

# Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity

## An Orthodox Perspective

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### I. Some introductory remarks

Reading the Report of Commission VIII on *Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity* presented to the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910 today, one can not but stop and wonder about the complexity of the problems dealt with in this report. The authors of this document have mainly taken into consideration reports from the mission fields, therefore the overall picture of the challenges to mission almost everywhere in the world is more than impressive. Many of the questions formulated in this report at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continue to be open questions challenging all churches and missionary agencies today.

The Orthodox Churches were not present at Edinburgh in 1910, first of all because of the fact that in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were no Orthodox missionary councils at work. On the other hand almost all Orthodox Churches were confronted at that time with big problems, which prevented them from being actively involved in international gatherings. In the report we are talking about the commission mentioned a correspondence with Archbishop Nicolai of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Tokyo. Archbishop Nicolai reported that: “I am in friendly, more than that, brotherly relations with all the missionaries of other sections known to me, and so are our Christians with their Christians. So shall we be from our part always, because we know that the first duty of us Christians is to cultivate Christian love to all men, and particularly to our brothers in Christ. But, nevertheless, there is no real and full unity between us and other sections; more than that, we are far from such unity because we are divided in the Christian doctrine”<sup>1</sup>.

The statement of the Russian Archbishop expressed a position, which is still valid for the Orthodox understanding of cooperation and unity in mission. Archbishop Nicolai pointed out the close relationship between the unity of the Church and the unity in mission. Actually this Archbishop appears to have been quite progressive in his attitude towards cooperation with other missionary groups in the same context. Motivated by Christian love he considered that he should have a brotherly openness towards his fellow Christians, but felt constrained to underline that the unity which may exist between them is not a full unity, because full unity in mission would imply also full unity of the respective churches, which was not the case.

Coming back to the report of the Commission VIII we should point out some questions dealt with in this report, which challenge us even today. Speaking about “Comity”, the second chapter of this report refers to the very difficult issue of “Delimitation of territory”. In this respect the report underlined that “Few would refuse to accept as an abstract principle the view that it is undesirable to press in

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<sup>1</sup>) World Missionary Conference, 1910, *Report of Commission VIII, Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity*, Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, New York, Chicago and Toronto, p. 4

where others are working when neglected fields are calling for labourers”<sup>2</sup>. It also indicated that “The avoidance of overlapping and interference with the work of others is also demanded by the spirit of Christian charity, which should be pre-eminently manifested in the work of Christian missions”<sup>3</sup>. If this principle would have been respected everywhere, then many conflicts would have been avoided, e.g. the difficult debate around the concept of “canonical territory”, to which the Russian Orthodox Church has made reference during the last decades.

The report referred further to the obstacles on the way to cooperation and unity in mission, “which are grounded in differences of doctrine or ecclesiastical polity” and which “are, perhaps, harder to overcome”<sup>4</sup>. The divisions between the churches weaken their “testimony and confuse the total impression made by Christianity on the minds of the non-Christian people”<sup>5</sup>. The divisions between the churches have indeed not been created by the situation in the mission field, but they do affect the mission field as well. Therefore one of the most significant contributions of the report from 1910 to the Ecumenical Movement as a whole was the reference to the close relationship between the unity in mission and the unity of the Church. The issue of the unity of the Church has been a concern for the divided churches for a long period of time, but the negative impact of this division for the mission of the churches was pointed out at the world level by the World Mission Conference from 1910 more than ever before.

The concern of Orthodox theologians in relation to the close link between the doctrinal differences and the mission of the churches in the world of today was best addressed by Metropolitan Ignatios Hazim, today the Patriarch of Antioch, in his speech at the fourth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Uppsala 1968, on the theme “*Behold, I make all things new*”. In his presentation, which was probably one of the most prophetic addresses at a WCC Assembly, the then Metropolitan Ignatios regarded the inter-church relations in an eschatological perspective asking whether the best way of solving the doctrinal or pastoral dispute which is still preventing full communion would not be “to turn together towards the Coming Lord? There is no programmatic sentimentalism in this, but rather that same evidence of faith, which would enable us to re-centre everything in the heart of the Mystery. The dialogue between the churches has perhaps remained at the stage of the time before Isaiah, 43,18, when one still considered ‘the things of old’. But it is certain that the Lord is ‘doing a new thing’; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”<sup>6</sup>.

The report from 1910 also makes references to some “Joint Actions” in mission, which were very relevant for the Orthodox Churches during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We would like to underline two of these joint actions, namely the translation and publication of the Bible and the cooperation in philanthropy. On the first issue, the report underlines that “there is no sphere of missionary work in which the value of cooperation has been tested and appreciated more than in the translation, publication,

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<sup>2</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 13

<sup>4</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 50

<sup>5</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 9

<sup>6</sup>) *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement. Documents and Statements 1902-1975*, edited by Constantin G. Patelos, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1978, p. 264

and distribution of the Word of God; and not least among the fruits of this work must be reckoned the friendships which have been formed between men separated ecclesiastically and diverse in nationality but called to work around the same translation board”<sup>7</sup>.

One of the most urgent missionary needs within the Romanian Orthodox Church during the time of oppression from the communist regime (1945-1989) was the publication of the Bible as well as liturgical books. The patriarch Justinian (1948-1977) published two editions of the Bible in 1968 and 1975 and several editions of the New Testament with the support of the United Bible Societies. The distribution of the Holy Scripture during that period of time proved to be one of the most fruitful missionary actions. This is only one out of many examples of cooperation between the Orthodox Churches and the Missionary or Bible Societies in respect to the printing and distributing the Bible as a missionary common task.

Finally another aspect underlined by the report of 1910 which has been relevant for the cooperation in mission from an Orthodox perspective is the “work of philanthropy and Benefice”, as the report formulated it. The report stated that “in time of famine, flood, earthquake, and fire, Christians men do not discuss whether they should cooperate, but simply do so as a matter of course. By the organisation of relief funds and the judicious disbursement of monies raised, countless thousands have been saved from suffering and death”<sup>8</sup>. The cooperation between churches of different confessional traditions by facing catastrophic situations around the world did bring the churches nearer and often help them address the theological differences between them from a new perspective. The Orthodox theology underlined repeatedly during the last decades that diaconia or the service to fellow human beings is an integral part of the mission of the church in the world of today and therefore cooperation in diaconia is cooperation in mission.

We underlined above the significance of some aspects raised in the report of 1910 for today. This report takes into consideration mainly the cooperation between different missionary groups in Overseas. But the questions raised by this report are questions challenging the cooperation between all churches in relation to their very important missionary tasks today. Although this report did not have a direct impact on Orthodox mission, it opened up a complex process of reflection about the mission in the world today, which involved a specific Orthodox contribution as well. Already the Encyclical Letter of the Ecumenical Patriarchate from January 1920, which constitutes a Charta Magna for the Orthodox involvement in the Ecumenical Movement, strongly suggested a “whole-hearted mutual assistance for the churches in their endeavours for religious advancement, charity and so on”<sup>9</sup>.

## **II.1. The Orthodox understanding of Mission**

His Beatitude Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana and All Albania, one of the most representative Orthodox theologians in respect to the missionary renewal during the last century, considered that when talking about Orthodox mission the first thing to do

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<sup>7</sup>) World Missionary Conference ... p. 56

<sup>8</sup>) *Ibid* p. 79

<sup>9</sup>) *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement*...., p.42

is “to state that by this word we mean witness to the living Trinitarian God, who calls all to salvation and binds human beings together in the church, who otherwise would not belong to it or who have lost their tie to it”<sup>10</sup>. In this respect “for every local church, mission is ‘inward’ or ‘internal’, when it takes place within its geographical, linguistic and cultural bounds, and ‘outward’ or ‘external’ when it reaches beyond these bounds to other nations and lands”<sup>11</sup>.

The very purpose of the mission is to build up the “communion with God and with one another through Christ in the Holy Spirit”<sup>12</sup>. Along this view mission is not just the exportation of new religious doctrine, but bearing witness to the love of God for the whole world, love which was revealed in Christ, communicated by the Holy Spirit and present in the hearts of those who are practising his commands. Therefore we should not forget that “the famous text on mission – ‘go and make disciples from all nations ...’ (Matt.28, 19) – has no complete meaning without the experience of what is said in the following verse, ‘I will be with you always even until the close of ages’. In other words, those who preach Christ and make disciples of Christ must themselves experience the presence of Christ or of his Spirit in them”<sup>13</sup>.

Following Jesus Christ or living in Christ means being a member of the body of Christ, which means a member of the Church. Strictly speaking for the Orthodox, the Church doesn’t have her own mission, but she participates in God’s mission. “The very being of the Church is missionary, the Church is, indeed, a missionary event. Therefore, mission is not one of the ‘functions’ of the Church, but the life of the Church that goes beyond itself to embrace the whole of humanity and the whole creation. The mission of the Church is not the expansion of the Church, but the establishment of the kingdom of God. Unity and mission must be understood in the perspective of the kingdom. They are for the kingdom and, as such, they are dynamically interrelated”<sup>14</sup>.

Mission is, for the Orthodox, exclusively a task of the Church. The Church is both the instrument and the purpose of mission. The real purpose of the mission is to bring people to Christ and to help them grow into the body of Christ, which is the Church. The preaching of the gospel alone without bringing new people into the body of Christ is not enough. The mission ends are not simply with bringing new people into the Church, but also to continue to accompany them their whole life. The pastoral task of the Church is therefore an integral part of her mission. Finally the mission is the task of the whole Church, both of ordained and lay people, of men and women, of old and young believers.

The Orthodox understanding of mission could be summarised in the following four points: 1. *Kerygma*, or the proclamation of the Gospel; 2. *Leiturgia*, as public service for the praise of God; 3) *Martyria*, or the witness to the faith as a life style and 4) *Diaconia*, or the service to the neighbour, or the service to the whole world. The

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<sup>10</sup>) Bishop Anastasios of Androussa, *Orthodox Mission. Past, present, future*, in „Your will be done. Orthodoxy in Mission“, edited by George Lemopoulos, WCC, Geneva, 1989, p. 63

<sup>11</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup>) Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea, *Confessing the Truth in Love. Orthodox Perspectives on Life, Mission and Unity*, Trinitas, Iasi, 2001, p. 136

<sup>13</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 137

<sup>14</sup>) Archbishop Aram Keshishian, *Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, Regnum LYNX, 1992, p.98

Orthodox theology is developing its mission, which is the mission of God in this world, following without break the tradition of the early church. The tradition, which in this context is the Holy Tradition and should not be mixed up with the church tradition or traditions, is not a dead letter, a collection of dogmas and practices of the past. This Tradition is for the Orthodox the history of salvation. It is the experience of the Holy Spirit in the history, who constantly illuminates men and women to become sons and daughters of God the Father, in Jesus Christ, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Through this Tradition the Orthodox Church of today stays in an unbroken continuation with the Apostles.

**Kerygma** is the proclamation of the coming of God's kingdom in the person, in the activity and in the teaching of Jesus Christ as incarnated Word of God, who was crucified and who rose from the dead for the salvation of all humankind and of the whole creation. The kerygma is at the same time an invitation to conversion from sin and determination to live a new life. It is the proclamation of the Word of God in the tradition of the apostles; it is centred mainly on Christ and the concept of salvation and not simply on purposes of this world.

Preaching the Gospel is not simply a matter of a theoretical exercise, of transmitting some abstract ideas, but a matter of sharing life experiences, of a living truth, of connecting people to a new living reality, of opening to them the perspective of living in communion with God and from this communion bringing them into a new communion with their fellow human beings. Therefore the real preaching of the Word of God is a charisma, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Kerygma happens not only through preaching, but also through catechises, religious education a. o. m. Kerygma enfolds not only verbally, but also non verbally, it may also use icons, or music, which are very important for the Orthodox tradition. Finally kerygma is the task of the Church; it is done by the Church, in the Church and for the Church.

The **Leiturgia** is the praise of God, which unfolds through all forms of private and public prayer. Prof. Emmanuel Clapsis considered that "the life of the early Christian community has been shaped by a two-fold orientation: towards the world in a movement of diastole, and towards God in that of systole. These two orientations constitute the being of the church as mission and liturgy, and neither of these two aspects of the church' being should be confused or separated from the other"<sup>15</sup>. First of all we should also underline the close relationship between mission and liturgy, as the two inseparable forms of being for the Church. Liturgy is "the work of Christ for the people together with the people, that is together with the people God gathered together through the sacramental power of the Holy Spirit present in hearts and minds"<sup>16</sup>. The mission is to witness to this gathering in order to keep the people gathered and to bring again and again new people in this gathering.

Besides the close relationship between mission and liturgy in the Orthodox Church one must also underline the missionary dimension of the Orthodox worship in general and specifically of the divine liturgy. All the liturgical texts in the Orthodox tradition reflect the Biblical content and use the terminology of the Holy Scriptures. An Orthodox worship is an actualisation of Biblical events in a spiritual way. Different

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<sup>15</sup>) Fr Emmanuel Clapsis, *The eucharist as missionary event in a suffering world*, in *Your Will Be Done. Orthodoxy in Mission*, edited by George Lemopoulos, WCC, Geneva, 1989, p. 162

<sup>16</sup>) Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea, p. 54

people are often attracted to the faith in Jesus Christ through the Orthodox worship, which in their beauty could bring “the heaven on the earth”.

**Martyria** is the mission through personal life and example up to the supreme sacrifice of his/her own life for Christ. For Dumitru Stăniloae, the most relevant Romanian theologian of all times, “mission is effective only when the power of the Holy Spirit radiates from the one who preaches Christ. This power purifies him so that the Holy Spirit can shine unhindered through his word which will then be the pure and powerful confirmation of the Spirit that is in him”<sup>17</sup>. The way many Christians were living out their faith in Jesus Christ on a daily basis has, during the centuries, attracted other people to this faith. The apostles and the martyrs are the basis of the Church. Therefore, at the beginning of many churches “there is a saint or martyr, or several of them, who have given their whole life, and not only their work, to make known to the others the wholeness of Christ.

The link between mission and martyrism is the link between words and deeds, a link which was eminently expressed in the person of the Word incarnated, the Lord Jesus Christ. Following Jesus Christ one can not only express his/her new life only through words, but also through deeds, through a new life style which is guided by the commandments of the Gospel. Martyrism is not an alternative to mission, but it is the most concrete way of living out the mission of God through his church in the world.

**Diaconia** is the service to neighbours; it is an integral part of Christian witness as an essential, original and perpetual task of the Church. Diaconia is “the gospel of love” expressed in an effective care of the needy. The mission of the Church as diaconia reaches people's hearts if the Church becomes a faithful servant of all those who are burdened and in need. In this sense the church is enjoying “the favour of the people” (Acts 2:47), and the Lord is adding “to their number daily those who are being saved” (Acts 2:47).

The diaconical work of the Church is directly related to its mission, because the service to fellow human beings is, for Christians, a concrete expression of the faith they are witnessing to the Triune God. Then “those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, can not love God whom they have not seen” (1 Jn 4:20). Following her Master, who came in to the world not to be served, but to serve, a true Church is a servant Church. The diaconical witness of the Church is very valuable in the world of today which is so marked by a materialistic vision.

## **II.2. The challenges of Mission for the Orthodox Churches in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The Orthodox Churches were facing during the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century many difficulties in developing their missionary tasks. Living mainly in countries ruled either by non-Christian or by atheistic governments, the Orthodox Churches were confronted with basic existential questions. The mission of a church under such circumstances is, if at all, an internal mission. If we should take into consideration the situation of the

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<sup>17</sup>) Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Witness through „holiness“ of life*, in *Martyria/Mission. The Witness of the Orthodox churches today*, edited by Ion Bria, WCC publications, Geneva, 1980, p. 47

Orthodox Churches in the former communist countries, then we cannot stop wondering how these churches survived and how a large majority of the respective peoples were continuously active members of their church.

In spite of these circumstances the Orthodox mission went through a real and sometimes spectacular revival mainly in the second half the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first input of this revival came naturally from the new developments in the respective political and economical contexts. Already after the first world war the Orthodox Theological Faculties in Athens, Thessaloniki, Sofia, Bucharest, Cernowitz and Belgrade became important centres among others also for the mission of the churches in the whole of Eastern Europe. The first international congress of the Orthodox Theological Faculties, held in Athens in 1936, established concrete guidelines for the development of Orthodox theological thinking inclusively in respect to the mission of the church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The immigration of Orthodox people during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly to the West, challenged the Orthodox mission in a very specific way. The Orthodox believers from the Diaspora came in contact not only with new political, economical and cultural realities, but also with new religious views. The Orthodox mission in such a context could no longer be only an internal one, but it had to also take into consideration dialogue with other Christian traditions or even with other religions. In trying to defend and affirm their own confessional or even their religious identity in a foreign context, the Orthodox believers became in a certain sense missionaries. The missionary experience of the Orthodox in a Diaspora situation improved the missionary activity of the Orthodox Church at home.

In the Diaspora the Orthodox Churches also established theological seminaries meant, first of all, to offer theological training for the ministers of these churches in the new context. We should mention here some of these institutions: Saint Serge Institute in Paris, established in 1925, the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, in Brookline, Massachusetts, USA, founded in 1937, Saint Tikhon Seminary from Pennsylvania, USA, established in 1937, Saint Vladimir Seminary in New York, USA, established in 1938, St. Herman Seminary in Kodiak, Alaska, established in 1972, and recently the Theological Institute from Chambésy, Switzerland (Institute Supérieur de Théologie Orthodoxe), established in 1996 as well as the different chairs for the Orthodox Theology at some Theological Faculties in the West. All these institutions improved in different ways the missiological thinking of the Orthodox Churches in the modern world.

One of the most important inputs for the renewal of the missionary ethos within the Orthodox Churches came not from outside but from inside and that was from a youth organisation, which is Syndesmos. The World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, Syndesmos, „was founded in 1953 to encourage contacts among Orthodox youth movements in Western Europe, Greece and the Middle East. Today Syndesmos has grown into a federation of 121 youth movements and theological schools in 43 different countries around the world. At the heart of the Fellowship is the desire of young Orthodox to work together serving the Church, Her unity, witness and renewal.

Syndesmos enjoys the encouragement and blessing of all the local canonical Orthodox Churches”<sup>18</sup>.

At the fourth General Assembly of Syndesmos in Thessaloniki (1958) an Orthodox movement for “external mission” was established in Greece. Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania, one of the main actors in this enterprise at that time, reported that with this initiative “we had to face two difficulties: the amazement of Westerners, who though the Orthodox Church was introspective and uninterested in mission; and a pathetic internal opposition from Orthodox, who considered such an interest as something imported. For this reason, during the first decade, not only was external mission stressed as an Orthodox theological and ecclesiological necessity, but a special attempt was made to study its history”<sup>19</sup>.

The Orthodox Churches have often felt misunderstood during the last century and even unjustly criticised by Western churches and missionary councils as not being a missionary church, since they do have neither a theology nor a practice of mission. More than that, the Orthodox Churches considered themselves as targets of aggressive missionary groups coming mainly from the West into the Orthodox majority context and proselytising among the Orthodox believers. The Orthodox cooperation with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and specifically with the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism, as well as within the framework of Regional and National Ecumenical Organisations, such as the Conference of European Churches or The Middle East Council of Churches, has been to a great extent marked by the ways the Orthodox considered being treated by other churches. The cooperation within the frame of these organisations proved to be necessary for both sides and in the end beneficial for both of them.

### **II.3. Orthodox contributions to the ecumenical approach of Mission at the world level**

When the International Missionary Council (IMC) became an affiliated body of the WCC, at the 3<sup>rd</sup> WCC General Assembly in New Delhi, India, the Orthodox Churches opposed to this integration first of all for ecclesiological reasons, considering that the IMC is not a church and therefore can not be a full member of a “fellowship of churches”. Secondly the Orthodox considered that they are the victims of proselytism exercised by churches or missionary agencies in membership with the IMC. In 1961 a large group of Orthodox Churches became members of the WCC as well and this fact opened up new perspectives for the cooperation of the Orthodox Churches with other churches including work in mission and evangelism.

One of the most important actions, which improved the cooperation of the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism with the Orthodox Churches, has been the creation of an executive position on Orthodox Mission Studies and Relations within the WCC in 1970. The first Orthodox theologian appointed in this position was the current Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania, followed by Fr Dr. Ion Bria, Mr George Lemopoulos and Fr Dr. Ioan Sauca. Through this desk several consultations have been organised, a lot of material about the Orthodox understanding

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<sup>18</sup>) See [www.syndesmos.org](http://www.syndesmos.org)

<sup>19</sup>) Bishop Anastasios of Androussa, *Orthodox Mission ...*, p. 64

of mission has been published and a network of Orthodox theologians committed to mission has been established. In that period of time specific chairs for teaching mission have been established at different Orthodox theological faculties. As George Lemopoulos stated in his speech at the Inter-Orthodox Mission Conference (Athens, 4-9 March 2005), “During all these years, participation in ecumenical discussions on mission allowed Orthodox theologians to develop a new discourse, addressing both the ecumenical family and their own churches”<sup>20</sup>.

Several consultations with Orthodox participants have been organised on the following topics:

1. The Evangelistic Witness of Orthodoxy Today, Bucharest, Romania, June 1974;
2. Confessing Christ through the Liturgical Life of the Church Today, Etschmiazin, Armenia, 16-21 September 1975;
3. The Bible and Liturgical Life, Prague, 12-18 September, 1977;
4. The Ecumenical Nature of Orthodox Witness, New Valamo, Finland, 24-30 September, 1977;
5. Bearing Witness to the Reign of God in the Struggle for God’s Truth and Justice on Earth, Paris, France, 25-28 September, 1978;
6. The Place of the Monastic Life within the Witness of the Church Today, Monastery Amba Bishoy, Egypt, 30 April – 5 May 1979;
7. Your Will be Done. Orthodoxy in Mission, Neapolis, Greece, 16-24 April 1988;
8. Orthodoxy and Cultures, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 19-27 January, 1996.
9. Starting with the World Conference for Mission and Evangelism from Bangkok (1972-72) and for all the following World Mission Conferences there have been organised Orthodox Pre-Assembly meetings, which address the respective themes from an Orthodox perspective and at the same time helped the Orthodox participants themselves better prepare for the coming assemblies.

Around these consultations a lot of material has been published from an Orthodox position, mainly through specific publications as well as through periodicals. The *International Review of Mission* must be specifically mentioned here for the fact that it has offered space for Orthodox contributions since 1970. From the topics specifically dealt with during this consultation process and which constitute a special Orthodox contribution to the debate on the different aspects of mission and evangelism in the world of today we would like to highlight the following:

### 1. Mission in relation to other religions

For Orthodox theology the confrontation with other religions is a painful one<sup>21</sup>. The starting point of an Orthodox theological approach for the relations to other religions, or for a possible Orthodox theology of religions, is a christological approach. According to this approach the Logos (Word) of God inspired, already before his Incarnation, all the good ideas in the different holy scriptures, not only in the Old

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<sup>20</sup>) Manuscript personal of the author

<sup>21</sup>) Metropolitan George Khodre of Mount Lebanon, *The Church as the Privileged Witness of God*, in *Martyria/ Mission ...*, p. 32

Testament, but also in the holy scriptures of the East up to India, or even in the ancient Greek philosophy. Together with the Church Fathers from the Alexandrian tradition (like Clement of Alexandria or Origenes) the Old Testament is not the unique Gospel-type scripture, “it is rather the prototype of all other Holy Scriptures”<sup>22</sup>.

Metropolitan George Khodre of Mount Lebanon considers “that God has also revealed Himself in these Scriptures. Our God is a hidden God. It does not befit us to define objectively the intensity of the Divine Presence in the Abrahamic Bible, for instance, but rather simply to seek in it the traces of Christ who is eternal Logos, and whose manifestation before the Incarnation and outside the historical heritage of the Incarnation are possible. These many modes of God’s revelation can only be read in the light of the Gospel. They all point to the mercy and meekness of the Divine Logos manifesting itself not only within a sacred historical tradition but even in a certain manner outside this tradition where the veil is thicker”<sup>23</sup>. This veil will be taken away from the minds of people only by turning to Christ (II Cor 3,16). In other words, the other religions should not be simply rejected as wrong, but considered in the perspective of their relation to the Logos of Christ. The Orthodox Christians came to this view not simply through an abstract theological or even philosophical reflection but rather through their long experience living next to or among people of other religions.

Along this view, the Middle East Council of Churches, which include not only Orthodox Christians but also Christians of other confessions, declared at its fourth General Assembly that if the Christian faith is authentically lived, then Christians have the responsibility to struggle for the rights not simply for a particular group, but also for the dignity of each and above all, for the integrity of those who are victims of injustice. “This responsibility of all people in every society, regardless of colour, race and creed, becomes a spiritual dimension, a fidelity to Christ, who calls us to assume on behalf of everybody all true human solidarity”<sup>24</sup>. In this way the Orthodox people learned to approach other religions not simply in an abstract theoretical view, but from their spirituality. This approach could be a specific Orthodox contribution to the theology of religions, or even to the very delicate issue of the Christian mission among other religions.

## **2. The missionary tasks of the local community**

The mission is first of all the task of the whole church and is best expressed through the local community. The issue of the missionary task of the local community was addressed at the consultation organised by the WCC with representatives of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches (Neapolis, Greece from 16-24 April 1988). This consultation constituted a preparatory meeting for the World Conference for Mission and Evangelism which was then organised at San Antonio, USA, in 1989 under the theme “*Your will be done*”. According to the Neapolis statement, the mission of the local community is to make it possible for everyone to have the possibility “to know Christ, to live in him and witness him by word and

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<sup>22</sup>) *Ibid*, p.33

<sup>23</sup>) *Ibid*, p.33-34

<sup>24</sup>) *Your will be done* ..., p. 97

deed”<sup>25</sup>. In this respect the first missionary task of the local community refers to the “internal” mission, which is the major pastoral task of every church. But when the Eucharistic assembly experiences the truth of the resurrected Lord, “the necessity to share the joy of the resurrection with all people is a natural consequence”<sup>26</sup>. In this case the mission of the local community becomes an external mission, which “includes even those who are baptised, yet ignorant of the calling and election they have received through baptism”<sup>27</sup>.

The same statement formulated as a practical recommendation to the Orthodox Churches that it is essential to develop contemporary means to help all the baptised believers “return to the fellowship of the church. The church’s mission also calls us to the task of peacemaking, reconciling and defending justice for everyone, especially in contexts where the people of God suffer from injustice, oppression and war. When the Eucharistic assembly does not engage in such outreaches it fails to realise its missionary responsibility”<sup>28</sup>.

### **3. Liturgy after the Liturgy**

The phrase “Liturgy after the liturgy” was formulated at the consultation organised by the WCC with Orthodox participants on “*Confessing Christ through the Liturgical Life of the Church Today*” (Etchmiadzin, Armenia, 1975). In that context Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania, then a professor at the University of Athens, wrote that each of the faithful “is called upon to continue a personal “liturgy” on the secret altar of his own heart, to realise a living proclamation of the good news ‘for the sake of the whole world’. Without this continuation the liturgy remains incomplete”<sup>29</sup>.

The late Fr. Ion Bria, who brought the most substantial contribution to the whole issue of Orthodox mission and WCC, further developed the concept of “liturgy after the Liturgy”, so that this expression has been more and more identified with his name. Bria underlined that “in ensuing ecumenical discussions other dimensions of ‘the liturgy after the liturgy’ have been discovered. The church’s liturgical and diaconical functions are connected, for liturgy reshapes the social life of Christians with a new emphasis on the sharing of bread, on the healing of brokenness, on reconciliation and on justice in the human community. The concept has also come to be associated with other facets of the life of the church, including education, evangelisation, concern for creation, spirituality and social ethics”<sup>30</sup>.

Very probably as a result of these contributions the WCC Assembly from Vancouver (1983) was speaking about an “eucharistic vision of ecumenism”<sup>31</sup>. The vision of the “liturgy after the liturgy” not only help Orthodox but also Christians of other confessional traditions to better link the worship of the Church with Her mission in the world of today.

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<sup>25</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 55

<sup>26</sup>) *Idem, Ibid*

<sup>27</sup>) *Idem, Ibid*

<sup>28</sup>) *Idem, Ibid*

<sup>29</sup>) Cfr. Ion Bria, *Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1996, p. 20

<sup>30</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 21

<sup>31</sup>) *Idem, Ibid*

#### 4. Mission and Unity

The issue of the mission and unity or of mission in unity was best addressed at the above-mentioned Neapolis consultation. In the final report of this consultation a special section is dedicated to the issue of “Mission and Unity”. In this section the following aspects are addressed: 1) Ecclesiological perspectives; 2) Common witness; 3) Proselytism and 4) The ecumenical vision. From an ecclesiological perspective, the Church, as the presence of the kingdom of God in the world, is called to manifest the Trinitarian communion and love “within its fold and towards the world. The church’s mission is the expression of this unity and love”<sup>32</sup>. In other words the unity of the Church is based in the unity of the Holy Trinity and from this unity results also the unity in mission, which is nothing else as the unity of the Church.

In relation to the issue of common witness the consultation from Neapolis recommended some concrete actions for cooperation between all Orthodox Churches as well as for the cooperation of the Orthodox Churches with other churches. The common witness is a concrete expression of the unity in mission. Proselytism is from the Orthodox perspective, the most difficult obstacle on the way towards unity in mission. Finally the ecumenical vision of the Neapolis statement refers to the fact that one impetus for this modern vision “was originally inspired by the committed search for a common witness to the good news of salvation. It still remain the primary objective of our ecumenical involvement – to offer common witness in love to the power of Christ, crucified and risen, so that those who are caught up in this world of division, conflict and death may believe and be transfigured”<sup>33</sup>.

#### 5. The issue of proselytism

The representatives of the Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical movement complained from the beginning about the fact that missionary groups from other churches are often stealing believers from Orthodox Churches. The statement of the consultation from Neapolis mentioned above addressed the issue of proselytism in connection with the question of unity in mission. In this respect the “proselytism, along with the actual disunity among the churches, creates major obstacles for our common witness”<sup>34</sup>.

The statement recommended that “all proselytism by any church should be condemned, and all antagonism and unhealthy competition in mission work should be avoided, as constituting a distorted form of mission”<sup>35</sup>. When these remarks were first made public they were confronted with a lot of criticism and considered as being in contradiction with religious freedom. Today such remarks are a common good in the ecumenical circles. The Orthodox Churches were called through the Neapolis statement “to continue efforts to persuade the churches and agencies involved in proselytism not to engage in dubious missionary activities detrimental to God’s will for unity, and to seek the path of true Christian charity and unity”<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup>) *Your will be done...* p. 47

<sup>33</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 51

<sup>34</sup>) *Idem, Ibid*

<sup>35</sup>) *Idem, Ibid*

<sup>36</sup>) *Idem, Ibid*

## 6. The Eucharist and Mission

Through mission the Church makes the people permanently aware of God's saving presence and action in the world, and invites them to partake in a new life of communion with the Trinity that decisively shapes their identity as this develops through and in relation to God and other people. "This kind of new life is sacramentally actualised and communally experienced in the eucharist, which is the great mystery of our participation in the life of the Holy Trinity, the recapitulation of the entire history of salvation in Christ and the foretaste of the Kingdom of God. In it, the faithful, by the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become the body of Christ, in which all respect one another for their unique gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed upon them for the building-up of their unity, which is grounded in their baptism"<sup>37</sup>.

The Church's mission in relation to the Eucharist is to reveal "what we have already become in the risen Christ, and what we will fully experience in his kingdom. Thus, Christians, as it becomes evident in the Eucharist, draw the being of their identity not from the values of this world but from being of God and from that which we will be at the end of this age. Baptised Christians, therefore, in the Eucharist become a community of people who together unite prayer with action, praise with justice, adoration with transformation and contemplation with social involvement. As they disperse in history for the proclamation of the Christian gospel, their missionary task is affected not only by their words but also by what they do and how they relate to each other as different members of the same eucharistic body of Christ in the context of the fragmented world"<sup>38</sup>.

## 7. Gospel and Culture

In relation to the World Conference for Mission and Evangelism from Salvador de Bahia (1996), which addressed the theme of *Gospel and Culture*, the specific Orthodox contribution to this issue was expressed at the Inter-Orthodox consultation on Gospel and Culture, organised in Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia, between 19-27 January 1996. The final statement adopted at this consultation underlined, among other things, that "the eternal truth which is Christ, delivered to the Church in its fullness immediately became incarnate in many languages in Jerusalem on Pentecost. The Gospel is always inculturated, proclaimed, manifest in a particular time and place by a particular people which means in a cultural context. With its reception by a people, their pre-existing culture is fertilised by the Gospel and organically transformed into creative energies towards salvation. There will inevitably be elements, attitudes, values within any culture alien to the Gospel and incompatible with it, which will be purified, transformed or exorcised by the Holy Spirit as the Spirit witnesses to Christ in the continuing life of the local eucharistic community"<sup>39</sup>.

At the European Forum on Gospel and Culture, an Orthodox theologian underlined that Orthodox theology neither identifies religion with culture, nor separates them completely, because the Orthodox Church "has avoided both the sacralisation of

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<sup>37</sup>) Fr Emmanuel Clapsis, *The Eucharist as Missionary Event* ...p. 165

<sup>38</sup>) *Ibid*, p. 168

<sup>39</sup>) *Orthodoxy and Cultures. Inter-Orthodox Consultation on Gospel and Cultures*, edited by Ioan Sauca, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1996, p. 183

culture and its secularisation”<sup>40</sup>. In relation to the very complex situations of today’s world, the Addis Ababa document stated that “in multi-cultural and multi-religious settings, different cultures and religions may compete with each other for predominance. This inevitably leads to violent conflict, exploitation and even persecution and death of the less powerful. In such situation of brokenness and violence, the Church by following the irenic life of Jesus Christ must actively work for the peaceful co-existence of all communities, enabling all to recongnize the sanctity of life as a gift of God and the right of all to pursue the quest for human fulfilment not in opposition with the other but in meaningful conversation of enrichment that enhances the understanding of life as God’s gift”<sup>41</sup>.

## 8. Mission and the whole creation

The mission of the Church relates not only to human beings but also to the whole creation which “itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8,21). Regarding the message of the Gospel as “God’s love and concern for the life of the whole world, the church cannot reduce its mission to the ‘salvation of souls’. The cosmic Christology implies that the mission of Christians in the world includes also their responsibility for the whole life of society and even their attitude towards nature and creation. In this sense, the Christian mission includes the dimension of a global human responsibility for the life of the world”<sup>42</sup>.

It is well known that His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is very much committed to the protection of the environment or to the integrity of the creation. For him “all of our efforts to cultivate a sense of environmental responsibility and to promote genuine reconciliation among people comprise the immediate responsibility and initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which has served the truth of Christ for some seventeen centuries. Our Church regards the sensitisation of its faithful in relation to the natural environment and in regard to the development of inter-religious dialogue as a central and essential part of its ministry of solidarity and co-existence”<sup>43</sup>. The original privilege and calling as human beings lies for the Ecumenical Patriarch “precisely in our ability to appreciate the world as God’s gift to us. And our original sin with regard to the natural environment lies – not in any legalistic transgression, but – precisely in our refusal to accept the world as a sacrament of communion with God and neighbour”<sup>44</sup>.

III. Instead of a conclusion we should simply quote His Beatitude Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens and of All Greece, who addressing the last World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, held for the first time in an majority Orthodox context (Athens (Greece), 9-16 May 2005) rightly appreciated “the holistic understanding of mission, being developed in recent years within WCC”. His

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<sup>40</sup>) Rev. Prtof. Dumitru Popescu, *Theology, Culture, Church. The Relation between Theology and Culture in Orthodoxy and in the Present Day Romanian Society*, in *European Forum on Gospel and Culture(s)*, edited by Viorel Ionita and Dietrich Werner, EMW Informationen, Nr. 113, December 1996, p. 36

<sup>41</sup>) *Orthodoxy and Cultures*...p. 186

<sup>42</sup>) Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea, *Confessing* ..., p. 142

<sup>43</sup>) <http://www.sofieprisen.no/Articles/48.html>

<sup>44</sup>) *Ibid*

Beatitude continued that his church “considered this conference important and providential among other world mission conferences of this kind, because of its new shift in mission paradigm, which makes it resonate with the theology, spirituality and contextual realities of our Orthodox Churches. We Orthodox do not only benefit from the ecumenical encounter and dialogue but also bring challenges coming from our history long mission experience and our mission theology with echoes from the time of the early Christian communities”<sup>45</sup>.

The World Missionary Conference from Edinburgh in 1910 opened up the process for a large ecumenical debate on the mission of the Church in the world of today. In preparing the centenarian anniversary of this conference we have to take into consideration the considerable ecumenical contribution towards a more comprehensive and more ecumenical approach of this issue during the last decades. In this perspective the Orthodox contribution will appear as a specific one, which enriched in a special way the holistic ecumenical approach of mission and evangelism towards a common witness of all churches to the faith in Jesus Christ, that the world may believe.

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<sup>45</sup>) [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/)