

## GOSPEL AND CULTURE: AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

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*Gospel, culture, orthodox perspective, pluralistic societies, interreligious dialogue*

The discussions about the relationship between the gospel and culture did not emerge from the experience of the Orthodox Christians, but have their starting point in Western Christian culture, as did the controversy over the relationship between grace and nature or between Scripture and Tradition. The issues on the relationship between the Gospel and culture is, in the end, a fruit of the Western missionary movement in territories such as Africa, Asia or Latin America. In their approach, the missionaries considered their religion and culture to be superior to other religions and cultures, thus mistaking Christianity with various forms of the Western culture. Not few were the times when this has led to rejection actions of the Christian faith by those among whom the Good News was preached, as a result of the fact that it was assimilated with a foreign culture by its own tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Orthodox Churches, not having missionary actions like the Western ones, had no dilemma of the relationship between the Gospel and culture. The only issue, however, that raises questions and quite hot debates, is around the diaspora, a kind of reality present in most Orthodox countries. Another issue is that many of the Orthodox Churches are assimilated to a certain type of traditional culture in the midst of which they emerged and developed. Thus, topics related to “ethnocentrism” and “nationalism” were debated. During these discussions, culture has become a kind of “mother” that comprises and protects all elements of people’s lives. The issue of encountering a “global or globalizing culture” that wants to become universal is also something that Orthodox Churches have to face, although its traces show it as having local roots. Globalizing culture is more about political and economic power than about true cultural realities.<sup>3</sup>

Gospel and culture should not be perceived as static realities. The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is not a simple text, but it is the life of the

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<sup>2</sup> Fr. Dr. K.M. GEORGE KONDOTHRÀ, “Gospel and Culture – An Oriental Orthodox Perspective”, in: *Orthodoxy and Cultures. Inter-Orthodox Consultation on Gospel and Cultures, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 19-27 January 1996*, Edited by Ioan Sauca, WCC Geneva, 1996, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> IBIDEM, p. 31.

Incarnate Son of God Who died and rose for our salvation. It is the reality between Alpha and Omega as a gift of God, the experience of salvation through the death and Resurrection of our Lord Christ. Starting from this aspect, one should differentiate between the experience of salvation in Christ and its spread using various cultural means. There are issues when this experience is seen as being exclusively of Greek or Roman, Syriac or Coptic origin, etc. No particular culture can comprehend the whole mystery of salvation. The distinction between the experience of Christ in a particular culture and its spread to the ends of the earth must be held to. Only by sharing the experience of a particular culture with those specific to other cultures will it be possible to overcome exclusivity, arrogance and any form of aggression of a spiritual nature but not only. The encounter with a new culture offers Christians the opportunity to confess their faith in compliance with the new aspects, as a unique expression of the faith through which the whole Church is enriched. This process is not about relativism, but also, about the dynamism of the faith understood as a lived tradition. The faith of the Church, by its dynamic and saving nature, is a kind of living reality that creates the identity of human communities in any historical life circumstance. If faith is seen as a static and enclosed expression of the divine overflow, then no dialogue between the Gospel and culture is possible.

Over the years, different examples of the way in which the Gospel and culture interacted were illustrated: from the disapproval of the different cultures of the peoples of the world where the Good News was preached (a fact specific to the nineteenth century), through the colonial era and by liberating peoples ages (events that were also notable from a cultural point of view), to the attempt to understand and accept other cultures and their role in preaching the Gospel. These situations were analyzed during several missionary conferences attended by Christians of different traditions.

Although the issue of the relationship between the Gospel and culture has been raised since the beginning of the nineteenth century within the World Council of Churches (WCC) the concern to deal with this issue and find a solution is relatively of a recent date. The matter was raised during the Sixth Assembly of the WCC, Vancouver (1983) and it became a very serious one during the Seventh Assembly, Canberra (1991) in the context of the essay presented by professor of theology at Ewha Women's University in Seoul, South Korea, Chung Hyun-Kyung, which gave birth to a great number of hot debates.

In the introduction of her speech, Chung Hyun Kyung assimilated The Holy Spirit with the spirit of Hagar, with the spirit of Uriah, with the spirit of Jephthah's daughter, with the spirit of male babies killed by the soldiers of king Herod upon Jesus' birth, with the spirit of Joan of Arc, with the spirit of the people who dies during the crusades, with the spirit of

indigenous people of the earth, victims of genocide during the time of colonialism and the period of the great Christian mission to the pagan world, with the spirit of Jewish people killed in the gas chambers during the holocaust, with the spirit of people killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs, with the spirit of Korean women in the Japanese “prostitution army” during the Second World War, used and torn by violence-hungry soldiers, with the spirit of Vietnamese people killed by napalm, Agent Orange, or hunger on the drifting boats, with the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, Steve Biko, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Victor Jara, Oscar Romero and many unnamed women freedom fighters who died in the struggle of liberation of their people, with the spirit of people killed in Bhopal and Chernobyl, and the spirit of jelly babies from the Pacific nuclear test zone, with the spirit of people smashed by tanks in Kwangju, Tiananmen Square and Lithuania, with the spirit of Amazon rain forest now being murdered every day, with the spirit of earth, air and water, raped, tortured and exploited by human greed for money, with the spirit of soldiers, civilians and sea creatures now dying in the bloody war in the Gulf, with the spirit of the Liberator, our brother Jesus, tortured and killed on the cross. Finally, Chung Hyun Kyung stated that her country, Korea, is the land of spirits full of *Han*, thus drawing a parallel and, at the same time, an assimilation between the Holy Spirit and the different traditional spirits.<sup>4</sup>

These statements aroused the dissatisfaction of the representatives of different Christian traditions present at Assembly from Canberra, among which the Orthodox were the most vocal. The Orthodox understood the Korean representative’s paper as a giving up to the Christian teaching and a dangerous form of religious syncretism. In the answer that the representatives of the Orthodox Churches offered it is clearly mentioned the fact that “the Orthodox follow with interest, but also with a certain disquiet, the developments of the WCC towards the broadening of its aims in the direction of *relations with other religions*. The Orthodox support dialogue initiatives, particularly those aiming at the promotion of relations of openness, mutual respect and human cooperation with neighbours of other faiths. When dialogue takes place, Christians are called to bear witness to the integrity of their faith. A genuine dialogue involves greater theological efforts to express the Christian message in ways that speak to the various cultures of our world. All this, however, must occur on the basis of theological criteria which will define the limits of diversity. The biblical faith in God must not be changed. The definition of these criteria is a matter of theological study, and must constitute the first priority of the WCC in view

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<sup>4</sup> CHUNG HYUN KYUNG, “Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation”, in: *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Edited by Michael Kinamon and Brian E. Cope, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1997, pp. 231-237.

of its desired broadening of aims. Thus, it is with alarm that the Orthodox have heard some presentations on the theme of this assembly. With reference to the theme of the assembly, the Orthodox still await the final texts. However, they observe that some people tend to affirm with very great ease the presence of the Holy Spirit in many movements and developments without discernment. The Orthodox wish to stress the factor of sin and error which exists in every human action, and separate the Holy Spirit from these. We must guard against a tendency to *substitute a «private» spirit, the spirit of the world or other spirits for the Holy Spirit* who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son. Our tradition is rich in respect for local and national cultures, but we find it impossible to invoke the spirits of «earth, air, water and sea creatures». Pneumatology is inseparable from Christology or from the doctrine of the Holy Trinity confessed by the church on the basis of divine revelation”.<sup>5</sup>

After the meeting in Canberra another meeting was held in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil (1996), under the topic *Called to one hope: The Gospel in diverse cultures*. The training lasted several years, preceded by local consultations of working groups from all over the world. Following these meetings 18 monographs were written dealing with the subject of the interaction between the Gospel and culture in particular contexts, works that were used as tools of analysis for the meeting in Brazil. The monographs approached some essential topics: “authentic witness within each culture; gospel and identity in community; local congregations in pluralistic societies; and one Gospel – diverse expressions”.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, during the meeting in Salvador outlined ideas were debated and put into practice over the time: the Gospel was preached taking into account certain human cultural ways; the Gospel met the cultures of the peoples among which it was preached; there is a dynamism between the Gospel and culture based on the conversation and understanding of the culture specific to each territory; the Gospel enlightens and transforms culture, so that any culture is refreshed by the Gospel, which can be preached everywhere without a particular culture be privileged.

In order to set common ground on the relationship between the Gospel and culture that was to be discussed in Brazil, the representatives of the Orthodox Churches met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (1996), the proceedings of this event being published by the end of the same year. In

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<sup>5</sup> “Orthodox Reflections, WCC Assembly, Canberra, 1991”, in: *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>6</sup> GEORGE R. HUNSBERGER, “Gospel and Culture”, in: *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Second Edition, Edited by Nicholas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, John Pobee, Tom F. Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, Pauline Webb, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2002, p. 496.

the *Introduction* of the volume that brought together all Orthodox contributions the idea from which one should start analyzing this subject was emphasized: “The issue of the encounter between the Gospel and the diverse cultures is as old as Christianity itself. For the Orthodox Church in particular, it has been an integral part of the historical development of her theology, liturgy, missionary activity and of her ethos”.<sup>7</sup> Since the very day of Pentecost, the Good News has been preached in different languages and to different nations, thus getting to be rooted in different cultures. During the meeting between the Gospel and different world pagan cultures, the latter were transformed by the Christian message. The same message came to life and was lived in a variety of cultures and liturgical expressions. This is how the genius of the Church Fathers emerged, those who knew how to create a harmonious relationship between the Gospel and different cultures of the world using the languages of the peoples in order to be more easily grasped. The process by which the Gospel and the cultures of the world met was not without difficulties, both for the Eastern and Western Christianity. These issues were debated during the Ecumenical Councils when the Church Fathers highlighted the cultures among which the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ was preached.

Over the time, Orthodoxy has been the safeguard of national and cultural values as well as of personal identity. Recently, at the same time with the conversion of many people to Orthodoxy in territories such as Africa and America, but also in the context of globalization and religious pluralism, the relationship between the Gospel and culture must be re-discussed and reinterpreted, without separating it from the Holy Tradition of the Church.

In the *Final Report* of the meeting in Addis Ababa the idea according to which there was no particular assimilation between Christianity and a certain culture was greatly highlighted. Nowadays, some Orthodox believers express appreciation towards the achievements in the cultural field, reinforcing the idea that Orthodox Tradition can provide a creative answer to the plurality of human creation and different religious traditions.<sup>8</sup>

The spread of the Gospel took place in the midst of Semitic culture in the beginning, within certain space and time. This was followed by the spread of Christian teaching within the pagan world, in Greek, Latin, and other languages quite soon after the event of Pentecost. The moment of the Descent of the Holy Spirit remains the main starting point in setting the relationship between the Gospel and culture, as a divine response to the

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<sup>7</sup> Fr. Dr. IOAN SAUCA, “Introduction”, in: *Orthodoxy and Cultures. Inter-Orthodox Consultation on Gospel and Cultures, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 19-27 January 1996*, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> “Final Report”, in: *Orthodoxy and Cultures. Inter-Orthodox Consultation on Gospel and Cultures, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 19-27 January 1996*, p. 179.

Tower of Babel, when the tongues were mixed. During the new event of Pentecost, the tongues of the world are to be seen as a gift of the Holy Spirit, who unites all in the mystical Body of the Lord, the Church. Thus, the true faith was illustrated by the Church Fathers as “Catholic”, meaning “everywhere”, a truth witnessed by every local Eucharistic community. The same apostolic faith can get embodied in different cultural contexts and can be sensitive to the contextual needs in which it is preached. In this sense, the Orthodox Tradition has given a special significance to the historical continuity of the local Churches in which the apostolic faith and the Eucharist are visibly witnessed.<sup>9</sup> There are different and complex outcomes of these realities, which vary according to the contexts in which the true faith is lived, which is not only a depository of the past, but also a gift of God as a perfection of His Kingdom. Thus, no human context is outer to the overflow of the Kingdom of God.

The unity of all in Christ transcends any historical division, not to be confused with uniformity, for the gifts shared by the Holy Spirit are countless. There is an interdependence and interconnection between the members of the Church, the mystical Body of the Lord. Duties in the Church are of equal importance, so that the laity participate together with the clergy in ecclesial life. The questions raised nowadays find their answer in the Gospel and in the Tradition of the Fathers, thus preserving the authenticity of the saving presence.<sup>10</sup>

For some peoples the Gospel has become the life core; cultural activity was influenced by the Christian faith. The Gospel inspired and guided people’s creativity in the creation of culturally remarkable works. At the same time, monastic life developed by enriching the cultural heritage with special spiritual literature. Inculturation was thus one of the greatest contributions that the Orthodox Tradition has made to the culture and civilization of the whole world. This did not mean that a certain nation embodied the Kingdom of God in its entirety, for as long as man lives historically, he is subject to sin that often takes the form of social injustices. Any attempt to assimilate the Gospel to a particular culture and civilization is only a distortion of the true meaning of cultural pluralism, of tolerance and mutual respect, of unity in diversity, which is the Love of God. Wherever injustices and conflicts arise, the Church must follow a path of peace, acknowledging life holiness as a gift of God, without rejecting other lives, but opening a dialogue, for mutual enrichment and growth in the love of the Creator.<sup>11</sup>

Nowadays, the Gospel is preached within a multicultural and often

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<sup>9</sup> IBIDEM, p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> IBIDEM, p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> IBIDEM, p. 186.

conflicting world. Given these current contexts, cultures tend to be treated equally, each bringing their own contribution to human progress. Every culture has the potential to receive and illustrate the perfection of God, the One who is communicated in local communities, being the One and Only for the whole world. Local churches need to be connected to each other and reflect on the fact that the Holy Spirit has been sent to the whole world through apostolic preaching. Gospel teaching must be received, understood, and shared to all people, so that expression diversity in different cultures represents a necessity in conveying the same message.<sup>12</sup>

The Gospel is based on inculturation; it is preached and illustrated in real situations and times, that is, within a particular cultural context. Any context can be turned into an extraordinary energy that will support man on the path to salvation by the Gospel. This is the reason why a multitude of forms and expressions are needed in the process of preaching and confessing the eternal Christ. The Gospel presupposes inculturation, being proclaimed and manifesting itself in concrete situations and periods, in a certain cultural context. “In order for the Gospel to be lived in all its universality – in every place and at every time – all peoples in all regions of the world need to reexamine it carefully, experience it in the context of their own cultures, and give it expression with their own voice and their own soul. Every nation is called upon to use its own particular tone and phrasing in the effort to know the Gospel. It is incumbent upon every local church to contribute the positive values of its own particular culture and to further develop them, consistent with its own national, linguistic, and tribal character. Furthermore, in order to purify itself, every local church should critically examine all those cultural elements that are antithetical to the dignity and the destiny of the human race, as revealed to us in the Gospel. Simultaneously, and without destroying its local identity, every church should further develop its catholicity by experiencing tradition, unity, and communion in an organic way with the «one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church», the Church of the past, the present, and the future”.<sup>13</sup> Each and every people and culture’s peculiarity does not hinder unity between peoples or cultural unity. “Through the power of the Gospel, culture realizes all human potential and thus becomes the process through which the entire world is transformed. This vision of continuous expansion is intensified by our anticipation of the ultimate end”.<sup>14</sup> In the Divine Eucharist all are mystically united in Christ, forming a community in the love of persons.

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<sup>12</sup> IBIDEM, p. 183.

<sup>13</sup> Archbishop ANASTASIOS YANNOULATOS, *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, Translation by Pavlos Gottfried, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2003, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> IBIDEM, p. 96.

In the process of preaching the Gospel, Orthodox Christians must take into account the complex changes that have taken place throughout the world lately. “One of the greatest problems the Orthodox churches face in the modern world is understanding what it means to be the Church of God in a pluralistic society. That is to say, one the churches affirm that the Church exists not only for its members but for the salvation of all, how does the Orthodox Church exercise its transformative role in a world where different religious, racial, ethnic and cultural communities demand public recognition?”.<sup>15</sup> If one analyzes the way modernity is viewed in different religious traditions, one can see a diversity of approaches ranging from its acceptance without restraint to the denial of its importance to people, manifested in the denial of acceptance of diversity in all respects. Under these conditions, dialogue remains the only chance to make yourself known to your fellow and to try to get to know him as well as possible. “The recognition that another person, despite his or her difference, is a genuine human person or that the life of a community is an expression of a particular culture implies, furthermore, that we recognize in the other some shared elements of common humanity or culture”.<sup>16</sup>

In the multicultural and multireligious context in which we live, Christianity is viewed with hostility in non-Christian lived territories, in democratic countries it occupies the same place as other religions, in the Orthodox tradition countries, which begin to lose this quality, there is a nostalgia for the old times, and in territories such as Asia and Africa the preaching environment often proves unfamiliar. “In all these contexts, the Church is challenged to understand theologially how particular situations of life and witness affect the Christian understanding, application and transformative proclamation of the Gospel”.<sup>17</sup> Under these circumstances, Orthodox must take into account the relationship between the Gospel and the culture specific to each territory where the Good News is preached. “In the first instance, efforts may be made to identify those elements of the culture which are compatible with Orthodoxy, upon which the Christian community can build a relationship of co-existence and co-operation with the «other», or perhaps the local church may become private and introverted, practising its faith quietly and appreciating the fact that it has the freedom to do even that. In societies where all cultural communities and religious groups are free to

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<sup>15</sup> EMMANUEL CLAPSIS, *Orthodoxy in Conversation. Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements*, WCC Publications, Geneva, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2000, p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> IBIDEM, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> IDEM, “Gospel and Cultures – an Eastern Orthodox Perspective”, in: *Orthodoxy and Cultures. Inter-Orthodox Consultation on Gospel and Cultures, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 19-27 January 1996*, p. 6.

peacefully coexist with the «other», Orthodoxy may criticize the relativization of truth that such a societal structure seems to espouse, but must ultimately recognize that a state with this type of structure provides the freedom which is necessary for the Church and other religious and ideological communities to exist and practice their beliefs”.<sup>18</sup> The situation differs in the territories where the culture of orthodox origin faces modernity and religious pluralism changes, thus becoming nostalgic when compared to the old times.

Taking into account these specific aspects of each geographical, cultural and religious area, “the relation of the Gospel to the diverse cultures of the world is not only a question that the modern missionary movement has raised for all Christian churches; it is also a significant pastoral issue that the Orthodox Churches must carefully study as they encounter challenging new cultural situations that need the healing and transforming grace of God’s Gospel”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the preaching of the teaching of our Savior Jesus Christ to the non-Christian world must take into account several elements: Christians, in relation to followers of other religions, must prove peace and forgiveness feelings; they must also take into consideration the fact that in other religions there are traces of the gifts with which God has blessed all men; this endeavor must start from the kenosis of the Son of God and from His words in the Holy Scriptures, as well as from the writings of the Church Fathers.

In the process of observing the relationship between the Gospel and culture in the Orthodox tradition, an important role is played by the *Prologue* to John’s Gospel. If *Genesis* starts with the creation of the world,<sup>20</sup> the *Prologue* to John’s Gospel, which sets the Word in the beginning.<sup>21</sup> This is of a major significance by the fact that the Son of God is not the Savior of an individual soul or a creator of ethical or philosophical doctrine, but He is the Savior of all creation. Thus, the Christian Church is not called to save human individuals, but the whole world. “So, the Word of God, as Logos, is not only spoken by the Christian. The Christian mission is a mission of renewal of creation, precisely because the same Logos was the Creator in the beginning and now comes again into the world, as its Saviour, and because, for God, speaking and acting is the same thing”.<sup>22</sup> This approach should start from two essential ideas: God is different from creation, He is transcendent; at the same time, God is present into creation. It is about the distinction

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<sup>18</sup> IBIDEM, pp. 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> IBIDEM, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1, 1).

<sup>21</sup> “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1, 1).

<sup>22</sup> JOHN MEYENDORFF, “Christ as Word: Gospel and Culture”, in: *International Review of Mission*, 74 (1985), p. 250.

between transcendence and immanence to which Christian theology must make reference.

Starting from the reality of the Incarnation of the Son of God for us humans and for our salvation, it means that there is no conflict between Godhead and humanity. God is not only in heaven, but also on earth. The death of God on the cross is not a simple event, but a transcendence of secularism, the event of death turns into a sacramental act. By getting Incarnate, the divine Logos has offered us the power to overcome secular events, and even if they still exist, we have the power from God to change them. The theology of God's Incarnation so that man become "god by grace" bears important significance for the relationship between the Gospel and culture, between the preaching of the Good News and its receiving by all nations of the earth. Christians bear responsibility for all people, seen not only as spiritual matters responsibility, but for all man's life. Christians do not believe that there is anything in God's creation that is not spiritual or spiritualized. God is the Creator of all Universe and nothing can be considered as secular. Nothing in the "old creation" can be left out of the "new one".<sup>23</sup>

This does not mean, however, that there is any cultural form that can cover the complete mystery of the Incarnation. Today's secularized cultures, which have left out the presence of *logoi* from creation, focusing on complete autonomy, are realities of modern times. The age in we live in is similar to the Greco-Roman period when the Church Fathers faced the realities of the pagan world. "Of course, our task is much more difficult, because the world we face is a *post-Christian* world: it pretends to know the Christian norms and to reject them deliberately. Christianity has tragically lost its novelty: it smells a reactionary past. A simple return to ancient liturgy, to ancient art, to ancient music is therefore both insufficient in itself and may lead to further compromising the ever-new, creative nature of the Christian faith".<sup>24</sup> At the same time, a simple return to the past can often be more useful than creating new adaptive forms to the present. The new realities which we live cannot be received in an uncritical way, but they must be adjusted to the content of the Christian Gospel in order to illustrate the Christian message in a way that takes into account the Holy Tradition of the Church. "So, authentic Christian creativity requires this effort of selection, of discernment, as well as boldness in accepting new things".<sup>25</sup> In spreading the Gospel to people living in territories with different cultural realities, the Christian nowadays must be both traditional and creative, both faithful and critical. Christian tradition preserves the past because it is the only way to

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<sup>23</sup> IBIDEM, p. 256.

<sup>24</sup> IBIDEM.

<sup>25</sup> IBIDEM.

meet the future and prepare for it.

Thus, an essential feature of Orthodoxy is that when the Gospel faces new life situations in the various territories where it is preached, in the light of the challenges it faces, an appeal to the rich Tradition of the Church is submitted. Everything is carried out with care and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Who keeps the Church true and united. Since the Holy Tradition of the Church is a gift of the Holy Spirit, Orthodox theologians must pay close attention to evangelical teaching before dealing with the new life situations. They must have as example the Apostolic Church, who has extended her mission to the Gentiles by preaching the Gospel in images and symbols so that those who were to join the Church could understand. This was the apologists' "spirit of dialogue" further carried on by the other Fathers of the Church throughout the centuries, reaching an inculturation of the Gospel in different geographical territories. It was also an overcoming of a static conception, keeping at the same time the connection with the past. The Holy Tradition has always been a way of protecting Scripture against "another gospel", so that Orthodox cannot accept a simple exegetical analysis of Tradition. Culture cannot be seen as "another gospel" or "creed", it must be "converted and baptized" in order to live the Gospel. "Contextual theology (which cannot be taken as «opinion polls») has to handle the gospel and culture syntax, pairing them in a sacramental way, not in a syncretistic pattern".<sup>26</sup> Under these circumstances, Orthodox must analyze the relationship between the Gospel, Tradition and culture.

In the misrepresentation of the relationship between the Gospel and culture, an important aspect was that of the misuse and misunderstanding of the word "tradition". "The Tradition convers a two-fold process; integrity to the apostolic faith and the cultural context of that faith, i.e., its reception by a human community converted to Christ, including personal faith and cultural manifestation. But in many cases this double dimension is missed".<sup>27</sup> Finally, in sorting out the relationship between the Gospel and culture, one must start from the idea that, for the Orthodox, this typology means adjusting realities in a sacramental way.

There have been and still are voices among Orthodox theologians who idealize the period when the encounter between Christianity and Hellenism took place. This goes even further and emphasizes the idea that, starting from this, the Church can only preach the Good News using the terms of this meeting. Father Georges Florovsky argued, starting from the idea of the "Christian Hellenism", that this encounter bears compulsory and eternal value since it is a part of both Theology and of the Church. Contrary

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<sup>26</sup> ION BRIA, "A New Typology for Gospel and Culture Syntax: from an Eastern European Orthodox Perspective", in: *International Review of Mission*, 84, 334, 1995, p. 274.

<sup>27</sup> IBIDEM, pp. 277-278.

to these ideas, commenting on the event of Pentecost, Archbishop Demetrios of America stated that the Good News found its expression in a great number of languages. “Anyone who recognizes the intimate link of language to culture must also recognize the bold statement that Pentecost makes: the truth of Christ can be embodied in more than one or two cultural-linguistic systems. The work of the Church is not to construct a single universal culture; instead, the kingdom of God created by the one Holy Spirit contains many languages, many cultures”.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, one cannot say that during the current preaching work of the Church those who want to embrace the message of the Gospel must know the whole ancient Greek culture.

From a different point of view, the transition of neophytes to baptism through Judaism was rejected during the Apostolic Synod in 50, so that the adoption of a certain culture by those called to Christianity is out of question. The decision made during the Synod in Jerusalem soon after the meeting with those of other creeds and religions led to the opening of the Church to “others”<sup>29</sup> by extending the Christian mission to the nations of the earth. The supreme revelation was offered to us by the Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, transmitted and preserved by the care of the Holy Spirit. Understanding revelation is still an ongoing process throughout history. Any new encounter between the Gospel and culture gives birth to new chances for both of them. “This requires that while we must be faithful to the Christian story and vision we must be open to the possibility that every «other» culture provides a new and vital understanding of the Christian faith that ultimately enriches the catholicity of the Church”.<sup>30</sup>

The Gospel must be preached in a living and always new way. This is what is called the “inculturation phenomenon” that grows during the ministry. Under these circumstances, “we can ask the following question: how much more «anti-religious» criticism and modernity claims would be inconsistent with the core of the evangelical truth and the Church’s self-consciousness than the categories of ancient Greek thought adopted by Christian theology? Why the concepts and categories of Greek philosophy, such as those mentioned before and which basically were foreign and even opposite to the self-consciousness of the Church, could become a part (*σάρκα, flesh*) of theology, but the same thing could not happen also with present times’ various challenges and priorities (*πρόταγμα*), whether it is the

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<sup>28</sup> DEMETRIOS, Archbishop of America, “The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World. An Ecumenical Conversation”, in: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World. An Ecumenical Conversation*, Edited by Emmanuel Clapsis, WCC Publications, Geneva. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2004, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 15, 28-29.

<sup>30</sup> Fr. Dr. EMMANUEL CLAPSIS, “Gospel and Cultures – an Eastern Orthodox Perspective”, p. 21.

self-conscious man and the emergence of the subject, or human rights, rationalism and the depravity of nature, the secularization of society (not necessarily the Church!) or freeing the public field (primarily politics) from the influence of religion?”<sup>31</sup>

Over the time, a certain way of creating theology has turned tradition into traditionalism, in the way, that everything relates to the past, Orthodoxy being seen only through the eyes of the Byzantine period, without taking into account current realities. “In the absence of a genuine, creative and critical relationship with the past history and culture, considering tradition and preservation identical, impacted by a conflicting mixture of ancient worship and longing for Byzantium, frozen in a conception that limits the Church to the one and only role as guardian and guarantor of national and cultural persistence, isolated on the contradictory axis East-West, we cannot consequently create a serious theological discourse, to participate from the same position and creatively in shaping and molding the contemporary world”.<sup>32</sup>

There can be no debates on the relationship between the Gospel and culture without recalling the saints, those who were able to grasp the true meaning of the gospel. A historical example of how this relationship must be referred to is illustrated by the ministry of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the ones who translated the Bible and the Liturgy into Slavonic. At that moment a hot debate was given birth to, meaning, that the German clergy, who was responsible for the genuine preservation of the Slavic peoples’ faith, claimed that the Scripture could only be read in Greek and Latin, a controversy that preceded the Protestant Reformation. Thus, the two Saints created the “Slavonic Church”, the means by which the Christian religion was spread in the Slavic area. Although, there is a discussion on the method used by the two in spreading Orthodox teaching, the Thessalonians were inspired by the Greek tradition in which they were trained. Thus, they firmly believed that faith teaching “must become incarnated (or indigenized) in order to produce authentic fruits of dynamic human cooperation with God in building up a Christian society and a Christian culture”.<sup>33</sup>

At present, the encounter between the Gospel and culture gives birth to new challenges that our Orthodox theologians have to face nowadays, especially related to the “non-theological” issues to which they must give an answer in theological terms. Current discussions deal with difficult questions related to the way in which the Gospel can be understood and transmitted to

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<sup>31</sup> PANTELIS KALAITZIDIS, *Ortodoxie și modernitate. O introduce*, Traducere din neogreacă de Florin-Cătălin Ghiț, Prefață de Radu Preda, Ed. Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 103.

<sup>32</sup> IBIDEM, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> JOHN MEYENDORFF, “Christ as Word: Gospel and Culture”, p. 246.

different cultures with and through unfamiliar means to many. Cultural communities have the potential to embrace the Gospel and be changed by it, since God is omnipresent in His work through the Holy Spirit. Although, cultures are different, they all bear the same significance for Him. In the process of the Gospel's encounter with different cultures, the particular elements of each are highlighted, which are changed by the Good News, thus rejecting what seems to disagree with God's plan. "Theology in its role as mediator between faith and culture has the task of assisting the Church in assessing critically the whole process of conversation between Gospel and culture and of developing principles and criteria of authentic inculturation that maintain faithfulness to the Judeo-Christian tradition".<sup>34</sup> The universal salvation message of all in Christ is the one that binds the relationship between the historicity of the Gospel and cultural diversity. "The positive appreciation of all cultures is grounded theologically upon the recognition that God, through His providential love, continues to sustain the totality of His creation, leading all into unity by the power of the Holy Spirit".<sup>35</sup> The Three Persons worked together to create the world. The Holy Spirit is the One Who holds all creation, the glory of God being present to the ends of the earth.

When preaching the Gospel to all creatures, Christians identified the presence of the Holy Spirit and the signs of God's Kingdom in those cultures and started from these realities in order to spread the Good News to all creatures. This is the reason why the Church Fathers defined the culture of the world as a "pedagogue to Christ". Christian missionaries, who followed the first period when the Gospel spread, first looked for the signs of the Kingdom of God in the cultures of the regions where they got to. Starting from these realities, they preached and built the Church of Christ on an already existing foundation. "The message of the Gospel came as a fulfilment, not as a radical replacement or as something brought into a spiritual vacuum. For this reason, Orthodox theology will insist that all people – believers and unbelievers, Christians and people of other faiths – are made in the image of God and to different degrees share the values of the kingdom. One has to see in every human being the face of Christ, and on the basis of this, one is called to walk and work together with all people of good will who make manifest their wish and determination to do justice and peace as signs of the kingdom. The early Orthodox mission history has many such examples".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Fr. Dr. EMMANUEL CLAPIS, "Gospel and Cultures – an Eastern Orthodox Perspective", p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> IBIDEM, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Fr. IOAN SAUCA, "The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. An Ecumenical Paradigm for Our Times: An Orthodox Viewpoint", in: *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 66, Nounber 2,

Admitting the fact that God is present in the world is of great significance in the process of spreading the Gospel, since the world is not the place of evil but, on the contrary, God's grace can be revealed in all the aspects of our existence, being at work.

The position towards other cultures is closely linked to the position towards non-Christian religions. In this regard, missionaries and theologians of all times have referred to the way the Church Fathers perceived other religions, often adopting conflicting views. Thus, an Orthodox theology on how Christians interact with followers of other religions and ideologies is a topic of real interest that is still in need of further developments. Being present in every culture, God is also present in every religion; Christians must discover His traces in the world's religions. Having this foundation, one must work to enrich His knowledge through preaching and ministry, with the power of truth coming from the Holy Spirit Who continues to reveal the unity of all starting from the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Starting from the historical truth according to which all cultures can receive the Gospel, one draws the conclusion of a new appreciation of the fact that the Gospel is spread and received differently by each culture. This is a sign of the infinite richness of the word of the Gospel. "The dialectic encounter between the Gospel and culture is a two-way exchange: from Gospel to culture and from culture to Gospel. In this encounter the Church will acknowledge the presence of God through His Spirit in some aspects of a particular culture and certainly it will consider other aspects of the same culture to be incompatible with the basic precepts of the Gospel".<sup>37</sup> The Good News works on any culture through its vision on the Kingdom of God that is to come, challenging that culture to free itself from the forces of evil and death by the help of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, culture, due to its encounter with the Gospel, can become aware of its own hopes and life visions and thus accept the Gospel as a gift that changes it. It can also discover its own roots in the Christian faith. In this way, man's deep roots generally speaking but also particular for each and every individual can be rediscovered. However, there is also the danger that after the encounter between the Gospel and culture, a mixture to be reached at in the sense that the Christian faith would be given up to in favor of a certain form of culture, a kind of syncretism of our times.

However, a distinction must be made between inculturation and

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2014, p. 176. "In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14, 16-17).

<sup>37</sup> Fr. Dr. EMMANUEL CLAPSIS, "Gospel and Cultures – an Eastern Orthodox Perspective", p. 17.

syncretism. The Church Fathers avoided the danger of religious syncretism in their efforts to preach the Christian faith. This happened under the protection of the Holy Spirit. Syncretism arises when distinct elements to Christian teaching are introduced into the apostolic faith teaching. If syncretism can and must be avoided in the process of preaching Christian teaching, inculturation is unavoidable. It refers to the planting of the Gospel in the land of a culture in order to grow to maturity under the protection of the Holy Spirit, in order to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth.<sup>38</sup>

No more space and time boundaries through the use of modern technology does not lead to the idea that the local specificity loses its importance. People still live in the local and familiar environment, their way of life (social, economic, political, cultural, and religious) meeting new forms that can give birth to uncertainties and disappointments. That is why a serious approach to what “inculturation” stands for in the life of nowadays man is necessary. Have a look back in history of how the Gospel spread to the ends of the earth, one can notice many moments when there was much uncertainty in the way the relationship between the Gospel and culture was perceived. “It is important to remember that the Church has evolved in history by embracing elements from other cultures and religions, but it has also resisted the incorporation or acceptance of certain elements from other cultures, religious faiths and philosophies”.<sup>39</sup> In the process of spreading the Gospel, the Church fought against syncretism of any kind that threatened the truths of the faith. Syncretism also threatens the contemporary world, being, at the same time, an element that characterizes the globalized society which we live in nowadays. In this sense, a true theology must be achieved, illustrating both the dangers of syncretism and the message of the Church in a syncretistic world that governs over all human life’s areas.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, the presence of God in every culture, whether ancient or modern, means that Christian missionaries do not bring God to anyone through their activity since God is present everywhere. But a giving up to the truth that our Savior Jesus Christ brought the supreme revelation would mean a giving up to the oneness of Christianity and would limit Christian faith to a cultural form like any other or to a simple religious value system.

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<sup>38</sup> Fr. Dr. MICHAEL J. OLEKSA, “Evangelism and Cultures – Syncretism and Inculturation”, in: *Orthodoxy and Cultures. Inter-Orthodox Consultation on Gospel and Cultures, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 19-27 January 1996*, p. 38.

<sup>39</sup> EMMANUEL CLAPSIS, “The Challenge of a Global World”, in: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World. An Ecumenical Conversation*, p. 59.

<sup>40</sup> Diac. Lect. Univ. Dr. ADRIAN BOLDIȘOR, “Locul sincretismului religios în Istoria religiilor și pericolele lui pentru lumea contemporană”, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, Nr. 9-12, 2012, pp. 116-138; ADRIAN BOLDIȘOR, *Importanța și actualitatea dialogului interreligios pentru lumea contemporană: istorie, perspective, soluții*, Ed. Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2015, pp. 9-14.

Acknowledging the fact that other cultures and religions bear the traces of God's presence does not mean a giving up to the oneness of the Christian message and to the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ represents "the Way and the Truth and the Life".<sup>41</sup>

**Abstract:**

*Therefore, if a strict report is to be drawn, the Gospel always takes precedence over any older or newer culture. Contrarily, there is a danger that the Gospel turn into several "gospels", one for each particular culture, becoming more a kind of human community's aspiration, and not the message of God's love for all people. That is why it is necessary to set the criteria for inculturation, that is, for the outcomes arising from the encounter between the Gospel and the cultures of the world. Under these conditions, any cultural expression of the Christian faith must remain united with the other expressions, resulting into faith harmony. Gospel teaching is transhistorical and transcultural, naturally speaking. This means that the way Christianity was understood and preached in the early Church is still relevant and bears existential significance to all people, regardless of the historical contexts they live in; the moment faith has reached inculturation stage. A new contextual expression of the Gospel must keep the same direction as the Apostolic and Patristic Tradition. As an act of the Holy Spirit, such a theology makes people experience more and more personal and collective meetings with God. A contextualized theology becomes a genuine expression of the Gospel when related to the doctrinal and liturgical life of the Church. Thus, the connection to "a new heaven and a new earth" promised by Our Lord is achieved.<sup>42</sup>*

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<sup>41</sup> John 14, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Revelation 21, 1.

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