

The Social Mission of the Church Orthodox and Patristic Perspectives

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Abstract

Many theologians and sociologists claim that in order to restore the social and postmodern man's original image and resemblance to God, turning him into a “complete person,” with spiritual, religious, or cultural needs, a complex theological approach is needed. This approach, known as Social Theology, includes both a social dimension and a theological one in a Chalcedonian unity and morally regulates the relationship between man and society, between Church and modern and postmodern secular society.

By means of this term, the Orthodox Church and Theology want to recover the social, just as “secularized culture experiences the recovery of religion, which it has transferred to the private sphere of people's life;” it summons the social to dialogue, collaboration and mutual responsibility, in order to recover the “contemporary individual.”

Keywords: *mission, Church, social theology, Church Fathers, Orthodox Church*

I. Introduction

From a historic point of view, the Cristian Church appears in history at Pentecost under the Eastern sign and the spirit of gospel which was inspired by the Holy Spirit to Apostles and to everyone that came for this event in Jerusalem (Mircea 1995, 62).

The selection of the Twelve Apostles was already a sign of universality for the gospel of Jesus Christ: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19), and the presence of so many nations at Pentecost (Acts 2:9-12) shows that Avraam, Isaac and Jacob's Jesus "God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: he is Lord of all (Acts 10:34-36)."

This is one of the fundamental ideas of the New Testament, which the Christian Church had to defend from its beginnings. The missionary trips made by the Church have their basis in the deep universality of salvation, within and through Jesus Christ. Counteracting the tendency of believing that the church is a "christian" community, isolated from the world, First Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. used a unique and original theological definition to say that Jesus Christ, "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven." "For us men" He created a missionary and sociable behavior for Christians.

From its beginning, the Christian Church engaged in at least two confessional directions: one, by feeding its own, managing the inner life, the liturgical and social life of the Christian community; and two, by preaching the Gospel to the ones from outside of the community, "Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them (Acts 11:3)." So, the Church appears as an Eucharistic community (Bobrinskoy and Bisericii 2004, 103-108), God's already redeemed nation which joins together to commemorate God's acts in the history of salvation, living a new life within the Holy Spirit, but as an apostolic missionary and social community as well, which has the consciousness of a special reference to those who believe (Acts 11:17).

We can notice that the Orthodoxy always combines the spiritual element with the social one. "The process of holiness, says a theologian, is the most holy Orthodox service the Samaritans, the experience of philanthropy, of following Christ in the way of sacrifice for any man. Asceticism, so characteristic of Orthodoxy is not only a solitary exercise purification, but also conscious expression of solidarity with the short (Plămădeală 1980, 299)."

II. The Social Mission of the Church

In the Orthodox outlook, the social mission of the church is very important, but it cannot and must not be separated from the sacramental mission, this one being the most specific mission for the church. Other organs of state, especially the state itself, have to care about the social life of its citizens, but the Church's first priority should be the spiritual part of the population, their soul salvation, but without neglecting the material part (Matthew 6:33).

We do not have to separate the sacramental part from the social one, but we do not have to only focus on the social activity of the church and forget about its sacramental activity either. Our Savior himself did not come with a social or an economic plan to solve the problems of his time, but he gave us a religious revelation, which should be understood as an infinite source of inspiration for the moral conduct of believers of all times.

Jesus Christ's mission was a religious, mystic and holy one, but he was not preoccupied with the social dimension of it. What can be the meaning of the fact that the Savior summarised all laws and prophets into the love for God, when half of this command has its focus in organizing the humanity to live together in the Holy Spirit of love for Jesus Christ, the Son Of God?

We get another proof of this from the Savior when, on another occasion, he synthesised the law and the prophets in the command, "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." As the Savior and the Holy Apostles chose to prioritise the spiritual part, the church did the same thing in history. But neither the Church could ignore the social part, as Jesus Christ did not ignore it either. And this is because in God's Kingdom you get from here, from Earth. In this sense, a contemporary theologian says: "Without God's Kingdom fully identify with society and our times, we must remember that you can not get to the acquisition of the first apart from the other two. God's kingdom opens here in the earthly social life (Abrudan 1981, 154)."

The Acts of the Apostles makes complete sense on this subject, mainly when it presents the Christian life at its beginnings. Like that, at first it shows the essence of life for the first Christians, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" and then speaks about the highest form of love, Agape (Acts 2:42). Without any doubt, the Church remains faithful to its mission, by continuing to save, but its meaning is shared by serving (Stăniloae 1972, 338).

By his Advent and his doings, Jesus Christ concentrated all of God's behavior and acts for humans and all the human interactions in one single world: "philanthropy" (1 Timothy 3:4), which means the love for mankind, mercy, benevolence, alms, kindness, help, justice, courtesy, favour and so on.¹

We are called to be God's children and to be closed to him. But the way to God, goes through our neighbour. Avva Dorotei shows this way as a very well made comparison "let's imagine a circle. The rays are starting from the centre. The longer they extend beyond the circle, the more they distance from the centre

1 The Romanian, Greek and Cypriot Orthodox Churches mostly use the word *philanthropy* as a term for the socio-diaconal aspect, while the Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches use the term *mercy*.

and one radius from the other. This is true in reverse as well. The closer to the centre they come, the closer one radiates to the other. Now let's imagine that this circle is the world, and the rays are the world's paths. The centre is God. When someone wants to reach the centre, to God, they get closer to God as well as closer to their kind. This is true in reverse as well. When they get further from God, they get further from their kind as well. So, mankind can only meet in the centre, where they form a holy-human body, a unity of harmony; only if they get closer to their kind, they get equally closer to God (John 14, 2:20-23)."

As Christians, we cannot ignore the society or the world that we live in and only to live in "the ivory tower of the liturgical space," is in our duty to "exorcize" what is bad in the world and to "re-christian," meaning to give a Christian sense to what already has social value, cultural, scientific, civic, economic policy, and so on; because everyones life affects everyone and the ecclesial life is very well organised from a Deacon-point of view; philanthropic changes "social" in Church.

With this in mind, we think that there is a need for a viable Social Theology. Missionary and Practical Theology are not one that is viewed as a theology for the civil society, separated from the one in the church, but one that is viewed as the last change for healing the "sociable," in their free falling into secularism, and their turn into his Sacred Body.

This implies the communion with God, of one to another, with itself and with nature. For this to happen, the Church must remain a permanent connection with the divine grace, as a first priority, but just as important is not to lose connection with the world that they live in. To keep this order, priority and balance it has to continue to act in the subsidiary social field and not to be viewed as a replacement of the state or to not replace the state, and not to be understood as a social service provider, replacing the state.

J. Moltmann writes that "our thinking is already operationalised, as we search for the truth and we know it only in practice. We are tempted to make a programme out of every hope of believe. Which does not make it a valuable act" (Moltmann 1977, 289). But in Orthodoxy, the dynamic of life and of naturalness as priority in front of every realisation and ruling. To put it differently, it cannot fall or crash in a social activism, like other churches from the West had fallen, which reduced the meaning of their social serving, putting together this phrase: "A church that does not serve serves nothing ("Eine Kirche, die nicht dient, dient zu nichts")," but it has to deal first with the spiritual duties and then with the social ones - philanthropic, but with a Christian motivation, in Jesus Christ and his Church, under the supervision and blessing of the Holy Synod.

The gracious dimension given to the apostolic inheritance and the historic one, together with the experience of the Church to serve the neighbor, gives sense to the Deacon-philanthropic act, as it comes from the infinite spring of Holy

Spirit (Grun 2005, 78). With this in mind, Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartolomeu I, said: “in Orthodoxy it cannot be imagined philanthropy without synodality, as there is no subsidiarity without synodality (Neagu 2005, 6).”

By subsidiarity, the Orthodoxy defines its own responsibility and initiative in the social life, which is part of the Holy Body of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:23), but it gives priority to the spiritual mission, without ignoring the importance of the social mission. So, in relationship with the state or the civil society, the church works by the subsidiarity principle,² but shown as a natural mission for the world; it serves not in a subsidiary way or a least important way, but as a priority ad straight from Jesus Christ’s demand (Matthew 22:2).

In this context, the church stands up and gives blessing to acts that come “bottom-up,” both the individual ones and the civil community ones, so not only those which are started directly from the Holy Synod. It underlines the freedom, the dignity, the rights and the duties of mankind, which is “in his own image and likeness” to justify the ecclesial involvement. That being said the human being has priority in front of any institution on Earth. In this case, the priority is the mankind, as a person, and as a second priority or a lower priority are the institutions.

III. The Biblical and Patristic Foundations of Social Missiology

God loved mankind so much that he had his own Son murdered for our salvation (John 3:16). The providence of God, that comes out of the the Holy Trinity works for everything: it heals sicknesses, drives away demons, it cares for the sad ones, it helps the one in need: poor, orphan, widow, hungry, thirsty, foreigner, imprisoned, naked, helpless, sorrow, slave, dying, despised, oppressed, deserted, spoiled, invaded etc.

For these helpful acts and social mission, the Romanian Orthodox Church, as part of the Universal Orthodox Church, adopted in its social doctrine a list of biblically and patristic bases (see Vizitiu 2001), from which we will name the most important ones for our study. In the orthodox tradition the following biblical texts are particularly emphasized:

“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3).

2 The principle is found in the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), and it is based both on the freedom and dignity of man as a person, as well as on the structure and particularity of the small communities which organize themselves much more easily and know their needs directly.

“Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God (II Corinthians 1:4).”

“Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us (Luke 1:78).”

“But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us (Ephesians 2:4).”

“Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved (Ephesians 2:5).”

“And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6).”

“In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace (Ephesians 1:7).”

“He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love (1 John 4:8).”

“In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might through him (1 John 4:9).”

Among the most important of the church fathers, St. Basil the Great (1989, 225) remembers two great parables of sacrifice: the servant of God, Moses, preferred to erase his name from the book of God, rather than not to have his sin forgiven by the people; and Paul prayed to be saved his brethren, even though he should be anathema from Christ.

Blessed Augustine of Hippo (1985, 65) prayed in the Confessions: “I received the comforts of human milk, and not my mother or the nuns filled my breasts, but You, through them ... let me, but let me speak to you Love, what earth and Ash are ... Your mercy is the one I’m talking about ...” Elsewhere, Blessed Augustine says, “I call you, my God, my mercy, that you have done me, and you have not forgotten the one who has forgotten you (1985, 287).”

Several other important ideas in the patristic and orthodox tradition are worth mentioning, even if only in brief:

Mankind seen from a faithful perspective with a Christological destiny, as its origin is in Jesus Christ. The real human being was “born when Jesus Christ came to life and was born (Cabasilas 604A),” and the birthday of Jesus is the “birthday of mankind” (Basil 1473A). Humans are theological conceived and to be real human beings they have to live theocentric and Christocentric. When they deny God, they deny themselves and they self-destroy themselves (Nellas 2002, 77). From an anthropological point of view, humans are the centre of the Deacon-philanthropy. They can develop by believing and loving God, by being loved and caressed by God (2 Corinthians 1:3). God is not an object, but the

Subject of knowledge and love; the relationship between him and ourselves is not possible by knowledge, but by the union of ourselves with him by love. The philanthropic Trinitarian character is tied up to the doxological character. This is why every pray starts with the blessing of the Holy Trinity. God is a source of inspiration, of power and help in our philanthropical serving. We copy the life-style of the Holy Trinity. God, whose life takes part of God, by Jesus Christ, is not an individual, but is part of the Holy Trinity. The face of God, in which form the mankind is crated, does not refer only to his individuality, but it takes part in his entire nature, including all interpersonal and social interactions between mankind. From the Holy Trinity we have the primordial spring and the example of our existence (Bria 1969, 777-787). In their community the human discovers the divine presence (Pavel 1967, 182-190). Actually, our love for others is from our love for divinity, is the visible and practical part of it and our participation in the Holy Trinity (Stăniloae 1978, 402). The Trinitarian mystery is not a theoretical concept, but a center of living being and our christian becoming. He can teach us a helpful education and solidarity between each other.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that even though the social mission of the Church in the Orthodox tradition is not at all as developed as in the Catholic tradition, there are attempts to explore in more theological and biblical depths the Orthodox understanding of the social dimension of mission. As we have seen, there is a strong Christological and biblical foundations for this but the main important source for the Orthodox thinking in this direction remains still the patristic tradition. And we are invited to return to these amazing resources of our faith and mission and appropriate them for the contemporary mission of the church in the world.

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Društveno poslanje Crkve – ortodoksna i patristička gledišta

Sažetak

Mnogi teolozi i sociolozi tvrde kako je za reafirmaciju socijalne i postmoderne izvorne čovjekove slike i sličnosti s Bogom potrebno čovjeka iznova pretvoriti u „cjelovitu osobu“, sa svim njegovim duhovnim, religijskim ili kulturnim potrebama, a za to je svakako potreban složen teološki pristup. Ova vrsta pristupa, poznata kao socijalna teologija, uključuje društvenu i teološku dimenziju u kaledonskom jedinstvu te moralno regulira odnos čovjeka i društva, napose odnos između Crkve i modernog te postmodernoga sekularnog društva.

Ovim izrazom Pravoslavna Crkva i teologija žele ponovno afirmirati društvenost, baš kao što „sekularizirana kultura doživljava ponovnu afirmaciju religije, koju je prenijela u sferu privatnosti ljudskoga života“; poziva na društveni dijalog, suradnju i uzajamnu odgovornost, sa svrhom afirmiranja „suvremenog pojedinca“.