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ORTHODOX UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIONS.

THE ROLE OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

The problems that humanity faced in the 21st century, including the threats of the Islamic fanaticism, the wars and the international danger of the world peace, have led the WCC and the Orthodox Church to think further of the necessity of the inter-religious dialogue.

In this paper, we will present the history of the inter-religious dialogues that Orthodox Church started and its role in them. Also, we will try to present a reevaluation of that dialogue in an Orthodox point of view in order to define the true presuppositions of the dialogues and the role of contextual theology.

From its first steps, the Church engaged in dialogues with Judaism and Hellenism.¹ All the Christian authors, especially the Apologists tried to have conversations with the philosophers and the Jews, using also some type of “contextual theology”. Those dialogues had a twofold character; they were apologetic and refuting.² Furthermore, these dialogues provided the opportunity to Christianity to be critique to the Polytheism and popular religion and to connect the Greek (Ethnic) religious philosophy to the Christian teaching.³

¹Martzelos G., “*Orthodoxy and Inter-religious dialogues*”, p. 1 in http://users.auth.gr/~martzelo/index.files/arthra_n.htm

² See, Justin, Dialogue with Tryphon, P.G. 6, 471A-800D, Justin, Exhortation to the Greeks P.G. 6, 241A-312A, Tatian, Address to the Greeks, P.G.6, 804A-888B

³ Yianoulatos Anastasios, Facing the world, SVS, Crestwood, 2003, p.129.

When the Arabs conquered some areas of Byzantine Empire, the Orthodox Church started to be in dialogue with them, in order to live in peace with them. Great Fathers of the Church engaged in a dialogue with Islam, such as Saint John Damascene, Saint Cyril of Thessaloniki, Saint Gregory Palamas, Joseph Bryennios and the theologian emperor Manuel II Paleologos. We will not present in this paper their understanding of religions, but in our presentation, we will criticize the method of the new Orthodox theologians who misinterpret those attempts for the dialogue.

The monastic community of Mount Athos, and especially the Holy monastery of Saint Gregory, criticized the contemporary inter-religious dialogue with Islam, because according to them, the message of the Fathers that engaged in those dialogues misinterpreted by those who started dialogues nowadays.

Saint John Damascene, saint Gregory Palamas, Genadios Scholarios and saint Nikodimus the Hagiorite, engaged in dialogues with Islam but they had different presuppositions. Those presuppositions were the authentic expressions of the dialogue between Orthodoxy and Islam. According to them, the characteristics of the dialogues were:

A) The Islamic religion was faced with spiritual criteria. The anti-Islamic texts of those Fathers are not fanatical but are recognized as different expressions of the dialogues.

B) All the Fathers had the certainty that Orthodox faith was the only way to salvation and in the dialogues they proposed the truths of Christ's teaching.

C) The superiority of moral values of Christianity is displayed as proof of the true faith of the Fathers. According to them the motive of the dialogue is not the anthropocentric love, but the Christocentric one.

These criteria are based on the faith in the Trinitarian God, the divinity of Jesus Christ and the mystery of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. All the previous, are expressed by the true love of Christianity, which is the

safest way to seek peaceful co-existence and cooperation with any religion, without the danger of syncretism.⁴

Right after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the dialogues stopped and restarted in the 20th century. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople started again wanting to be in dialogue and this was proved by the Synodical Encyclicals of 1902 and 1920.

In the initial Encyclical, the Patriarchate called Orthodox Churches to a unity of belief, concord and brotherly and peaceful co-existence. With the second in 1920, the Patriarchate of Constantinople not only wanted to be in a dialogue with other churches, but also to engage in a dialogue with the other religions and peaceful co-existence with them.⁵

According to prof. Martzelos, Orthodoxy was the first that stated the need for an inter-religious dialogue in the First Pan-Orthodox Conference of Rhodes (1961).⁶ At that Conference, the local Orthodox churches understood the gift of the dialogue to prevailing peace, freedom and love between people from different religions. At Chambezy in 1976, Orthodox churches realized the necessity of an inter-religious dialogue on a Pan-Orthodox level. The declaration of this conference was the base of the dialogue that Orthodox Church started.

“the inter-religious understanding and cooperation, and through these to the elimination of fanaticism from every side, and thus to reconciliation of peoples and the prevalence of the ideas of freedom and peace in the world, to serve modern man, irrespective of race and religion”⁷

The same desire was expressed again by the Third Pre-synodical Pan-orthodox Conference in Chambezy 1986.⁸

⁴ *Orthodoxy and Islam*, Holy Monastery of Saint Gregory, Mount Athos 2000, p. 14-15.

⁵ Ziaka Angeliki, *“Interreligious dialogue in promoting peace and overcoming religious conflicts”*, in *Religion and Conflicts*, Harpree Publishing, London 2009, p. 274.

⁶ Martzelos G., *“Orthodoxy and Inter-religious dialogues”*, p. 4 in http://users.auth.gr/~martzelo/index.files/arthra_n.htm

⁷ Synodica, Periodical edition of the Secretariat for the preparation of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, 2, Geneva 1978, p.201.

⁸ Martzelos G., *“Orthodoxy and Inter-religious dialogues”*, p. 4, in http://users.auth.gr/~martzelo/index.files/arthra_n.htm

The main question according to us is, if it is possible to stay in those principles of dialogue in the 21st century's dialogues.

After those decisions, the Orthodox Church and especially the Ecumenical Patriarchate started a bilateral academic conference with Judaism and Islam. With Judaism from 1977-2003 are held five conferences and ten conferences with Islam from 1986-2002.⁹

Moreover, with the assistance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the significant role that held in them, International Inter-religious Congresses and meetings in Constantinople (1994 and 2005), in Brussels, in Thessaloniki (2003) and in Athens (2004) were organized. The "Athens declaration" concludes all the previous ones:

"We repudiate all forms of nationalist, racist, religious, social and other discrimination, by means of which morbid religious intolerance and fanaticism is harbored, together with the proclivity of seeking to find justification for bellicose conflicts and organized terrorism, to the obvious immense detriment of the peaceful co-existence of all human beings and all people. Therefore, we launch an appeal to the spiritual leaders of all religions to undertake the necessary work and to co-operate in achieving the defusing of these perilous confusions, in order thereby to achieve the truly credible furtherance of God's will that peace, social justice and respect for fundamental human rights will prevail".¹⁰

Let's move now to the methods that are held in those dialogues and we will criticize those methods with the accordance of the contextual orthodox patristic theology.

The first method is the Pneumatological. This means that, we have to see the Soteriology into the Ecclesiology in order to accept pluralism and to

⁹ For more information of those conferences see Ang.Ziaka, "Interreligious dialogue in promoting peace and overcoming religious conflicts", in *Religion and Conflicts*, Harptree Publishing, London 2009, p. 275-279.

¹⁰ Martzelos G., "Orthodoxy and Inter-religious dialogues", p. 6, in http://users.auth.gr/~martzelo/index_files/arthra_n.htm

present inclusiveness or exclusiveness.¹¹ A Christocentric theology discriminates Christ from the mystery of the Trinity. Bishop G. Khodr, states that the most important step in the mission of the Orthodox Church is to “*follow the will of Christ for teaching the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is free to act in other religions*”.¹²

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in other religions? According to Archbishop of Albania Anastasios Yianoulatos, this Spirit continues to act for the Salvation of every person and fulfills the entire world. As a Spirit of holiness, it carries God's inspiration, love and power to humanity. As a Spirit of power, renews the world, as a Spirit of truth motivates and inspires people to search the truth. As Spirit of peace, helps people to live in a peaceful way and as a Spirit of justice inspires people to yearn for justice.¹³

This passage, which Anastasios Yianoulatos and G. Khodr interpret in this way, is the passage John 3, 8 that states: “The Spirit blows wherever it wilst”. The Orthodox hermeneutics are totally contextual, so we have to see what exactly means that quotation of Christ.

This passage is a part of a conversation with Christ and Nikodemus that Christ teaches him about His Kingdom. Nikodemus asks how someone who is old, can be re-born. Jesus answers to him that only with water and spirit (in other words in Baptism) can someone be re-born in Christ. Right after that, and for the best understanding of His teaching about the Holy Spirit and how it acts after the Baptism, Christ states that the Spirit goes everywhere and nobody knows where it goes.¹⁴

¹¹ Dupuis Jaques, “*Trinitarian Christology as a model for a theology of a religious pluralism*”, *The myriad Christ. The quest of theological norm* (ed. T Meringan/ J. Haers), Leuven University Press, Leuven-Paris-Sterling-Virginia, 2000, p. 83-99.

¹² Khodr G., “*Christianity in a Pluralistic word. The economy of the Holy Spirit*”, *The Ecumenical Review* 23 (1971), p. 118-128.

¹³ Yianoulatos Anastasios, *Facing the world*, SVS, Crestwood, 2003, p.149.

¹⁴ John 3, 8.

According to Saint John Chrysostom, the Baptism is the first intellectual asset that a human needs to have and then, the Holy Spirit starts its action and no-one knows how it acts.¹⁵

“That which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Seest thou the dignity of the Spirit? It appears performing the work of God; for above he said of some, that «they were begotten of God» here He saith that the Spirit begeth them...Here is the conclusion of the whole matter. «If» saith He «thou knowest not how to explain the motion nor the path of this wind, which thou perceivest by hearing and touch, why art thou over-anxious about the working of the Devine Spirit, when thou understand not that of the wind, though thou hearest its voice?» The expression «bloweth where it listeth» is also used to establish the power of the Comforter; for if non can hold the wind, but it moveth where it listeth, much less will the laws of nature, or limits of bodily generation, or anything of the like kind, be able to restrain the operations of the Spirit...As then the wind is not visible, although it utters a sound, so neither is the birth of that which is spiritual visible to our bodily eyes;”¹⁶

It is obvious from the above; that the action of the Holy Spirit starts only after Baptism and Christ gives the example of the wind, in order Nikodemus to understand the role of the Spirit. Without Baptism it is impossible for a man, to receive the Holy Spirit and analogically the Salvation outside of the Canonical boundaries of the Church is impossible for anyone. The same interpretation of this passage is given by Cyril of Alexandria¹⁷ and by Gregory Palamas.¹⁸

The second method is the Trinitarian model. This model has its roots on the theology of Metropolitan John of Pergamon (Zizioulas). According to him, community means unity and diversity.¹⁹ This Trinitarian life is the example of

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *In Johannem*, P.G.59, 154.

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homily XXVI*, NPNF 14, p. 91.

¹⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarii in Johannem*, lib. II, P.G. 73, 215CD.

¹⁸ Gregory Palamas, *Contra Acindinus* 3, Chrestou 4.

¹⁹ Zizioulas John, *Being as Communion. Studies in personhood and the Church*, SVS Press, Canada, 1985.

mission of the Church and the inter-religious dialogue.²⁰ According to prof. Vasiliades, Trinitarian theology gives us the opportunity to understand the other as a co-walker of the discovery of the truth.

The question that raised in this model is where can we find the truth. Is it Christianity and especially the Orthodox Church the only way to find the truth? According to Christ, He is the only truth, the only way to the Father and for that we understand that only Christianity has the truth.²¹ So, there is no truth in other religions according to the Fathers.²² It is also obvious that the Fathers expressed the theory of the “Seminal Word” such as Justin Martyr and Philosopher, in order to have a dialogue with the other religions and to contextualize the teaching of Christianity.²³

The difference between the theory of the “Seminal Word” with the contemporary dialogues is obvious. None of the Apologists accepted that having dialogues with the others is a syncretistic synthesis. According to my opinion, this is the danger that we face today in the dialogues and Yianoulatos’ position that *“these formulations did not result any kind of syncretistic synthesis or to hide the Christian message”*²⁴ is totally acceptable.

Furthermore, a crucial point of our paper is that Christ Himself had a dialogue with the gentiles, such as the Canaanite woman and the Centurion²⁵ with presuppositions that lead us not to a syncretistic synthesis but in a dialogue of truth and faith. This Christian message which Paul taught and preached calmly and firmly widen up in humanity and gave to everyone the word of Salvation and the Ressurrectional hope.

The third method is the one that Anastasios Yianoulatos, Archbishop of Albania promoted. The humanitarian principles of the religions, such as freedom, human dignity and the true love of the others must be a new way of

²⁰ Vasiliadis P., *Orthodoxy in a Crosswalk*, Paratiritis publications, Thessaloniki 1992 (in Greek).

²¹ John 14, 6.

²² Origen, P.G. 14, 209DF, Cyril of Jerusalem, P.G.27, 55D.

²³ Yianoulatos Anastasios, *Facing the world*, SVS,Crestwood, 2003, p.145.

²⁴ Yianoulatos Anastasios, *Facing the world*, SVS,Crestwood, 2003, p.147.

²⁵ Mt. 15, 21 cf.Mk. 7, 24-30 and Mt. 8, 10 cf. Lk. 7,5.

discussion and understanding. In that new context that rose in a pluralistic and globalized world, Orthodoxy has the duty to answer to the problems of the peoples. Having understood the true meaning of the liturgical, mystical and soteriological character of the Orthodox Church, we as Orthodox, have to be the first who want to engage to the inter-religious dialogues.

In connection with the above, is the theological approach to the Fall. According to the Patristic tradition during the fall of humanity, the “God’s image”, that is the whole humanity, was not completely destroyed (as Protestants and Roman Catholics claimed) but damaged. This means that, humanity can understand that God is above all. Also this connection, lead us to the “Incarnational theology” or the Christological understanding of the religions. In such Christology, Christ as a new Adam, saves all mankind with the Holy Spirit through Baptism. This is exactly the concept of the theory of the “Seminal Word” that we mentioned previously.²⁶

God wants to save all human beings²⁷, but this salvation is placed when human opens his heart in God, recognizes the Trinitarian God as his Lord and Savior. The acceptance of this calling is completed with Baptism and by receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit and in that way, human became a partaker of the “root” that is Christ.²⁸ The energy of the Holy Spirit acts only after Baptism.

The contemporary inter-religious dialogue, as dialogue of love and respect, without the acceptance of the teaching of Christ in Matthew 28, 19-20, that is the real dialogue and mission of the Orthodox Church, is a dialogue that denies the only truth which is Christ.²⁹ The real inter-religious dialogue is the Orthodox missions, because those missions are dialogues of truth and love. These missions are totally contextual, because they address the word of Gospel to any civilization and to everyone. They call all people to return to the faith of

²⁶ Yianoulatos Anastasios, *Facing the world*, SVS, Crestwood, 2003, p.141.

²⁷ John 3, 16.

²⁸ Rom. 11, 16.

²⁹ Thessalonians II, 2,13.

Jesus Christ, a call in repentance and give them the opportunity to be partaker of the divine nature.³⁰ This mission respects all mankind and teaches the word of Gospel. According to my opinion, this is the true inter-religious dialogue, with the Christocentric meaning of real love, to contemporary problems of the people in the 21st century.

Another method that according to us is important for the inter-religious dialogue is the contextual theology. Contextuality, according to some dictionaries means the theology that is predicated with reference to its context. Therefore, contextuality means relation to the substance and nature of the context, which includes geographic, linguistic, social, political, cultural and ideological factors.³¹

In the Conference of Volos' Academy of Theological Studies, about the Contextuality of the Orthodox theology and the dialogues of the Orthodox Church today, some questions were raised that were crucial for the definition of the Contextuality in the Orthodox Theology. "*Can Orthodoxy be both faithful to the tradition and contextual? Can «a return to the Fathers» degenerate into idolatry and Orthodox ideology if not contextual?*"³². Prof. Marzelos' paper at this Conference emphasized in the role of Contextual theology in the Orthodox tradition and his criticism on a text of Canberra 's 7th General assembly of the WCC, about the role of the Holy Spirit in the traditions of the South Korea in a framework of pantheistic and animistic belief and images, was a start point of our presentation about this method of contextual theology in the inter-religious dialogue.³³

We must emphasize in the outset, that the use of contextual representations and images, in order to understand the truths of the Gospel by people with different cultural and spiritual background, is from the standpoint

³⁰ Second Epistle of Petros, 1, 4.

³¹ Schreiner Lothar, "*Contextual Theology*", Encyclopedia of Christianity p. 678-680

³² Prologue to the booklet of the abstract of the papers of the International Conference Neo-Patristic Synthesis or Post-Patristic Theology? Can Orthodox theology be contextual?, Volos' Academy of Theological Studies, Volos 3-6 June 2010

³³ Martzelos G., "*The role of Contextual theology in the Orthodox tradition*" (in Greek) in http://users.auth.gr/~martzelo/index.files/arthra_n.htm

of Orthodox not only legitimate but necessary as well. This is a fundamental missionary and educational authority, that is deeply rooted in history and life of the Church. We must use these contextual representations and perceptions to define the morphology of the Gospel, and to leave the essence of Gospel intact. This meaning of contextuality is exactly fulfilled by the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church. Although they used representations and concepts from cultural background and general atmosphere prevailing in the Greek world, those were limited exclusively to morphological level and does not dilute the message of divine revelation. On the other hand, they expressed it accurately, ensuring even simultaneousity with the varieties of heretical forgeries. This attitude of the Apostles and the Fathers would have been unthinkable, if they did not act under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and they did not realize the missionary dimension and importance of the Incarnation of God.

“In this respect it could be said that Orthodox theology is the contextual theology par excellence because it dared to formulate the Gospel in a way that was unique and unprecedented in history, based on the contextual figurative images and terminological presuppositions of the Greek world. Without this venture, the «marriage» between Christianity and Hellenism, or rather the Christianization of Hellenism would not have been possible.”³⁴

After everything that has been said above, the question that is raised here is: Can orthodox theology reclaim the contextual character and maintain a dialogue with other religions with different tradition? Can Orthodox theology bring the redemptive message of post-modern and globalized modern world, or will it remain enclosed within forms and shapes of the past, which is many times completely incomprehensible by people with different culture and religion?

³⁴ Martzelos G. Abstract of the paper titled: *The role of Contextual Theology according to Orthodox Tradition*. Paper presented on the International Conference Neo-Patristic Synthesis or Post-Patristic Theology? Can Orthodox theology be contextual?, Volos’ Academy of Theological Studies, See also Martzelos G., “*The role of Contextual theology in the Orthodox tradition*” p. 13-16 (in Greek) in http://users.auth.gr/~martzelo/index.files/arthra_n.htm

We believe that the bright example of the Apostles and the Fathers, that used the principle of the martyria of the Gospel, the Incarnation principle within the Jewish and then into the Greek world, even succeeding in this way, as we have seen, the Christianization of Hellenism, shows the way to the contemporary Orthodox theology, to respond to the contextual challenges of our time in the inter-religious dialogue. We cannot set aside that orthodox theology, this traditional and patristic orthodox theology, is the product of dialogue with the contextual environment. Only in that manner, of the contextual way that is free from syncretism, Orthodox theology can give its message to the true Inter-religious dialogue.

Finishing our paper, we want to propose some presuppositions for a real ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, which I believe will give a push and a new dynamic to them.

1. In the dialogues we must not follow the political diplomacy and its methods, because diplomacy and politics decide without the agreement of the people that they represent. In the Church, though, an agreement which has not been acceptable by the ecclesial body, remains ephemeral.

2. In the inter-religious dialogues, each religion must present its contemporary characteristics, the life of the people, the civilization that represents, and keep as a background the tradition that it has. With all that, we avoid the enhancement and the syncretism.

3. Each religion must understand its role in the solution of contemporary problems, which are raised in 21st century. In my belief, a dialogue of truth, a dialogue that Christianity and especially Orthodoxy can give to the “gentiles” again the interpretation of the Word of God with the assistance of the patristic thought contextualized to the new problems of our century, is acceptable.

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