

Three Levels of Conciliarity: Orthodox Perspectives on Wholeness and the Post-Modern Subject

Vasileios Thermos

Wholeness has been the perennial dream of humankind. While people are strongly interested in preserving their own identity and distinctiveness, they simultaneously tend to cling to collective constellations seeming to promise an inner coherence.

This urge is so strong that it may have side-effects, more or less inappropriate or even dangerous. In struggling to articulate paths to a multi-level wholeness, thinkers have generated ideologies, leaders have invented totalitarianism, religions have been attracted to pantheism, and simple folks have pursued desperate romantic affairs. Diverse as all these failures may be, nevertheless they represent attempts to bring individualistic parts into a harmonious synthesis.

It is reasonable that the vision for wholeness has a divine origin. This is nothing less than human creation “as His image and likeness” (Gen. 1: 26). Theologians have elaborated on the idea that all unities are motivated and fed by the foremost Unity who is God. *The ultimate One*, as Dimitru Staniloae called Him, is both the point of reference and the source of any human wholeness.

Staniloae emphasizes that “this One is infinitely more perfect than His creatures. No division, no schism can appear in Him.”¹ He proceeds further to declare:

By being different from the world this One affirms His freedom and His personal character in granting existence to beings conscious and free, creating them out of nothing and not out of His nature. The motivation of this creation can only be the freedom of love, not an inner necessity... He transcends the world because He is a wholeness that creates and preserves wholenesses, holds them in a unifying system of relevant references, and leads them towards a greater wholeness in Him. This world is dominated by one thought, that tends to a wholeness and desires to transcend itself towards Someone beyond this world.²

So, according to Staniloae who is a distinguished pupil of Saint Maximus the Confessor, the source of wholeness is God and His uncreated logoi (*λόγοι*) which inserted the longing for wholeness in human nature. Indeed patristic thought generally suggests that all distorted and failing struggles for wholeness are covertly oriented towards God and His divine call. Usually all failures of this struggle find their cause in the irreconcilable warfare between the search for *identity* and the pursuit of wholeness. Vital as they both are, they seem often quite incompatible. What is interesting here is that Greek patristic thought early admitted the need for a stable and safe identity. In the writings of the “areopagite” we read:

But how, someone may say, do all things aspire to peace, for many things rejoice in diversity and division, and would not, at any time, of their own accord, be willingly in repose. Now, if in saying this, he affirms, that the identity of each existing thing is diver-

¹ Dimitru Staniloae, “The Ineffable Mystery of the Ultimate One,” *Synaxi* 19 (1986): 5–18 (in Greek from the French, all excerpts from which are my translation).

² *Ibid.*

sity and division, and that there is no existent thing whatever, which at any time is willing to destroy this (identity), neither would we in any way contradict this, but would declare even this an aspiration after peace. For all things love to dwell at peace. ... And the perfect Peace seeks to guard the idiosyncrasy of each ... by its peace-giving forethought, preserving everything unmoved and unconfused, both as regards themselves and each other, and establishes all things by a stable and unswerving power, towards their own peace and immobility.³

Saint Maximus, who is a commentator of the “areopagite,” continues that “this absolute and transcendental One is revealed to human beings through their desire for a higher unity which cannot stop at any relative unity... Thus human beings see that they themselves are not the last reality and freedom, so they are not absolutely satisfied in remaining in their own selves... It is only in their unity in Him that all conscious created beings find their rest, peace, and joy, gifts provided by one to the other.

In this self a faculty called human *logos* resides, as a product and agent of the divine uncreated *logos*. This human *logos* (which is not reduced to mind) has been assigned the task of implementing what the divine *logoi* for humanity have preconceived, namely of promoting the wholeness of the subject. It has undertaken the mission of extinguishing any irrationality from human life that makes an obstacle to wholeness. Pointing to the same aim, an Orthodox prayer after receiving Holy Communion asks for “peace in my mental powers,” namely for a reconciliation of mental functions.

Staniloae described it this way: “The law that links everything is the expression of a *logos* of a unifying power abiding in everything.”⁴ That is, our nature possesses the necessary powers and qualities for wholeness because this is its own

³ *On Divine Names*, 11, 5 (P.G. 3, 952–953). Retrieved from http://www.ter tullian.org/fathers/areopagite_03_divine_names.htm#c11.

⁴ Dimitru Staniloae, Comments on “Mystagogy of Saint Maximus,” (in Greek: Athens, Apostoliki Diakonia 1973), 166–168 (my translation).