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Contemporary missionary efforts in the Orthodox Churches: limitations and possibilities

Abstract

The article traces the perspectives and the predicaments of the missionary work of the Orthodox churches today. Two particular problems are brought to the fore: The poorness of mission studies and certain problems in the concept of the “missionary” local church. The article puts emphasis upon the need for sound studies, beyond outdated stereotypes, and upon the task that the voice of the young churches in the Third World is heard by the global Orthodoxy.



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One can probably pose numerous questions about the missionary perspectives in the Orthodox Church¹. However, I am² going to single out two issues, which are of major importance in my view: 1) Mission studies, and 2) The concept of the local church.

1 Mission Studies

It concerns:

- the theology of Mission,
- research,
- dialogue with ecumenical and global missionary trends, and
- the preparation of potential missionaries.

This outline involves questions such as: Do our theological curricula contain missionary sensitivities, which call, among others, for education in anthropology, cultures, languages, inculturation and contextualization? I have the impression that, apart from a few particular cases³, the Orthodox world does not favor missionary studies and preparation. And I'm not speaking of classes on general missionary principles, but on really specific matters.

¹ This paper was delivered at the 5th Orthodox Mission Network (OMN) meeting, 1 December 2014, Agioi Anargyroi chapel, Palaia Kokkinia, Piraeus, Greece

² My own experience comes from short visits and teaching in missionary churches (in Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Korea) as well as from theological research on Missiology and my participation in ecumenical forums.

³ As far as Greece is concerned, one should mention Petros Vassiliadis, now professor emeritus of the New Testament at the Theological Faculty of Thessaloniki, who has been working for an Orthodox participation in ecumenical missiological discussions.

I am convinced that, no matter how long one stays on the mission field, he/she needs a special ability to get to know the field really well. He/she needs a deep sense of “todayness”. By this neologism (a deep sense of “todayness”⁴) I mean real knowledge of what composes real life in a certain place right now.

Students of theology in Greece, for example, do not have the chance to be educated on the history and the traditional structure of African societies (they do not know about tribalism, about the philosophy of polygamy, about African anthropology, etc). So, when they happen to find themselves (for various reasons) in Africa, they are unprepared (and sometimes unwilling) to get in touch with the real Other. Instead, they reproduce naïve exotic generalizations and outdated images vaguely spread in Greece.

This is a serious shortcoming. But we must also pay attention to the following delicate issue, no matter how paradoxical it may sound. This valuable knowledge (of the traditional features of African or Asian culture) is necessary, but is not sufficient in and of itself; the missionary must also have access to “todayness”! Emphasis on traditional culture alone may hinder the missionary from realizing what constitutes real life in a particular place today, such as, for example: the osmosis and exchanges between the traditional and the modern; the transformation of traditional cultures; the impact of parliamentarism on highly hierarchical societies; the fact that today Africa is not a heathen continent, but largely a Christian one⁵. In my opinion, this is a crucial issue, rooted in the Church’s ethos, to encounter concrete human beings in their

⁴ See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "Diakonen eines Gottes-Missionars: Eine orthodoxe Betrachtung der Mission und der 'Heutigkeit'", *Una Sancta* 65.3 (2010), pp. 190-199.

⁵ See *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910-2010* (Todd M. Johnson - Kenneth R. Ross, eds.), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2009, pp. 110-133.

“todayness” – and not abstract images and ahistorical phantoms of human beings.

If this readiness for the sense of “todayness” is lacking, then even long term stay in the mission country does not help. The missionary may well remain enclosed in an imaginative or perhaps golden cage in the midst of the mission country, untouched by the real reality of the country. In that case, what comes true is the saying “They See Everything, and Understand Nothing”⁶.

All of this is related to intercultural missionary work. Here one more question may be raised—a basic question, yet a very important one: What is the definition of mission? Is mission just a movement from the developed countries to those in the Third World? How valid is a world picture in which Christian nations are sending missionaries to non-Christian ones? In ecumenical circles, this model has been heavily criticized since as early as the 1960s, and quite rightly. The motto of the 1963 world conference in Mexico City, “Mission in six continents” (that is, the enlargement of mission so as it encompasses every continent and not only those of the south) is especially vivid today. In our days, the West is no longer Christendom. All western societies are a contradictory mixture of pre-modern, modern and postmodern realities. European congregations are on the decline, while the demographical center of Christianity has already moved outside the western world, to the south. So, what is the land of mission *par excellence* today? Nairobi, or... London? Or both?

The discussions on topics related to these developments are innumerable worldwide, and sometimes contribute to transformations of religious identities and theologies. However many Orthodox cannot discern these transformations and they think of western theology as one solid and undivided entity. But

⁶ Taken from Robert J. Priest & Joseph Paul Priest, “They See Everything, and Understand Nothing”; “Short-term mission and service learning”, *Missiology* 36.1 (2008), pp. 53-73.

this is not the real situation. We are not living in the 15th century; many western theological trends have questioned western absolutes and are decidedly oriented to an ecumenical theology. For example, the western theologians who welcomed the Orthodox emphasis on the Holy Spirit have questioned (among others) the *Filioque* and have proceeded to a new understanding of missionary work among people of other faiths⁷. Orthodox do have many theological potentials at their disposal⁸, but we have to keep it in mind and work on it all the time. Ankylosis and narcissism are constantly at work.

2 The Construction of a really local Church

I do not intend to repeat the fundamentals of Orthodox ecclesiology here, or to underline the wonderful dimensions of Eucharistic theology. I honestly believe that all these are self-evident and basic presuppositions for all of us. Yet, their theoretical repetition without any critical approach to the *actual situation* produces a false picture and conceals the real problems.

An important criticism to the paternalistic, colonizing western mission (a criticism which sprang from the guts of the western world more than one century ago) speaks about the need for “the Three Selves”, which means that a really local church cannot be a branch, an annex or a subdivision of another

⁷ Cf. Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, ““If I cross the boundaries, you are there! An affirmation of God's action outside the canonical boundaries of the Church”, *Communio Viatorum* 53.3 (2011), pp. 40-55.

⁸ See Petros Vassiliadis (ed.), *Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, Regnum Books, Oxford 2013. Also Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, *Future, the Background of History; Essays on Church Mission in an Age of Globalization*, Alexander Press, Montreal 2005, pp. 98-117 (“Between the devil of imperialism and the deep blue sea of marketing”).

church, but has to be self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating / self-theologizing⁹.

I believe that our attitude to these axioms, on the basis of Orthodox criteria, may reveal our perspectives and will show whether a missionary work (even the brightest one) has acquired real roots and has real future.

Are the so-called missionary churches able to financially support themselves on a permanent basis? I am referring to the operating expenses; not to cases of emergency, disasters, etc. I certainly believe that support from outside is necessary in the first missionary stages, while solidarity between the churches has to be a perennial event. But what is the meaning of missions that lack even a loose vision of the community's financial independence? What are the ecclesiological implications (as well as the implications for the psychology and mentality of the ordinary believers) of the concepts of a church/consumer on the one hand, and of a church/narcissistic benefactor on the other?¹⁰

As far as self-theologizing is concerned, meaning the articulation of the ecumenical Orthodox theology in local ways¹¹:

Is there any Orthodox bibliography on applied Orthodox contextualization (a term better than inculturation)? For example, can I find articles presenting certain examples of African Orthodox art (far away from mere import of Byzantine

⁹ John Mark Terry, "Indigenous Churches", *Evangelical Dictionary of Missions* (ed. A. Scott Moreau), Baker Books, Grand Rapids 2000, p. 484. Here I cannot enter the heated debate about the validity of the Three Selves approach. I am bringing it to the fore now only as a tool serving our current discussion.

¹⁰ See, for example, Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2006.

¹¹ See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "Journey to the Center of Gravity; Christian Mission One Century after Edinburgh 1910", in: Todd M. Johnson, Rodney L. Petersen, Gina A. Bellofatto, Travis L. Myers (eds.), *2010 Boston: The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity* Pickwick Publications, Oregon 2012, pp. 67-83.

icons) or Asian Orthodox theology (not only translations of prominent Greek and Russian theologians)? And, can we hear any voice coming from African and Asiatic churches in the agenda of the Great Panorthodox Synod, which has been planned for 2016? It is true that several efforts are being made for all these. But my questions want to emphasize the fact that these efforts are scarce, unnoticed and helpless.

All these are my proposals for discussion. And let me conclude with these thoughts:

Mission is the work of the First Missionary, Christ, and the Church is the deacon of his mission. The faith of the Church is addressed to Him, not to her own schedules. And, the Church is not the Kingdom. She is the sign and foretaste of the Kingdom; which means that the basic characteristic of missionaries is their functioning as Forerunners – as “*prodrómoi*”. “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). I believe that this should be the watchword of the missionaries, not only in relation to Christ himself, but also in relation to their successors. Excuse my recalling a harsh expression (which nevertheless is absolutely in accordance with the aforementioned biblical perspective and the virtue of humbleness): “*Euthanasia of the Missionaries*”¹², meaning not the end of mission (mission is the heart of the church), but the voluntary lowering of our personal magnificence to the benefit of the flowering of the Church in the open future and God’s open horizons.

¹² John Mark Terry, *op.cit.*