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## EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION

Dialogue and Witness in the Thought of Metropolitan George Khodr  
of Mount Lebanon

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### *1. Introduction*

The Middle East is a crossroad of civilisations and cultures, of religions and denominations, restless, turbulent in its history, a meeting point of East and West. In this tormented region, Lebanon offers a context where a genuine and open thinker can thrive. But if one thrives, it is precisely because of the depth and the painful or complex character of one's life experience. Forming and speaking one's mind, giving one's witness, (significantly, termed *martyria* in Greek), can be linked with the notion of martyrdom; with the readiness to give of oneself; at the same time, one can be the bearer of a spirit of reconciliation and an ascetic practitioner of conviviality, a true minister of dialogue. So Khodr bears witness to an experience that may be interesting, fascinating, and valuable, but is also hard to bear, even harder to express.

Khodr's thought is thus of vital importance for Orthodox theology and beyond, but has not yet been thoroughly studied in the West, even among the Orthodox. His thinking, in full accordance with the action of his life, is genuine and original, deriving from experience in the personal, existential sense of the word, but also conceived as a collective experience, namely the heritage of Christian Tradition. Part of this originality is

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linked with Khodr's stirring and lively personality, and part with the fact that his skill in theology and increase in faith was attained in a minority situation, which inevitably influences one's understanding of the world, of oneself and of God, in one way or another. In this regard, Khodr's theological thought has a unique value. Apart from the Churches in the Orthodox *Diaspora*, traditionally most Orthodox enjoy a majority status in society, at least on the statistical level. Therefore, Khodr's views on theological expression, as dialogue and witness, and his lifelong struggle to serve them both, in a harmonious balance and with laborious effort, can be seen as a beacon for every traveler between cultures, for every genuine theologian, believer and thinker.

Expression is tightly linked to the understanding of oneself, to the scrutiny of self-examination, to the careful and persistent study of one's own heart and mind. The struggle to attain self-knowledge is on various levels internally related to Khodr's character as a poet – a poet in prose; it is reflected in most of his works, especially the short texts called *نَجْوَى* (*najwa*). It is related to his artistic bent and his lifelong study in art, especially literary arts, which led him to serve the field of education in a double capacity – as a professor of Arab Culture and Islamology in the Lebanese University in Beirut (1964-1970) and of Pastoral Theology at St. John of Damascus Institute of Theology at the University of Balamand (already from the 1950s, when it was just a Church-based institution for clerical education at the secondary level, and later when it was upgraded to a Theological Institution, up to his retirement in 1995).<sup>1</sup> Throughout his life Khodr sought the companionship of people who shared his feeling for art, and he cultivated personal friendships with Arab poets.<sup>2</sup> Meta-

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1. Cf. the biographical references on the official website of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Mount Lebanon, <http://www.ortmtlb.org.lb/index.php/metropolitan-george>, last updated on Wednesday, May 09, 2012 / last accessed September 21, 2017. Also, cf. M. Egger, "Georges Khodr ou La Révolution de l'Esprit," in G. Khodr, *Et si je disais les chemins de l'enfance*, R. and G. Rizk (transl.), (Paris and Pulli: Les Éditions du Cerf and Le Sel de la terre, 1997), 35 [5-37]. On the history of Balamand and the role/-es that Khodr undertook in various phases, cf. the "About" of the official website, section "History": <http://theology.balamand.edu.lb/index.php/about-us/history>, last accessed September 24, 2017.

2 "George Khodr: The Poet Bishop." An Interview to Joanna Azar. *Al-Akhbar*, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/11626>, published August 31, 2012/ last accessed September 21, 2017.

literary reflections are omnipresent in his writings, and linguistic problems as well as questions of expression, articulation and art are often used as themes, sometimes predominant themes. It is very interesting how Khodr, in many cases, serves a theological and an artistic viewpoint all at once.<sup>3</sup> He has always regarded himself as a man of art and consciously constructed such an overall image: in his essays, articles and interviews. Besides his many short writings, and books that consist of collections of articles, Khodr wrote basically only one book, *The Ways of Childhood*.<sup>4</sup> Khodr himself characterised it as his “only true book”.<sup>5</sup> It has been published in Arabic,<sup>6</sup> French, and (very recently) English, and will shortly appear in Greek.<sup>7</sup> In this book Khodr furthers the construction of a self image, as we shall explain below. The book is also a most significant source for our topic more generally.

In the *Ways of Childhood* there is a fictional reference very similar to the autobiographical references,<sup>8</sup> placed right next to them and following a precise chronological order in the narration, which could mislead the reader. Khodr speaks of his “friend”, the main literary figure of the book, and says: “at the end of his secondary studies, he joined the fine arts faculty” (p. 39). The literary person of the “friend” may be interpreted in a variety of ways, not least as an *alter ego* to the writer’s own self. Khodr never joined a fine arts faculty, but this is an argument that establishes the construction by Khodr of a literary self-image.

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3. A very characteristic example is George Khodr, “Art et création,” in Idem, *L’Appel de l’Esprit: Église et société*, R. Rizk, G. Ghandour, Y. Moubarac, A. Manzi and A. Asfour (transl.), (Paris and Pulli: Les Éditions du Cerf and Le Sel de la terre, 2001), 195-214.

4. George Khodr, *The Ways of Childhood*, Nuha Jurayj (transl.) (Yonkers, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Orthodox Christian Profiles Series 6, 2016), 39-40.

5. According to Maxime Egger in the introduction to the French edition: M. Egger, “Georges Khodr ou La Révolution de l’Esprit,” *o.c.*, 5.

6. جورج خضر، *أو حكيث منسرى الطفولة*، بيروت، دار النهار، 1979.

Ḡūrḡ Ḥudr, *Lau Ḥakaytu Masrā Tufūla*, Bairūt, Dār Annahār, 1979.

7. Forthcoming from Maistros Publications which is gradually publishing his entire work in Greek, translated by Roni Bou Saba and Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina. For the English and French, see notes 4 and 1 respectively.

8. On the veracity of autobiographical information included in *The Ways of Childhood*, see note 12.

The construction of an image does not however imply that it is a false or inaccurate one. Though the specifics are imaginary, the image as such does correspond to reality. In fact, Khodr is one of the very few theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (alongside Olivier Clément from France and Nikolae Steinhart from Romania) who are extremely well versed in literature, philosophy and art, which suggests years of continuous study and personal commitment. This is not only my very personal assessment after many years of studying the whole work of Metropolitan George Khodr; it is more of a common feeling among those who read him in the original, as expressed in one way or another in almost all secondary literature on Khodr. As the (anonymous) author of the introduction to the English edition of the book says of Khodr, “the rhythm and vision, the composition and coloring, the spirit of the Bible in the language of the Qur’an, the concord of mind and heart—all of these together make of the Arabic book a living work in which prose and verse become homogenous.”<sup>9</sup>

And there must be a reason for this: the personality of the author, his broad knowledge and interests, and his devotion to language – Arabic and French, which he mastered well.<sup>10</sup> Beyond his theological and pastoral capacity, Khodr is a true intellectual, in the best sense of the word.

## 2. *Self-Knowledge, Experience and Biography*

As to biography, I draw information on Khodr from the official biographies of the Metropolitan in his books, or the official diocesan website,<sup>11</sup> from secondary literature (where noted), as well as from personal testimonies and accounts from Antiochian Christians. Besides, his book, *The Ways of Childhood*, could be used as a biographical source, but with extreme caution, as it is primarily fictional in character, combining facts and imagination, narrations as well as philosophical thoughts, in order to provide a peculiar, unique literary *genre*, where dream and reality are interwoven.<sup>12</sup>

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9. “About this Book”, *The Ways of Childhood*, o.c., 7 [7-8].

10. Cf. M. Egger, o.c., 34.

11. See above, note 1.

12. A. Kattan, “‘Anziehung und Repulsion wie zwischen zwei Verliebten’: Zur Wahrnehmung der westlichen Kultur bei Georges Khodr,” in *Christsein in der Islamischen Welt: Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtstag*, Sven Grebenstein

Given our basic sources, we shall come to the basics of his life.

Metropolitan George was born in Tripoli, the second city in Lebanon in terms of size and importance, on July 6, 1923. He grew up in the Christian neighborhood of Harat el Nasara (*an-Nasara*, Nazarenes, being the Christians), for which he had a great affection. He describes his childhood memories in the first chapter of *The Ways of Childhood*.<sup>13</sup> He studied law at St Joseph's University, a Jesuit institution in Beirut.

In his native Lebanon, Khodr was one of the founders of the Orthodox Youth Movement (OYM) also known as MJO (Mouvement de la jeunesse orthodoxe), which was established in 1942 and contributed to the resurgence of Orthodoxy in the Arab world through a series of activities inspired by love, zeal, and enthusiasm: the creation of Bible study groups, the establishment of cultural centres, witness among working people, social work, etc. Some of the effects of this atmosphere can be seen in monastic revival, the development of parish life and self-awareness, and the blossoming of Orthodox thought. The MJO was also a founding member of Syndesmos, the World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, and through its principles, its spirit, and its activity it played a major part and had an impact on Orthodoxy and its youth movement internationally.<sup>14</sup>

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and Sidney H. Griffith (eds.), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2015), 514 [513-523], critically discusses the value of the book as autobiography. Yet, he claims that –especially in the first part– the book is filled with very detailed and accurate autobiographical details as to Khodr's childhood and neighborhood, the Lebanese city of Tripolis he grew up in. He considers it therefore trustworthy as a source of biographical information as to that part, when used with some caution. M. Egger, "Georges Khodr ou La Révolution de l'Esprit," *o.c.*, 9, considers the book less of an autobiography and more of an interior memoir ("mémoires intérieures") of the author's. In a specific piece of research on Khodr's *Ways of Childhood*, Ubayd clarifies in detail the autobiographical elements and distinguishes them from the fictional: جورج إميل عُبيد (Jūrj Imīl Ubayd), *قراءة في فكر المطران جورج خضر (Qirā'ah fī fikr al-muṭrān Ġūrġ Ḥudr)* (Study in the Thought of Metropolitan George Khodr), [Beirut (published by the author), 2008].

13. Titled "The Past is in our Hands", 15-18.

14. As to the leading role of Khodr in MJO and its impact worldwide, see Nicolas Abou Mrad, "The Witness of the Church in a Pluralistic World: Theological Renaissance in the Church of Antioch," in: Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 247-248 [246-260]. As to Syndesmos, its impact,

On November 11, 1943, Khodr joined friends and fellow-students in a peaceful demonstration against the French colonial administration, proclaiming the right and aspiration of the Lebanese people to freedom and independence. That day remained indelibly engraved in his memory and would determine the future course of his life, since on government orders, the unarmed demonstrators came under fire, resulting in the deaths of 11 people including personal friends of his.<sup>15</sup> It was a life-changing experience that led him to dedicate himself to peace and justice, and become one of the most political of spiritual leaders within the Orthodox Church. Since his youth he liked the simple people, who, largely illiterate, were richly endowed with wisdom, humility, and clarity of mind. His love for the poor accompanied him throughout his life. Genuine as it was, it never came from a position of superiority, nor did it take the form of a benevolence and charity that was only one way.

He also cherished the life of solitude and contemplation, and he spent a short period of his life in the quiet monastery of St George el-Harf, in the mountain area of Deir el-Harf in the Mount Lebanon prefecture, before his ordination as a priest. Ascetic preparation before going out to preach and serving the world is a common trope in many *vitae* of Eastern Fathers, corresponding to Jesus Christ's own withdrawal into the desert for forty days (Mt 4:1-11 and parallels).

The experience he had there is transcribed and transformed in the imaginary narration of his "friend", taking refuge in a mountain village, after finishing secondary school.<sup>16</sup> The specifics are altered; even the age is changed. Khodr's sojourn in the monastery took place after he finished Law School, and after he finished his theological studies in St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. It was in fact in 1952 that he took monastic vows.<sup>17</sup> It is

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and the founding members, cf. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Who are the Orthodox Christians? A Historical Introduction," *o.c.*, 16 [1-18].

15. Ζορζ Κοντρ, *Η Φύση του Ισλάμ* [George Khodr, The Nature of Islam], Roni Bou Saba (trans.), Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina (prol. and ed.) (Athens: Μαΐστρος [Maistros], 2009), 52 (biographical note by the editor). Cf. *The Ways of Childhood*, 63.

16. George Khodr, *The Ways of Childhood*, 29, 35.

17. "George Khodr: The Poet Bishop," *o.c.* There is an inaccuracy in this interview, mistaking Khodr's monastic vows for his ordination to the priesthood. Khodr took monastic vows in 1952 and was ordained in 1954. This is confirmed by other sources and

plausible to suppose that his steps towards faith were taken at an earlier stage and resulted in his stay at the monastery.

However, in his *Ways of Childhood*, in the chapter “To Become a Living Church”, the way he describes the path to faith of his “friend”, a way liberated from any need for realism, reflects indeed in a transformed manner a chart of his own spiritual biography and inner life: In solitude and isolation a window of light opened wide for his “friend”. It was the window of faith. His “friend” starts out with visual art, and especially with painting. He picks a “narrow door” to painting, namely the postimpressionist French painter Paul Gauguin and his “pagan word”, as Khodr describes the overall style of the painter,<sup>18</sup> referring thus most probably to his primitivism, very characteristic of a certain period of Gauguin’s work. It is quite interesting that other first class theologians and monks have also entered the world of prayer through art and especially painting. Among many, most noteworthy are the Russians Leonid Ouspensky and Sophrony Sakharov of Essex. Perhaps Gauguin is a narrow door to painting, but the choice of such a “door” is a token of the wide and solid basis of Khodr’s cultural cultivation and education, and the openness of his heart and spirit, beyond borders. Khodr also describes his “friend” there, in isolation and solitude, reading the French philosopher Henri Bergson, “because of the poetry and spiritual traits that suffuse his work”.<sup>19</sup> It is beyond any doubt that these references reflect Khodr’s personal taste and preferences, no matter when and where they developed. It is probable that he is becoming closer to factuality when he says that there, in prayer and silence, his “friend” dedicated himself to the study of sacred texts, experiencing an unexpected wonder before new, uncharted, and inexhaustible hermeneutical depths. It was there that he discovered the notion of sanctity; he experienced the presence of God in existential and personal terms, as that of a friend. “Those who live in holiness, are often incapable of eloquence, or barely speak”,<sup>20</sup> Khodr observes, bringing us to the very heart of our theme, the tension or harmony between experience and expression. Yet, silence can also be transmitted. Sanctity of life radiates

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witnesses and is further established by the fact that Khodr signs his older articles as a “brother” and only since 1954 as a “father”.

18. *The Ways of Childhood*, 35.

19. *Ibid.* 36.

20. *Ibid.* 40.



light, and preaching in silence is worth more than words, he remarks many a time in his works.

The period spent in the monastery deepened and established his faith and spiritual constitution. On the other hand, the shortcomings of the people of faith and the difficulties of daily common life also became apparent. Thus an enthusiastic and idealistic view of the Church gave way to a more down-to-earth approach. Khodr was not meant to stay in the monastery forever. Life changes as time moves on, and Khodr descends from his mountain of transfiguration and preparation, and comes down to assume pastoral responsibilities. On December 19, 1954 he was ordained priest. The following year he began serving in the parish of the Prophet Elias in the harbour area of Tripoli, where he remained until he assumed the rank of bishop on February 15, 1970.

Already as a priest, he achieved recognition as a theologian, pastor, and spiritual father, and his fame spread beyond the borders of Lebanon. Thus in 1968, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, and likewise twenty years later by the Protestant Theological School in Paris. On June 22, 2007 he was similarly honored by St Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute.

His dedication to the field of education was of enormous importance. We have already mentioned his appointment as a professor of Arab Culture at the Lebanese University and Pastoral Theology at the St John of Damascus Theological Institute at the University of Balamand. His activity was of great significance not only on the inter-Orthodox level, through the MJO and Syndesmos, but also in the areas of dialogue between Christianity and Islam and ecumenical dialogue. He usually served as the Orthodox Church of Antioch's official representative at official pan-Orthodox and inter-Christian dialogues.

As a writer he was especially productive, authoring works of various sorts on an extremely wide range of subjects. Articles and homilies of his have been published in a variety of places within Lebanon and abroad and made available on the Internet and mass media, while his books have been published mainly by An Nour Publishing,<sup>21</sup> by An Nahar,<sup>22</sup> and of

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21. The name means 'light'; it is the publishing arm of the MJO.

22. The name means 'day'; An Nahar publishes books as well as a daily newspaper, in which the Metropolitan wrote a regular weekly column for many decades.

course by the Archdiocese of Mount Lebanon, and have also been translated into several other languages.

The great variety of subject matter that he concerned himself with is revealed by the titles of his writings: “New Antioch”, “A Word on Sunday”, “Hope in Time of War”, “Issues in Lebanon”, “The Movement as Enlightenment and Vocation”, “The Spirit and the Bride”, “Places of Pilgrimage and the New Life”, and especially the most important work, previously mentioned, *The Ways of Childhood*.

The aged Metropolitan with his breadth of spirit, his love, his tireless desire to bring peace and reconciliation and his limpid, original thinking remains even today a reference point in the suffering region of Lebanon and the Middle East, as well as throughout the world.

### 3. *Literature: A Pathway to Heaven*

We have already referred to Khodr’s particular interest in literature and prose. For him, literature is a path to understanding the world, and oneself. He says of literature:

Literature is a bridge between soul and mind, between our spirit and the hearts of others. The heart flows into our consciousness, and the writer’s task is to create a starting place for the soul’s purification, a softening of reason and thought in communion with the Spirit. Literature brings about the unity of our being; it opens the door to divine influences that perfect it through grace and benevolence.<sup>23</sup>

The way Khodr describes literature as a source of knowledge and self-awareness goes beyond the limits of sociological or psychological thinking. In Khodr’s view, literature connects the human being with the divine, opens a window for grace. It unites all elements in the human being, overcomes an existing dichotomy between soul and mind, between oneself and the ‘other’. Why does this happen? It happens, perhaps, because of the holistic character of literature, conveying human experience in a way that knows nothing of the methodological categorisations and divisions so commonly found in logical and scientific thinking. Khodr is not

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23. *Ibid.* 40.

against science –on the contrary– but he understands its limitations and its shortcomings when it comes to the mystery of life. Human *ratio* is not an exclusive source of knowledge and wisdom. The way Khodr conceives rational thinking, in contradistinction to literature, also reflects his assessment of the difference between Eastern and Western culture, mentality, civilisation – a multi-layered evaluation, going back and forth, between deep admiration to grave reservation.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, self-knowledge attained through literature is directly linked to the authenticity of oneself, the authenticity of being in the image and likeness of God. This is the basis upon which he builds the idea of “purification of the soul”, in the above excerpt, through literature, on the pathway to self-completion, which is in fact a pathway to heaven, a pilgrimage. As far as I know based on my study of the works of Orthodox theologians, Metropolitan George Khodr’s high appreciation for literature and for its role in human salvation is unique. There are others with a similar proclivity for prose and poetry, such as Gregory the Theologian among the church Fathers, or Nicolae Steinhardt (of Rohia) among 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians. But no one has ever expounded a theory rating literature so highly as a means to self-knowledge and salvation.

The struggle to find expression is a permanent feature in Khodr’s life. When it comes to theology, things are far graver and even harder. In *The Ways of Childhood*, using the literary *persona* of his “friend” to represent the *alter ego* of the author, he says:

My friend was struggling to tame words. How could he correctly express his thoughts without letting God die between the lines?<sup>25</sup>

Taming words is an energy-consuming endeavor, in all respects. It becomes of paramount importance, when it comes to expressing the fine notions of theology, to expressing faith. Christian preaching is a proclamation of the living God. “Christ is risen”, the Paschal greeting among Christians in the East, is also the very core of Christian preaching. Do Christians succeed in conveying the Paschal message, the Good News, in

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24. On precisely this point see A. Kattan, “ ‘Anziehung und Repulsion wie zwischen zwei Verliebten’: Zur Wahrnehmung der westlichen Kultur bei Georges Khodr,” *o.c.*, 213-223 (cf. esp. 515-517). Cf. *The Ways of Childhood*, 21-23, 37, 95-105.

25. *The Ways of Childhood*, 40.

their expression and rhetoric? Khodr says, referring to the condition of dialogue, it is not Christ who is called in question. Yet the Church as such and the people of the Church may very well be.<sup>26</sup> Do Christians convey the message of a living God or are they witnesses to His death? In the lines quoted above Khodr is implicitly referring to the ‘theology’ of the “death of God”<sup>27</sup> and expressing his well founded suspicion that modern atheism may have to do with the ineptitude and unworthiness of Christian preaching.

#### 4. *Language and the Struggle for Expression*

It is the salvation of man that preoccupies George Khodr. The attainment of self-knowledge is ultimately knowledge of and communion with God. And it would be the mission of the Church to assist and accompany this

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26. George Khodr, “Mission and Dialogue: A Theological Reflection”: *WSCF Journal*, April 1988: 30 [30-33].

27. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who first declared God dead (“Gott ist tot”) in 1882, in his work *The Gay Science*, B. Williams (ed.), J. Nauckhoff (transl.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge texts in the History of Philosophy, 72008), 109 [Book 3, § 108]. In the editor’s “Introduction”, vii-xxii, there is more information on this basic Nietzschean idea, further developed by Nietzsche in *Thus spoke Zarathustra: A Book on All and None*, A. del Caro (ed. and transl.) and R.B. Pippin (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge texts in the History of Philosophy, 2006), 5 (in Zarathustra’s Prologue) and 69 (in part 2, “On the Pitying”). A quote from the latter: “Thus the devil once spoke to me: ‘Even God has his hell: it is his love for mankind.’ And recently I heard him say these words: ‘God is dead; God died of his pity for mankind.’”) There are many levels of reading the notion of the “Death of God”, and a vast literature further discussing this idea was produced in closer or looser connection with Nietzsche himself. In fact, Nietzsche made manifest an already-existing tension in society; he shed light on it, he did not introduce it. On the contrary, he was alarmed by the possibility of a nihilistic society, seeing danger in the lack of authority; this is why he proposed a man-centered model and the notion of the *Übermensch*, introducing thus a post-Christian understanding of the world. Among Orthodox theologians who have dealt with the issue, one of the first notable essays on the topic is Olivier Clément’s “Dionysos et le Ressuscité,” in *Évangile et Révolution*, Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, Olivier Clément and Jean Bosc (Centurion, Paris 1968). But the Death of God is here used in the broader sense: it signifies one of the main streams of thinking within modernity, the development of atheism in a variety of forms – and beyond that the emergence of post-modernity, often conceived as a world that is post-Christian too.

human exploration, bestowing the gift of life through Holy Eucharist. Khodr understands mission for the most as *martyria*.<sup>28</sup> In terms of personal responsibility, this would mean the radiation of the light of one's spirituality, reflecting the presence of God in one's life. Khodr places sanctity at the very heart of Christianity.<sup>29</sup> This is a very traditional idea in patristic thinking,<sup>30</sup> which is revitalised by George Khodr, by a slight shifting of emphasis. The adequacy of Christian preaching, accompanied by a corresponding life of sanctity, becomes on a secondary level a competence in eloquence, in expression, in sensitivity to the use of words, intonation, coloring and shades of meaning, images, metaphors, and style in general. The content is very tightly linked with the style, in fact dependent on it.

One should thus take great care not to let God die between the lines. The struggle for expression is immense. It may take place in silence, by a life that radiates light and holiness; it may take place in words – the words of the Arabic language.

George Khodr is *in love* with the Arabic language. His relationship with it is a passionate one, somewhat analogous to the traditional theological trope we commonly use in the East to describe the relationship of man to the Triune God as *eros*. It is this metaphor, in my opinion, that best and more adequately conveys the overall attitude of Khodr to language, rather than any literal expression. As we shall try to establish in what follows, he masters language at the highest level. But although language is a means and a tool for expression, he does not simply utilise it. He personifies it, speaking admiringly of its beauty.<sup>31</sup> His deep knowledge of the language, of its various layers in the course of time, is a

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28. For a more elaborate discussion of Khodr's understanding of mission mainly as *martyria*/witness, and a general study of his theology of mission and dialogue, see Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, "Metropolitan George Khodr of Mount Lebanon: A Life of Mission and Dialogue," in *A Contested Coexistence: Historical, Theological, and Linguistic Insights into Arabic Christianity* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, forthcoming).

29. *The Ways of Childhood*, chapter "Sanctity is the Heart of Christianity", 19-24.

30. E.g. John Chrysostom, one of the Greek fathers of constitutive importance for the shaping of the Eastern Christian identity (4th-5th century A.D.), speaking of the success or failure of Christian preaching, places the emphasis on the quality of how Christians live their lives. If Christians lived the way they should, he states, words would have been unnecessary and needless. *In Mt.* 46.iv, PG 58, 480C.

31. *The Ways of Childhood*, 20.

very rare virtue and skill – almost unique. Khodr is difficult to understand to his very depths; he is also difficult to translate, and the translations of his articles are uneven. Furthermore, it is only the poetic language of the original that can reflect all the levels of meaning.

In his use of words –rich and skillful, graceful and accurate as it is– he conveys the whole meaning of them, starting from the very root of the word. Those who are familiar with Arabic understand the importance of the roots of the words and the multilevel connections and interrelated meanings they carry. He is conveying all the multiplicity of historical variations, playing with the multiple connotations of each word.

His special interest in the Arabic language is only a part of his personal excavations to find the inheritance, the tradition and the fullness of meaning, of expressing his own condition as a man, a human in a specific historical context.

In the very first phrase, the first chapter title, of *The Ways of Childhood* he states:

بَعْضٌ مِنْ شِعْرٍ.

*Ba 'aḍun min shi 'r.* “A piece of poetry”. And yet, the word شِعْر (shi 'r), usually and commonly translated as ‘poetry’, also means ‘intuitive knowledge’, a knowledge that is not logically constructed, that, in fact, goes beyond logic *sensu stricto*, what we call *ratio*. It derives from the hidden depths of human existence, moves through uncharted ways, works through unspecified methodological steps, and constructs itself according to undefined laws.

لَا يَذْكُرُ الْكَثِيرَ عَنْ طُفُولَتِهِ. مَرَّتْ غَامِضَةً كَأَنَّهُ لَمْ يَكْ يَوْمًا طِفْلًا.

(*lā yaḍkuru lkaḥīr 'an ṭufūlatihi. marrat ḡāmiḍatan ka 'nnahu lam yaku yawman ṭiflan*)<sup>32</sup>

He does not remember much about his childhood, as if he had not been there. Suddenly an older type of Arabic emerges, يَكْ (*yaku*) instead of the common type of the verb كَان (*kāna*), in the Jussive, يَكُنْ (*yakun*). The language signifies the author’s travel through time; it actually depicts it and

32. Cf. *The Ways of Childhood*, 15: “He remembers little of his childhood. It passed by in an obscure way, as if he had never been a child.”

brings it to life. The past is closed, it is dark and unclear; all these meanings conveyed by one sign, one signifier. The word غامضةً (*ġāmiḍatan*), a modal participle (usually considered in translation as an adverb) from the verb غمض (*ġamaḍa*), to ‘close’, to ‘shut’, signifies in a metaphorical sense the dark, the obscure.

Khodr’s understanding of poetry does not limit itself or even focus on arranging words and rhymes, on creating a rhythm or even an aesthetic delight. The idea, seen above, that poetry is a deep intuitive knowledge,<sup>32</sup> is also repeated later in the book, in different ways. What can be the content of this knowledge other than knowledge of the world, of the great issues that preoccupy humans, of the questions of life and death, of love as a virtue and of egotism – the negation of love – as a sinful passion? What else is the knowledge of the world if not knowledge of one’s place in the world, self-knowledge?

### *5. A Dialogical and Missionary Task*

Literature in Khodr’s mind conveys the most significant of meanings. It brings people together and connects them. In this regard it is considered a vital form of dialogue, interactive by definition. On the one hand it consists of an impression made on the mind by the exterior world through reading, seeing, generally experiencing the products of art – an import. On the other, it is an expression of mind and heart, a struggle to convey a message, to meet with the receiver – an export. Through this give and take one grows in wisdom and faith, as we saw earlier in his definition of literature. Even further, literature addresses every human person, and as such it becomes a catalyst for dialogue and encounter beyond the boundaries of civilisations, ideologies or religions, touching the very core of human existence.

Khodr does not understand dialogue in a formal or bureaucratic sense. As an official delegate of the Patriarchate of Antioch in many official church-based or broader religious and political, regional or international, dialogical endeavors, Khodr has taken part in plenty of dialogues, gaining through the years a unique expertise. Yet he invested less in structured official dialogues, and more in direct communication among people. This

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33. For these observations I am referring to the original edition, cf. note 6.

is the kind of dialog he favored *par excellence*; one that allows for direct circulation of ideas, for the building of relationships, for deeper exchange and understanding, for the sharing of common concerns and views, for common work on specific tasks that interest the whole of society. Any segmentation and especially ghettoisation of society was considered an evil, in disharmony with the Christian faith and the divine economy which includes all creation.<sup>34</sup> Khodr was beyond multi-culturalism, he favored cross-cultural exchange.<sup>35</sup>

Methodologically, he would thus seek what is common in human interests, what could dynamically unite people. A secular milieu could be useful in creating bridges in a religiously segmented society.

One direction of this common base could be the common social concerns of people. The secular milieu also could be a zone of eirenic encounter and the sharing of common concerns. Active participation in the concerns of society, in the social and the political, has been a long tradition of MJO, and of Khodr himself.<sup>36</sup> Christians should consider it their main duty to care for the poor and to share with others, creating bonds of solidarity and working for peace and justice. This is a long tradition in Arab Orthodoxy. For Khodr it would be the best way to implement the Christian ethos and thus to witness to Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Another avenue, complementary to the previous one, would be to build bridges through culture and language in the context of the Middle East. Describing the priorities of the revival of Church life and theology in the region, Khodr says:

A revival of [the] Church is taking place and people are being stimulated by God to expound the faith in a language accessible to the Arab mind. We are already getting out of the ecclesiastical ghetto, and of the vocabulary which addresses exclusively our congregations. The Christian modes of literary and artistic expression are getting shape.<sup>38</sup>

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34. Cf. Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 40-43.

35. For more on Khodr's view on dialog see Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, "Metropolitan George Khodr of Mount Lebanon . . .," *o.c.*

36. Cf. Nicolas Abou Mrad, "The Witness . . .," especially 254-257.

37. Cf. Mrad, "The Witness . . .," 249.

38. George Khodr, "Christian Mission and Witness in the Middle East," 5.



The common ground of the Arabic language, history and culture, would serve as a catalyst to facilitate communication. Khodr makes a point of using classical Arabic, and he calls his Christian compatriots to articulate their faith in this language, so that their message reaches the recipient. He himself was characterised by the outstanding Syrian poet Adonis as the “last classical Arab [author].”<sup>39</sup> Besides, “he refused to accept the idea that the Arabic language was impervious to Christianity,”<sup>40</sup> which would mean surrendering Arabic exclusively to the thought world of Islam. On the contrary, a Christian should deeply own the language and use it as a means of dialogue with Islam, too.

The question of the quality of mission interconnects with the question of expressing the dogma of the Church at the meeting point of systematic and practical theology:

To be fair to historical reality, one has to say that the Eastern Church did not betray the fact that it is committed to witness. It undertook the apology of faith in different manners. It needs more scholarly knowledge of Islam, and an utterly new language more or less freed from Greek philosophy to express faith within the categories of [the] Arabic mind in a society where secularism has begun to find its way.<sup>41</sup>

This is in line with global missiological concerns as expressed by the pioneers in the field.<sup>42</sup>

In the Middle East, as Nicolas Abou Mrad says,

like Patriarch Ignatius, Metropolitan Georges Khodr invites Eastern Christianity to express its faith and formulations in such a way as to

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39. Cf. the Prologue of Jūrj Imīl Ubayd, o.c. (note 12).

40. *The Ways of Childhood*, 52. The third person in this quotation signifies the literary *persona* of his “friend”, his literary *alter ego*.

41. Ibid. Cf. *The Ways of Childhood*, 52.

42. Thus a similar concern was expressed and another independent effort was undertaken in the same direction by Elias Voulgarakis, the late professor and founder of the academic branch of Missiology in the Orthodox world. He gave priority to the theological idea of gaining a greater freedom from Greek philosophy, out of consideration for the need for enculturation of faith in different contexts and civilisations at a global pan-Orthodox level. Cf. Ηλίας Βουλγαράκης, *Σχεδιάσμα για την Αγάπη* [*Schediasma gia tin agapi* (A Draft on Love)] [Athens: Μαΐστρος (Maistros), 2004].

come closer to Islamic thought and mentality, and to produce a living culture that would address the Muslims in their concerns and preoccupations [...].<sup>43</sup>

Arabicism, especially cultural arabicism, could be a key to dialogue in his context.<sup>44</sup> This accords with the general trends and preoccupations of the Arab world in previous decades,<sup>45</sup> but it is also consistent with Khodr's concern for an adequate presence of Orthodox Christian theology in society, through words and actions that do not alienate people, but rather facilitate their search for God the Creator, the source of life and redeemer. One should not forget systematic theology in an effort to respond to human existential questions. It is an expression of the Experience of God's Revelation in History. Dogmas and doctrines are not ends in themselves. Dogmas and doctrines are at once a guide and a boundary. But it is the anthropological aspect that is primary, if theology is to have any soteriological reference to people. Khodr makes space for the Church to encounter the human quest through literature and poetry which speak to everyone, in the service of dialogue and mission, theology and humanity.

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43. Mrad, "The Witness...," 255. In the common preoccupations, Khodr according to Mrad would include "Palestine, Iraq and the anti-Islamic trends in the West which characterise Islam as a terrorist religion", *ibid.*

44. *Η Φύση του Ισλάμ* [The Nature of Islam], 46-47.

45. Cf. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), *passim* (e.g. 341-373); *Idem*, *A History of the Arab Peoples, With a New Introduction and Afterword by Malise Ruthven* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 470-485 [chapter "The Climax of Arabism (1950s and 1960s)"].

