

Anastasios Yannoulatos

Facing the world

Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns
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208 pages

Reviewed by Daniel Munteanu

In this book of His Eminence Anastasios Yannoulatos, Archbishop of Tirana, Durres and All Albania, Professor Emeritus of the University of Athen and Corresponding Member of the Academy of Athens, we can find answers “based on Orthodox spiritual experience and tradition” (p. 12) to the most brisant questions of our time: globalization, human rights, meaning of culture, interreligious dialogue, responsibility and contribution of Orthodoxy in the contemporary society.

This book which is indeed “an Orthodox answer to modern problems of global concerns” (p. 13) contents seven essays on theological and interreligious studies. Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos’ understanding of ecumenism serves as basis for an orthodox view of interreligious dialogue. The Orthodox Church has not only to be ecumenical, but its vision of ecumenism is “the best response” to the “new global conditions” of our contemporary society (idem). Orthodoxy has always an universal dimension and leads from “Global Community” to a “Communion of Love” (p. 21). The main aim of the world and of each society is to become a *koinonia of love* “with our fellow human beings, with the entire

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universe, and with the Supreme Reality” (idem.).

For Archbishop Anastasios the technological culture encourages to a crisis of identity and of meaning which can be overcome only by a spiritual culture of love (p. 22f). The fundament of this spiritual culture is the koinonia of love, the perfect koinonia of the Trinitarian God, who is at the same time the beginning and the aim of all creation. The human being as image of God aspires to this life in community (p. 24). The rupture in the relationship with God caused by sin involves a “fragmentation of the human self”, an “alienation from the essence of human nature” (p. 26). Humanity can “return to koinonia with the Holy Trinity through Christ” who, as “incarnation of the Word of God”, is the “new force for koinonia” (p. 26f).

Archbishop Anastasios focuses on a *cosmic ecclesiology* based on pneumatology. The true church is not an “insular community” but a symbol for a “worldwide unity” and a fruit of the Holy Spirit who “works to achieve the unity of all beings” (pp. 28-30). This understanding of a worldwide unity as koinonia of love through the Holy Spirit involves a concret mission, service and responsibility to the world. “Love constitutes the basic element of humanity’s ‘divine image’” and is the real source of transfiguration (theosis) of the world (p. 32f).

Archbishop Anastasios underlines the *ecological dimension of a cosmic ecclesiology* when he shows the inner connexion between koinonia with God and koinonia with God’s creation. Not only human beings “have a vital need to be in a koinonia of love” but so the entire universe (p. 37). We can find in this book fundamental aspects of an orthodox understanding of creation as space of the indwelling and acting of the Holy Spirit. In his pneumatological view of creation Archbishop Anastasios emphasizes an optimistic worldview in which the natural world is always kept alive through the grace of God. Nature lies not outside the “sphere of the Holy Spirit’s activity” (idem). This is why the material elements like bread and wine are essential parts of the sacraments and of liturgy (idem). The material world has a theological value and dignity because it was created by God himself (p. 170). In the middle of Archbishop Yannoulatos’ pneumatological doctrine of creation stays the Liturgy as eschatological and doxological process of koinonia: “Harmony between humanity and the physical world is restored through a process of love and thanksgiving. (...) The cosmos was created so that it might be transformed in its entirety (...) into a ‘eucharist’, a loving act of thankfulness toward our loving God” (p. 172).

This fascinating theology of koinonia of love has not only an ecological but also a *social* and a *political* dimension. Archbishop Anastasios asks for

social justice, equality and freedom as direct consequences of this understanding of *koinonia*. The Orthodox Church has from the very beginning actively “wholeheartedly endorsed the statements and decisions” of the World Council of Churches on human rights and religious freedom (p. 67) and support “the basic principles of freedom, equality, dignity, brotherhood, and all other human rights” (p. 68). Human rights have to be seen in balance with human obligations. “A one-sided emphasis on rights can result in unhealthy individualism and also makes it easier for those rights to be abused. It is precisely in order to defend rights that responsibility and duty must also be stressed” (p. 55). This means that *individual rights* should become compatible and harmonious with *social and political rights* (p. 71). There is for instance no human dignity without responsibility for the rights of future generations (p. 74).

In this book we can find also an *orthodox theology of culture*. Culture is a “communication system or code”, language and regulation of social life, which “provides a series of responses and solutions to the fundamental categories of existence” (p. 80). “Culture is universal to all human beings” and societies (*idem.*). It is sustained by God’s energies and the power of the Holy Spirit (p. 84). Not only etymologically (culture – *cultus*) derives culture from cult but also historically it is originated in worship.

The culture is important also for the spread of the Gospel. “The flame of Pentecost abolishes linguistic, ethnic, and cultural borders. Culture is on the one hand accepted but at the same time transcended. While the gospel emphasizes its eternal and divine character, it has no difficulty in being incarnated in time and again in the specific cultural body of each epoch” (p. 87f). Thanks to its concept of *unity in diversity* the Orthodox Church accepted the meaning and the importance of local culture and traditions (p. 89f). The orthodox culture as dynamic process leads to the “eucharistic transformation” of the world (p. 94). The gospel “becomes incarnated (...) and regenerates culture in the Holy Spirit” (p. 97).

This book is a major statement of Orthodoxy and it will become a point of reference to the main issues of our contemporary pluralistic society. For Archbishop Anastasios the theology of love (1 Jn 4.16) is also the fundament of the interreligious dialogue. Eastern Christianity has a “fundamental attitude of respect and tolerance for an understanding of the religious experiences of others” (p. 124). Due to its own history the Orthodoxy can contribute in an special way to the dialogue with Islam: “Of all the living religions, Islam is the closest, both spiritually and geographically, to Orthodox Christianity” (p. 119). The Orthodoxy have long time coexist (“living dialogue”) with Muslim world and can offer a significant contribution to the contemporary Christian-Islamic dialogue as dialogue of reciprocal respect, tolerance and understanding for the

preserved spiritual treasures of the others (pp. 122, 136). Engaging in dialogue is not a deny but an affirmation of Orthodox Faith: “Every time we engage in dialogue we also interpret and elucidate the testimony of our Christian faith. We have an obligation to speak with people and to offer the priceless treasure that we possess” (p. 153).

Archbishop Anastasios develops a remarkable theology of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue from an orthodox perspective of an *anthropology of grace*. Dialogue is the only way toward a culture of understanding, respect and love. All human beings are connected to each other through their intangible dignity and divine origin that never get lost. Each human being has the ability to make the intimate experience of God. Archbishop Anastasios’ trust in the human being is also a trust in the cosmic presence of the Holy Spirit in the whole universe.: “Every human being was created ‘in God’s image’ and is therefore our sister or our brother. The rays of divine glory that embrace the entire universe are received by everyone. All human beings benefit from the activities of the Holy Spirit – activities that promote life, love, and truth” (p. 152). A *culture of peace and reconciliation* is nothing else than a fruit of the Holy Spirit as Spirit of life, of holiness, of truth, of peace and of justice (p. 148f).

The most important universal vision and message of this book is that the Orthodoxy has to take seriously its own global responsibility in the world and contribute to the peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religions, “to seek solutions that will lead us toward a *koinonia agapes*, a society and communion of love” (p. 201).

The book *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns* is to be recommended not only to orthodox theologians and Christians but also to all people interested in an orthodox view of globalizations, of human rights and of interreligious dialogue.