discuss the issues that divide us but also the realist position that assumes that conflicts and differences among people and communities can only be resolved through the use of power or coercion. Dialogue is neither futile nor conclusive, but it helps to sustain the unity of conflicting communities in the conversation process. If the interlocutors in a conversation do not achieve agreement, they may at least mediate their conflicts temporarily and consider the conflict from the perspective of what they already share. Provided that all are free to participate in the process of deliberation, dialogue advances the common good of society.

The Orthodox Church can play a role in liberal societies that always retains—in fidelity to God’s Kingdom—a critical distance from any particular political form, and yet never remains aloof from all those whose experience of evil inspires them to struggle for justice. The eschatological orientation of the Orthodox faith does not allow the Church to be an apologist of any national and racial ideology, political system, economic theory, and praxis since all of them are effected by the pervasive corrupting presence of evil and their anthropocentric operating conception of reality. What then is the function of the Church in the public realm if it cannot fully endorse any political and economic system and praxis, nor fully reject them, once it discerns traces of God’s Spirit in them? The notion of being “connected critics,” in the phrase of Michael Walzer, illuminates our vision of how the Church should operate in a democratic society. Christians should be committed to the fundamental ideas of democracy and yet be able to see the shortcomings of any particular democratic regime and society. As connected critics, they deeply care about the values inherent in any particular political project, and their critique serves to call a commu-
nity back to its better nature. “Because people of faith share the fundamental values of democratic societies, they remain connected to public life even as they engage in criticism; because their commitment to democracy remains penultimate, however, they can appeal to transcendent ideals to critique current practice and to elevate their understanding of democratic values themselves.”

The Orthodox Church moving into the public realm as a theological agency must operate in a space where the common good is built on affirmations of shared political values rather than of the sacred texts and teachings of any particular religious tradition. In such a context, the Church must use her language of faith with an emphasis on its hermeneutical potential to illuminate and interpret shared meanings, rather than to witness to her sovereign truth. An insistence on particular religious doctrine may be heard simply as an appeal to a particular group identity rather than as an invitation to reflect on our common situation. The Church should instead evoke the shareable human experience that allows the citizens of democratic societies to reflect on their common human situation. In this context, the promotion of human rights plays a key role in the Church’s relationship to the contemporary world and thereby in the process of shaping a renewed sociocultural identity. This form of identity does not have demarcation from antagonistic ideological forces or other Christian communities as a constitutive feature, and for this reason it is capable of initiating a wide range of alliances in promoting justice and peace for all. Refraining from religious language in circumstances where it may alienate other citizens of good will is a form of respect, recognizing that Christian witness must often take the form of anonymity precisely for the sake of respecting the presence of Christ in our neighbor.

The Orthodox understanding of authentic human existence as the “being in communion” that Orthodox anthropology espouses is an important contribution to the quest for building a human community woven through personal relationships of freedom and love. Such theology needs to come, however, in terms of the all-pervading and inescapable power of sin, corrupting all who are exposed to the temptations of wealth and power. Orthodox anthropology, while acknowledging the pervasive presence of evil in every human being and society, at the same time affirms the far greater power of the presence of God in all human beings through the grace of God’s Spirit and of Christ’s salvific life, death, and resurrection. The Christian vision of the human person as sinful, redeemed, and capable of virtue should
inform democratic societies by helping people in their personal and communal life to develop ways to limit corruptibility and increase the range of opportunities for expressing the good present in them. The Church in her public presence is called to acknowledge both the human capacity for cooperation and solidarity and the human proneness to exclude and exploit others unless structures and sanctions are enshrined in law and in public institutions that promote human solidarity, justice, and peace, bringing all closer to each other and more especially closer to God’s intention for the created world.

Notes


3. Taylor, Ethics, 72.

4. Taylor, Ethics, 78.


2014) provides illuminating findings about the Orthodox people in the United States that support my argument. The report estimates that the Orthodox people are approximately 1 percent of the American population. They are ranked according to their income in the middle and upper-middle class by either meeting or, in some instances, exceeding the national averages. 28 percent of them are college graduates and 18 percent hold a postgraduate degree while 22 percent have received some college education. 58 percent are married but only 30 percent have one to three children. As far as their faith is concerned, 71 percent percent have a strong faith in God but only 56 percent consider their religious faith important for their lives. 60 percent pray to God daily and the rest either weekly or seldom. Most of the Orthodox people go to Church once every month or a few times a year, while 26 percent attend services regularly once a week. Scripture is considered literally the Word of God only by 26 percent, while 33 percent believes that it is not the Word of God word by word and 29 percent that it has been written by men. In interpreting the Orthodox faith, 68 percent believe that there is more than one way to interpret it and only 28 percent believe that there is only one way to understand the teachings of the Church. Furthermore, 70 percent of Orthodox people believe that many religions can lead to eternal life and only 20 percent believe that only the Orthodox faith leads to salvation. 43 percent of the Orthodox people think that the government should do more to protect the moral fabric of American society, while 48 percent think that the government is too involved in legislating morality. On the issue of homosexuality, we have surprising numbers: 48 percent believe that it should be accepted by society while 30 percent believe that society should discourage its practices. On abortion, 24 percent (18 percent national) believe that it should be legal in all cases, 38 percent legal in most cases and only 20 percent illegal in most cases. These findings disclose that a substantial number of Orthodox people in this country have differentiated, to some degree, their religious and moral beliefs from the formal teachings of the Orthodox Church. They have done so not by denying the importance of their faith in God and even of their tradition, but mainly because of the contextual realities in which they live, their level of education, and their appropriation of God’s love for all people.

16. Clapsis, “The Orthodox Church in a Pluralistic World.”