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Emotions and Orthodox Spirituality during Turbulent Times: Analysis of Facebook Expressions over the Abduction of Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi) of Aleppo

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Abstract

On 22 April 2013, the Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox Metropolitans of Aleppo, Paul (Yazigi) and Gregorios John (Ibrahim), were abducted *en route* to their city from the Turkish borders, after accomplishing a humanitarian mission in turbulent Syria. Since then, Facebook activists have expressed their thoughts and emotions *via* different means, in several forms, and for various objectives. This paper takes a close and analytical look at some of these and related posts and comments associated with Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi). As a matter of fact, such 'virtual' expressions, like 'real' prayers, might increase compassion and solidarity on one hand, and lead to frustration when they remain unfulfilled on the other. Finally, this paper aims at suggesting better and probably healthier Ecclesiastical reasoning and praxis, specifically, in re-considering some traditional beliefs and practices and proposing a new approach for dealing with emotions during turbulent times.

Keywords

Emotions, Expressions, Facebook, God, Church, Orthodox Spirituality, Prayer, *Realpolitik*, abduction, Interdisciplinary analysis.

Introduction

ON 22 APRIL 2013, THE GREEK ORTHODOX and Syriac Orthodox Metropolitans of Aleppo, Paul (Yazigi) – brother of the current Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch John X (Yazigi) – and Gregorios John (Ibrahim) were abducted by an unknown terrorist group *en route* to Aleppo from the Turkish border, in an area which was under the control and surveillance of the Syrian opposition and certain secret intelligence agencies, after accomplishing a humanitarian mission in turbulent Syria. In response to the

abduction, there were official calls for patience, reliance on God, strengthening the hold of the faith and special prayers for their liberation in both Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox Churches (see Joint Communiqué 2013a). Furthermore, activists started to express their thoughts and emotions over this plight in some places and on social networking sites. This paper will take a closer look at and analyze some related posts and comments on Facebook regarding the abduction of Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi), mainly stated by Greek Orthodox activists (laymen and clergy) in Arabic, during the first year of the kidnapping; the fate of the two bishops is still unknown (cf. Aziz 2014). Moreover, the paper aims at increasing awareness of what it takes to live in a real world while at the same time maintaining a healthy belief in God and in various Ecclesiastical duties, by challenging some traditional beliefs and practices. Finally, this paper will take an interdisciplinary approach in analyzing confusion in the theological, ecclesiastical, religious, spiritual, psychological, political and social matters.

1. Facebook Emotional Expressions

In general, Facebook activists feel and like to express their thoughts and emotions; they do so in various ways facilitated by Facebook, by (a) adding a cover photo, (b) changing the profile picture, (c) writing a status or a comment, (d) uploading a picture, (e) sharing and/or liking any of the aforesaid ways, and (f) using various emoticons. Greek Orthodox Facebook activists are no exception. Their thoughts and emotions concerning the abduction of Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi) are of two types: (1) positive emotions addressed to the bishop himself and (2) negative emotions which are related mostly to the abduction itself. Some of the positive emotions addressed to the bishop himself are a) trust (e.g., tr. *"We trust that His Eminence does not fear those who kill the body but he will fight those who try to kill the spirit"* (Aljamal 2014)), b) confidence (e.g., tr. *"I am confident of your coming back home, we are waiting for you, your Eminence"* (Khoury 2013)), c) hope (e.g., tr. *"Someone would say, according to human reasoning, that Bishop Paul will not come back ...But, in what do we seek protection? Isn't it by hope?"* (Moussi 2013)), d) faith (e.g., tr. *"Pray without cessation ...Nothing is impossible for God"* (Massih 2013)), e) nostalgia (e.g., tr. *"How beautiful was the time we spent with*

you” (Marcos 2013)), f) love (e.g., tr. “Come quickly among us ... We love you ... and the warmhearted person does not cease to meet his beloved ones” (Kabbara 2013a)), g) gratitude (e.g., tr. “Our lord, we remember the old days at Balamand (i.e., Monastery and University of Balamand) where you beautified the houses of the Lord and decorated them with hymns. You taught us reverence, and through the icons, you taught us about the greatness of our rituals” (Khaouly 2014)), h) solidarity (e.g., tr. “We pray for both of them, and we are aware that the prayer will unite us and them in the presence of the One God” (Attieh 2013b)), i) patience (e.g., tr. “Patience, O Beloved One”), j) reverence (e.g., tr. “Our father and Metropolitan, may the Lord God remember him in his Kingdom always; now and ever, and unto ages of ages”), and k) courage (e.g., tr. “We pray the Lord ... So that He may strengthen them, wherever they are, and stand firm in the faith” (Kabbara 2013b)). However, some of the negative emotions which are related mostly to the abduction itself are a) doubt and confusion (e.g., tr. “I know that what I will say is refused by some ... but, are they still indeed alive? ... Who claimed responsibility for the abduction?” (Elzein 2014)), b) annoyance (e.g., tr. “Enough is enough; silence is becoming abject” (Tasrini 2013)), c) frustration (e.g., tr. “I will not raise my concerns about Aleppo, but I will make my complaints against Antioch as a whole ... because of the deficit in its unity and love ... and the weakness of her lords (i.e., bishops) ...” (Ward 2014)), d) sadness (e.g., tr. “No joy in the heart while the free Paul is still in custody” (Tohme 2014)), e) disappointment (e.g., tr. “Where is the Media at these days while two Orthodox bishops in Syria are kidnapped and missing?” (Samaan 2013)), f) tiredness (e.g., tr. “Come back as you promised us ... we are tired of little excuses and our eyes are weary of waiting” (Kabbara 2013c)), g) misfortune (e.g., tr. “We are in a state of misfortune due to your physical absence” (Nassif 2013)), h) timidity (e.g., tr. “Confident people. You will regret tomorrow when you find out that your silence today was a contribution in a crime we hope will not take place”), i) regret and anger (e.g., tr. “Unfortunately, some believed that by being silent, the bishops would be released” (Tasrini 2013)), and j) anxiety and fear (e.g., tr. “Are they still alive? ... The fact that no one adopted the kidnapping of the bishops gives a bad auspice that leads to anxiety” (Elzein 2014)).

The numerous posts examined for the purpose of this study are usually displayed in tune with (a) ecclesiastical events; i.e., feasts (e.g., Christmas,

New Year's Day, Lent, Easter, St. Peter and St. Paul's Day), ecclesiastical cases (e.g., the disciplinary and ethical case of Fr. Panteleimon (Farah), Abbot of Our Lady Monastery of Hamatoura-Lebanon) and personal celebrations (e.g., ordinations of clergy, mainly of spiritual sons), (b) political and social developments (e.g., the release of the kidnapped Lebanese Shiite pilgrims on October 20, 2013 who had been abducted in Azaz near the Turkish borders as well as the abduction of Greek Orthodox nuns of St. Taqla's Monastery in Maaloula-Syria on December 3, 2013 and their recent release on 9 March 2014), and (c) various denunciations, condemnations, and feelings of concern expressed by religious and political officials and human rights activists. With time, activists deprioritized their expressions for four main reasons: (1) the lack of information concerning the bishops and their kidnappers, (2) the lack of progress in liberating them, (3) the feelings of utter exhaustion, and consequently (4) the tacit acceptance of the situation.

Most of the pictures posted on Facebook carry (a) photographs of Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi) in his hierarchical vestments, (b) Byzantine icons (e.g., the *Theotokos*, the Theophany, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection of Lazarus, Saints Peter & Paul), (c) Biblical verses (e.g., tr. "*For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit*" [Col 2:5]; "*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?*" [Ps 13:1]; "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*" [Gal. 2:20]; "*The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?*" [Heb. 13:6]; "*And I tell you ...and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*" [Mat 16: 18]), (d) invocation hymns (e.g., tr. "*Unto you, O Theotokos, invincible Champion, your City [or "we your people"], in thanksgiving ascribes the victory for the deliverance from sufferings. And having your might unassailable, free us from all dangers, so that we may cry unto you: Rejoice, O Unwedded Bride*" (Akathist Hymn Service); "*Lord of the Powers be with us, for we have no other help in times of distress but Thee. O Lord of the Powers, have mercy upon us*" (Great Compline Service)), (e) quotes from various sermons about faith, praying, trust in God, dependence on God, God's love, God's joy, and the spiritual weapons, (f) spiritual quotes (e.g., of St. John Chrysostom on patience and of Elder Paisios on the holy war and the bishops' duties), (g) personal prayers (e.g., the one composed by Fr. Elia Mitri in which he asked God tr. "*not to allow that they will be achieved by misfortune*", "*to free them now*", and "*not to let evil triumph over good*") (Mitri

2014), (h) poems written by relatives and spiritual sons and daughters (e.g., tr. “*What happened to you?*” by his mother Rose Yazigi; “*Where did they take you?*” by his sister Nun Mariam Yazigi; “*Absent from eyes, present in spirit*” by his spiritual son Fr. Andreas Marcos), and (i) slogans (e.g., tr. “*Antioch lights the candle of Hope*” (Balamand Monastery 2014) in marking the first anniversary of abduction). Like the aforementioned pictures, numerous comments and statuses were posted, liked, shared, and commented on. They reflect theological, ecclesiastical, religious, spiritual, psychological, political and social contents. It should be noted that many expressions are of a rational nature and are meant to meet particular objectives: (a) to reveal emotions (e.g., tr. “*We are waiting for you ...Your Church misses you*”; “*We will not forget you ...O Good shepherd*”), (b) to remind the people of the inhumane nature of the kidnapping and to denounce it, (c) to boost the faith during difficult and turbulent times, (d) to share quotes said by Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi) and ritual hymns chanted by him, (e) to support other cases (e.g., the Maaloula nuns’ abduction and Fr. Panteleimon’s ethical and administrative case), (f) to encourage the believers to protest in the streets, (g) to inquire whether they are alive, and (h) to pray and urge the believers to pray to God, to the Lord Jesus Christ, to the Virgin Mary/the *Theotokos* – tr. “*whose request cannot be refused*” (Madani 2013), and to the saints, who can and will liberate the abducted bishops and return them to their flocks. However, some expressions are enigmatic, such as the one accompanied with the icon of the resurrection of Lazarus and the picture of the bishops together with Jesus’ phrase “*Come Forth*” [Joh 11:43], or the picture of Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi) and his brother Patriarch John X (Yazigi) with the caption tr. “*Are you praying for me, brother?*” (Attieh 2013a)

Finally, Facebook activists have shared many statements, quotes, articles and press releases about the abducted bishops, Interchurches’ Joint Statements, Patriarch John X (Yazigi) Pastoral Letters, the US Orthodox Bishops Letter to Secretary of State John Kerry (Assembly of Bishops 2013), The World Council of Churches Statement of Solidarity (2013), the Letter of the Antiochian Metropolitan Philip (Saliba) of New York to President Barack Obama (Saliba 2013b), the frequent supportive messages of the Antiochian Metropolitan Silwan (Mussi) of Buenos Aires entitled “*Bishop Paul on Ecclesiastical Mission*”, Metropolitan Philip’s Letter to the Faithful Regarding

Abductions in Syria (Saliba 2013a), an Appeal to President Obama and his Government for the Release of two Abducted Orthodox Christian Archbishops in Syria (the online petition, however, has expired, “*because it failed to meet the signature threshold*”) (White House Petition 2013), and last but not least, all published remarks of Lebanon’s General Security Service Chief, General Abbas Ibrahim, regarding the case.

2. Orthodox Spirituality

Most of the religious expressions observed in this study are within the spirit of the Orthodox Tradition. In Orthodox Theology, ‘Tradition’ (Gr. *Παράδοσις*; Lat. *traditio*) is one of the terms frequently used to reflect the mind of the Church (Gr. *Τὸ ἐκκλησιαστικὸν φρόνημα*); i.e., the practice of the correct faith (orthodoxy, Gr. *ὀρθοδοξία*) in the correct manner (orthopraxy, Gr. *ὀρθοπραξία*). It refers to the “*essence of life-saving Gospel of Christ*” which was transmitted to us “*through the church by the power of the Holy Spirit*” (McGuckin 2011: 90). Thus, Orthodox Tradition is “*the metamorphosis, the continuous transfiguration of the people of God ...as experienced in the daily life of the Church*” (Bebis n.d.). Many theologians go further in explaining this metamorphosis, relying on Hesychastic Theology and its therapeutic approach (Vlachos 2013). They consider that Orthodox Tradition advances man through purification (catharsis, Gr. *κάθαρσις*), illumination (Gr. *φωτισμός*), and deification (Gr. *θέωσις*) which is “*the unification with God*” (Metallinos n.d.) by the “*participation in the divine energies*” (Papademetriou n.d.). Besides, unlike Western Theology, Orthodox Theology does not differentiate between Scripture and Tradition; the Holy Scriptures, the creeds and the doctrinal definitions of the ecumenical councils, the Writings of the Fathers, the Liturgical Texts, and the Icons which are the sources of the Tradition and its “*outward forms in which it is expressed*” (Ware 1993: 199-207).

Orthodox Spirituality is an embedded part of Orthodox Tradition. It is usually manifested in the following practices: (a) preservation of the doctrine in the Triune God and the adherence to the faith, (b) regular corporate worship through the sacraments, litanies and other prayers, in “*order to sustain the community’s engagement with the mysteries of God*”, seeking “*the sanctification of every conceivable human activity through prayers*” for

the blessing of places, programs, and products (Stylianopoulos 2011b), (c) regular personal prayer “*by means of words, thoughts, gestures, gifts*”, showing dependence on God (Stylianopoulos 2011b), (d) virtues, i.e., faithfulness, prudence, humility, discernment, peacefulness, patience, truthfulness, compassion, inner joy, and love (Stylianopoulos, 2011a), and (e) daily Christian living, e.g., lighting and offering a candle, fasting, philanthropy, celebrating the feast days of the liturgical calendar, reading Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Church fathers, serving in one of the Church’s ministries and services, and obeying Christ’s teachings (Stylianopoulos 2011a). The question remains, what influence, if any, is exercised by Orthodox Spirituality on the Greek Orthodox Facebook activists? The answer to this critical question can be formulated within three main approaches: (a) Orthodox Spirituality where people (i) depend on the Triune God, e.g., “*My hope is the Father, my refuge is the Son, my protection is the Holy Spirit*” (Small Compline Service), the *Theotokos*, e.g., “*All my hope I place in Thee, O Mother of God*” (Small Compline Service), and the Saints, (ii) live a pious life, and (iii) gain relief and feel comfortable and secure in the Church, especially when challenges and difficulties strike: (b) Orthodox Psychotherapy, where Spiritual Fathers depend on the neptic-hesychastic approach in curing the body and soul of the faithful, without overlooking modern psychology (cf. Vlachos 1997; Morelli 2006; Vlachos 2013); and (c) Religion and Psychoanalysis, where observations are made based on various perspectives i.e., religious, psychological, spiritual, anthropological, and economic, in order to reconcile man, through reasoning, with himself and with society (cf. Fromm 1950; Black 2000; Helminiak 2006; Belzen 2009).

3. Interdisciplinary Analysis

Doing an in-depth interdisciplinary analysis on Facebook expressions and their causes is a formidable task due to three main reasons: 1) the complexity of the Middle Eastern context which is traditional, religiously oriented, politically turbulent, and psychologically sensitive: 2) the danger of falling into the trap of pitting psychology, philosophy, and theology against each other although they may differ in their approaches to human existence and functions; and 3) the difficulty of rationally and critically challenging the

traditional and ecclesiastical *status quo*. Therefore, it is significant to reflect on some questions and remarks that can be sparked by the analysis of the various expressions of the observed Facebook activists. This analysis requires a bilateral and multilateral dialogue between and among the following fields: Theology (doctrines, liturgy, hermeneutics), Philosophy (reason and thought), Religion (emotions and feelings, praxis and piety), Psychology (emotions and psychoanalysis), and History and Politics (context), which are not always complementary, sympathetic, or cooperative. As a result, we may highlight the following remarks and recommendations:

- *God and Orthodox Spirituality*. In Orthodox Theology, it is believed that the faithful (clergy, laity, and saints) are all in communion in the Church – the Body of Christ. In fact, God is not a distant absent (McGuckin 2011: 122), “*He is uniquely close to us, filling all things, present everywhere around us and within us*” (Ware 1979: 13). In short, He is personal. Anyone might ask: Where was God – the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, when Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi) was abducted? Was the abduction according to God’s Will? Can God liberate him? If yes, will He do so, and how? Why did God leave the prayers of the believers unfulfilled? Would the invocation prayers to the Virgin Mary and the other saints make a difference in real life ‘through their intercession’? Needless to say, it is useful to pray since it may offer the faithful (individual and congregation) comfort, strength, and solidarity; however, it is essential to teach people what to pray for. What about the prayers offered concerning the liberation of the bishops? Are they valid and effective or just ‘false hopes’ and ‘wishful thinking’? Why did Patriarch John X (Yazigi) ask the Orthodox flock in his Pastoral Letter on 27 April 2013, one week after the abduction, to tie their candles with black ribbons and chant the invocation prayer “*Unto you, O Theotokos, invincible Champion*” (*Akathist Hymn Service*) instead of the hymn “*Rejoice o Bethany*” in procession on Palm Sunday, “*asking the Virgin Mary to keep our Church as a fortified city*” (Yazigi 2013a)? Does the black ribbon symbolize ‘mourning’? How should one interpret certain Biblical verses, such as: “*Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours*” [Mar 11:24] and “*If God be for us, who can be against us*” [Rom 8:31]? Does the *Tropar-*

ion “*Lord of the Powers, be with us . . .*” (Great Compline Service) help in the case at hand? The fact of the abducted bishops not being released can be a direct answer to the aforementioned critical questions.

- *The Church and Realpolitik*: Although the Church is a divine-Human/*theanthropic* Organism (Morelli 2006; Alevisopoulos 1994: 60), it is important to emphasize that Her members live in the world and face daily paradoxes, challenges and difficulties. This world is neither Plato’s World of Ideas nor St. Augustine’s City of God. The Middle East is a turbulent region where democracy and the rule of law are not well established. Its people lack some basic principles of human rights, more precisely, the recognition of inherent dignity, freedom of speech and freedom from fear affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] (1948) as well as the end of “*arbitrary arrest, detention or exile*” [UDHR 1948, art. 9]. Within this context, Christians are asked “*to speak the truth with love*” [Eph. 4:15] and “*to stand firm till the end*” [Mk 13:13]; unfortunately, they are constantly subjected to direct or indirect intimidation. This might explain why the Church authorities neither supported nor encouraged public demonstrations; moreover, they did not reveal from the first day of the abduction the content of the SMS probably sent by Metropolitan Paul (Yazigi) to some friends to the effect that: tr. “*We are kidnapped by Al-Qaeda and we are taken to a place in Turkey*” (Khoury 2014). Moreover, the Church authorities remained silent, like many Facebook activists, on the reports accusing the Syrian Opposition and its supporters of the kidnapping. They always addressed “*the kidnappers and the countries concerned*”. Patriarch John X (Yazigi) slammed the reaction of the International community to the abduction case, on 16 October 2013. He also asked and hoped for dealing “*calmly away from the media [spotlight] so that our efforts will achieve the results desired by everyone*” (Daily Star 2013). Later, he expressed his anger through an appeal to the international community on 5 December 2013 regarding the abduction of Maaloula’s nuns by saying, “*we no longer need denunciation, condemnations, or ‘feelings of concern’ about the assault on human dignity . . . Today, we need concrete actions, not words*” (Yazigi 2013b). Some would wonder about “*the steps to be taken if the two bish-*

ops were not released within the few hours” [Joint Communique 2013b]! Finally, the Church could have at least encouraged some nonviolent secular actions; e.g., public demonstrations and symbolic protests, sit-ins, vigils, community activities, direct lobbying, targeted appeals, on-line petitions, and follow up with governments, members of parliaments, NGOs, and political parties committed to human rights around the world.

Conclusion

The abduction of the two Metropolitans of Aleppo is another sad and terrible phase in the declining life of Christians in the Middle East. This tragic event created not only responses of hope, fear and anxiety, but most certainly also feelings of insecurity. Greek Orthodox Activists expressed their emotions by various means; Facebook was the most accessible one, where people published genuine and shared emotions and information. These activists are credited for free expression of thought, conscience, and religious sentiments, upholding solidarity, and showing affiliation and love to the abducted bishops. However, their ‘virtual’ expressions have not resulted in any changes, most particularly in liberating the abducted bishops. These expressions reflect, in fact, not only aspects of Orthodox Spirituality, but one might say, ignorance, inefficiency and lack of skills in dealing with turbulent political situations and abduction cases. Prayers can have a therapeutic effect rather than a determining effect. Even the prayers themselves seem to need further orientation and reconsideration since it is not possible to imply that the abduction is in line with God’s will or their liberation as God’s intervention. Finally, Facebook activists might be able to use social networking sites to encourage and organize nonviolent secular actions towards the bishops’ liberation. In the last analysis, however, a fair question can still be asked based on the aforementioned remarks and reservations: Can the Orthodox Church, given Her structure, history and dogma, face up to worldly crisis, such as the one that is forced upon Her at present?

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr. David Tawil, Professor of Psychology at Haigazian University, for the insightful discussions that we have had during the preparation of this paper.

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