Spiritual Transformation – a response

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## Introduction

As a newcomer at this consultation and in a sense also as a newcomer in this orthodox - evangelical dialog, allow me to bring greetings from the Central and Eastern European Association for Mission Studies, an international and interdenominational platform stimulating the academic reflection on the missionary practice of Church and mission, and of mission related issues in today’s society, in place since 2002.

This morning, I will share with you some reflections on Spiritual Transformation. Please bear with me, as in my brief presentation I may not have grasped well the richness of your tradition.

1. The first time I was exposed to the Orthodox tradition was in **1995,** at a remarkable International conference in Moscow when I remember well in the Danilov monastery, on Christian Missions in the XVIII–XX Centuries, organized by Andrew F. Walls, co-sponsored by the Institute for Universal History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The main purpose was - with the secular scholars of this institute and a few colleagues of Prof. Walls - to uncover a possible “secret” of the economic development of the West in the modern mission movement with its strong voluntary principle. A new world opened up to me.
2. The second time was in 2010 at a consultation in Minsk of the Orthodox Mission Network with Olga Oleink and Vladimir Kozhuharov, myself being one of the two Protestants among the fifty or so participants.

I was struck by the open sharing regarding the struggles these priests faces in the Orthodox parishes with the growing number of nominal Christians, the increasing internal erosion and the genuine search for new ways for the renewal of church in mission. It resonated with the work I was involved in Hungary, helping the Reformed Church in Hungary regain her missional vigour.

I was deeply moved by the closing liturgy - translated into English - with Finn, Kenyan, USA, Belarus orthodox brethren and sisters. The awe for God reminded me of the reverence for God in my own Reformed Calvinistic tradition.

1. In Budapest we had many special meetings with colleagues from different traditions including orthodox, within the framework of the Central and Eastern European Association for Mission Studies.

I remember one occasion that Prof. Darrell Guder - well known for his publications on the missional church - gave a public lecture on “Walking worthily: missional leadership after Christendom.” On the first row several orthodox colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe were listening attentively. One of them sprang up right after the lecture: “this is what we need!” Prof Guder, you should come to us to lecture on this topic!

Having said this, I am here among you as a learner, as a listener, with a great desire that we will gain more understanding and be enriched by each other’s traditions. Above all, that our time together will expand our views on the themes we will discuss, and that Christ in us may grow, and we may radiate the Gospel, radiate the love of Christ in our different - sometimes very difficult and challenging - contexts.

## My roots

A few remarks on my own roots for better understanding. I grew up within the Calvinist branch of the mainline Reformed church in the Netherlands with the three Sola’s and a view of conversion as a lifelong process. Calvin’s *Gloria Dei* as the purpose of my life was embedded in me as long as I remember.

Part of this Reformed heritage are also the principles of mission of Gisbertus Voetius, the 17th century mission theologian and founder of my alma mater, Utrecht University:

* *Vocatio et conversio gentium* (the calling and conversion of the gentiles);
* *plantatio ecclesiae* (the planting of the church) and
* ***gloria et manifestatio gratiae divinae*** (the glory and manifestation of divine grace).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Since my eyes were opened for the reality of Christ, I have considered myself not only a Reformed Christian, but at the same time also an evangelical, of which the essence is in the words of Jim Stimoolis: “a personal relationship with the living God through faith in the risen Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2)”

When looking back, I still am amazed that I was allowed to attend the Lausanne II in Manila conference in 1989, a life-changing experience in many respects and later Lausanne III in Cape Town.

Since I arrived in Budapest in 1987 - coined by someone as a “holy spy” - I have seen a massive invasion of missionaries into Eastern Europe, by far the majority came with no background knowledge in culture or language, in an attitude they “need to bring Jesus” to Eastern Europe.[[3]](#footnote-3) They had no sense that for centuries millions of people had worshiped Jesus Christ in Central and Eastern Europe. I also have observed the mixed effect it had on the churches that had been around for so long.

Without wanting to underestimate the sacrifices of many missionaries, and knowing that God in His sovereignty still uses weak human beings as you and I in His mission work, allow me to make some observations on the current mission movement, as Spiritual Transformation may possibly serve as a corrective.

I observe that mission work in Central and Eastern Europe and worldwide is operated more and more on the basis of secular business principles instead of theological principles[[4]](#footnote-4), focusing more on output and results instead of fruits growing in a hidden way, on value for money instead of free grace, on success stories instead of sacrifice and commitment, on quantity instead of quality, on superficial quick results instead of long term transformation and incarnation, with hanging on to power instead of committing to offering humble service.

## My understanding of Spiritual Transformation

Now to my understanding of Spiritual Transformation. In reading through the “Three views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism” book[[5]](#footnote-5) and in trying to understand the meaning of this doctrine, I feel similar as when I first started to learn Hungarian, using my fourth language, German. Your mind needs to get used to a complete different way of thinking, a completely different structure and a fully opposite sequence of words.

The same is I think true with doing theology. I have a sense that one of the difficulties in our evangelical - orthodox dialog is that evangelical theology is a “product” of the enlightenment, with an enlightenment frame of thought, rather easy for me to understand, because I was raised in that environment. It is full of dichotomies, but for “us” enlightenment people, that is “normal”.

Orthodox theology seems to have a complete different way of doing theology that I do not yet grasp at all, as I need more time to be immersed in it, like with learning Hungarian. It seems to be less analytic, and more organic.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The new way of thinking required to speak Hungarian well came after living among Hungarians in the student dormitory. It is good that we have a whole week ahead of us here to learn to better understand each other’s “theological language” and way of thinking.

## Reformed Theosis?

Allow me to present my understanding of Spiritual Transformation using Gannon Murphy’s thought provoking article “Reformed Theosis?” and a response of Myk Habets.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Murphy states that the Reformers have always had a strong focus on the *Christus in nobis* - Christ in us - principle. However, they have failed to recognize - with some exceptions - “the surprising elements” of Reformed theology that bear striking similarities to the concept of *theosis*. These elements are - so Murphy - the *Christus in nobis* and the *unio mystica*. Union with Christ is the basis for genuine divine-human relationality. The Reformers Luther and Calvin - preceding modern evangelicalism - strongly emphasized Christ’s personal activity in the mystical union.

Luther emphasized this union so strongly, that he spoke of those adopted into God’s family as being:

“so intimately with Christ, that He and you become *as it were one person*. As such you may boldly say: “I am now one with Christ. Therefore Christ’s righteousness, victory and life are mine.” On the other hand Christ may say: “I am that big sinner. His sins and his death are mine, because he is joined to me, and I to him.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Murphy states that Calvin probably even more than Luther “placed critical emphasis on the believer’s union and oneness with Christ.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This is also recognized by the dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, who remarked: “although Calvin may have been the most rigid among the reformers, yet not one of them has presented this, *unio mystica*, this spiritual union with Christ, so incessantly, so tenderly, and with such holy fire as he.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Murphy observes that evangelicals have since rather emphasized the *Christus pro nobis* (Christ for us) than *Christus in nobis* (Christ in us) principle, focusing more on Christ’s justification and atonement.

Kuyper speaks elsewhere about the mystical union with Christ as “…a union invisible and intangible; the ear fails to perceive it, and it eludes all investigation; yet it is very real union and communion, by which the life of the Lord Jesus directly affects and controls us. As the unborn babe lives on the motherblood, which has its heartbeat outside of him, so we also live on the Christ-life, which has its heartbeat not in our soul, but outside of us, in heaven above, in Christ Jesus.[[11]](#footnote-11)”

Murphy concludes, that similarly “our unitive bond with Christ transforms our world of disconnected aloneness into one in which *the Lord is our world.* This unspeakable bond is incomplete I this life, though it is progressively increased through sanctification (and *theotic* in nature).[[12]](#footnote-12)

## Manyfold risks

Murphy points to “manifold risks” of appropriating a *theotic* component into the broader framework of a Reformed model of divine-human relationship.

1. One of them is that the **Creator-creature distinction**, in order to avoid pantheism or panentheism. In Murphy’s understanding God’s elect do become “partakers” in the divine, but their “creaturely status or individual personality is not distorted or erased”. It is on the contrary rather actualized.

2. A second is that attaining *theosis* can never be considered as a kind of reward for holy behavior: “A Reformed understanding must ground *theosis* and its fruits in the unilateral operation of God in the believer in both ends and means.” It must be consistent with a “monergistic soteriology”.

*Theosis* has been used in various traditions. There has been a lot of dispute on the meaning of deification. Murphy asks, “What then does it mean to be or to become “divinized” or “deified” if not that humans become gods”? This sentence is interpreted in the evangelical-orthodox dialogues, and has been subject to many discussions. I wonder whether also here we probably deal with a completely different way of doing theology, as I mentioned earlier. This is not a statement of a systematic theologian, I realize, but I hope it is clear.

For Athanasius incarnation is closely related to spiritual transformation. The teaching of Athanasius that “God descends to the nadir of existence - fallen humanity, marked by death - so that a pathway of ascent can be made for humans to the divine” is considered by Vladimir Lossky “the very essence of Christianity”. And, I would like to add, also for our mission work.

To Murphy it is “baffling” that “such a central concept has been so ill pursued in Western Theology - especially within the Reformed context.[[13]](#footnote-13)”

## Restoration or reintegration?

Murphy summarizes the issue at hand “*not* whether it is the image or likeness that is restored (or whether these are a kind of hendiadys - a figure of twinnes - in which they have essentially the same referent) but with “the Christian’s reintegration into the life of God.[[14]](#footnote-14)”

David Bosch in his *Transforming mission* emphasizes that the image of God is *restored*.[[15]](#footnote-15) Christ did not come primarily to put away human sin, but to “restore in humans the image of God and give them life.” [[16]](#footnote-16) According to Bosch the doctrine of *theosis* has clear missionary significance. People are not simply called to know Christ, to “gather around him, or to submit to his will; ‘they are called to participate in his glory’ quoting his Eminence Archbishop Anastasios (Anastasios 1965: 285). The progress from one degree of glory to another defines the “process by which the faithful are sanctified during the present life”. [[17]](#footnote-17) With Murphy Bosch also emphasizes that *theosis* is union with God rather than deification. In the words of Bria, it is “a continuing state of adoration, prayer, thanksgiving, worship, and intercession, as well as meditation and contemplation of the triune God and God’s infinite love” (Bria 1986:9).[[18]](#footnote-18)

## Three points of learning

This brings me to my next point, **The way** of Spiritual Transformation. Several parts of Hieromonk Damascene’s article inspired me. What I appreciated in his article that in a sense it is an exegesis of Rom. 12: “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind”. Many years ago my spiritual Father, a Dutch Reformed pastor, taught me, think in biblical theological terms, that unities, thinking in doctrines divides. I still try to practice it.

I would like emphasize three points that resonated with me, and that require more reflection in relation to mission work:

### 1. “Not conformity but transformation”

There is much conformity in our mission work to the “schemes” and fashions of this world, by including secular values, without realizing it. At an individual, personal level and at a church, corporate level what then does the *metamorphosis,* transformation imply, “that we are to change *who we are?”*

For our mission work - in a time of social media - we need to think through what the implications are of the statement:

“In the world - the world of the passions - much emphasis is placed on ‘image’: you have to have the right outward ‘image’ in order to be successful in this world. Our aim as Christians is entirely different. We are to be wholly *transformed* in order to be fit citizens for *another* world.”

In our participation in God’s mission we - as evangelicals? - need to put much more emphasis on being than on doing, less on human activism and more focusing on God, allowing Him to fulfil His mission at His time in His way.

### 2. “Watchfulness and prayer”

The second point that resonates with me is that of the spiritual disciplines, about prayer, a rule of prayer, the Jesus prayer. I observe among “evangelicals” like myself a desire to grow in spiritual formation. Probably impacted by the pressure to produce more “results”, and more “success”, to meet the expectations of donors - be it local congregations or grant giving organisations - the need to grow stronger roots in Christ, in God’s resources is the only way to survive.

I wonder in what way orthodox theology with the doctrine of *theosis* could rescue such a focus on mission and restore the biblical perspectives and categories?

There is a second reason. In my missiological teaching I find myself emphasize more and more the concept of “transformation”, transformative learning as an educational paradigm over and against the knowledge acquiring paradigm focusing on getting a degree.

The first step in this paradigm is to be transformed ourselves, in order to become agents of transformation in the societies in which we live.

How could the orthodox doctrine of spiritual transformation strengthen the development of a missionary spirituality, a “spirituality of the road” as David Bosch calls it, a spirituality that affects our everyday life, and that strengthens our spiritual roots and transform us into shining lights in this world?

### 3. “The primary mark of Spiritual Transformation”

The third what struck me in this article is the simplicity of the most essential mark of spiritual transformation, “that we have love”. “By this shall all men now that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John. 13: 35). How could we help our churches that they live up to their doctrines and confessions, and combine orthodoxy with orthopraxis?

## Three questions

There are several areas that are not quite clear to me, but I sense it has to do with my not yet understanding the orthodox language of doing theology.

1. How could the creator-creature distinction avoid pantheism?

2. In what way are *theosis* and the evangelical doctrine of justification to be considered compatible?

3. What about God’s energies and God’s essence in *theosis?*

I would like to draw my response to an end. In our consultation we seek to learn from each other and *support one another* as we each obey the call to share in God’s mission.

## The risen Lord as starting point of mission

Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that mission starts with the risen Lord! It is not our business it is God’s business. May we then grow in our understanding of *Christ in us*, of the doctrine of Spiritual Transformation?

“The Christian mission began not as something to be done for the world, but as something God has done for all – the conquest of death. The risen Lord with us – that is the starting point. Jesus reigns; He is the Alpha and Omega; all authority in heaven and earth is His. He builds up and casts down, He roots up and He plants. He is not struggling against a world too strong for Him. He is not appealing to us to help Him to overcome the world. He has overcome the world, and all things – the things that so baffle us and frighten us – are in His hands to deal with as He will. How foolish we are when we allow ourselves to be tempted to seek some other source of authority and assurance for our mission… As if who Christ is and what He has done were not good enough reasons to go singing to the ends of the earth.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Christian mission does not begin with a programme of action, but with the Risen Lord. “It does not have about it that atmosphere of strain and anxiety, which always characterizes a human programme. It begins with a shout of joy… He is risen from the dead!”[[20]](#footnote-20) Christian world mission starts with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, “that explosion of hope (which) carried the believers to all the points of the compass.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Could this be considered as a mark of spiritual transformation?

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5. Bradley Nassif and James J. Stamoolis, *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Danut Manisterianu in personal conversation with author, 15 Sept. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gannon Murphy, "Reformed Theosis?," *Theology Today* 65, no. 2 (2008); Myk Habets, "'Reformed Theosis'? A Response to Gannon Murphy," ibid., no. 4 (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gannon Murphy, "Reformed Theosis?," ibid., no. 2 (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In: ibid.. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In: ibid.196. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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13. Ibid.203. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid.204. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission : Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).209. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid.209. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid.209. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid.209. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Newbigin, "Bringing Our Missionary Methods under the Word of God.", p. 2. See also: Anne-Marie Kool, "Changing Images in the Formation for Mission: Commission Five in the Light of Current Challenges: A Western Perspective," in *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross and David A. Kerr (Oxford, UK, Regnum Books International; Carlisle, UK, Paternoster Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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21. J.E. Lesslie Newbigin, "The Future of Missions and Missionaries," *Review and Expositor* 74, no. 2 (1977). p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)