

One Christ-Many Witnesses: Visions of Mission and Unity from an Orthodox Perspective (A Response to Prof Dana Robert's Keynote Paper)

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I am extremely grateful and specially honoured to be invited to this event that marks the closure of the Edinburgh 2010 Regnum Mission Series, an incredible scholarly production with missiological views from all Christian traditions. In almost all these mission documents a new paradigm in Christian mission is manifested that radically changed in a positive way the route of our Christian witness to the world. I am also grateful to have been invited to be one of the editors of the series.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Dana Robert for her insightful paper with the remarkable overview of the modern era of global Christian mission. Needless to say, I fully endorse almost all her points, as well as “the lessons of our recent missiological pilgrimage”, Her closing remarks: “Walking and eating together, common witness, testimony, worship and celebration in the Spirit--and yes, even the ecumenism of blood as we witness to the one Christ among the nations”-- together with her special emphasis on the importance of unity (even with overtones of diversity) as the *sine qua non* of all contemporary missionary efforts, perfectly summarize our present situation.

My short response from an Orthodox perspective will limit itself to some specific information and focuses, not fully highlighted in her keynote address. And first of all I would like to invite you to recall that the present focuses that emerged in global Christian mission are what the Orthodox expected as the very first step the ecumenical movement should take, even before the 1910 Edinburgh mission conference, considered in the West as the beginning of the ecumenical era.¹ The famous Encyclical Letters of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1902, 1904, and later in 1920, to all Christian Churches insisted that social and other practical activities of the Churches should not be postponed until a complete doctrinal agreement is achieved. Only through cooperation in social issues and joint commitment in the name of Christ for the sake of humanity, the encyclicals went on, can a visible unity of the Church be accomplished.²

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¹ According to Thomas E. FitzGerald, “even before the Edinburgh Conference, the Orthodox Church of Constantinople, known as the Ecumenical Patriarchate, began a new series of discussions on issues related to church divisions as early as the year 1902. On June 12 of that year, Patriarch Joachim III addressed an encyclical...” (*The Ecumenical Movement: An Introductory History*, Praeger Publishers: Westport CT 2004, p. 82).

² Cf. “Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1920: ‘Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere,’” Gennadios Limouris (ed.), *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism. Statements, Messages and Reports on the Ecumenical Movement 1902-1992*, WCC, Geneva 1994, pp. 9-11. As interpreted by the first General Secretary of the WCC and historian Visser't Hooft this important principle was one of the key requirements of the ecumenical movement (cf. *Minutes and Reports of the Twelfth Meeting of the Central Committee, Rhodes, Greece, August 19-27*, Geneva 1959, pp. 95-97). Cf. also the § 12 *Unitatis redintegratio*, of the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism. Of course, for unspecified reasons the Orthodox interest in the course of time shifted to an exclusive quest for Church unity, depriving the most urgent quest for the unity of humankind of the Orthodox energy and theological reflection. More on this in Stylianos Tsompanidis, “The Ecumenical Process of *AGAPE* (Alterative Globalization Addressing People and Earth): An Orthodox Perspective,” in

This is what all Orthodox committed to ecumenism expect from Global Christian Mission. In one of the last Messages of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches it was clearly stated that:

“Orthodox Christians share responsibility for the contemporary crisis of this planet with other people, whether they are people of faith or not, because they have tolerated and indiscriminately compromised on extreme human choices, without credibly challenging these choices with the word of faith. Therefore, they also have a major obligation to contribute to overcoming the divisions of the world”.³

Some of these divisions are to a certain extent due to the failure or shortcomings of modernity in justice, peace, the integrity of creation, and the world economy, as a result of individualism (one of the pillars of modernity) and the ensuing absolute, unconditioned, uncontrolled freedom of the individual in all aspects of life (sexual freedom, freedom in public lifestyle, legally protected freedom in accumulating wealth etc.), heralded as the new faith after the Enlightenment. Many theologians and missiologists from all religious quarters speak now of a *liberation of modernity*.⁴

The most tangible aspect of this liberation has to do with the most revered in modern culture *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Human rights are now proved awfully ineffective, if they are not accompanied by “*human responsibilities*”. The struggle of Christians to promote such a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, of course along with the Human Rights, is not just a diplomatic initiative aiming at introducing in the world agenda moral values at the expense of the values of modernity and the democratic achievements of the Enlightenment. It came out of pressure from prophetic and charismatic figures and theological movements for social and ecological justice from a faith perspective. Long before a universal concern (political, scientific etc.) and advocacy for the dangerous effects of the climate change was developed, theologians and missiologists put a critical question to their own religious institutions:

“Will the churches have the courage to engage with the ‘values’ of a profit oriented way of life as a matter of faith, or will they withdraw into the ‘private’ sphere? This is the question our churches must answer or lose their very soul,”⁵

declared a WCC consultation of Eastern and Central European Churches on the problem of economic globalization at the dawn of the 3rd millennium, that paved the way toward the New Mission Statement together with the *Call for Action*, which appeals for “building a common voice, fostering ecumenical cooperation, and ensuring greater coherence for the realization of an Economy of Life for all”.⁶

And the Orthodox Primates clearly affirmed that:

“the gap between rich and poor is growing dramatically due to the financial crisis, usually the result of manic profiteering by economic factors and corrupt financial activity, which, by lacking an anthropological dimension and sensitivity, does not ultimately serve the real needs of mankind. A viable economy is that which combines efficacy with justice and social solidarity”.⁷

Therefore, the Christian Churches slowly, but steadily, started being concerned about two interrelated aspects of globalization: ecology and economy. Therefore, it did not come

A Testimony to the Nations. A Vigintennial Volume Offered to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Thessaloniki 2011, pp. 905-923 (in Greek). Also his *Orthodoxie und Ökumene. Gemeinsam auf dem Weg zu Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und Bewahrung der Schöpfung*, Münster/Hamburg /London 1999, especially chs. I,1.3, II,2, and II, 1.

³ § 6 of the *Message of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches*, disseminated *urbi et orbe* by the ultimate authority of the Orthodox Church, namely the Synod of the Primates of the independent (Autocephalous) Orthodox Churches, issued on 12-12-2008).

⁴ This is the general message of an international, interdisciplinary, inter-faith project, which Orthodox institutions participated in, analyzed in the recently published book by U. Duchrow - F. J. Hinkelammert, *Transcending Greedy Money. Interreligious Solidarity for Just Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012.

⁵ Rogate Mshane, *Globalization. WCC-JPC*, presented in the Harare WCC Assembly. *The Responsibility of World Religions for Ecology, the World Economic System, and the International Law*.

⁶ *Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call for Action*, § 23.

⁷ *The Message of the Primates*, § 8.

as a surprise the immediate response by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and Patriarch Bartholomew in particular, who was given the nickname the “Green Patriarch.”

On a theoretical level, however, the most significant and crucial conclusion was the conviction that from a Christian faith perspective economy and ecology cannot be dealt with in isolation from each other. Global Christian Mission, came to the conclusion that

“various aspects of climate, ecological, financial, and debt crises are mutually dependent and reinforce each other. They cannot be treated separately anymore... (The people of faith) discern the fatal intertwining of the global financial, socio-economic, climate, and ecological crises accompanied in many places of the world by the suffering of people and their struggle for life. Far-reaching market liberalization, deregulation, and unrestrained privatisation of goods and services are exploiting the whole Creation and dismantling social programs and services and opening up economies across borders to seemingly limitless growth of production.”⁸

This is something that was painfully felt in Greece by the majority of its citizens during the recent economic crisis. I have argued elsewhere⁹ that Orthodoxy and Mission are two terms that at a first glance seem quite incompatible; at least to the western historians of mission, even to this very day.¹⁰ When in 1910 the historic gathering of missionaries across denominational boundaries took place in Edinburgh, in order to launch an inter-denominational missionary co-operation, Orthodoxy was completely marginal and not even present. In their deliberations there were only references to the Oriental (sic) or Greek churches, always within the framework of the western (mainly Protestant) mission. Even in the following generation no article on the importance of mission was written by Orthodox theologians.¹¹ The initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the dawn of the 20th century, I mentioned before, only later were brought to the attention of Christian ecumenical mission.¹²

Archbishop of Albania Anastasios (Yannoulatos), former CWME moderator, and the late Prof. Fr. Ion Bria, to mention just two Orthodox missiologists, made significant contributions, together with many other Orthodox theologians, to the development of the contemporary mission theology. The *martyria* dimension of mission in the place of an offensive and sometimes arrogant mission, the *Trinitarian* importance of the *missio dei* theology, the liturgical aspect of the Christian witness in the form of the *Liturgy after the liturgy*, and quite recently also the understanding of mission as the *Liturgy before the liturgy*,¹³ are only few cases of the “Orthodox” contribution to the new ecumenical understanding of mission in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Gleaning from the richness of the Christian tradition of the undivided Church, as well as from the wealth of their missionary heritage (especially St. Cyril and Methodius’ evangelization of the Slavs, and of Europe in general) the Orthodox not only explained their different approach to mission; they also became invaluable players in the field of contemporary Christian missiology, evidenced in the Edinburgh 2010 event.

During the last 50 years, i.e. from the time of the full integration into the world mission of all the Orthodox Churches there have been three statements on mission and

⁸ § 10 of the *Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call for Action*.

⁹ Most of what follows is based on an earlier article of mine under the title “An Orthodox Assessment of the New Mission Statement”, published in *IRM* 102 (2013), pp. 174-178.

¹⁰ More in the collective volume I edited under the title *Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series 17, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies – Regnum Books, Oxford 2013, which was actually prepared as an Orthodox input to the Busan WCC General Assembly.

¹¹ More in Athanasios Papatheanasiou, “Tradition as Impulse for Renewal and Witness: Introducing Orthodox Missiology in the IRM,” *International Review of Mission* 100:2 (2011), pp. 203–215.

¹² Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), “Discovering the Orthodox Missionary Ethos,” in Ion Bria (ed.), *Martyria-Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox Churches*, WCC Publications, Geneva 1980, pp. 20-29; also in his *Mission in Christ's Way*, HC Orthodox Press/WCC Publications, Brookline/Geneva 2010, pp. 117-134.

¹³ E.g. Bishop Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, “Mission as Liturgy before Liturgy and as Contestation,” P. Vassiliadis (ed.), *Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Oxford 2013, pp. 175-178.

evangelism: The 1982 “*Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*”, the 2000 “*Mission and Evangelism in Unity*”, and the 2012 new mission statement, entitled “*Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*”.

The 1982 mission statement is a traditional mission statement, reflecting the mostly Protestant understanding of mission, and despite its translation among other languages also into Greek,¹⁴ was never embraced and wholeheartedly followed by Orthodox missionaries and missiologists, obviously because the Orthodox did not feel at home with its theological arguments or the overall aura. This became quite evident in the attempt to update it with strong Orthodox theological terminology (and of course substantial Orthodox contribution) in the 2000 *Mission and Evangelism in Unity* statement, which met with some criticism from the Protestant (and particularly Evangelical) missiologists. This was the reason why it never acquired a universal acceptance and official approval by the entire WCC in the form of a decision by its Central Committee.

Both the 1982 and the 2000 mission statements attempted to bring into actuality the traditional (western and eastern respectively) understanding of mission. However, they both came short as regards the adaptation to the rapidly changing landscapes. The third millennium required concrete affirmations as regards the emerging new challenges, especially the growing pluralistic situation and the immoral world economic system, and a renewed philosophy and language.

TTL and many books in the Regnum Mission Series fulfil some of the expectations of the Orthodox, especially in areas of crucial theological importance. And first of all, the Trinitarian, i.e. Pneumatological, basis (§ 1ff.). The Orthodox always insist that all fundamental aspects of Christian theology, creation of the entire cosmos by God, redemption in Christ and salvation through the Church, but beyond her historic boundaries in the power of the Holy Spirit, etc., are all conceived as the natural consequence of the inner dynamics of the Triune God, i.e. of the communion and love that exists within the Holy Trinity.

“The Trinitarian theology points to the fact that God's involvement in history aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God's very life. The implications of this assertion for understanding mission are very important: mission does not aim primarily at the propagation or transmission of intellectual convictions, doctrines, moral commands etc., but at the transmission of the life of communion that exists in God”.¹⁵

One could also add some further points: the *ecclesial* dimension of mission, the implicit *liturgical* aspect (although not fully articulated in the direction of the Eucharistic approach to mission, especially in view of the affirmation in §17), the explicit *environmental* and *inter-faith* consequences of an authentic Christian witness, and the clear *connection between mission and unity*,¹⁶ are all profound theological aspects, very familiar to the Orthodox tradition.¹⁷

The strong *spiritual dimension* that permeates TTL and most of the Regnum series is yet another positive point the Orthodox can immediately endorse. For generations, even centuries, the triumphant character in doing mission overwhelmed the quintessence of the Christian message and attitude, the Pauline affirmation that “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor 1:21).

I will end my short intervention by underlining few more specific characteristics of the Orthodox theology of mission. Without losing sight to the fundamental conviction that

¹⁴ Cf. Ion Bria-Petros Vassiliadis, *Orthodox Christian Witness*, EKO 1: Tertios Press, Katerini Greece 1989, pp. 177-200 (in Greek).

¹⁵ I. Bria (ed.), *Go Forth in Peace. Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, Geneva 1985, p. 3.

¹⁶ “Practically, as well as theologically, mission and unity belong together” (§ 60)

¹⁷ See e.g. Archbishop Anastasios' recent short contribution to M. Oxbrow and T. Grass (eds.), *The Mission of God. Studies in Orthodox and Evangelical Mission*, Regnum Studies in Mission, Oxford 2015, under the title “Theological Understanding of Mission: Variations on a Theme,” pp. 24-29.

Jesus Christ is “*the way, the truth and the life*” (Jn 14:6), most Orthodox missiologists insist that the Church is not but a simple servant in the “mission” of God. Basing their theology on “the economy of the Spirit” (side by side of course with the “economy of Christ/the Word”), they argue that God uses not only the Church, but many other powers of the world for the salvation of humankind and the entire creation. After all, it is the Holy Spirit, the “*Spirit of Truth*,” that leads us to the “*whole truth*,” (Jn 16:13) and “*blows wherever He/She wills*” (Jn 3:8), thus embracing the whole of cosmos.

This “ecclesiological” and “pneumatological” understanding of mission is also reinforced by a peculiar theology, which in the Orthodox East is expressed by such terms as *theosis* or *deification*. Whereas in the post-Augustinian Christianity a clearly static dichotomy between “nature” and “grace” was developed, in the East a more inclusive and dynamic theology was elaborated with significant consequences for mission.¹⁸ Human nature was never considered as a closed, autonomous, and static entity; its very existence was always determined by its *relationship* to God. Guided, therefore, by a vision of how to “know” God, and “participate” in His life, Christian witness is closely connected with the notion of a *synergetic* theology of *theosis* or *deification*. Human beings are called to salvation neither by an extrinsic action of God (as e.g. the “irresistible grace” of Augustine), nor through the rational cognition of propositional truths (cf. the scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas), but by “becoming God”. This was the primary and permanent task of any authentic Christian witness: to make people achieve God’s “likeness” (*kath’ omoiosin*), restoring in this way the human “nature” to its original status. Rooted in the normative biblical (Pauline) expressions of life “in Christ” and “in communion of the Holy Spirit”, and inextricably connected with Christology, as it was first articulated by St. Athanasius (“*Christ became human, so that we may become Gods*”), this later Orthodox understanding of mission in terms of *theosis* is not to be confused with the neo-platonic return to an impersonal One. It is a true continuation of the so-called “social” understanding of the Holy Trinity, also known as “Cappadocian” Trinitarian theology.¹⁹

This *relational* and *synergetic* theology may have been the cause of a much more inclusive understanding of mission than the conventional exclusivist one that has generally developed until very recently in the West. And if I am allowed to make a recommendation this is a re-evaluation of the theology of *theosis* from a missiological perspective. Its full integration in contemporary World mission vocabulary and spiritual practice is something urgently needed.

¹⁸ It is quite encouraging that even J. Stamoulis, an Evangelical of Greek origin, hinted this point in his “Justification, Sanctification, Theosis: An Evangelical View,” M. Oxbrow and T. Grass (eds.), *The Mission of God. Studies in Orthodox and Evangelical Mission*, pp. 200-212.

¹⁹ More in my “Theological Education in the Orthodox World,” in D. Werner - D. Esterline - N. Kang - J. Raja (eds.), *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity. Theological Perspectives-Regional Surveys-Ecumenical Trends*, Regnum Studies in Global Christianity, Oxford 2010, pp. 603-610.