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Mission and Evangelism in Modern Greece. A Selective Guide through Major Missionary Initiatives in the 20th and 21st Century

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Abstract

The purpose of this Paper is to present the shift in the missionary paradigm in modern Greece, taking into consideration the major changes on a global level. Tradition and innovation are being discussed under the light of Orthodox theology. The history of the orthodox mission in the 19th and 20th century is briefly outlined, with special reference to major missionary initiatives. Thus, the unique opportunity presented by the invitation of anti-colonial movement leaders in the '60s to the Orthodox Church to preach the Gospel in the orthodox way in Africa is being discussed, and the response and results evaluated. The linked to this effort *Poresthendes* Movement is also presented, as well as the later embracement of the idea of Mission officially by the Church of Greece. After the fall of the communist regimes in the '90s new challenges have been met in the European and especially the Balkan region. Today's financial crisis is also calling for a new set up of priorities; thus the new focuses of missionary theology and praxis are critically presented.

Keywords

Church Mission, Church of Greece, Orthodoxy, Mission and Evangelism

We are living in a changing world. And we are changing too, day after day. Stagnation is death, change is a sign of life. Change is welcome, change is inevitable. Yet, not all forms of change are welcome. Some are to be avoided. Getting old, for example, is a change, getting sick is another one. But even these uncalled for forms of change cannot be dealt with by non-change, by stagnation. We can only get affiliated with them, get the most out of them, or direct the inevitable change into a different path, transform it into a positive, life giving reality. Older age or sickness can even be rejoicing experiences, if seen by a different angle, if approached as a new, advanced level and opportunity of awareness. Moving from the biological to another systemic example, to life in modern-day Greece, one cannot help noticing that the socio-economical situation is deteriorating vastly, rapidly, abruptly and immensely.¹ People despair. People commit suicide. People lose jobs, homes, hope. People die of hunger and sickness. People are angry. Yet, a new level of thinking, of raising questions, of exploring is currently at work. People wish to know who and what to blame. People try to define what to change and how. People reexamine the way to live. People philosophize. People's awareness is increasing. Devaluation is present, not in the economical sense, but in a philosophical one, as more superficial values lose their previous glamour and more essential values become center-stage in our value system. Amidst darkness and general despair, a shivering light, a humble candle is lit, the candle of faith and hope, of solidarity (in social terms) and love (in Christian terms).

Shifting paradigms call for a new missionary approach in a changing world. Local experience is intertwined with the global one, as described in the New Missionary Statement of the WCC. From an orthodox point of view, theology is but the interpretation of Eternity into Modernity. So is our missionary paradigm, traditional in its very core, yet full of variety, color and flexibility in its expressions. Truth is not an invention or an innovation, in philosophical terms.² For theology, truth is the Triune God, eternal and present in human history, known to us in time through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Logos, and through the Holy Spirit that enlightens and inspires us. What is timely, what comes and goes out of fashion, is

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88j30vh-yho&feature=share> (posted 8 Sept. 2012).

² So claimed Zisimos Lorentzatos, one of the most reputed experts in Literary theory in modern Greece, and a poet himself: «Όσοι ξεκινούν» (“To Those who are starting out”), in “Μελέτες” (Studies), bd. 1, Athens, Domos, 1994, p. 471.

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of a relative value, facilitating our meeting with the Triune God: partially now, but utterly so in His eschatological Kingdom. Life affirming ways are welcome, at all levels of human existence.

In more precise terms, I shall offer an account of the inter-dialogue among these elements in modern missionary praxis. A very short second prologue might be needed.

In the 19th century, the Russian Orthodox Church experienced one of the most flourishing periods of its missionary history, in Eastern Asia and the Alaskan peninsula, a period marked by personalities like St. Innocent of Alaska (Veniaminov), also characterized by the integration of the Orthodox faith into the local cultures, and the attainment of a new level of organization, financing and awareness in general. At that same time, the Greek Orthodox Church was making its first uncertain steps in an environment characterized by a strong craving for national self-fulfillment. The new Greek state was recognized in 1830 after 400 years of slavery to the Turks. Almost a century later, the flourishing Russian mission was abruptly interrupted by the October Revolution of 1917. On the other hand, the Greeks could not find a steady walk for many decades to come. The early 20th century was unfortunately sealed by a state of uncertainty, by war after war, including the Balkan wars, the 2 World wars and the Asian Minor Catastrophe of 1922, an event of disastrous impact on the Greek political thinking and self awareness. As Archbishop Anastasios of Albania (Yannoulatos) summarizes the situation, adding the further factor of massive immigration, which placed many Greeks in an unknown heterodox environment, all this “caused the Orthodox – in order to maintain their own faith – to close themselves temporarily up and form to a certain extent introspective communities. This tactic, understandable and perhaps needed, became time after time a habit and often took the characteristics of isolationism.”³

Only in the late 50’s did this situation start to invert. In the context of thinking on questions of mission at the International Missionary Conference (especially the 3rd one, held in Tambaram, India, 1938) and subsequently in the WCC, as well as in the context of Syndesmos (World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth), the Inter-Orthodox Centre ‘Porefthendes’ (‘Go ye’)

³ Anastasios (Yannoulatos) of Albania, *Ιεραποστολή στα Ίχνη του Χριστού (Mission's: Footsteps in Christ's Way*, Athens, Apostoliki Diakonia, 2007, p. 53 of the Greek edition.

was founded in Greece in 1961, and a first breeze of mission began to blow. At that time the protagonists of this effort, the present Archbishop of Albania Anastasios Yannoulatos and Elias Voulgarakis, later Professor of Missiology at Athens University, were voices crying in the wilderness. This was unheard-of, as is apparent from their writings of the time. Mission seemed a preposterous idea, a rash and groundless youthful enthusiasm... Our theology at that time was deeply rooted in academic rigidity, misery, peevishness and ethnocentrism. Yannoulatos and Voulgarakis, along with other colleagues and collaborators, initially founded the missionary journal *Porefthentes* ('Go ye'), published in Greek and English (1960-70). Later, in 1967, after struggles lasting many years, the Office of Foreign Mission of the Church of Greece was set up, and the popular missionary magazine *Panta ta Ethne* (All Nations) was launched in 1981, continuing up to the present. It is an important source of news about mission, but only sporadically carries short theological and theoretical articles. The hard core of *Porefthentes* visionaries and executives volunteered to work closer with the official Church, though without abandoning their original home. This choice, an ultimate combination of the "public" and "private" sectors, if one may use this metaphor, provided authority and flexibility at the same time. Some of them also followed an academic career that allowed them to do further research as well as teach about mission.

Porefthentes contributed highly to the dissemination and deepening of the idea of mission, and many imitators came along the way. To this day, *Porefthentes* is facilitating other missionary associations in terms of organizing money transfer or welcoming aid in different forms and sending it via its own transportation means, for example by arranging for common containers, when needed, or by undertaking to perform bureaucratic work for all, etc.

Porefthentes' origin coincided historically with movements of awareness within African Christianity, which sought their own freedom as well as authenticity and tradition in faith, elements discovered by some in the Orthodox Church. [The deepest source of knowledge of all this development is, for me personally, oral: the various narrations and stories told at home, along with discussions and questions heard, perhaps overheard, by me... Yet, there is written evidence as well in the two above mentioned periodicals (passim), particularly in Arch. Anastasios's book

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Στην Αφρική (In Africa)].⁴ A request was received by leaders of the Maou Maou movement, a revolutionary anti-colonialist, mainly Kikuyu rooted movement, that led to a military conflict in Kenya between 1952 and 1960, which was repressed by the British army. Despite the defeat and failure, the Maou Maou uprising set up the stage for Kenyan independence in 1963. Although the latter is also disputed by some historians, who claim that the actual riot delayed the independence, the fact is that within this movement the new revolutionary ideas of self-determination and African self-fulfillment were planted and cultivated. Parallel ideas found a favorable ground in Uganda. Three personalities marked the period: Arthour Gaduna, a Kikuyu from Kenya (who later created a schism within the Orthodox Church), Ovadia Basayakitalo, whose grandson today is Metropolitan Ionas of Uganda, and Rouvim Spartas. The latter two belonged to the Muganda ethnic group (plural: Baganda), consisting of 52 tribes, and having a leading role in Uganda as the largest ethnic group.

The challenge was enormous. Yet, the response did not match the challenge. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria was ill-prepared: it is a historical Patriarchate with ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the whole continent of Africa, but traditionally its activity extended chiefly to the Greek communities on the Mediterranean coast of Africa, which corresponds historically to Roman North Africa.⁵ Together with the inward-looking and bureaucratic attitude in Greece, this led to enormous mistakes. So when some initial steps were finally taken, they were timid, wrong and utilized unsuitable people, so that a great opportunity was lost... Nevertheless, *Porefthentes* was ready. *Porefthentes* persisted. *Porefthentes* grasped the vast opportunity on offer. While Elias Voulgarakis was working backstage, keeping an eye on everything in Athens, Anastasios went to Eastern Africa one day after his ordination as a priest (presbyteros), on the 24th of May 1964. An outbreak of malaria delayed his effort, but only temporarily. Precious time was lost. The opportunity was passing by. Yet, much was redeemed and healed later. However, if the Orthodox had the readiness, the eagerness and the missionary awareness that characterizes the Muslims, for example, the religious map of Africa would have been

⁴ Anastasios (Yannoulatos) of Albania, *Stin Afriki* (In Africa), Athens, Apostoliki Diakonia, 2010, p. 132ff, 165ff.

⁵ For further reading on the historical context, see: Sousan Raven, *Rome in Africa*, New York, Routledge, ³1993.

quite different today. And this is something we should regret about and repent for the rest of our lives...

Even so, ever since the first invitation to Africa, *Porefthentes* has been supporting the missionary work there. To this day, a significant amount of its budget, coming mainly from donations for a specific cause, is directed to Africa and in general to all Orthodox external (from a Greek point of view) missions on the globe. A group of volunteers gather there for the purpose of sewing priestly garments, baptism vests (robes) and all kinds of clothing needed for liturgical purposes. They also manufacture icons, paper on wood, or plastic icons, while keeping a good company and disseminating the concern for mission, which is also a concern against any form of racism or marginalization of people and groups of peoples.

The great shift in European history that took place in the '90s with the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, was met as a new challenge, and was just as eagerly taken up by *Porefthentes*. Without abandoning the old agenda, a new one came forward: Albania, the most deprived European state at the time, both spiritually and financially. The work done in Albania is of epic proportions. Starting out literally from the ground level, as a result of the complete destruction of the indigenous Orthodox Church, which was in ruins (a common fate for every religious segment in Albania), Archbishop Anastasios built a flourishing and living Church. It would take too long to narrate all achievements in this field. Mention must be made, however, of the generic relation between *Porefthentes* and the Albanian Orthodox Church.

Many churches were built, among which the Cathedral in Tirana is worth mentioning. Hospitals, schools of different nature and direction, even a University with technical, theoretical and medical Faculties were founded...⁶ None of this would have been possible if not for *Porefthentes* as a supporting mechanism, facilitating the work of Archbishop Anastasios.

Another, independent effort is worth mentioning; the Balkan Orthodox Youth Association, founded in 1996 in Sibiu, Romania, after a first preparatory meeting in Pendeli, Greece, held in 1993. BOYA is an organization, the concept of which is based partly on *Porefthentes*' model and partly on WSCF and Syndesmos' model. It is an Association of

⁶ Further information on <http://www.orthodoxalbania.org/new/index.php?lang=en> (official page).

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youth Organizations and Church based groups, responding to the basic missionary needs of the 90s in the Balkan region.⁷

Today, after the major crisis of 2008 that hit Greece in 2011, there has been a shift of priorities. Firstly, there is a lack of financial resources that poses different problems on different projects. They all come down to one: asphyxiation, a threat to the very existence of these projects. People have to come up with resourceful solutions, new ways to do things, and place more effort and commitment as well as invent new ways to increase productivity and achieve results.

One of the oldest problems facing orthodox mission, has resurfaced: Lack of continuity... The generation that founded *Porefthentes*, my father's generation, is now comprised of old people and is furthermore split in two neighborhoods, the homeland and the destined land. We younger members continue the effort to a certain extent, but also seek new ways to accomplish mission in Christ's way, the Trinitarian way. Urgent social problems, the disorientation of Greek society, a yearning for solidarity, a wish for clarity of mind and spirituality, all raise different priorities. I shall only mention one example, characteristic for a different style of mission: the founding of a Facebook group called *christianantirafana*,⁸ an Initiative of Christians contra racism, fascism and neo-Nazism. Being the founder of this Group, I can speak with "authority": we envision an expression of faith in relation to daily life and society. Without wishing to substitute the Church in any way, we wish to counter Nazism and fascism, inspired by the Christian faith, the Gospel, our Tradition, and the example of Christian martyrs. Living as we do in an extreme situation of violent impoverishment and despair, we wish to serve the Greek society in a solidarity movement that may also serve as a witness for the Orthodox faith.

As regards the globe, one can only say that the new and dramatic exodus of our younger generation, the best and most educated of our youth, to the ends of the earth looking for work and a better fortune, might reveal, through this human tragedy, a new opportunity to manifest the ethos of martyrdom which governs our faith. From martyrdom to witness...

⁷ <http://www.boyanet.org/index.php/en/about-us/10-balkan-orthodox-youth-association-18-years-of-continuous-presence-and-activity> (official page). I happened to serve as the founding General Secretary of this Association, taking it from the first conception of the very idea to its official foundation.

⁸ <http://www.facebook.com/groups/christianantirafana/>.

“From death to life...”, as we sing at Easter. In Greek, the word revolution (επανάσταση) is based on the word resurrection (ανάσταση). And what is urgently needed more than ever is the revolutionary Christian ethos of the first Christian community. A life affirming way and much more: a fullness of life.⁹

⁹ “Affirming life in all its fullness is Jesus Christ’s ultimate concern and mission (John 10:10)”: Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in changing Landscapes. A New WCC Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism (2012) (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes.html>, posted 5.09.2012).