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New Wine into Old Wineskins? Orthodox Theology of Mission Facing the Challenges of a Global World

Summary

Orthodox theology of mission, along with the wider renewal of Orthodox theology which took place during the 20th century, first in the diaspora, and then to many Orthodox countries, has provided a significant contribution to the global Christian community, and the ecumenical theology regarding issues of missiological interest.

First achievement of the Orthodox missionary theology is the foundation of mission in Trinitarian theology, the understanding of mission not as aiming primarily at the propagation or transmission of intellectual convictions but at the transmission of the very life of personal communion that exists in God. Secondly, comes the theological reflection on the charismatic boundaries of the church, seen from either a Pneumatological or soteriological perspective, exceed its canonical limits, embracing people from inter-faith or inter-religious areas.

The mission as diakonia and “liturgy after liturgy,” is another significant aspect of Orthodox missionary theology, relating the Eucharistic gathering to the social praxis, the liturgical life with the poor and the marginalized, expending therefore the liturgical ethos of sharing in everyday life. Closely related to the idea of “liturgy after the liturgy” is also the notion of “liturgy before Liturgy”, as a presupposition for a genuine Eucharistic gathering and as a way to overcome discrimination against people by virtue of caste, race or gender.

Furthermore, the overcoming of both mission as a universal proselytism, and its aggressive practices, and the understanding of mission in terms of a common Christian witness, and interfaith dialogue, is considered as another major contribution of missionary theology. In addition, 20th century Orthodox mission had the significant advantage in most of the cases of being dissociated from colonialist attempts and expansive political projects. At the top of the missionary initiatives is the remarkable medical, social and philanthropic activity of Orthodox missionary centers and their important contribution to the economic development. Meanwhile, missionary activity offers the chance to women to move outside home, taking on roles or vocations within the church, parallel to those of traditional wife and mother.

Despite these positive presuppositions, Orthodox mission did not progress during the 20th century, while nowadays is facing difficulties and challenges to which is not always ready to respond in a proper way. Orthodoxy has not seriously taken

into account the serious demographic shift, created by the massive movement of Christianity from the North to the Global South. Orthodoxy is not aware of the radical changes, about to shape the map of the World Christianity in years to come. Apart from some little, but very dynamic Orthodox missionary communities mainly in Africa and Asia, there is a very thin Orthodox presence in these regions. Orthodoxy is almost absent from this religious cosmogony and seems unable to play any role in the emergence and shaping of this non-Western Christianity.

Orthodoxy turns out to be so closely identified with Byzantium that is eventually able to follow only the Byzantine model in every domain and aspect of church life (theology, liturgy, preaching, church design, iconography, singing, etc.). But this precise model is not necessarily the one which fits with the expectations of the people of the Global South, who have a completely different historical background, and cultural context. Historical Orthodoxy seems thus to be trapped in Byzantium, and to this regard the greatest challenge for Orthodoxy today is to overcome this historical and cultural fixation, and discern its mission to today's world, without the continuous reference to this historical period of the church.

A re-ordering of priorities is then necessary vis-à-vis the theological and cultural criteria, a new balance between the local and the universal, the particular and the catholic. On the other hand, in the case of the mission countries of the Global South, what is absolutely vital for Orthodoxy is the incorporation and integration in each particular culture (inculturation), in other words not only the translation of our biblical and liturgical texts in the local languages, but also the "translation" of the whole ecclesial tradition in the local cultures, i.e. the "translation" in the local cultures of our profound Christology and the incarnational theology, of our Trinitarian theology and its sense of the person and personal communion, of our rich and beautiful liturgical tradition.

Likewise, Orthodoxy has to be freed from another fixation: the almost exclusive recourse to the ontological language practiced by Orthodox theologians, clerics, and some missionaries in their theology and preaching, even when they come to the Global South, where most of the peoples and languages do not even have, use, or know the verb "being." It appears that Orthodoxy as a whole, Greek-speaking and not Greek-speaking, cannot depart from its strong connection with the Hellenistic world. It is not yet able to understand and to accept that we are not any more leaving in a Hellenic world, and that Ontology is not the dominant philosophical language of our time, that ontological philosophy is not any more the only, or the main vector of the relationship between church and the world. Without refusing or neglecting the major achievements that came out from the encounter between Christianity and Hellenism, Orthodoxy has to recover and rediscover its biblical foundations, and its narrative and non-philosophical treasures.

It is clear that we cannot address today's Global challenges when as Orthodox we are constantly and persistently refusing the reality of globalization, a fact implying a lack of awareness regarding the world in which we are living today. There is a predominant anti-globalization discourse in many Orthodox settings. Whenever the ecclesiastical discourse speaks against globalization or calls for resistance, it does not

invoke theological arguments or criteria but cultural and national ones, arguments about the defense of national independence, about language and identity being in danger. However, it neglects to point out the negative financial and social consequences of globalization for the poor and the marginalized.

Orthodoxy is therefore mainly identified with spirituality, accepting for itself to be relegated to the realm of mysticism and the exotic or mystical version of Christianity, thus self-resigning from a catholic, holistic, and inclusive vision of the world and its salvation. What is at stake is not a separation or dissociation of spirituality from revolution, or Eucharist from liberation, but on the contrary the connection of Eucharist and liberation, and the relation of revolution with spiritual meaning.

In conclusion, after mission has been associated with pietistic and activist religious fellowships such as “Zoe,” and consequently been undervalued as Western-influenced by many of the theologians of the “return to the Fathers” movement, we recently began to realize the problematic legacy of the previous theological generation, by finally accepting what was self-evident, i.e. that mission is no less constitutive of the church than the Eucharist, and that mission is the implementation and continuation of Christ’s command in history, to “go ... and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).