

FROM XENOPHOBIA TO PHILOXENIA: A JUMP FOR HUMANITY

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ABSTRACT

Xenophobia is a strong feeling of dislike or fear of people from other countries [1] and not only that but also the fear of people that are different from our reality. *Philoxenia* (=hospitality) is the willingness, the friendly disposition to welcome and above all to provide free shelter, food, and care to one or more persons during their temporary stay in a foreign home [2]. The term of *philoxenia* is ancient Greek and it means the love (φιλω=ἀγαπῶ) for the xenos (=stranger). The term of *philoxenia* used by holy fathers in Christianity to speak about the embrace of the other, unconditionally. Saint John the Chrysostom spoke about the importance of hospitality and gave the paradigm to be followed by the believers for a better society. Christ himself lived as a hunted, as an immigrant, And as a refugee. As a baby, Jesus was persecuted by Herod [3]. The Godman, an unfamiliar, a foreign person, stepped into the world to save it from its destructive self, to demolish every certainty it had built in order to show it a different, transformative and soteriological path [4]. Fazal Sheikh (1965) is an American photographer who engaged in documentary photography by focusing on refugees and the socially marginalized people. His portraits find the face of the other when suffering. He tries to capture the glance of the foreign face and create a social comment, a social statement for the refugees that could possibly awaken the masses around the world (Afghanistan, India, Africa, South America, Middle East, Southwest United States and Mexico). This paper examines the two terms of *xenophobia* and *philoxenia* from the field of Orthodox theology and more specific from dogmatic theology and aesthetics. Aesthetics is understood as that creative way that expresses doctrine without altering or mitigating it. The methodology that is followed is the comparative study of patristic and biblical sources and the Fazal Sheikh's photography and theoretical work as a dialogue that can depict the gap of the two terms and the overpass of it to the great jump for humanity, because "humanity remains on the move" [5].

Keywords: *foreigner, Christianity, hospitality, photography, portrait*

INTRODUCTION

The Nobel awarded Greek poet Odysseus Elytis wrote "Make jump faster than wear" [6]. This poetic verse means that man should try to make the difference, to change the habits. The jump is not easy. It is a risk and a challenge, to move forward and to move faster undressing yourself from all your personal certainties in life. This humanitarian jump is different. It has the burden of the

human life in its existential way. And it is not that simple. If it was, everybody would try it. In contemporary world is not easy to raise your voice. It might even be dangerous. How could xenophobia be overpassed? How could man change his glance towards humanity?

Photography is an existential way to maintain and reproduce mechanically the infinity only once [7]. Photograph carries a piece of history, a piece of time, human emotions. It is a trace and evidence of existence in time. A separate moment of immortality. Documentary photography is formed by the technology and aesthetics of each historical period [8]. Documentary characteristics of photography are the ones that can form and reshape the public opinion and awaken the masses. A very representative example of documentary photography is the one that did not only record the Great Depression (1929–1939) in the United States but also shaped the world’s consciousness. The *Farm Security Administration* photo project with Roy Stryker as head hired photographers to depict the bad living conditions of the farmers that were suffering by the economic crisis [9]. It was not all about recording but an attempt to move the public opinion and depict the farmer’s reality suffering.

The science of theology can interpret, explain, or comment the terms of photography and, in this case, Fazal Sheik’s documentary photography. In dogmatic theology and aesthetics, we can find similarities of common terms and “common pictures” with photography: xenos, foreigner, stranger, neighbor, other. This paper aims to enlighten both theology and photography through a common ground which is the unfamiliar human face by the Fazal Sheik’s photography portrait to overpass it. Two ways we to overpass xenophobia and find a new ground, the common ground of filoxenia or philoxenia as it is more widely known.

XENOPHOBIA: A TIMELESS PICTURE

Xenophobia is a compound word. It comes from the terms *xenos* (=stranger) and *phobia* (=fear). It is not defined when the word of xenophobia was born. In ancient Greece *xenos* did not only have the meaning of stranger and foreigner but had also the meaning of the guest. This presupposes the existence of some other man who would be the host. The host should had been followed all the social rules of hospitality. So, at ancient Greece the term of *xenos* did not have as negative meaning as it has during the years ahead. Hospitality rules were closely connected to god’s will. This is a fact that many ancient Greek writers (Plato, Homer, Socrates, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristotle) can confirm. This law of hospitality is fundamental in Christianity and Christian writers too. As George Makari concluded in his thorough research, the term of xenophobia does not appear in any of these writers. The paradox here is the fact that although that there is no such a term in Greek or Christian writers, the term is only implied. As Makari ended up in his research, the term *xenophobia* firstly appeared on March 13, 1909, by an Italian correspondent archaeologist and cartographer, Rodolfo Lanciani, in his report in *The Athenaeum*. Lanciani used this word to describe the denial of the

discovery of a Semitic temple in the center of Rome. This discovery started from a scientific hypothesis by a French archaeologist, Paul Frédéric Gauckler but it rejected by Germans and Italians experts [10].

In Old Testament we can find passages that are mentioned the term of *xenos*. In the book of *Exodus*, we can find the ancient Greek term *prosilitos* which means the man who changed his religion and his religious beliefs. This word is interpreted with the word *stranger*:

“You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 23:9)

The stranger is linked with the man in need according to the Old Testament verse. In the book of *Leviticus*, we find the same term:

“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 19:33-34)

Many are the biblical verses that are referred to the term of stranger. What we observe is the fact that this term of stranger is linked with God’s mercy and love. The same value of the love to *xenos* is followed and is verified in New Testament too. The ancient Greek term *plesion* which means the man near, the neighbor has close meaning to the term stranger. Jesus gave the paradigm:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt. 19:19)

We should not forget the fact that when Jesus Christ was born, he was chased by Herod. Herod was afraid of the newborn that was said to be the messiah. He was afraid of losing his power and domination by Jesus. So, Herod tried to find the newborn Jesus to kill him but without success. Christ had to face the xenophobia of his time for his mortal nature but also the xenophobia for his immortal nature too. Jesus’ environment was not safe from his day born. Let us not forget the Pharisees and scribes that were also Godman’s enemies. They were blindly following Biblical laws. Pharisees and scribes were also afraid of Jesus’ interaction with the people and His public speeches that could influence them. They could feel His eloquent and powerful speech to the public. Jesus was a new human model that showed a different way for man to find God. He opposed to Pharisees and scribes and to anything fake and hypocritical. And this is the reason why they crucified Him: Jesus was a menace.

CAPTURING PHILOXENIA

The answer in the existential question of xenophobia is the philoxenia. The Greek word philoxenia is the hospitality, the embrace of *xenos*. John the

Chrysostom in his discourse *On almsgiving and hospitality* underlines that almsgiving does not only concern the rich people but also the poor, it is an ability that everybody can develop and a paradigm that everybody can follow because it is a matter of human willingness. By doing charities and help your neighbor you come closer to God's will and closer to salvation [11].

We can find this term of philoxenia in the New Testament:

“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it”. (Heb. 13:2)

Philoxenia can be an outcome of *theoxenia*. John Chrysostom in the same discourse refers to Abraham's philoxenia which proved to be a theoxenia. Abraham hosted three angels that were the triune God [12]. In the book *Human Archipelago* (2018) we can find the same idea of theoxenia by Teju Cole's note next to Fazal Sheikh's photo. According to the note of the photo:

“Theoxenia is hospitality (xenia) towards the humble stranger (xenos) who turns out to be a god (theos). The concept is later ritualized.” (*Human Archipelago*, p.168)



Fig. 1. Fazal Sheikh, *Tupasi's bedroom, government women's ashram, Vrindavan, India 2005*

Fazal Sheikh captured the result of hospitality in a place that women in Vrindavan found their shelter. Indian widows move to the holy city of Vrindavan to devote the rest of their lives in praying to the god Krishna inside the temple, now awaiting only death. It is their only “good option” of living while by staying at their hometown they risk getting hurt, getting married by force, raped, or even be killed. The holy city offers the chance for peace and redemption for the Indian women. The unfamiliar face of the other, the woman face of xenos meets every woman in suffer. The humble meets the holy. And all this mystery becomes a sacrifice, a fact that is proved by the sacred offerings we see in the picture. Faith is captured on a wall of a safe place for the humble women. This offerings on the wall represent the result of philoxenia, a philoxenia that has its roots in theoxenia.



Fig. 2. Fazal Sheikh, Ruin and surround lands of the Palestinian village of Beit Jibrin, Hebron district, Israel 2013

According to the *Human Archipelago*, hospitality should arise as a result of the human duty. The sense of hospitality to the stranger in someone’s home means that he comes closer with a different reality, the reality that the stranger had to face, the reality of the war, the reality of the brutality, and the reality of the genocide [13]. The sense of home and hospitality is transformed in this picture. A ruin carries all the deeper meanings and all the realities that are still exist. The ruin carries the idea of the home and the idea of the ideal home. A home that has space for the man in need, for the xenos. Fazal Sheikh’s photo combines the deeper meanings of the hospitality. Between the ruins we can see that the door and the windows are missing. We see a ruin with open door and open windows. Maybe this openness is what exactly human need to be hospitable. This openness

is an element that is close to Christian thought. At the same time this photograph of the ruin is a call to aesthetics. New perspectives that are build when the ruin has its own dynamics and speech to the humans and nature within time and history [14]. It is an aesthetical redefinition but also an existential redefinition of what this home used to be and of what carries through time and what means today.

THE FLASH OF HUMANITY

Two different ways to perceive the essence of xenophobia and its opposite term which is the philoxenia. Dogmatic theology gives us the theoretical background to realize xenophobia's roots and dynamics through time. Theological aesthetics as a branch of dogmatic theology gives us the opportunity to go further and find new ways, aesthetical ways that can speak of the matters that theologians try to describe theoretically. Photography has the power of the image, has the power to speak without words and descriptions. Photography is art but also a testimony of truth. Documentary photography gives pieces of reality and awakens the masses. It is not only about capturing a moment, but it is also a matter of awakening. Fazal Sheikh's photography work can affirm that.

Photography is not only an aesthetical depiction, but also an experience. An experience of change and an experience of a metamorphosis. This experience and this transformation give a new perception of life. A new perception and a new dimension of the world by the glance of the photographer. It is an aesthetical experience because we develop our "aisthíseis", our senses to feel the world with our personal way. Senses are the ones that a photographer transforms with his camera, as pieces of life within life: the attraction, the motion, the emotion, the fear, the enthusiasm [15].

According to theology, transformation is an approach to the divine by grace, in history and in creation. Man experiences a renewal and a new existential way of living. Photography can also transform the things we know. It is the unique eye of the photographer that makes this transformation happen. In both cases there is a common factor: the belief. In theology, transformation presupposes the belief in God. In photography, transformation presupposes the belief in life and humanity. In Fazal Sheikh's photos we can see this flash of light for transformation. Fazal Sheikh captures humanity through his human portraits, the unfamiliar faces of the people in margin. He focuses on their gazes, and he gives them space to exist. The photographer makes a humanistic statement to change the people's consciousness and furthermore, he makes a photographic effort to move the masses and react to the injustice and pain of the socially weak, of the displaced people.

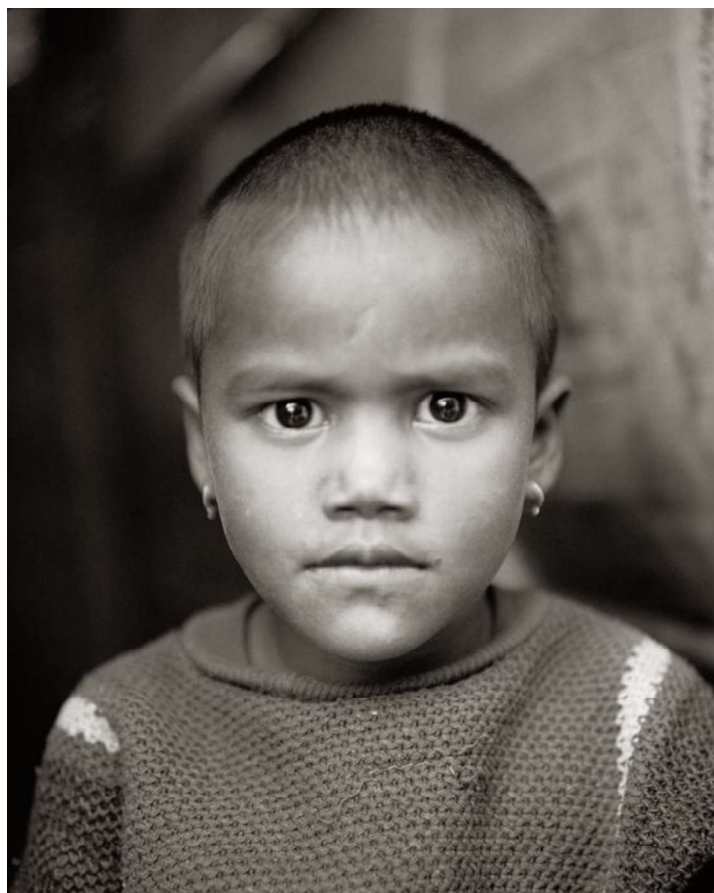


Fig. 3. Fazal Sheikh, Annu, Jai Hind squatter settlement, Delhi, India 2008

CONCLUSIONS

From the day we born we try to learn how to walk. But what about jumping? How are we going to learn how to leave our certainties and take the risks for the things that worth? A jump was never easy because there is always the risk of falling. The jump here in this research case is to take aside all the prejudices that are deeply rooted in human thoughts. Xenophobia is a timeless term that will not ever disappear if we do not change our glance to the other and our glance to diversity. Xenos is a word and a reality that is related to the margin, the displaced. In ancient times writers described this phenomenon of xenophobia, the same Christianity also did. But surprisingly officially the term of xenophobia appears as it seems in 1909.

Philoxenia comes to change the unhostitable behavior. Philoxenia is a life proposal and a life attitude. Theoxenia looks like the first step us to get closer to philoxenia. When someone recognizes God in stranger's face, he will get closer to God as well. Jesus Christ spoke about philoxenia and taught to his disciples the importance of this action by His paradigm. According to theology, on the face of the stranger we should recognize Jesus. According to Fazal Sheikh's photography, on the face of the stranger we should recognize the common human nature, but also the face of God. Both in Orthodox theology and Fazal Sheikh's photography the hospitality is human's duty, and both embrace the idea of the transformation

from an aesthetical, awakening path. This does not mean that this paper is an attempt to identify theology with Fazal Sheikh's photography work. This paper is a dialogue between Orthodox theology and documentary photography that aims to highlight the terms of xenophobia and philoxenia for the everyday human to find back his lost values, to find back himself, to find back his hidden humanity. Theology and photography can be the tools.



Fig. 4. Fazal Sheikh, Rodi with roses, streets of Delhi, India, 2005

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