

An Orthodox Assessment of the New Mission Statement

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Orthodoxy and mission are two terms that at first glance seem quite incompatible, at least to the Western historians of mission.¹ When in 1910 the historic gathering of missionaries across denominational boundaries took place in Edinburgh to launch an inter-denominational missionary cooperation, Orthodoxy was completely marginal. In their deliberations, there were only references to the Oriental (sic) or Greek churches, always within the framework of the Western (mainly Protestant) mission. Even in the generation that followed, no article on the importance of mission was written by Orthodox theologians.² The initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the dawn of the 20th century, which invited all Christians to address together the great challenges of the 20th century, only later were brought into the Christian attention.

Even the encounter of the Orthodox with world Christian mission has not always been a happy event. The missional dimension of the Orthodox Church was rediscovered just more than a generation ago thanks to efforts and the theological arguments of the former moderator of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), and now president of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and primate of the Albanian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos).³ The theological discussion originally with Protestantism in the field mission within the framework of

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

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

³ Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), “Discovering the Orthodox Missionary Ethos,” in *Martyria-Mission: The Witness of the Orthodox Churches*, ed. Ion Bria (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1980), 20–29; also in his *Mission in Christ's Way* (Brookline/Geneva: HC Orthodox Press/WCC Publications, 2010), 117–134.

the activities of WCC, and after Vatican II also with Catholicism, has awakened the importance of mission for the Orthodox Church universal.

However, a significant contribution to the overall deliberations for an ecumenical mission theology in the form of a mission statement had to wait until a missionary awareness of the various *autocephali* Orthodox churches was accomplished. Gradually, in addition to Archbishop Anastasios, other Orthodox theologians who were actively involved in one way or another with the ecumenical movement, and particularly with the CWME of WCC, most notably in the case of the late Professor Ion Bria, made significant contributions to the development of the contemporary mission theology. The *martyria* dimension of mission in the place of an offensive and sometimes arrogant mission; the trinitarian importance of the *missio Dei* theology; the liturgical aspect of Christian witness in the form of the *Liturgy after the liturgy* – these are only a few cases of the “Orthodox” contribution to the new ecumenical understanding of mission in the 20th century. Gleaning from the richness of the Christian tradition of the undivided church, as well as from the wealth of their missionary heritage (especially Sts Cyril and Methodius’ evangelization of the Slavs, and of Europe in general), the Orthodox not only explained their different – and to a certain extent difficult to understand by Western missiologists and missionaries – approach to mission; they also became invaluable players in the field of contemporary Christian missiology.

During the last 50 years – that is, from the time of full integration into the WCC (and the overall ecumenical movement) of all the Orthodox churches, as well as of the International Missionary Council (IMC), in the 3rd General Assembly of WCC in New Delhi) – there have been three statements on mission and evangelism: the 1982 *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*, which was officially approved by the Central Committee of WCC; the 2000 “Mission and Evangelism in Unity”, adopted by CWME as a study document; and the new mission affirmation, entitled *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, unanimously approved by the WCC Central Committee held in Crete, Greece, on 5 September 2012.

The 1982 mission statement is a traditional mission statement, reflecting the mostly Protestant understanding of mission; and despite its translation among other languages into Greek,⁴ it was never embraced and wholeheartedly followed by Orthodox missionaries and missiologists, obviously because the Orthodox did not feel at home with its theological arguments or the overall aura. This became quite evident in the attempt to update it with strong Orthodox theological terminology (and of course substantial

⁴ See I. Bria and Petros Vassiliadis, *Orthodox Christian Witness*, EKO 1 (Katerini, Greece: Tertios Press, 1989), 177–200.

Orthodox contribution) in the 2000 *Mission and Evangelism in Unity* statement, which met with some criticism from the Protestant (and particularly evangelical) missiologists. This was the reason why it never acquired a universal acceptance and official approval by the entire WCC in the form of a decision by its Central Committee.

Both the 1982 and the 2000 mission statements attempted to bring into actuality the traditional (Western and Eastern, respectively) understanding of mission. However, they both came short with regard to the adaptation to the rapidly changing landscapes. The third millennium required concrete affirmations in the emerging new challenges, especially with regard to the growing pluralistic situation, the immoral world economic system, and a renewed philosophy and language. In addition, the widening of the spectrum of Christian missionaries – ranging from the historically traditional churches (Orthodox and Catholic) and the traditional mainstream Protestant ecclesial communities, to the new vibrant and charismatic ones (evangelical and Pentecostal) – required a broader appeal of the statement, even wider than WCC member churches and affiliated mission agencies, so that all Christian can commit themselves together to fullness of life for all, led by the God of life. It is in this situation that the most recent mission statement, *Together Towards Life*, came out.

Of course, any new statement concerning the Christian imperative of mission would be wholeheartedly welcome from an Orthodox perspective. This one, however, seems in addition to fulfil some of the expectations of the Orthodox, especially in areas of crucial theological importance. And first of all, its trinitarian – that is, pneumatological – basis (TTL, §1ff.). The Orthodox always insist that all fundamental aspects of Christian theology – creation of the entire cosmos by God, redemption in Christ, and salvation through the church, but beyond the church's historic boundaries in the power of the Holy Spirit, etc. – are conceived as the natural consequence of the inner dynamics of the Triune God, for example, of the communion and love that exists within the Holy Trinity. Applied to mission, this trinitarian basis can have tremendous effect in helping Christian missionaries to avoid imperialistic or confessionalistic attitudes. "The Trinitarian theology points to the fact that God's involvement in history aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God's very life. The implications of this assertion for understanding mission are very important: mission does not aim primarily at the propagation or transmission of intellectual convictions, doctrines, moral commands etc., but at the transmission of the life of communion that exists in God."⁵

⁵ *Go Forth in Peace: Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, ed. I. Bria (Geneva: WCC, 1985), 3.

One could also add some further points: the ecclesial dimension of mission, the implicit liturgical aspect (although not fully articulated in the direction of the eucharistic approach to mission, especially in view of the affirmation in article 17), the explicit environmental and interfaith consequences of an authentic Christian witness, and the clear connection between mission and unity⁶ are all profound theological aspects, very familiar to the Orthodox tradition. The importance of the interfaith dialogue (instead of an aggressive and triumphant mission), on the basis of the economy of the Spirit (side-by-side, of course, with the economy of the Word/Christ)⁷ and the integrity of creation with the ensuing environmental missional ethos,⁸ must certainly please not only the Orthodox missiologists, but also the theologians engaged in the quest for the visible unity of the church of Christ. To my knowledge, this is the first time that a mission statement makes such a strong and direct appeal: “We are called to participate in God’s mission beyond our human-centred goals. God’s mission is to all life and we have to both acknowledge it and serve it in new ways of mission. We pray for repentance and forgiveness, but we also call for action now. Mission has creation at its heart” (§105).

The strong spiritual dimension that permeates the whole document is yet another positive point the Orthodox can immediately endorse. “Authentic Christian witness is not only in *what* we do in mission but *how* we live out our mission. The church in mission can only be sustained by spiritualities deeply rooted in the Trinity’s communion of love” (§29). Closely connected are also the spirit of humility and the imperative of repentance in mission. The cross, says the document, “calls for repentance in light of misuse of power and use of the wrong kind of power in mission and in the church” (§33). For generations, even centuries, the triumphant character in doing mission overwhelmed the humble quintessence of the Christian message and attitude, the Pauline affirmation that “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21).

This brings us to the heart of the new mission statement, namely that in the third millennium, Christian mission, in addition to the proclamation of the good news, should address the structural sin, expressed in the intertwined contemporary crises, economic and environmental, from the perspective of the marginalized (§36ff.):

⁶ “Practically, as well as theologically, mission and unity belong together” (TTL, §60).

⁷ (Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon) Georges Khodr, “Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit,” *The Ecumenical Review* 23:2 (1971), 118–128.

⁸ (Ecumenical Patriarch) Bartholomew Archontonis, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York/London/Toronto/Sydney/Auckland: Doubleday, 2008). His initiatives became almost characteristic of the Orthodox theology, and resulted in His All-Holiness becoming known as the “Green Patriarch.”

“Christians are called to acknowledge the sinful nature of all forms of discrimination and transform unjust structures” (§49), and “all missional activity must . . . safeguard the sacred worth of every human being and of the earth” (§42).

The third millennium, in which all Christians are called to witness to the gospel, is characterized by a deep and prolonged crisis, caused by the world economic system; and their mission cannot be authentically pursued without addressing this structural evil. In this respect, the 2012 AGAPE “Call for Action” is clearly echoed in one of the final affirmations:

Economic globalization has effectively supplanted the God of life with mammon, the god of free-market capitalism that claims the power to save the world through the accumulation of undue wealth and prosperity. Mission in this context needs to be counter-cultural, offering alternatives to such idolatrous visions because mission belongs to the God of life, justice and peace and not to this false god who brings misery and suffering to people and nature. (TTL, §108)

Such a strongly socially oriented missionary appeal, of course, is not something new in the recent history of the missionary branch of the WCC. Some forty years ago, and only in the second decade after the integration of the IMC in the WCC, it was one of the causes for a dramatic split in the world missionary Christian movement with the creation of the “evangelical” Lausanne movement. This time, however, the profound biblical, theological, and spiritual argumentation can hardly provide any reasonable excuse for theological disagreement on the part of the evangelicals or the Pentecostals. It may not be accidental that the Orthodox are engaged in a very constructive theological dialogue with both these Christian communities, not to mention, of course, that since the time of the 2005 Athens world mission conference (and also in the 2010 Edinburgh centenary celebrations) they were central players.