

The Meaning of the New WCC Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism for a Russian Orthodox Missiologist

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The document *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (TTL) is a timely and relevant milestone on the way of defining ecumenical strategies and tactics for the life of Christian communities in our rapidly changing and increasingly globalized world. It is of current interest especially for Russian missiology because, as a field of studies, missiology has taken shape only in the last twenty years. The pre-revolutionary history of Russian Orthodoxy knows several names of missionary devotees, and conceptualizing missionary activities began in the late 19th century, but this movement was cut short following the establishment of Bolshevik regime in 1917. The missiology that originated in the West in the 20th century has only recently been brought to study in Russia. More than half a century of membership of the Moscow Patriarchate in the World Council of Churches (WCC) has partially made up for the shortage of ecclesial and theological fellowship of churches from the ideologically opposing systems. Still, so far perceptions associated with ecumenism in mass consciousness of Russian believers (not only Orthodox) are vague and distorted.

The first thing to note is the invaluable act of bringing the subject “mission and evangelism” to the attention of the 10th Assembly of the WCC. Hitherto, most of the believers, and even most of the clergy, remained unaware of the fact that ecumenism is simply co-working for the cause of Christian mission. Discussion of the topic, and that within the context of the recently celebrated centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, will deepen missionary consciousness both of Christian leaders and laity. Oddly enough, the need for Christian cooperation and unity that was

felt unquestionable by many missionaries a century ago remains unobvious for some of our contemporaries.

Another significant issue is “changing landscapes.” Strategies and tactics of the mission should be determined by a current situation in the missionary field; that is, they should be a function of numerous factors – social, political, psychological, economic, cultural, linguistic, etc. The task of saving traditional values involves renewing the concepts and methods of the mission. It is hardly reasonable today to take mission as increasing membership of the community rather than *missio Dei*.¹

Yet regrettably, for Russian Orthodox believers there still remain some barriers.

The idea of our faith as traditional, conservative, resistant to any influence that is implanted in the minds of the Orthodox believers makes their situation still more confused. It is often said that renewal, *aggiornamento*, is contraindicated to Orthodoxy. Yes, it is traditional, but it is a living Tradition. Yes, it is conservative, but in the sense that it serves preaching and conservation of the eternal values of the Gospel. The Church as a Theandric organism cannot but interact with the social milieu, cannot but look for a language to communicate those who are to listen to the Gospel. Missiological reasoning for such a position can start from the notion of “inculturation” introduced into missiology in the last quarter of the XXth century. Since horizontal, geographical inculturation is readily apparent, it seems natural to admit chronological inculturation as well.²

Within the context of the concept of *missio Dei*, highly relevant is an emphasis on the Christian contribution to the mission with special reference to creation. The late 20th century highlighted implications and significance of the fact that theological contemplations on the economy of salvation, ecology, and economy stem from a common root: that is, *oikos*. Logic leads us from theology to ecology, from ecology to the ecumenical values of cooperation and responsibility for the creation and humankind that we all share.³

¹ See *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (TTL), §43. The affirmation of God’s mission (*missio Dei*) points to the belief in God as one who acts in history and in creation, in concrete realities of time and contexts, who seeks the fullness of life for the whole earth through justice, peace, and reconciliation. Participation in God’s ongoing work of liberation and reconciliation by the Holy Spirit, therefore, includes discerning and unmasking the demons that exploit and enslave. For example, this involves deconstructing patriarchal ideologies, upholding the right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples, and challenging the social embeddedness of racism and casteism.

² See Vladimir Fedorov, “Wind of Change: An Orthodox Point of View,” *International Review of Mission* 101:2 (November 2012), 404–406.

³ See TTL §19: Mission is the overflow of the infinite love of the triune God. God’s mission begins with the act of creation. Creation’s life and God’s life are entwined. The mission of God’s Spirit encompasses us all in an ever-giving act of grace. We are therefore called to move beyond a narrowly human-centred approach and to embrace forms of mission which express our reconciled relationship with all created life. We hear the cry of the earth as we listen to the cries of the poor and we know that from its beginning the earth has cried out to God over humanity’s injustice (Genesis 4:10).

The fact that the *Basis of the Social Concept* (in 2000)⁴ contained a section on ecology and that in 2013 the Russian Orthodox Church had a specially developed document conceptualizing its position on ecological problems⁵ is evidence of the particular interest the Russian Orthodox Church will have in the parts of TTL that deal with creation.

An essential contribution to TTL is the section “Evangelism, Interfaith Dialogue and Christian Presence.” Not all Christians are willing to admit that “God’s Spirit can be found in all cultures that affirm life. The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, and we do not fully understand the workings of the Spirit in other faith traditions. We acknowledge that there is inherent value and wisdom in diverse life-giving spiritualities” (TTL §93). Despite the fact that Christian Apologists asserted that there is the seed of Logos in every faith⁶ as far back as the second century, there are Christians who would fail to assimilate the idea. The same can be said about the concepts of freedom of conscience and religious tolerance.

Given the current situation, these values should be obvious for a missionary, and that not because of their being promoted by the secular society; it is called for by the current understanding of the Christian mission. It is a requirement of the time. That makes article 96 of TTL especially relevant:

It is necessary to protect rights of minority groups and religious freedom and to enable all to contribute to the common good. Religious freedom should be upheld because it flows from the dignity of the human person, grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). Followers of all religions and beliefs have equal rights and responsibilities.

It seems useful to remember that some missiologists predict that the Christianity of the future will be a minority Church in most parts of the world.

The document under discussion is essentially missiological; it has been prompted on the one hand by requirements of Christian communities, and on the other by actual vectors of missiological activities. Missiology should not be reduced to controversy with new religious movements, the way it is in some post-Communist countries. Of paramount

⁴ This document can be read on the Russian Orthodox Church website, at <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ According to St Justine, Christianity exists beyond its visible boundaries and prior to its historical appearing, but up to the incarnation, it is fragmentary, hidden, even mixed with error and ambiguous.

importance is its role as an analytical control of the practices of religious life in secular societies. Every aspect of the church life – theological study and education, liturgical life, church order and church law, inter-church and inter-faith dialogues – should follow the missionary strategy. In my opinion, the new affirmation suggests the idea that an adequate analytical missiological structure should be created as a mainstream to guide the tactics of all church administrative structures.