

MISSION AMONG OTHER FAITHS: AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

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The overall approach of the Eastern Orthodox Church to people of other faiths grows out of her theology. The importance of theology, however, does not necessarily mean surrender to a “theology from above”. After all, as St. Maximus the Confessor has insisted, a theology without action is a theology of the Devil. There are three distinctive characteristics of Eastern Orthodox theology which determine the Church’s attitude toward other religions: her *ecclesiological* awareness, the *pneumatological* dimension of her understanding of the Holy Trinity, and her teaching of *theosis*.

The Orthodox Church – without setting aside her conviction that she is “the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church” and her task to witness the whole gospel to the whole world, and without forgetting that her Lord Jesus Christ is “*the way, the truth and the life*” (John 14:6) – humbly believes that, although she is the authentic bearer of the apostolic tradition, she is only a simple servant in the “mission” of the Triune God. This conviction of hers is the result of the “economy of the Holy Spirit”. According to this chapter of trinitarian theology – for centuries marginalized in the West – the Holy Spirit, the “*Spirit of Truth*”, which leads us to the “*whole truth*” (John 16:13), “*blows wherever he/she wills*” (John 3:8), thus embracing the whole of the cosmos.

The Orthodox, therefore, believe that God uses not only the Church, but many other powers of the world, for his mission to save humankind and the entire creation. With the contribution, therefore, of the theological vision, the missionary task expands to new, previously unimaginable areas of action: the emphasis is no longer placed on mere proselytizing activities, but on full-scale conversion of both the Christian evangelizers, and those to whom the witness is rendered. In this way a total transformation occurs and the implementation of God’s rule becomes a reality, since according to the biblical *Magna Carta* (Matthew 25), God judges humanity with criteria other than the conventional religious ones. With the “economy of the Spirit”, the narrow boundaries of the Church are broadened, and the cultural (and religious) superiority syndromes give place to a “common witness” and a humble “inter-faith dialogue”.

However, the Orthodox never dissociate the “economy of the Spirit” from the “economy of Christ/the Word”; while her Pneumatology never

overshadows Christology, being in fact conditioned in a dynamic way by Pneumatology. Defining *missio Dei* on the basis of John 21, the Orthodox believe that God in his own self is a life of *communion*, and that God's involvement in history (and consequently our missionary task) aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God's very life. This ultimate expression of *koinonia* and love through this kind of "inter-faith" encounter is transferred to the whole world not as dogmas or ethical commands, but as a communion of love. This openness toward the faithful of other religions is also reinforced by its unique anthropology, developed especially by the Byzantine Orthodox theologians of the second millennium, and expressed in such terms as *theosis* or *deification*. This Orthodox theological formulation doctrine, being the result of the Christian doctrine of *incarnation*, was a further elaboration of the *justification by faith* biblical notion, and St. Athanasius' famous dictum: "God became man, so that human beings may become God (acquire *theosis*)." According to this dynamic theology, human nature in the Orthodox Byzantine tradition is not a closed, autonomous entity (as it was believed in the post-Augustinian western Christianity, which was trapped by the static dichotomy of "nature/grace"), but a dynamic reality, determined in its very existence by its relationship to God. Guided by a vision of how to "know" God, to "participate" in his life, and of course to be "saved" neither by an extrinsic action of God nor through the rational cognition of propositional truths (contrary to the medieval scholastic views), but by "becoming God", this soteriological notion is much more inclusive to non-Christians than the old conventional exclusivist mission theology of western Christianity. Together with the *relational* understanding of the "social" (Cappadocian) Trinity, the Orthodox permanent task of *theosis* – a task but at the same time a "given" at God's creation of humans in his "image" – is neither a neo-Platonic return to an impersonal One, nor a replacement of the biblical (Pauline) *justification by faith*, but a true continuation of the biblical expressions of life "in Christ" and "in communion of the Holy Spirit".

This *pneumatological* and *deification* understanding of mission has nothing to do with *syncretism*. Those who believe in the importance of inter-faith dialogue, mainly on the basis of the "economy of the Spirit" – and the Orthodox also on the basis of the anthropology of *deification* – insist that the mutual respect and peaceful relations and co-existence with faithful of other beliefs (or even non-believers) do not by any means lead to the naïve affirmation that *all religious are the same*. On the contrary, dialogue and co-operation are necessary, exactly because the various religious traditions are different and promote different visions of reality. In inter-faith dialogue the encounter between religions (more precisely between *faithful* of different religions) is understood as an "encounter of mutual commitments and responsibilities" to the common goal of humanity to restore communion with God, and thus restoring the rule of God "on earth as it is in heaven".

This kind of Christian witness does not aim at the creation of a new “pan-religion”, or a new “world religion”, as it is quite naïvely claimed by ultra-conservatives from all Christian confessions, but would inevitably lead to a “communion of faithful from different religious traditions”. After all, this is the ultimate goal of the divine economy, as it is clearly stated in our normative biblical foundations (cf Eph 1:10, Col 3:11, etc.).

This endeavour does not only decrease the enmity and the hostilities between people of different religions; it is also a call to the faithful to engage strongly in social development. Above all, it makes the “other” a partner in mission, not an “object” of mission. Viewing the faithful of other religions as co-workers in God’s mission, the Christian *synergetically* assists in the realization of the work of the Holy Spirit for a new world order, a new world economy based on the biblical truth that the “land belongs to the Lord” and caring for the “fulness of life”, i.e. a global communion of love, which transcends his/her personal as well as cultural and ethnic *ego*. The common Christian witness unceasingly promotes the salvific power of God through Jesus Christ, but does not obliterate God’s dynamic involvement through the Holy Spirit into the whole created world. It is a useful means to carry out the unity within a more and more divided world.

The place of Orthodoxy, as all pre-eminent Orthodox theologians insist, is not on the margins of history, but at the centre of social fermentations as a pioneer agent in the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit. Mission is conceived by the Orthodox as a response to the call of the Triune God for a common journey and a participation in the love of God. Hence the importance it gives to a *martyria-mission* – which extends even to *martyrdom* – and to the doxological praise of God in liturgy. For the Orthodox the liturgy is not only a springboard for mission (that is why they call it *liturgy after the liturgy* – which can also mean that mission is *a liturgy before the actual liturgy*), but a proleptic manifestation of God’s Kingdom and an offering and thanksgiving for the *oikoumene*, in fact for the entire world, regardless of religious convictions.

If one surveys the diverse religio-cultural contexts of various Eastern Orthodox churches (but also the non-Chalcedonian Oriental Orthodox churches) one can observe that there is a long history of peaceful co-existence between the Orthodox and people of other religions. When the Crusaders in the Middle Ages launched that dreadful campaign to liberate the Holy Land, they accused the Orthodox of “being too tolerant toward the Muslims” (!). The Indian example is even more telling, certainly deserving special mention. India is the home of major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, and despite this there is no historical incident of any real conflict between Christianity and the other faiths. The life and historical memory of a genuinely Indian and oriental church like the Malankara Orthodox Church, for instance, would illustrate the peaceful co-existence and good relations between Christianity and other religions in

India. Ironically the Orthodox in India experienced oppression and persecution for the first time in their history, not from Hindus or Buddhists but from the colonial Portuguese Christian (Roman Catholic) authorities in the sixteenth century. Additionally, this colonial western Catholic mission divided the Indian Church, which was one and united until that time.

Indian Christianity maintained naturally the uniqueness of its Orthodox faith while in social and cultural matters it was fully inculturated in the indigenous Indian context. Furthermore, the profound philosophical-spiritual-ethical context of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions provided support for the spiritual-ethical ethos of Orthodox Christianity. There had always been a dialogue of life and an underlying, though not always articulated, feeling of fraternity, mutual respect and a sense of common ground between Orthodox Christianity and the major religions of India. The old “western” aggressive “mission paradigm” with its brutal and intolerant attitudes (from the Roman Catholic and the Protestant missions) did a lot of harm in India. As a consequence, in recent years many contemporary Indian theologians have attempted to draw from the wealth of the Indian philosophical and spiritual tradition, and the long legacy of mutual respect and openness experienced by the Orthodox presence.