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Orthodoxy and Interreligious Dialogue

Abstract

The interreligious dialogue has a very important place in all the meeting agendas from all over the world, regardless the topic addressed. Having a concrete dynamic, this kind of theological problematic follows the general spiritual movement of communities and their unresolved necessities. Although the interreligious dialogue has an old history, it developed today on the basis of actual issues of violence and disagreements between peoples. Therefore, because religion has an essential place in the life of human communities from all over the world, the dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies must be necessarily promoted. In this context, the Orthodox Church representatives participated at many meetings in the purpose to promote and sustain the interreligious dialogue, bringing in actuality their bi-millenaries theological experience, based on the Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition. From the orthodox point of view, the liberty is the greatest gift which God has given to man and also a free world cannot exist without love between people. This love has its fundament and purpose in the Holy Trinity.

Keywords: Orthodoxy, interreligious dialogue, Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition, love.

Prawosławie i dialog międzyreligijny

Abstrakt

Dialog międzyreligijny zajmuje bardzo ważne miejsce w niemal wszystkich spotkaniach, niezależnie od poruszanego tematu. Mając swoją konkretną dynamikę, ta teologiczna problematyka idzie w parze z ogólnym duchowym rozwojem różnych społeczności i ich aktualnymi potrzebami. Chociaż dialog międzyreligijny ma długą historię, współcześnie rozwijał się w związku z kwestiami przemocy i konfliktami między narodami. Ponieważ religia zajmuje istotne miejsce w życiu społeczności ludzkich na całym świecie, konieczną rzeczą staje się promowanie dialogu z ludźmi innych wyznań i ideologii. Dlatego przedstawiciele Kościoła prawosławnego uczestniczą w wielu spotkaniach mających na celu promowanie i podtrzymywanie dialogu międzyreligijnego, wnosząc weń swoje doświadczenie teologiczne, oparte na Piśmie Świętym i Świętej Tradycji. Z prawosławnego punktu widzenia wolność jest największym darem, jaki Bóg dał człowiekowi, a wolny świat nie może istnieć bez miłości między ludźmi. Miłość ta ma swój fundament i cel w Trójcy Świętej.

Słowa kluczowe: prawosławie, dialog międzyreligijny, Pismo Święte, Święta Tradycja, miłość.

Introduction

In the world we live in, characterized by an increasing degree of instability and uncertainty, gradual exclusion of religion from people's lives has led, paradoxically, both to the rebirth of fundamentalisms, resulting into local, national and international religious conflicts, as well as to the phenomenon of "returning to God."¹ Some researchers, among whom a special place is held by Samuel Huntington², connected these realities to what has become known as "the clash of civilizations" and to "the clash of religions". Others saw religion as one of the sources that can promote peace and understanding between people. The conversation on the topic on the "return to religion" is hotter and hotter, but without reaching syncretism or the homogenization of the differences between religions. Thus, interreligious dialogue holds an important place.³

In this sense, the representatives of the Orthodox Churches have made important contributions, starting from the specific way in which they live and relate to those of other faiths and ideologies. When addressing the issue of interreligious dialogue, the Orthodox start from The Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, the two sources of divine Revelation. Such an approach makes possible both a traditional and a modern Orthodox view on the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian old or new religions. The aim of this dialogue is not to create a world religion, but to promote collaboration between followers of the world's religions, without giving up to their inherited faith. "It should here be stressed that dialogue that respects the religious principles and opinions of others does not imply syncretism (amalgamation) or blemishing of one's faith. On the contrary, it demands substantial knowledge as well as the constant experience of one's faith. None of the responsible Orthodox representatives participating in these interreligious encounters is favorably disposed to denying or diminishing his or her Orthodox identity or to compromising his or her Orthodox doctrine. After all, our substantial contribution is not compromise or silence, but serious and critical

¹ Chantal Delsol. 2021. *La fin de la Chrétienté. L'inversion normative et le nouvel âge*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf.

² Samuel P. Huntington. 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations?". *Foreign Affairs* 3 (72): 22-49; Samuel P. Huntington. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

³ See an analysis of the inreligious dialogue in: Adrian Boldișor. 2015. *Importanță și actualitatea dialogului interreligios pentru lumea contemporană: istorie, perspective, soluții*. Craiova: Mitropolia Olteniei; Adrian Boldișor. 2016. "Orthodoxy and Islam". *Studia Oecumenica* 16: 401-419; Adrian Boldișor. 2019. *Ortodoxia ieri, azi, mâine. Teme intercreștine și interreligioase pentru secolul XXI*. Craiova: Mitropolia Olteniei, 157–199. For an analysis of the Orthodox position towards the ecumenical movement in general, see: Doru Marcu. 2022. *A Critical Analysis of the Theological Positions and Ecumenical Activity of Ion Bria (1929–2002)*. Craiova: Mitropolia Olteniei.

thought, and witness to the treasure of Orthodox tradition and theology at every given opportunity.”⁴

1. The Holy Scripture and Interreligious Dialogue

The Holy Scripture teaches on the existence of one God, who rules over the whole earth. All humanity is of a common origin and the whole earth is full of His glory.⁵ Over time, God made several covenants with different people: with Adam and Eve⁶, with Noah⁷, with Abraham.⁸ The Holy Scripture offers examples of people who followed the divine commandments, although they were not Jews (Enoch, Melchizedek, Job) and mentions the women of foreign descent. in the genealogy of our Jesus Christ the Savior.⁹ Relating the Old and New Testaments, Orthodox Christians start, in promoting dialogue with those of other faiths and ideologies, from the one of a kind event of the Incarnation of the Son of God.¹⁰ Thus, “Christology, and not ‘comparative’ religion, must be the basis of our concerns. Our main interest is not the ‘interreligious conferences’ per se; it must consist in our presence together with Christ in His continuous work among people of other religious faiths. Christ takes us out of our own isolation and places us in an intimate relationship with all our fellows.”¹¹

Jesus Christ the Savior appreciated the behavior of non-Jews and the faith they showed, the centurion¹² and the Canaanite woman¹³, the faith of Cornelius is illustrated in Acts.¹⁴ These testimonies of true faith are related to the fact that God “accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right”¹⁵, He not leaving Himself without a witness on the whole face of the earth.¹⁶ Saint Paul the Apostle emphasizes this idea in Romans: “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for them-

⁴ Anastasios Yannoulatos. 2021. *Coexistence. Peace, Nature, Poverty, Terrorism, Values (Religious Perspectives)*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 110.

⁵ Isaiah 6:3.

⁶ Genesis 3:15.

⁷ Genesis 8:21-22.

⁸ Genesis 12.

⁹ Matthew 1.

¹⁰ John 1:14; 3:16.

¹¹ Nicolae Achimescu. 2006. *Religii în dialog*. Iași: Trinitas, 19.

¹² Matthew 8:5-13.

¹³ Matthew 15:21-28.

¹⁴ Acts 10:1-48.

¹⁵ Acts 10:35.

¹⁶ Acts 14:16-17.

selves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them. This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares."¹⁷ Starting from these scriptural testimonies, which refer to natural revelation and the creation of man in the image of God, it can be stated that "every human being who is of good will, has good intentions, and keeps the commandments of Christ (genuine love, humility, forgiveness, and unselfish service to others) – even if he or she does not have the privilege of directly knowing the ineffable mystery of Christ – receives, we would venture to say, the Christ-Word that is present in his commandment. Since God is love, any expression of love whatsoever is automatically attuned to his will and his commandments."¹⁸

An important moment in the Christian preaching to those of other religions is represented by the sermon of Holy Apostle Paul in the Areopagus from Athens.¹⁹ This discussion is meant to be an example for all Christians when the information on natural revelation is used to achieve the ultimate truth, Christ, who is present everywhere and in everyone. Among the Athenian scholars, the Apostle of the Gentiles follows the exhortation to preach given by our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁰

The teaching about the Holy Spirit, who, at the creation of the world, "was hovering over the waters"²¹, holds an important place within interreligious dialogue. He is the Spirit of holiness, of power, of truth, of peace, of justice²², who blows wherever it pleases.²³ The Holy Spirit is present in the world, sharing Himself with all creation. "Nothing can restrict the radiance of the Holy Spirit. Wherever we find love, goodness, peace, and the Spirit's other 'fruits' (Gal 5:22), there we discern the signs of its activity. Furthermore, it is clear that quite a few of these things are present in the lives of many people who belong to other religions."²⁴ Starting from the teaching on the Holy Spirit, several issues that arise in the way of dialogue with those of other religions must be analyzed.

¹⁷ Romans 2:14-16.

¹⁸ Anastasios Yannoulatos. 2003. *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 150.

¹⁹ Acts 17:22-31.

²⁰ Mark 16:15; 1 Timothy 2:1-6.

²¹ Genesis 1:2.

²² Galatians 5:22-23.

²³ John 3:8.

²⁴ Yannoulatos. 2003. *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, 149.

“Undoubtedly, a distinction on *the exclusive and inclusive* work of the Holy Spirit is to be made. The Christian attitude towards other faiths and religions can be differentiated; if we consider God’s truth limited to the historical limits of the Church or if we accept that His truth is just as free as His Spirit, always active and acting in all peoples.”²⁵ Pneumology must be placed alongside Christology and Triadology in order not to fall into the error of confusing the teaching about the Holy Spirit with other foreign and wrong ideas and concepts.²⁶

In the patristic tradition, the energies of the Holy Spirit are present throughout creation and history. This teaching disagrees with any personal or collective tendencies towards self-sufficiency and isolation. The fact that truth and wisdom can be found in the beliefs of people of other religions or even in non-religious people is a gift from God. The Holy Spirit is present and works in all creation and on all people. He is omnipresent in the world; God’s presence everywhere is a sign of His blessing. Starting from these teachings, Christians must look for traces of the divine presence in people of other faiths. The breath of God everywhere is a sign of His freedom; therefore, interreligious dialogue is possible and necessary.

The work of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, outside the borders of the Church was mentioned by Orthodoxy when emphasizing the fact

²⁵ Achimescu. 2006. *Religii în dialog*, 32.

²⁶ These clarifications are necessary if one takes into account what was discussed during the 7th General Assembly of the CMB in Canberra, in 1991, starting with Professor Chung Hyun Kyung’s presentation of the University of Seoul (South Korea). (Chung Hyun Kyung. 1997. *Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation*. In *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*. Eds. Michael Kinamon, Brian E. Cope, 231–237. Geneva: WCC Publications). The teacher’s statements aroused the dissatisfaction of the representatives of several Christian denominations during Canberra Assembly, among which the voice of the Orthodox was the strongest. In the text of the Korean representative, the Orthodox saw a renunciation of Christian teaching and a dangerous form of religious syncretism. In the response that the representatives of the Orthodox Churches drafted, it is mentioned the fact that the Orthodox follow and support the involvement of WCC in the dialogue with the representatives of other religions as an idea of a further cooperation between people. Through dialogue, the Orthodox bear witness to their faith, a process that involves theological efforts to transmit the authentic Christian message to different cultures and ideologies. “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 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” (Orthodox Reflections, WCC Assembly, Canberra, 1991. 1997. In *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, 237–238).

that the presence of the Spirit in the world does not mean separation from Christ. Starting from the fact that the fullness of God's love is present in the Church, the idea that the Holy Spirit works throughout the world in order to unite and participate in the Kingdom of God was emphasized. This Trinitarian perspective highlights the cooperation between the Son and the Holy Spirit, the "two hands of the Father."²⁷

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the world is the most important argument when talking about dignity of each person; people are united and collaborate beyond cultural, racial, economic, social or religious differences. Dialogue does not mean negotiation or compromise, but listening to the other and confessing faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, who died and rose again for all of us and for each one individually. The relationship between the divine Logos and the Holy Spirit has implications on the way in which those of other faiths and ideologies are perceived. God, present everywhere, works as the Holy Trinity.

Orthodox theology focused on the work of the Spirit in the spiritual life of believers, in the life of the Church, in the Holy Mysteries, as well as on the relationship between the Persons of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The presence of God in people's everyday life was and remains a subject that must be deeply reflected upon. The Church has shown her openness to all people; starting from the teaching that the Holy Spirit is present and works in the world through His uncreated energies. Thus, Orthodox theology combined the universal (the presence of God in the world) with the particular (God reveals Himself perfectly in Jesus Christ our Lord). This Trinitarian vision takes into account both the supreme revelation in Jesus Christ and the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

Separations between people are overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit and God's love for people. Even if the Orthodox Church argues that only within the supreme revelation sent to us by the incarnate Son of God is to be found, this does not limit the teaching on the presence of the Spirit in creation through His uncreated energies.²⁸

This approach is related to what is called "interreligious ecumenism" or "macro-ecumenism": wide openness to dialogue with other religions and traditions beyond the borders of Christianity. The involvement and interest of the representatives of the Orthodox Churches in the dialogue focused on the issues

²⁷ Emmanuel Clapsis. 2013. Theology of Religions as Concern for Ecumenical Dialogue of Orthodox Theologians. In *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism. Resources for Theological Education*. Eds. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Thomas FitzGerald, Cyril Hovorun, Aikaterini Pekridou, Nikolaos Asproulis, Guy Liagre, Dietrich Werner, 673–675. Oxford: Regnum Books International.

²⁸ Emmanuel Clapsis. 2012. "The Holy Spirit in the World: The Tension of the Particular with the Universal". *Current Dialogue* 52 (Special Issue): 29–41.

of understanding, collaboration, religious freedom, care for minorities, elimination of anti-Semitism, peace promotion, etc. In order for these to bear real fruits, a better collaboration between Christian confessions must first be achieved in order to create a common message from Christians to the representatives of other religions and ideologies.

2. The Holy Tradition and Interreligious Dialogue

Over time together with the Holy Scripture, the Orthodox Christians have focused on the Holy Tradition to find examples of the way in which they should relate to the religions of the world. The answers to the question regarding the relationship with other religions have been formulated since the first centuries, when the followers of Christianity came into contact with the representatives of ancient polytheism and Greco-Roman philosophy. Starting from the works of the Church Fathers and ecclesiastical writers of the first Christian centuries, two opinions emerged regarding the way interreligious dialogue was perceived.

Saint Justin Martyr the Philosopher starts his writings from the philosophy of time to present the Christian faith to the pagan nations²⁹. For Saint Justin, all those who lived before Christ with the idea of the Logos are Christians.³⁰ This Church Father argues on the presence in the world of the “logos spermatikos” before the Incarnation of the divine Logos, in the sense that high ideas can also be found in non-Christian religions, as foreshadowing of the Incarnation and the activity of the Incarnated Logos.³¹ Clement of Alexandria seems to share a similar vision; bringing arguments from Greco-Roman culture to support his idea according to which God made Himself known among the pagan nations before the Incarnation of His Son.³² The Alexandrian writer states that pagan religions and philosophies were “pedagogues” to Christ.³³ An opinion that sees other religions as works of evil was formulated by Tertullian. For the former lawyer converted to Christianity, world religions are teachings of men

²⁹ Sfântul Iustin Martirul și Filosoful. 1997. Apologia a doua în favoarea creștinilor. In *Apologeți de limbă greacă*. Ed. Bartolomeu V. Anania a.o., 111–112. București: IBMBOR.

³⁰ Sfântul Iustin Martirul și Filosoful. 1997. Apologia întâi în favoarea creștinilor, 75.

³¹ Sfântul Iustin Martirul și Filosoful. 1997. Dialogul cu iudeul Tryfon. In *Apologeți de limbă greacă*. Ed. Bartolomeu V. Anania a.o., 228–231.

³² Clement Alexandrinul. 1982. Cuvânt de îndemn către eleni (Protrepticul). In *Scrieri*, partea întâi, 67–162. București: IBMBOR.

³³ Clement Alexandrinul. 1982. Stromatele. In *Scrieri*, partea a doua. București: IBMBOR, 25–28.

and demons.³⁴ On the other hand, Tertullian states that human soul is naturally Christian.³⁵ Origen also analyzes the relationship between Christianity and the religions among which it spread, emphasizing the idea that divine revelation can also be identified in pagan religions. However, the true revelation is to be found only in Christianity, where the Son of God becomes man, dies and rises for our perfection.³⁶

A special case in the analysis of interreligious dialogue, starting from patristic works, is represented by Saint Cyprian of Carthage.³⁷ The Holy Father argues that “there is no salvation outside the Church” (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), as the Church is the bride of Christ, pure, righteous, cannot commit adultery, knows only one house, keeps the oath of one bed. She preserves the people of God and reserves the Kingdom for her sons. Whoever separates from the Church and unites with another violates his promises to her, and whoever leaves the Church will not have a reward from Christ, as he/she becomes a stranger, a profane, an enemy. He who does not have the Church as his mother cannot have God as his father. Whoever violates peace and union with Christ is against Christ. Whoever does not obey unity, does not obey God’s law, faith, life or salvation.³⁸

These statements of Saint Cyprian raised questions over time regarding the possibility of dialogue with those of other faiths and ideologies. Many times, starting from this “axiom”, the orthodox theologians divided into two, bringing into question the same quotes on the basis of which they developed their arguments in support of the contradictory opinions. In the end, everything comes down to the answer given to the question of whether God’s grace is present and works outside the borders of the Church.³⁹ In this sense, the teaching of faith was formulated starting from certain biblical sources.⁴⁰

³⁴ Tertulian. 1981. Despre prescripția contra ereticilor (De Praescriptione Haereticorum). In *Apologeti de limbă latină*. Ed. Bartolomeu V. Anania a.o., 142–143. București: IBMBOR.

³⁵ Tertulian. 1981. Apologeticul (Apologeticum). In *Apologeti de limbă latină*, 64.

³⁶ Origen. 1984. *Contra lui Celsus*. București: IBMBOR.

³⁷ See on the thought of Saint Cyprian: Ioniță Apostolache. 2017. *Apologetica Ortodoxă – Mărturisire și Apostolat*. Craiova: Mitropolia Olteniei, 141–150.

³⁸ Sfântul Ciprian. 1981. *Despre unitatea Bisericii ecumenice (De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate)*. In *Apologeti de limbă latină*, 438–439.

³⁹ See an Orthodox analysis on the idea about the Church: Irineu Popa. 2018. *Biserica în actualitate sau actualitatea Bisericii*. București: Academia Română.

⁴⁰ “But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered: You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16); “Jesus answered: Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5); “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles: Brothers, what shall we do? Peter replied: Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call. With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them: Save yourselves from this

In the third century AD, Saint Cyprian was mainly concerned with the danger that befell the community he shepherded; a danger that arose as a result of an increasing number of persecutions in those lands, reaching the point of separating some from the Church. Saint Cyprian's statement was related to those who willingly left the true Church, becoming heretics, and less with reference to pagans and Jews; majoritarian in the Roman Empire. Since the Church is the Body of Christ, anyone who separates from her separates from Christ and loses salvation. Saint Cyprian's statement identifies the Church's charismatic limits with her canonical limits.

God is present everywhere in the world through the work of the Holy Spirit; the One who shifts creation towards eschatology, uniting everyone, in an explicit or hidden way, in the risen Christ. The universality of God's love unites all creation. Humanity and creation represent the Body of Christ in a broad sense; by recapitulating everything in the resurrected Lord. Thus, the Church includes Orthodox Christians and can also include other people who want to live together with God, showing their love for all creation and humanity. The Holy Spirit is present into the world in a mystical way beyond the boundaries of the Church, proving divine love and freedom. Although salvation is achieved into the Church to those who confess Jesus Christ as God and Savior, God did not limit His presence and His work in history only within the limits of the Church. Before the Incarnation of the Word, God gave the natural law to pagan peoples, and the Law through Moses to Jewish people, thus preparing all people for the coming of His Son. It is the symbol of God's love, who offers salvation to all.

These remarks seem to contradict the statement of Saint Cyprian of Carthage. On the one hand, some Church Fathers agree with the idea according to which divine grace is also present outside the Church; on the other hand, they claim that there is no salvation outside the Church.

Agreeing to the universal presence of God, those who take part into interreligious dialogue must work to identify the signs of this presence in other people. Only in this way can they open up even more to God in order to become aware of His fullness in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, through His presence, helps in the mission of confessing Christ to all creation. The Church did not reject what was good in other religious communities outside her borders, because it considered them traces of the divine presence that illuminate and lead to God. The Church has the role to fulfill what is incomplete. Thus, the Church cannot be indifferent

corrupt generation. Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:37-41); "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12); "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

to non-Christians, because they are also led by the Holy Spirit; all creation is in God's care.⁴¹

The teaching on the Person and the work of the Holy Spirit in the world remains essential within theological approach on the relationship between the Orthodox and people of other faiths and ideologies. If some Orthodox theologians minimize this work to the visible limits of the Church, others maximize it beyond them. From a Trinitarian perspective, the supreme revelation in Jesus Christ does not exclude God's work throughout the world through the Holy Spirit, present upon all and fulfilling all, thus working to save every human being.⁴² The Holy Spirit was also present in the Old Testament; His marks can be discovered in all people. Thus, God works, giving wisdom, blessing and leading the life of all humanity.

In an article dealing with ecumenical coordinates from an Orthodox perspective, Father Dumitru Staniloae began his argument in relation to openness to the world, as an essential note of the approach to ecumenism from an Orthodox point of view; from the unrepeatable event of the Incarnation of the Son of God, which represents not only the supreme revelation of God, but also His discovery through man, and thereby the maximum valorization of the human being. Out of the value of each human person derives catholicity. "Ecumenism, as it results out of catholicity, or out of embracing all divine and human values, or out of the modernizing all human values in the light of Christ, by every Christian, in a unity in variety, must be open to all humanity, both on his way to the sought after target as well as once it reaches that target, to a degree that can always be increased. This necessity is especially in accordance with two circumstances: 1) with the circumstance that God is active beyond the borders of visible Christianity and 2) with the circumstance that, learning from God's work in a humanity that is becoming more and more unified in its variety, the Churches can also get close to their unity in variety."⁴³

Regarding the presence of God beyond the visible borders of the Church, Father Staniloae starts from the idea that God did not limit His work only within the Church. Through the Incarnation, the Son of God assumed human nature which was not yet the Church. In the New Testament, there are cases where God works directly on some people, without the mediation of the Holy Apostles, i.e., the Church: the centurion, Saul, Cornelius. Holy Apostle Paul and common experi-

⁴¹ Clapsis. 2013. *Theology of Religions as Concern for Ecumenical Dialogue of Orthodox Theologians*, 670–672.

⁴² "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

⁴³ Dumitru Stăniloae. 1967. "Coordonatele ecumenismului din punct de vedere ortodox". *Orthodoxia* 4: 527.

ence strengthen the fact that God also exercises His judgment on those who are not part of the Church, when they do not fulfill His will written in their hearts (Romans 1:18-22, 25; 2:14).⁴⁴ Saint Maximus the Confessor is the one who deepens the idea of the relationship between people and God, arguing that all are held together by a net of reasons that radiate like threads from the divine Logos and in which they all gather, as they develop according to their reasons, in the unity of the Logos.

The image of a closed Church was related to the doctrine of a dominating Church, of a static vision of both God and the world. Currently, this view must be replaced by the image of an open Church so that the world will also open up to her message. The church is not like a state, it has no borders or customs and no plans to rule over others. Only if the Church is open to the world from all times and from all places, will she be able to understand the work of God within the world, thus taking part into its path to perfection “Christ sent his disciples as trusting lambs in the midst of the world, not as to stop the world from its development, but to give it a testimony of God’s love towards the world. The church is made up of people who confess Christ in the middle of the world; the supporter of everything that takes place into the world (the Pantocrator), not only by word but also by their deeds of exemplary service in all the problems that their life sets in continuous motion.”⁴⁵

In order to observe the close connection between Christians and other people, one must not forget the fact that the unity between Christianity and the whole world is based on the relationship that the divine Logos entered into, through the Incarnation, with all people. The common point of the Fathers in this matter is the teaching about God Pantocrator, the Creator of all Universe and the Lover of all. Both cosmos and nature share a theophanic component that is the place of divine energies. The incarnate Logos leads the world to this goal through humanity assumed, crucified and resurrected; the universal example by which all men are guided. Thus, “Churches are connected with the world through the common humanity of their members and other people; through the common world in which they rule their lives; through their origin in the creative act of God; through the unitary system of divine reasons that supports and guides them in a solidary way; through the ontological union of Christ as man with all men; through guiding all mankind towards the higher goals of the rational and spiritual perfection of all, in superior social relations, even if some of the people remain poisoned by their selfishness and locked in their lack of perspectives.”⁴⁶ Finally, due to the fact that

⁴⁴ Stăniloae. 1967. “Coordonatele ecumenismului din punct de vedere ortodox”, 527–528.

⁴⁵ Stăniloae. 1967. “Coordonatele ecumenismului din punct de vedere ortodox”, 530–531.

⁴⁶ Stăniloae. 1967. “Coordonatele ecumenismului din punct de vedere ortodox”, 536.

the Church embraces the truth and understands the ultimate reality, she cannot close herself to human values, each person being created, helped and guided by God towards the Kingdom of Heaven.

3. Historical coordinates of the interreligious dialogue from an Orthodox perspective

Starting from the Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, the importance of interreligious dialogue for Christianity, both in the past and in our times, can be highlighted. “As the world continues to bring us all closer to one another, we Christians have a pressing obligation to engage in dialogue with people of other religious beliefs. In order for such dialogue to be sincere, we must first have respect for the personality and the freedom of those with whom we speak, as well as sincere love and understanding. We must also acknowledge the inspiration that exists in other religious experiences. Nevertheless, this openness toward dialogue does not mean that we stop bearing witness to our Christianity. Precisely the opposite. Every time we engage in dialogue we also interpret and elucidate the testimony of our Christian faith. We have an obligation to speak with people and to offer the priceless treasure that we possess. We cannot remain silent about the things that God’s love has revealed to us and has bestowed on us. These include, above all, our certainty that God is love and that all people are called upon to participate in a communion of love with the trinitarian God. If we are to be persuasive, however, what we say must grow out of our lives and our experience.”⁴⁷

During the meeting in Addis Ababa (1971), when the foundations of a program were laid within the World Council of Churches (WCC) promoting interreligious dialogue, Metropolitan George Khodr of Mount Lebanon emphasized its role and importance in the context of the realities the world is now facing. “The increasing need for unity makes dialogue imperative if we wish to avoid a *de facto* syncretism of resurgent religions all claiming universality. In face of this resurgence of religions and a plurality which shows no signs of yielding to the Gospel, the question arises as to whether Christianity is so inherently exclusive of other religions as has generally been proclaimed up to now.”⁴⁸ This is not only a particular is-

⁴⁷ Yannoulatos. 2003. *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, 152–153.

⁴⁸ Georges Khodr. 1997. Christianity in a Pluralistic World – The Economy of the Holy Spirit. In *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, 402.

sues, but it is related to all Christian life and must start from the theological meaning of the term “oikonomia”. Economy is not reduced only to historical manifestations, but makes us full participants in the life and mystery of God. “Oikonomia” is closely related to the term “kenosis” of the Son, which begins with the Incarnation and, if starting from the Old Testament, with the act of man’s creation. Man’s relationship with God does not refer only to the Jewish people, but to the all mankind; God does not leave Himself without testimony in other traditions. These truths derive, on the one hand, of the unrepeatable event of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, which encompasses all earth edges, and, on the other hand, of the event of Pentecost; the Holy Spirit pours out over all people. The religions of the world are like schools of divine mercy that must be viewed with patience and understanding. There is one universal community that can enrich religious experience, but all must be seen in the light of Jesus Christ our Savior’s teaching.

Given this context, there are individual gifts in other religions that can be seen beyond historical symbols and forms. It is Christians’ duty to initiate a dialogue with those of other religions, giving up to different forms of pride and confessional superiority. Their purpose is to be found in identifying the Christian values present in others so that, starting from here, they can introduce Christ to their peers, in whom all are united. “The task of the witness in a non-Christian context will be to name him whom others have already recognized as the Beloved. Once they have become the friends of the Bridegroom it will be easy to name him. The entire missionary activity of the Church will be directed towards awakening the Christ who sleeps in the night of the religions. It is the Lord Himself who alone knows whether men will be able to celebrate an authentically glorious Paschal meal together before the coming of the heavenly Jerusalem. But we already known that the beauty of Christ shining in our faces is the promise of our final reconciliation.”⁴⁹

The ideas on the relationship that must exist between Christianity and other religions were sketched during several meetings attended by representatives of the Orthodox Churches, most of them taking place at Chambésy, Switzerland. In the documents that were adopted, the importance and necessity of the participation of the Orthodox Churches in the meetings with the representatives of other Christian denominations and other religions was emphasized.

In 1971 *Oikonomia in the Orthodox Church* was created by the Preparatory inter-Orthodox Commission of the Holy and Great Synod. In 1976, on the recommendation of the Secretariat that took care of the preparation

⁴⁹ Khodr. 1997. *Christianity in a Pluralistic World – The Economy of the Holy Spirit*, 406.

the Holy and Great Synod, The First Pre-conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference the importance of this text decreased, especially following the opposed discussions that took place regarding the limits of the Church and the ecclesiological nature of other communities. At the same time, the idea that the Orthodox Churches contribute to the understanding and promotion of interreligious dialogue and, in this sense, intercede for combating religious fanaticism of any kind was strengthened. The need for reconciliation between people belonging to different religions was also discussed “to ensure the fulfillment of the ideals of freedom, reconciliation among peoples and peace in the world, in the service of man today, irrespective of race or religion.”⁵⁰

These prepositions were reiterated and highlighted during the Third Pre-conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference which took place in Chambésy in 1986 when *The Contribution by the Orthodox Church to the Realization of Peace, Justice, Freedom, Brotherhood and Love among Peoples and the Elimination of Racial and any other Discrimination* was adopted. This document tried to focus on several topics which set the guidelines on the way in which the Orthodox should collaborate both with the representatives of other Christian confessions and of other religions and ideologies: *The Value of the Human Person. A Foundation for Peace; The Value of the Human Freedom; The Mission of Orthodoxy in the Contemporary World; On Peace and Justice; Peace as a means to eliminate War; Racial Discrimination and of any other kind; Brotherhood and Solidarity among Peoples; The Prophetic Mission of Orthodoxy: A Witness of Love in Serving the Neighbor*.⁵¹

On January 7, 2000, in the *Message* sent from Bethlehem, the Primates of the Orthodox Churches emphasized the need for dialogue with those of other religions and ideologies, reiterating the desirability of peaceful coexistence of religious groups and minorities in territories around the world, without affecting human beings’ freedom of conscience and the each person’s sense of belonging to his/her own country: “We look to the other great religions, particularly the monotheistic ones of Judaism and Islam, and we are prepared to build up even further the presuppositions for dialogue with them, looking to achieve a peaceful coexistence of all

⁵⁰ The First Pre-conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference, Chambésy, Switzerland, 2nd–28th November 1976. 2014. In *Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. The Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Meetings since 1923 until 2009*. Ed. Viorel Ioniță, 152. Basel. Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag.

⁵¹ The Third Pre-conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference, Chambésy, Switzerland, 20th October – 6th November 1986. 2014. In *Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church. The Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Meetings since 1923 until 2009*, 158–167.

peoples... The Orthodox Church rejects religious intolerance and condemns religious fanaticism wherever these phenomena may appear.”⁵² In these conditions, the Orthodox position may be critical towards other religious systems, but towards people who share different beliefs, the attitude must be one of respect and love, following the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. “For man continues to bear within himself the ‘image’ of God and the possibility of ‘likeness’ by virtue of the innate components of his existence – free will, a mind capable of reason, the disposition and the possibility of love.”⁵³

In 2016, at the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, in Crete, the ideas from the previous meetings regarding the importance of interreligious dialogue were resumed. “As a presupposition for a wider co-operation in this regard the common acceptance of the highest value of the human person may be useful. The various local Orthodox Churches can contribute to inter-religious understanding and co-operation for the peaceful co-existence and harmonious living together in society, without this involving any religious syncretism.”⁵⁴

The theme of the WCC’s 11th Assembly (Karlsruhe, Germany, August 31 – September 8, 2022) was “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”, a theme drawn from 2 Corinthians 5:14. Since 1983, it has become a tradition that before a WCC Assembly, an Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation takes place, where delegates meet to reflect on the theme and sub-themes of the

⁵² A Message of love without discrimination is sent by the primates of the Orthodox Churches from Jerusalem. 2010. In Anastasios Yannoulatos. *Mission in Christ’s Way. An Orthodox Understanding of Mission*, 227–228. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.

⁵³ Yannoulatos. 2010. *Mission in Christ’s Way. An Orthodox Understanding of Mission*, 225.

⁵⁴ “The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World” (16.02.2023). <https://holycouncil.org/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>. In “Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” is mentioned the fact that “the explosions of fundamentalism observed within various religions represent an expression of morbid religiosity. Sober inter-religious dialogue helps significantly to promote mutual trust, peace and reconciliation. The oil of religious experience must be used to heal wounds and not to rekindle the fire of military conflicts. The Orthodox Church unequivocally condemns the extension of military violence, persecutions, the expulsion and murder of members of religious minorities, forced conversions, the trafficking of refugees, the abductions, torture and abhorrent executions. She denounces the destruction of churches, religious symbols and cultural monuments. Very particularly, she expresses her deep concern about the situation of Christians and of all the persecuted minorities in the Middle East. She calls on the governments in the region to protect the indigenous Orthodox and other Christians and all the populations who have an inalienable right to remain in their countries as citizens with equal rights. Our Council appeals to all parties involved to make systematic efforts without delay to bring to an end the military conflicts in the Middle East and wherever armed hostilities persist and to enable all those displaced to return to their homes. We address our appeal particularly to those in positions of power to act so that peace and justice may prevail in the countries of origin of the refugees. We urge the civil authorities, the citizens and the Orthodox Christians in the countries in which the persecuted are taking refuge to continue to offer help to the limit or even beyond the limit of their abilities”. (“Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” (16.02.2023). <https://holycouncil.org/message>).

assembly. Therefore, between 10–15 May 2022, the consultation took place in Paralimni, Cyprus.

Starting from the truth according to which God is love, the representatives of the Orthodox Churches concluded that: “love, in Orthodox Christian perspective, is not merely tolerance, but is rooted in the very nature of God and is manifest in compassion, in taking on the identifying with the sufferings of the world through ‘transforming discipleship’. Love-as-sacrifice supersedes love-as-tolerance. Through the sacrificial love of God in Jesus Christ, we are taught (1 Thessalonians 4:9), and called to emulate, a deeper experience of self-emptying love that knows no bounds. This emptying of the self in love for the other is a clear virtue and Christian preoccupation. The impetus of this love is reconciliation.”⁵⁵

Conclusions

Dialogue is a gift of God, who is constantly in dialogue with human beings created in His image. A dialogue is a fundamental experience of life and can only take place in an environment characterized by respect and responsibility, aiming at mutual understanding and clarifying misunderstandings. It is important that the participants in the dialogue make the difference between the historical context, traditions or particular beliefs and the ultimate truth. Heresy occurs when only one part of the truth is selected and absolutized in a fundamentalist way, to the exclusion of other aspects. God’s plan includes all people created out of love and it never changes, although human beings and historical circumstances may change. “We are convinced that despite cultural, religious, and racial differences, we are closer to one another than we could ever imagine.”⁵⁶

The Orthodox Church received the overflow of truth through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; truth cherished and spread within the communion of Saints. For humans, the knowledge of divine truth is a gradual process part of an endless development. Each person walks this path alongside his/her peers, without being identical to them. Each person receives and perceives truth in accordance with his/her own religious experience and capacity to understand. The ultimate

⁵⁵ Report of the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation for the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2022 ‘Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity’ Organized by the World Council of Churches & hosted by the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, Paralimni, Cyprus, May 10–15, 2022. 2022. In *Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Karlsruhe. Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity*. Eds. Ioan Sauca, Vasile-Octavian Mihoc, 13. Geneva: WCC Publications.

⁵⁶ His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. 2008. *Encountering the Mystery. Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*. New York: Doubleday, 221.

truth exists and has been revealed completely, but the way it is perceived varies from one person to another. “This is not a narrowly doctrinal vision of theological truth. However, it is an essentially spiritual vision for worldly reality, one that removes arrogance from authority and opens new ways of approaching believers of other religions. It presupposes magnanimity and charity, faith and hope, tolerance and reconciliation. It opposes forceful conversion and conflict, imposition and intolerance, aggression and violence.”⁵⁷ This approach prevents us from attributing to God intentions and decisions that are, mostly, only our own. When dialoguing with those of other faiths and ideologies, one must always keep in mind God’s sacrificial love for all people: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”⁵⁸

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⁵⁷ Bartholomew. 2008. *Encountering the Mystery. Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*, 224.

⁵⁸ John 3:16-17.

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