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Orthodoxy and Inter-religious Dialogue

The great problems, persecutions and dangers that missionaries and the faithful have been facing for centuries from the fanatical followers of traditional religions, mainly in Asia and Africa, have been compounded over recent decades by the rise of religious, particularly Islamic, fanaticism. This constitutes a serious threat to world peace and has led the WCC, the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches to realize the necessity for inter-religious dialogue. This promises to be the most appropriate means of dealing with the various social problems, which stem from the encounter or co-existence of heterogeneous religious groupings within the framework of both the modern state and the world community.

Of course, inter-religious dialogue as a means for overcoming the difficulties entailed by the living together of Christians with people of other religions was not unknown to the practice or the history of the Church, and of Orthodoxy in particular. From Her first steps the Church engaged in dialogues with Judaism and Hellenism, despite the fact that the writings of Christian authors, through which these dialogues were conducted, were largely of an apologetic or refuting character¹. Moreover, particularly from the time when Arabs and subsequently Ottomans conquered areas of the Byzantine Empire inhabited by Christian populations and made the living together of Christians with Muslims inevitable, the dialogue of Orthodoxy with Islam was to the Orthodox Church an ineluctable necessity. Great Fathers and Theologians of the Orthodox Church, such as John of Damascus, Gregory Palamas, Joseph Vryennios, but also emperors of Byzantium, such as Manuel II Palaeologus, endeavoured to engage in a

¹ See, for instance, the works of the philosopher and martyr Justin *Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon*, PG 6, 471A-800D, *Discourse to the Greeks*, PG 6, 229A-240A and *Exhortation to the Greeks*, PG 6, 241A-312A, as well as with the works of Athenagoras *A Plea for the Christians*, PG 6, 889A-972C, and of Tatian *Address to the Greeks*, PG 6, 804A-888B.

considerable dialogue with Islam because of the related challenges they faced². Similar, though limited, efforts for inter-religious dialogue can also be identified in the mediaeval West, mainly in the meeting of Christianity with Islam on the Iberian Peninsula.

However, from the mid-20th century onwards, the need for inter-religious dialogue became more acutely felt than ever before. The close interdependence among different social groups, nations and civilizations, an interdependence that has been one of the main features of our time, contributed to this sense. Although this interdependence intensely marks the economy and the political and social life in the form of globalization, mainly, it has nevertheless created a new reality, in which the risk of religious conflicts, indeed when these are fuelled by fanaticism and intolerance, can become fatal for world peace. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, which was qualified as "the day that changed the world", but also what followed thereafter, demonstrated and confirmed in the most eloquent manner the necessity of dialogue and cooperation between the different religious leaders, so that religion be not turned into an instrument in the service of nationalist aspirations and political aims at the expense of mankind and eventually of religion itself. As has already been very aptly indicated in the Berne Declaration (1994), "war in the name of religion is war against religion".

Within the framework of this problematic that decisively marked our time, from the mid-20th century onwards, both WCC and the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches laid particular emphasis on the convocation of bilateral or multilateral inter-religious conferences, and indeed at frequent intervals. Although some efforts for understanding the notion of salvation in other religions had already been made from the beginning of the 20th century, in order to set the

² See G. D. Ziakas, "The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the dialogue with Islam" [in Greek], in *Studies in Religion (Living in harmony with men)*, Vantias Publications, Thessaloniki 2004, pp. 240ff.

relevant missionary methodology to be followed by the Churches, the necessity of inter-religious dialogue within the framework of WCC could not be accepted as yet. Things began to change mainly because of the new spirit that prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council³.

Realising the need for inter-religious cooperation in order to face modern missionary and social problems, this Council set up the Secretariat for non-Christians (1964), on the one hand, which was subsequently renamed the "Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue" (1988) and, on the other hand, issued the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, proclaimed by the Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965⁴, by which it exhorted the Roman Catholic faithful, "through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, [to] recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men"⁵. Indeed, to this purpose, it organised Inter-religious Assemblies itself, three in Assisi (1986, 1994 and 2002) and one in Rome (Vatican, October 25-28, 1999) with representatives from almost across the religious spectrum⁶.

Under the pressure of this new spirit within the Roman Catholic Church, WCC carried out a series of inter-religious meetings and conferences, mainly between Christians and Muslims, and in 1971 set up the Section for Dialogue with other religions and ideologies, thus expressing the sensibility of many Churches, particularly of those of the Third World, regarding the issue of the relations with other religions⁷.

³ See G. N. Lemopoulos, "The World Council of Churches and inter-religious dialogue" [in Greek], in *Kath'odon*, issue no. 3 (1992), p. 44.

⁴ See Wayne Teasdale, "Inter-religious Dialogue since Vatican II. The monastic contemplative dimension", in *Spirituality Today*, vol. 43, no. 2 (summer 1991), p. 123.

⁵ *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

⁶ See G. D. Martzelos, "The Inter-Religious Assembly in Rome (Vatican, October 25-28, 1999)", in *Orthodoxe Theologie zwischen Ost und West. Festschrift für Prof. Theodor Nikolaou*, Verlag Otto Lembeck, Frankfurt am Main 2002, pp. 587 ff.

⁷ See also G. N. Lemopoulos, op. cit., p. 45.

Although the aim of inter-religious dialogue, as set in the fundamental principles of WCC, consisted mainly in the prevalence of religious freedom and in the presentation of Christian witness within the framework of the multi-religious and multi-cultural societies, in which the Christian Churches of the Third World largely live and develop, the Orthodox had at first serious reservations and criticisms against such inter-religious openings and the new aims of WCC. However, one should not fail to stress the fact that, already in the First Pan-Orthodox Conference of Rhodes (1961), that is before the inter-religious interests of the Second Vatican Council were manifested, the Orthodox Church included both the issue of "Orthodoxy and other religions" and the matter of a "Contribution of local Orthodox Churches to the prevalence of the Christian ideals of peace, freedom, brotherhood and love between peoples" in the agenda of the Holy and Great Synod that was to be convened⁸.

The First Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conference (Chambézy, 1976) constituted a landmark in the realisation of the necessity of inter)religious dialogue on a pan-orthodox level. This Conference saw the unanimous expression of the desire of local Orthodox Churches to contribute to "inter-religious understanding and cooperation, and through these to the elimination of fanaticism from every side, and thus to the reconciliation of peoples and the prevalence of the ideals of freedom and peace in the world, to serve modern man, irrespective of race and religion", as is stated verbatim⁹. This desire of the Orthodox Churches was expressed anew and more systematically in the relevant Declaration of the Third Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conference (Chambézy, 1986), which, indeed, after long elaboration, was unanimously accepted and as such was submitted to the Holy and Great Synod as the expression of the official position of the Orthodox Church on this matter¹⁰. The

⁸ See op. cit., pp. 46ff.

⁹ *Synodica, Periodical Edition of the Secretariat for the Preparation of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church*, vol. 2, Geneva 1978, p. 201.

¹⁰ See *Episkepsis* (in Greek) 369 (1986), p. 19. See also I. Briar - P. Vassileiadis, *Orthodox Christian Witness. Church - Society - Ecumene I* [in Greek], Tertius Publications, Katerini 1989, p. 164.

spirit of such Pan-Orthodox Declarations is not founded on secular ecclesiastic-political purposes, but emanates from the essence of the Christian message and, particularly, from the theology of the Orthodox Church. The perception of God as love indiscriminately poured into the entire world, the respect for the freedom of the human person as a creature after the image of God and the duty of Christians to love everyone according to the model of Christ and to be interested in the prevalence of peace in the world constitute fundamental principles of the Orthodox tradition, which thoroughly pervade the aforementioned Pan-Orthodox decisions on the promotion of inter-religious dialogue.

In this spirit, therefore, of the decisions made on a Pan-Orthodox scale, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, in cooperation with the relevant political and religious authorities, played a leading part in the organisation of bilateral academic conferences with Judaism and Islam, on the one hand, and, on the one hand, of inter-religious congresses and meetings between leaders and between representatives of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The bilateral academic conferences with Judaism and Islam began thanks to the initiatives of the Director of the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambézy (Geneva) Most Rev. Damaskenos, Metropolitan of Andrianoupolis and, at the time, of Switzerland. So far five bilateral academic Conferences with Judaism (1977-2003)¹¹ and ten with Islam (1986-2002)¹² have taken place.

As regards the International Inter-religious Congresses and Meetings, in the organisation of which the Ecumenical Patriarchate played a leading role, two such Congresses in Constantinople (1994 and 2005) took place and led to the documents known as "Declarations of Bosphorus" and another three in Brussels (2001), in Thessaloniki (2003) and in Amaroussion, Athens (2004) that led to similar Declarations¹³. The resultant of all these Declarations is expressed in the following position and appeal of the Amaroussion Declaration:

¹¹ See www.centreorthodoxe.org/index.php?lang=fr&smenu=smenu8&nav=dialogues8.

¹² See www.centreorthodoxe.org/index.php?lang=fr&smenu=smenu8&nav=dialogues9.

¹³ The most important of them see in the site of the Ecumenical Patriarchate: www.ec-patr.gr/docdisplay.php?lang=en&cat=22.

"We repudiate all forms of nationalist, racist, religious, social and other discrimination, by means of which morbid religious intolerance and fanaticism is harboured, together with the proclivity of seeking to find justification for bellicose conflicts and organized terrorism, to the obvious immense detriment of the peaceful coexistence of all human beings and all people. Therefore, we launch an appeal to the spiritual leaders of all religions to undertake the necessary work and to cooperate in achieving the defusing of these perilous confusions, in order thereby to achieve the truly credible furtherance of God's will that peace, social justice and respect for fundamental human rights will prevail"¹⁴.

The inter-religious dialogue of Orthodoxy with Judaism and Islam brings out the depth of sincere inter-religious collaboration by which participants will be able not only to overcome the painful experiences and tensions of the historical past but jointly to tackle the modern social problems that constitute a menace to man and the world.

There are of course certain clergymen and theologians, mainly within Greek Orthodoxy, who are opposed to such inter-religious initiatives for the fear of syncretism or of a gradual alteration of the Orthodox spirit due to the participation of the Orthodox in these interreligious meetings. Nevertheless, we must emphasise the fact that, on the one hand, such fears are totally unfounded, because all Orthodox Churches that participate in these meetings show great sensitivity to the preservation of the Orthodox faith from the danger of syncretism. It is telling that, whereas by the Declaration of the Third Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conference (1986), Orthodox Churches are invited to contribute to inter-religious understanding and collaboration for the elimination of fanaticism, the reconciliation of peoples and the prevalence of peace and freedom in the world, it is explicitly stressed that "this collaboration

¹⁴ See *Inter-religious Conference of Athens, "Religion, Peace and the Olympic ideal"* (Amaroussion, Athens, August 10-11, 2004), Declaration of Amaroussion: www.ec-patr.gr/docdisplay.php?lang=en&id=304&tla=en

excludes both syncretism and attempts at the imposition of any faith upon others"¹⁵.

Besides, during the 7th General Assembly of WCC in Canberra (1991), when an attempt was made at combining Christian teachings on the Holy Spirit with animistic and pantheistic perceptions mainly of the peoples of Northeastern Asia¹⁶, the Orthodox expressed their intense opposition to any syncretistic compromise at the expense of Christian faith¹⁷.

Even so, on the other hand, it would be inconceivable for Orthodoxy to become "encaged" in itself, thus abnegating Its responsibility for solutions, as far as possible, to the problems that pose a threat to mankind. This would amount to Its forsaking Its mission in the world. Yet certainly, one of the problems that threaten mankind and cannot leave Orthodoxy indifferent or insensitive is the prevalence of peace in a world which is exposed both to the increasing religious fanaticism of our times and to the explosive magnitude of social injustice in all its forms at the expense of the poor and the weak. The constant and unflinching interest of Orthodoxy in resolving this fundamental problem and tackling the causes behind it is, as was emphasized in an inspired manner already by the Third Pre-Synodal Pan-Orthodox Conference (1986), inextricably intertwined with the nature and the mission of the Orthodox Church¹⁸. Orthodoxy cannot possibly deny Its nature or Its mission in the world in the name of any dangers that threaten It.

¹⁵ See *Episkepsis* (in Greek) 369 (1986), p. 19.

¹⁶ On this matter, see G. D. Martzelos, *Orthodox doctrine and theological problematics. Studies on dogmatic theology, A'* [in Greek], Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki 1993, pp. 133ff. and G. Martzelos, "Theologischer Animismus und orthodoxe Pneumatologie", in *"Poreuthentes..."*. Volume in honour of Anastassios (Ghiannoulatos), Archbishop of Albania, Armos Publications, Athens 1997, pp. 127ff.

¹⁷ See «"Orthodox Churches and WCC": Report of the Inter-Orthodox Conference of Orthodox and Orthodox Non-Chalcedonian Churches-members of WCC» [in Greek], in G. N. Lemopoulos, *The 7th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Canberra, February 1991): Account - Documents - Assessments* [in Greek], Tertius Publications, Katerini 1992, pp. 100ff.

¹⁸ See *Episkepsis* (in Greek) 369 (1986), pp. 25ff.