

Is there a Theological Rationale for Co-operation in Theological Education?

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I. Introduction – Discerning scriptural patterns

Bom dia! It is an honour to be here with you this morning. Thank you, Fr David, for starting us off with stimulating questions and more importantly for reminding us that any rationale for cooperation needs to be based in the texts of holy scriptures. But which scripture texts & whose reading is most valid? Why? We gather here for these days from so many different walks of life, from different parts of the planet, different ecclesial traditions, different languages.

Perhaps in all this diversity there isn't just one rationale. However, there are some things we hold in common and these ought to inform our theological reflections:

First, we care about theological education and we care about mission – those are the themes, the focus of this gathering. I assume that if neither of those were of interest to you, you would not be here. Yet what an evangelical missionary describes as mission activity might be very different from what an Orthodox priest might consider to be missionary work. How do our educational institutions inform these debates? Why cooperate?

Second, we can agree that Jesus is our centre. How we narrate this theologically or how we describe becoming closer to Jesus might vary, but let us agree that Jesus is at the centre. He is the perfect God-human without whom we would not know what it means to be God's people or to be fully human in the first place.

There are patterns in scripture and learning how to grow as God's people and as God's people sent out into the world, are a part of that pattern. Again, Jesus is the climax of God's people and the climax of the one sent into the world. Thus, a rationale for cooperation is Christological.

II. Reframing the question, or, “The questions *behind* the question”:

The question Fr David and I were given is: Is there a rationale for cooperation in theological education between Orthodox and Evangelicals? The short answer, Yes! But I'd like to reframe the question a bit, or, as one my favourite professors used to say, “there are questions behind that question!” These are:

- a. What do we have to gain from cooperation?
- b. What will we lose if we do not cooperate?

- c. Or, more directly, Why should Orthodox and Evangelicals (and I would add other Christian traditions) make an effort to move beyond co-existence or simply tolerating one another?

III. Some theological responses

In the academic world, so often we get caught up in our debates and learning that I think we fail to see that something is actually at stake. Mission in part is a reminder to us academics that this more than just clever argumentation. Our cooperation is a matter of life and death, it is a gospel matter.

The answer, in part, is at least threefold:

a. It matters for the sake of our participation in God's mission & witness in the world

- i. You know the familiar passage of John 13: the world will know that you are my disciples by the love you have for one another. You also know that the earliest disciples struggled with this. They were not natural friends; everything in their society, their religious tradition and their economy said that they did not belong together – there is nothing normal about making a fisherman and a tax-collector cooperate, let alone call one another “brother.”
We see the early church struggling to show this love for one another. We see division, we see rivalry among the twelve. And yet, Jesus sets the tone – there needs to be particular Christians showing love for one another for the sake of the world. This is a fundamental way of participating in God's mission in this world. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that if we don't show such love, the world will not know him and therefore not know the Father who sent him.
- ii. There are places, countries, regions, contexts of tension between Orthodox and Evangelicals. This is no surprise to any of us. This is in part why LOI exists in the first place. But if we are going to take Jesus' words in John 13 (and elsewhere) seriously, if we are going to think and work together towards finding the scriptural patterns for cooperation, then we must consider, confess and re-think our witness. If we don't cooperate, where is there hope & a sense of oneness for Christians being persecuted around the globe?

What does a compelling witness look like in a context where the witness has historically not been compelling, where it looks like Evangelicals and Orthodox are just two more groups with different styles, different agendas, getting on with their own group and, at best, without much to do with one another, at worst fighting with one another. That to me describes a rather poor and very weak concept of mission and witness, let alone solidarity with those who are persecuted.

What if we used the example of Antioch as our model for cooperation – two different groups – Gentiles and Jews – who historically did not belong together and were not used to loving one another, coming together in the name of Messiah Jesus, in a way that actually exploded the categories so much so that they didn't even know

what to call themselves. They became people of the Way. That gives us the rationale or at least that's a beginning of a rationale.

You might be wondering, if we are to be like Antioch, how do we hold onto our distinctiveness? What happens to the uniqueness of our traditions and all the richness therein? Fair questions, and I don't think there are simple answers to them.

What I am proposing is that for too long many of us have actually been more concerned with what I call the "counter-rationale" for cooperation. That is the rationale of the yeast of the Pharisees: it is theologically more important to maintain the purity of our group than it is to risk crossing the boundaries that Jesus himself crossed. It is the rationale that in all sincerity and piety says, "for God's sake we've got to police who is in and who is out, who belongs to us and who does not." Like Antioch, or Philippi, like Jesus – especially in those places where there are tensions between our traditions, there, more than ever, we need those Christians who dare to cross the boundaries. To cross the boundaries not to show their courage or their progressive mentality, but for the sake of Jesus and the mission into which he draws us, so that the world will know the Triune God.

b. Growing as disciples of Jesus

i. Missiological teaching that transcends the dichotomy of evangelism/theosis

As I mentioned at the beginning, our rationale for cooperation is having Christ at the centre. This includes how we grow closer to Christ as individuals and as church.

There has often been a struggle within strands of the Evangelical world between how to hold together our evangelistic zeal – sharing Christ in word, deed and character – together with our convictions about promoting God's justice and peace in the world AND our convictions about personal sanctification – how God's Spirit works in us drawing us closer to Jesus. As Evangelicals, our teaching about mission, about social engagement and about sanctification often happen separately, without much consideration of how one strand of our life is connected to one of the other strands.

We don't grow closer to Christ in a vacuum. We need one another for our growth. Theosis is not an individualistic or separatist concept, but one which invites the crossing of boundaries. Peter needed Cornelius in order to hear anew the words of God's Spirit speaking to them both. We need one another (and others) if we are to grow deeper in our faith.

Part of crossing the boundaries involves learning about and from one another, particularly how we understand and practice "mission" as part of our life of discipleship.

To put this into our immediate contexts and drawing us back to the text of John 13, consider this:

First, a lesson from the Orthodox for Evangelicals: with our Evangelical missionary zeal we need to remember that any love we show in the world needs to be animated by the love and grace of God. Evangelicals need to be reminded of that source of our mission, of the

divine energy that animates our mission. It is this love and this grace that the Orthodox liturgy makes clear.

Perhaps for the Orthodox there is also a lesson to be learned from the Evangelicals. That is: the reminder that gathering for the celebration of holy mass, for worship of the Triune God is for the sake of God's mission in the world; perhaps what is needed is a reminder of that missionary zeal that Evangelicals wear on their sleeves. To quote Fr Schmemmann in his *For the life of the world*, "The Eucharist is the entrance of the Church into the joy of its Lord. And to enter into that joy, so as to be a witness to it in the world, is indeed the very calling of the church, its essential *leitourgia*, the sacrament by which it 'becomes what it is.'"¹

ii. Biography as theology: Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891-1945)

Elisabeth Pilenko was born in December 1891 to a family of the Ukrainian landed aristocracy. She was a distant relative of Empress Anna and had a happy childhood growing up near Anapa, on the shores of the Black Sea. It was the early death of her father, when Elisabeth was 14, that led to her doubts about faith and God. As she later wrote about that time: "This is an unjust death. Therefore there is no justice. And if there is no justice, there is no just God. If there is no just God, there is no God at all. I had broken through to the adult secret: God does not exist. The world is full of misery, evil, and injustice."²

The family moved to St Petersburg and at 18 she married a lawyer, member of the Social Democratic Party. They had one daughter. But Elisabeth grew tired and angry with the intellectual elite groups of which she was a part. Influenced by Dostoyevsky and others, she felt drawn to the land, to the people, to the poor of Russia. By 1913 she was becoming more informed about the Orthodox history and theology and was perhaps the first woman to take courses at St Petersburg Theological Academy. Meanwhile, her marriage fell apart.

During the revolution she joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party and was a staunch advocate of its motto – *pravda*, "truth-justice." But with the triumph of Lenin's party, she fled to Anapa, where she exercised the duties of mayor and town administrator. In 1918 she was accused of collaboration with the local soviet group, but was found not-guilty by a military tribunal. On the tribunal was a young officer, Daniel Skobtsov, whom she ended up marrying. With the defeat of the White Army and the evacuation from Crimea, the family fled to Paris. She left with her mother and her eldest daughter on the last boat to Georgia. Her son Yuri was born in Tblisi and Daniel was reunited with his family in Constantinople. A year later their daughter Anastasia was born and by 1922 the couple and their children moved to Paris. In Paris they experienced poverty, insecurity and a stateless existence. Then the toddler, Anastasia, died of meningitis.

While the death of her father had pushed her away from God and towards a denial of anything holy, it was the slow and painful death of her young daughter that brought Elisabeth back to God and set the tone for how she would live the rest of her life.

¹ Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the life of the world: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, p. ? Cf. Orlando Costas, who says, "the world is both the object and the context for the gospel." *Christ outside the gate*, pp. 163ff.

² Behr-Sigel, Elisabeth, "Mother Maria Skobtsova (1891–1945)," in *The Wheel*, Vol. 7, no. 8, p.44.

“The death of the child whose name meant ‘Resurrection’ broke her mother’s heart. But paradoxically, the Living God, this God in whom Elisabeth had ceased to believe after the death of her father, re-entered her life through the same emotional breach. She experienced the catastrophe as a mysterious divine ‘visitation,’ but also as an anticipation of the Last Judgment.”³

Soon after her daughter’s death she wrote, “Nothing is greater than the commandment, ‘Love one another.’ To follow love to its end; to love without exception. Then everything becomes clear, and this life, which otherwise would be nothing more than an abominable burden, is justified.”⁴

She followed Christ’s command to love to the end, without exceptions and this became her rationale for mission. ‘Without exceptions’ meant she collaborated with anyone and everyone for the sake of bringing Jesus to the least of these. Together with friends, homeless people, outcasts and a local priest she opened a house of hospitality for homeless and destitute. She bartered with local merchants for food to feed everyone and continued to participate in theological and political discussions with many of the Russian immigrants who found themselves in Paris in the 1930s and 40s. In 1932 Daniel Skobtsov accepted her request for a divorce on ecclesiastical grounds. That same year she took her monastic vows and became Mother Maria, named for St Mary of Egypt. The ceremony of monastic profession took place in the church of St Sergius Institute in Paris.

Akin to Bonhoeffer’s call for a “new monasticism,” Mother Maria’s monasticism was anything but a life of quiet contemplation or walled existence, set apart from the world. Rather, she travelled to Estonia and Latvia urging communities of women to be engaged with the world, serving and caring for the poor, looking after the persecuted, standing up for justice and peace. In Paris her life was one of action, prayer, theological conversations and writing.

It was her eschatological vision that drove her mission and the ways she collaborated with others. While she loved the liturgies of the Orthodox Church and remained faithful to the Church until her death, she became impatient when liturgy did not express itself in and with the poor. “She dreamed of a creative monasticism renewed in response to the call deciphered in the ‘signs of the times’: a monasticism lived not in the desert or behind protective walls but *in the world*— fire and hearth ablaze in the middle of the city...”⁵

During the war she helped the resistance movements and hid Jews in her home. In 1943 the Gestapo arrived at the block of flats, but she was not in. They arrested her son, Yuri, the priest Fr. Dmitri and Feodor Pianov, the administrator of the organization she had founded, Orthodox Action. She was told that if she turned herself in they would be released. She did so. They were all deported to different concentration camps. Of the 4, only Pianov survived. Nothing is known for certain how Mother Maria died. Some say it was of starvation and illness, others say she was sent to the gas chambers. She died in 1945 at Ravensbrück.

³ Behr-Sigel, p. 46.

⁴ Behr-Sigel, p. 46.

⁵ Behr-Sigel, p. 48.

c. The liturgy after the liturgy: Do Evangelicals and Orthodox have ears to hear again that 'all of life is liturgical'?

i. There is a pattern in Scripture that we rehearse and re-enact as we gather

The example of crossing boundaries is a pattern in the New Testament. It is not just the early disciples who are very different who have to learn to gather and to be together, it is the churches in dispersion, the mix of languages and peoples that we see at Pentecost. The gathering itself is a prophetic statement.

The purity and efforts at a monoculture of the Pharisees affirmed that “we, and only we, embody God’s truth. We don’t need the other to live out our faithfulness to God.” But as Steve Bevens argues, the pattern in Scripture is actually that we need the other. We need what Bevens calls “prophetic dialogue” – listening and learning the truth of Ephesians 2 such that we are transformed and shaped into faithfulness in ways we could not be without the other. We embody God’s truth and we are more missiological together that we would have been apart. But you can only have Ephesians 2 if first you have Acts 10-15: the coming together of Peter with one who was called “unclean.” This very gathering is itself prophetic.

ii. Gathered and sent out into the world – being changed by this love and displaying God’s love in our mission

When we think about mission, Evangelicals tend to have an attitude “lets just get on with doing mission in God’s name.” We need this cooperation with the Orthodox to help us see the richness around the mystery of Trinity and communion and the ways in which this mystery informs our mission.

Orthodox have an expression that I love – the liturgy after the liturgy, which is the call to mission, the response to God’s gracious presence with us. We are not just human activists. God actually sends us and as we are sent, we are partnering with the divine.

Mother Maria argued that “the path to God passes through the love of neighbour.” She also stated the need to “ecclesialize life... in other words, to penetrate all of life in its social and personal dimensions, with the light of Christ.”⁶

As her life shows, liturgy and mission cannot be separated and the roots of this unity are in the patterns of Scripture. Orthodox theology reminds us that the source of mission in the world is the mystery of God’s triune love. Evangelical theology reminds us that God’s mission is for the world and not to be contained within only one tradition. Any theological rationale for cooperation needs to hold onto both.

There are two distortions to this rationale:

1. That we try to win the world for Christ without expressing the liturgical logic of the love of God in the world.

⁶ Behr-Sigel, pp. 47, 49.

2. That we try to contain or limit the liturgical logic within our own walls without fully expressing it in the world.

What is the way forward?

Together hearing once again from the Word what God joined together in the beginning of creation: God, humanity, and the world.