

Multi-Faith Europe and Orthodoxy (Part III) (Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



3. The problem of *the relations between Christians and people of other religions* is much more complicated. In general it has two facets. The first is practical: the need to co-exist with people of other religious persuasions. In this case, we have a “dialogue of life” where the only appropriate attitude is one of peaceful co-existence, respect for religious freedom and, broadly speaking, for the human rights of others. But there can also be co-operation on matters of social harmony and progress.



The second is theoretical: understanding other religions from a theological standpoint. Just as the life of Christ, the new Adam, has world-wide consequences, so the life of His mystical Body, the Church has world-wide range and energy. Its prayers and interests embrace the whole of humankind. The Church offers its Divine Eucharist and Doxology on behalf of all people. It acts on behalf of the whole world. It radiates the glory of the living Lord to the whole of creation[14].

An attitude to life that respects the religious principles and views of others does not imply syncretism and estrangement from one's awareness of being a Christian. On the contrary, it demands knowledge of our faith and a continuous experience of it in repentance, humility and genuine love. The message of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches at the festal concelebration at Bethlehem on 7 January, 2000, emphasized: "We look to the other religions, especially the monotheistic ones of Judaism and Islam, willing to build even further the conditions necessary for dialogue with them for the purpose of the peaceful coexistence of all peoples... The Orthodox Church rejects bigotry and condemns religious fanaticism, whatever the provenance of these phenomena"[15]. In general it supports the harmonious co-existence of religious communities and minorities as well as freedom of conscience for each person and people.

Especially as regards the relations between Christians and Islam, we have centuries-old experience, substantially more than the West. On the one hand, these have been traumatic because of the pressure involved, but, on the other, there are examples of peaceful co-existence. Today, a serious problem which can be dealt with in common with people of other religions is the protection of the natural environment. Ecological issues, which are now at the centre of world interest, are a broad field for creative inter-faith dialogue and co-operation.

More generally, I believe that the proper Orthodox attitude in today's multi-faith society is the outlook of witness and mission. "And you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1, 8). "Ends" in all senses. We testify to our faith wherever God opens a door: in non-Christian, indifferent or atheistic environments- in Europe, in Africa, in international or global organizations. Without any requirement that our positions be accepted, without the spirit of proselytism, without arrogance, without anxiety or phobias. With respect for the personal freedom of the other. God will take care of the rest. This internal disposition gives us the chance to communicate with ease, offering the Orthodox experience in all directions, including to those who have different religious or world views. Whatever they believe or don't believe, they still have value as human persons, made in the image of God.

4. There is great interest among the citizens of Europe today in creating a society of justice and mutual support. In the social sphere, we Orthodox are called upon, together with the other Christians of Europe, to contribute to the support and *reinforcement of the fundamental Christian values* which played a positive role in the shaping of European culture. I shall mention but a few: a) emphasis on the value of the human person, as the foundation of human rights; b) respect for the freedom of each person, regardless of background, race, education or religious conviction; c) the importance of marriage and the family; and d) the responsibility of each citizen for the progress of the whole.

Despite progress and the many developments of Western culture, certain human characteristics have remained the same over the centuries: greed, violence, conceit, hypocrisy, the sense of loneliness and of vacuum. Who will bring the heartbeat of life? It requires faith, and enthusiasm for the course of Europe, faith in people and their future. The crystal spring of this kind of faith is the truth of the Gospel.

But the great contribution of the Christian faith was- and will remain so in perpetuity- the principle of love, with the breadth, depth and height which was given to its meaning. Within this is the special importance attributed to forgiveness. The possibility of forgiveness neutralizes conflicts and hostilities in their various forms and leads to real reconciliation between individuals and peoples. The inspiration offered by the Christian faith to millions of people to experience clemency and love is historically beyond question. Without love, European civilization loses its breath, its force and its beauty. And Orthodoxy must be an inexhaustible fount of love.

5. Particularly in contemporary theological pursuits, the *theological riches of the Patristic tradition of Orthodoxy*

are very important. At a crucial turn in the life of the Church, when it was facing dangers both from a head-on confrontation with ancient Greek philosophy as well as a static adherence to an external piety and formality of worship, the great Fathers of the Eastern Church fought against both these extremes with far-sighted wisdom and with courage in the Holy Spirit.

They managed to progress beyond intellectual dilemmas to new areas and to make statements which utilized the best that ancient Greek thought had contributed to the course of humanity, in an encounter with the positive news of the Gospel, which opened up new horizons to people's minds, hearts and existence. In every age, the combination of the internal force of the Christian message and the eternal reflections on the quest of humanity enriches anew the creative thought which God has given to people.

Patristic theology remains a fecund source for theology today and tomorrow, which, as the Romanian theologian Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae said: "must be open to the whole historical and cosmic reality, but at the same time it must be spiritual. It must help all Christians to achieve a new spirituality proportional both to the cosmic dimensions of science and technology and to the universal human community"[16].

Especially as regards the delicate matter of the relationship between Christian faith and the sciences, the Orthodox Church has avoided seeking to stand guardian to the evolution of scientific efforts, to hasten to take a position on every emerging scientific question as certain Churches in the West have been prone to do. For the Orthodox conscience, freedom of research is a gift from God to humanity. Fortunately, the Eastern tradition has tried, as much as possible, to avoid any conflict between science and theology, because of the two-fold methodology of the Orthodox Fathers, which is founded on an ontological distinction between created and uncreated.

At the same time as this positive stance, however, Christian thought notes; first, the dangers lurking behind certain scientific achievements; second, the limits of human knowledge; and third, the existence of another form of "knowledge". The last is not subject to the scientific field, but has proved necessary in many ways for the proper demarcation of freedom and the use of the fruits of science- by restricting self-centeredness and emphasizing the ultimate unity of truth, beauty and love.

Finally, the intensity and breadth of the liturgical experience of Orthodoxy, and the ascetic ethos often associated with it is commonly recognized as being of especial importance to modern European religious discussions. To this we can add the persistent festal reference to the Resurrection. United organically with Christ, Who

took upon Himself and redeemed the whole of human nature through His Cross and Resurrection, the faithful are called upon to embrace everyone and everything with hope, and without fear. With perfect love, which “casts out fear” (*Jn. I, 4, 18*). In the Orthodox view of things, the Church is not a closed company of the saved who enjoy exclusively the gifts of God and lay claim to comforts, privileges and secular authority. It is the Eucharistic community of the faithful who live and celebrate the experience of the Resurrection, of the victory over death. And with this truth it kindles and transforms the life of the whole world, in freedom and love.

Beloved,

At the beginning of the last century, Oswald Spengler[17] claimed that there was a natural evolution of great civilizations: birth, development, flowering, maturation, ageing and finally death. It was his view that Western civilization had reached this last stage. Many voices were raised against this view, among which the position of Arnold Toynbee[18] is prominent. He pointed out the difference between material and technological progress on the one hand, and real progress on the other, which he calls “spiritualisation”. He sees the roots of the crisis in the Western world in its departure from the religious experience and the adoption of the worship of technology, the nation and the military establishment. And he equates the crisis with secularization. As a course of treatment, he recommends a reinforcement of the religious element. To the concept of biological decline, he opposes the volitional position, based on the robustness and vitality of creative minorities and outstanding personalities.

We are called upon to be just such a creative minority. But in order to match up to its historical role and to contribute to the spiritual path of Europe, the Orthodox Church must, first of all, be consistent to its sacramental and saving nature. It must remain what it is in essence: the ark of truth which the Triune God revealed; the manifestation of the dispensation of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit; the locus where the transfiguration of the person is accomplished; the transcendence of their existential angst; and their union with the God of love.

It is this Orthodoxy which we ought to represent in Europe and throughout the world. Let us not concern ourselves that we do not belong to the majority. What is required is that we should become a creative core which will allow Europe to reveal and develop the best elements of its heritage and go forward to a new period of spiritual vigour.

Speech on the occasion of the award of an **Honorary Doctorate** in the **Department of History** at the Ionian University to Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Dürres and All Albania, Emeritus Professor of the University of Athens and

Honorary Member of the Academy of Athens (Corfu, 20/3/2007)

[14] I note the words of an outstanding theologian of the Orthodox Church, Professor and Academician, in one of his last speeches the Academy of Athens (*"The Universality of Salvation in Christ"*): "Not only Christians but also non-Christians, infidels and Gentiles can become 'fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus (*Eph. 3, 6*) through the Church to which the Gentiles and heterodox can belong invisibly on the basis of the strength of their own faith and the saving grace granted to them by God". I. N. Karmiris, «*Η παγκοσμιότητα της εν Χριστώ σωτηρίας*», *Proceedings of the Academy of Athens, year 1980, vol. 55, Athens 1981, pp. 261-289*. Idem, «*Η σωτηρία των εκτός τής Εκκλησίας ανθρώπων του Θεού*», *Proceedings of the Academy of Athens, year 1981, vol. 56, Athens 1982, pp. 391-434*.

[15] Quoted as «*Μήνυμα αγάπης χωρίς διακρίσεις στέλνουν οι προκαθήμενοι των Ορθοδόξων Εκκλησιών από τα Ιεροσόλυμα*», in the newspapers Kathimerini and Eleftherotypia on 8.1.2000.

[16] D. Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, St. Vladimir's Seminary, Crestwood, New York 1980, p. 226.

[17] *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 2 vols. 1st ed. Munich 1918-22.

[18] *A Study of History*, abridged ed., Oxford 1987.