Inter-Religious and inter-Christian Dialogue – a Contemporary Ecclesial Educational Priority

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Abstract: The contemporary world is dominated by communication and dialogue despite conflicts and wars of all kinds. Dialogue is an actual existential need and a responsibility that the current generation has for the future. From this perspective, inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue is a life necessity and a pledge of genuine faith in God, because, beyond everything that separates us, He is the Creator of all of us, the source of life, and we are all part of the same human family. If inter-Christian dialogue seeks to achieve the unity of the Church of Christ by concrete actions, theological dialogue and philanthropic gestures, inter-religious dialogue aims at establishing communication bridges in order to give common testimony as regards matters of wide interest, such as the ecological issue, defence of unborn life, peace, justice or social equity. Modern inter-Christian or ecumenical movement arose about a century ago and although the road to full unity seems long, many steps have been made in this direction. The inter-religious movement especially focuses on the dialogue among the major monotheistic religions of the world and today it gives us many hopes. Our study aims to show that ecumenical and inter-religious education is a necessity of our times that may lead to defusing many conflicts and preventing future tensions based on religion. Here, we have in mind the education within the Romanian Orthodoxy received during the religion classes in school and also with the help of the media.

Keywords: *dialogue; inter-Christian; inter-religious; education; cooperation.*

How to cite: Ghibanu, I.A. (2018). Inter-Religious and inter-Christian Dialogue – a Contemporary Ecclesial Educational Priority. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 10(2), 36-44. <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/44>

1. Introduction

Inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue is an educational priority of the Christian church, in general, and of Romanian Orthodoxy, in particular, as we live in an age of encounters, of migration, in which the walls dividing cultures and civilisations crumble to the ground. The historical context nowadays favours the inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue; but from a doctrinal point of view it is based on the fact that man is God's image-bearer, though some theologians state that humanity in its entirety is God's image-bearer and not each individual, which emphasises the need for communion and dialogue. Furthermore, a better understanding among nations and communities requires a dialogue that should concern the spiritual foundations of humanity, for it is well-known that religion has a great ability to dynamise the human being. It should also be specified that there are voices that challenge the necessity of this type of dialogue, starting from a doctrinal imperialism and a missionary exclusivism; however, they do not represent the official position of the Orthodox Church, but are merely erratic voices underlying ideologically the fear, insecurity and lack of faith in their own doctrinal truth (Bria, 1999). This study aims to show the educational urgency, at the Romanian orthodox ecclesial level, of openness and inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue.

2. Theoretical Background

The theological context of the topic dealt with in this study is complex and vast, as we have various nuanced ideas and approaches (Himcinschi, 2003).

Those who dispute the need for openness and dialogue at the ecumenical and inter-Christian level rely on the idea of fear of losing one's purity of faith or of one's ecclesial integrity being affected (Yannaras, 2009).

This attitude arises from the idea that all the other Christian denominations are heretical, i.e. they have strayed from the fundamental doctrinal truth and if they still retain elements of this truth, vague reflections of it, this is of no practical significance. Moreover, the other religions are considered to be at best failed attempts of man to reach God, if not diabolical delusions.

Naturally, this perspective represents the anti-ecumenical fundamentalist extreme, which is against establishing any contacts with a major religion of the world. There are also nuances according to which all heterodox are outside God's soteriological plan, based on a doctrinal choice.

This perspective comes especially from isolated monastic backgrounds that ideologise the fear of strangers, of alterity in general and refuse the authenticity of another religious experience, accepting only their own. This attitude has been theorised by some theologians belonging to the Greek space, like Romanides, or to the Serbian one, such as Justin Popović.

After the convening of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in 2016, there were voices rising against the synodal declaration on the inter-Christian dialogue, but the tone was low, which shows that the Orthodox people are alien to these exaggerations regarding the understanding and living of faith.

The Orthodox world has been characterised by wisdom and harmony and we believe it is still true to its own historical path.

Against this perspective, the official position of Romanian Orthodoxy, and of all Orthodox Churches and major Christian denominations for that matter, is that openness is essential because the inter-Christian dialogue is a missionary necessity in order for the world to have faith, in order for the Christian mission to have credibility. This way, through dialogue, churches will share each other's postmodern missionary experience because unity is an ecclesial inherent need (Pontifical Council for Religious Dialogue, 1999).

Orthodoxy participates with interest in the inter-Christian dialogue because it thus has the possibility to become known and share its rich spiritual experience, its liturgical and dogmatic treasure that may provide the contemporary individual with a testimony of the experience of the undivided Church.

The inter-religious dialogue offers the opportunity to conjugate the efforts of the major religions of the world in matters of common interest, such as issues of ecology, human rights etc., and, above all, fosters mutual respect, the elimination of proselytism and of religious conflicts.

Running away from dialogue and openness implies a manifestation of fear and weakness, the fact that those who behave in such a way are not sure of their faith, otherwise how can one make their own religion, in our case Orthodoxy, known?

This study aims to emphasise that dialogue is part of human ontology, for man, as a creation in the image of God, either as an individual or as a community or human totality, has dialogue and openness inscribed in their most intimate structure, according to the image of the Holy Trinity (Yannoulatos, 2003).

Moreover, we would also like to emphasise that the ecumenical dialogue voices the Saviour's express wish, as is evident in Chapter 17 of the

Gospel of John, and the only possibility to revive the Gospel preaching missionary work with great power.

Without dialogue, the world slides down the dangerous slope of war, tensions, hate and isolation. We do affirm that wars with apparently religious causes could have been avoided and can be prevented through dialogue, knowing each other and cooperation in projects of common interest, an activity doubled by an exchange of experience at the level of the mission in post-modernity.

Last but not least, it should be stressed that there is a significant Romanian diaspora especially in Europe or the dialogue with the major Christian denominations (Catholicism, Protestantism and Neo-Protestantism) or religions (Islam and Judaism).

From an educational point of view, in Orthodox theological seminaries and faculties there has been, for a long time but more pregnantly after the 1990's, a concern that has led to the establishment of missiology and ecumenism departments or classes of ecumenism and elements of inter-religious dialogue precisely in order to educate future clerics in the spirit of respect for those of other faiths, for openness and cooperation and to build an inclusivistic and integrating view of human society.

At the same time, inter-Christian and inter-religious cooperation actions have intensified at the level of dialogue and scientific bilateral and multilateral meetings and of practical projects as well.

In the generous spirit of universal Orthodoxy, priests more often than not manifest this wisdom of dialogue in educating the herd they shepherd. Moreover, religion teachers have the same reconciling, tolerant and open-minded spirit in their approaches in most cases, for the purpose of this openness is to create concrete dialogue bridges, collaboration and cooperation with our brethren of other Christian denominations or religions (Plămădeală, 1979).

To educate for dialogue, to cooperate and collaborate does not mean to give up something of one's own faith or authenticity of Christian experience, but to vouch for it and accept the other's pledge, to act as sons and daughters of the Same Heavenly Father, to His praise and our welfare.

3. Argument of the paper

This chapter consists in a key idea of the paper, which should be reasoned or contradicted by means of theoretical analysis (not by empirical evidence).

The central idea of our study is that education for inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue must be the main preoccupation of the Church in this new century and millennium, for dialogue and cooperation may bestow a more stable, more secure, peaceful and prosperous world on future generations (Zielinsky, 1998).

Moreover, it is the only way to get rid of any occasion of religiously grounded conflict, as this is nonsense and an outrageous crime: no one can ever kill, inflict suffering or raise walls among their fellow creatures based on religion, which, by its very etymology, shows us it is a phenomenon that builds bridges and generates dialogue.

This idea is biblically and patristically supported, for the Saviour Himself prayed for all to be as one, while the contacts between Christians and non-Christians have been frequent since the beginning.

Then, a relationship of dialogue and cooperation can only bring good to our world and testify about the fact that religion means good, light, hope, peace, open-mindedness, generosity and truth. One does not give up any of their own truth when one knows the other one's. One never loses anything when giving, but only grows rich.

Dialogue-oriented education is the most important legacy we leave to generations ahead, in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, in the purest spirit of the will of Christ the Saviour, for His work of redemption and salvation never excludes anyone in any time (Bobrinskoy, 1999).

4. Arguments to support the thesis

The arguments supporting the abovementioned thesis rely on the fact that all people have the same Creator, the same eschatological purpose, the same fundamental needs, and that man is ontologically opened for dialogue. It is just as true that we speak about *homo religious* as it is real that we speak about man as a *dialogical being*, opened for alterity and spiritual and relational enrichment.

Dialogue, cooperation and educational openness to all this are natural means of togetherness that facilitate a vast, durable and healthy development of our society on its way to harmony and prosperity.

Education for inter-Christian and inter-religious openness is a need given by the contemporary migrationistic context when we interact with people of Christian denominations and religions that are different from our own. We have the example of the numerous Romanians that have migrated to various countries and have been well received, not discriminated because

of their religion and, most of all, they have often created mixed families, so dialogue-oriented education is extremely necessary.

Numerous migrants, especially Muslims, who have come to European countries and who will probably arrive in our country too, require an educational approach of inter-religious dialogue, because we need collaboration and cooperation, mutual respect and avoidance of any conflict. We must not forget that Christian-Muslim relationships have not always been tense and must not make the unforgivable mistake of considering any Muslim as a terrorist or refusing dialogue. Muslim civilisation is more than the bad news we sometimes receive; it is much more complex.

Through understanding and cooperation Christian Churches and religions can successfully support a deepening of our world's unity, especially in the face of a threat of crises of any kind, economic and moral in particular, can help purify those isolationist, obsolete and bad structures and mentalities that have led to this state of affairs (Riccardi, 1998).

Education is gradual and systematic, therefore we cannot have great expectations outright; however, it is obvious that our world is more opened for dialogue than the mediaeval and puts less passion into supporting pros and cons, which easily leaves room for dialogue and understanding.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

One might criticise the too small steps and deadlocks of these dialogues and the still minor results of education for inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue or the existence of still consistent fundamentalisms and fanaticisms, but we are still in an early educational stage (Trachy, 1981).

The most important counterarguments regarding the above thesis refer to the inter-religious dialogue being accused of not having produced a significant closeness among churches and a full communion and since Orthodoxy is the only true faith, dialogue is useless. Whoever wants to know the truth should become Orthodox. That is what one of the fiery opponents of education and inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue would say. Furthermore, relationships with heretics contaminate and are but a waste of time or power to cope with their wish to convert us.

Despite this attitude, religious wars are still being fought and inter-confessional conflicts are still being carried out; in a word, with all the dialogue and education, people are still dying from real or false religious causes.

Education in the above sense may lead to moral or religious laxism, dimming the religious experience and Christian testimony and possibly some may even lose their faith by entering into dialogue with the heterodox.

6. Dismantling the arguments against

All the above counterarguments actually support, in a negative logic, the inter-Christian and inter-religious education. Dialogue is being created with small steps just like education and cannot produce immediate effects – one can only note the difference between our present world and the world a century ago or that of the Middle Ages.

With small but sure steps does one advance into history, but the effects can be seen in decades or even centuries. Nothing is too much when it comes to peace and understanding.

A significant closeness among churches has occurred, but it is not as great as our expectation and it is important to remark that Orthodoxy has become known and today has a firm and respected voice despite its numerical minority. The major Christian denominations view it as the Church that has best preserved the tradition of the undivided Church, with a vast liturgical and doctrinal richness. Full communion has not been yet achieved, but the necessary steps have been made towards it; it will never be achieved unless doctrinal dissensions are reconciled.

Religious wars and conflicts do exist, but their true origin lies not in religion but in economic, social or political matters that are clothed in religious pretexts, for it is known that they give much impetus to people and human communities. It is precisely through dialogue-oriented education that we hope to attenuate to the maximum the asperities among people and communities of various Christian denominations or religions (Remond, 2003).

The so-called contamination with heterodox religious ideas is a false issue, because no one has ever lost their faith as a result of dialogue and education – on the contrary, it has got deeper and stronger through contradiction and difference. No one has become Catholic in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue or because they have been educated to be tolerant, and the examples could continue.

Moral or doctrinal laxism that those who oppose the need for religious education fear is also a false issue, for it is through dialogue and knowledge that one's own faith grows, evolves and becomes missionary. To respect those of other denomination or religion does not mean to approve of their doctrinal errors or the different style of religious manifestation or to

borrow something from them. Nor does it imply to disregard or appreciate too little one's own faith, but rather to better appreciate it, to get to know it through difference and to preach it to others as well (Montzarides, 2004).

Therefore, all counterarguments that dispute the main thesis defended in this study are marginal, contextual and superficial and can by no means be convincing.

7. Conclusions

As shown before, education for inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue is an educational necessity of Romanian Orthodoxy, keeping up with the needs of our times and the contemporary challenges of our society. Inter-religious dialogue does not seek to create a false super Church, with elements from all Christian denominations, or to convert to Catholicism or Protestantism, but to achieve the unity of Christ's Church. So, inter-religious dialogue does not aim to create a single religion – that would not be possible – , but to enable cooperation among the great religions of the world in matters that regard the defence and protection of human life and dignity or of the integrity of creation, for better knowingness and understanding among believers (Moraru, 2006).

Ecclesial educational urgency for dialogue, as previously shown, is an inherent churchly necessity and a current need of our nation and community in the country and in the diaspora.

We need a commitment full of determination and courage to educate the young generation in the spirit of mutual respect, cooperation and collaboration, because stability, peace and prosperity of the society of tomorrow depends on this noble educational enterprise as well (Manolescu, 2005).

Romanian Orthodoxy is well aware of playing a part in the creation of the history of our people and our world and views education for inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue as a duty, contributing to the work of world renewal, of removing evil and darkness and of healing sin in the world.

The dialogue-oriented educational commitment of the Romanian Orthodox Church relies on the will to follow the will to unity of Christ the Saviour in the spirit of dialogue, peace and harmony characteristic of the Eastern Christianity (Moraru, 2006).

Therefore, the role of Christian religions and denominations is essential for the future development of our continent and we should grant it proper attention (Himcinschi, 2006).

Religious and confessional diversity is a challenge for the 3rd millennium Europe, which can provide not only a creative experience of faith, but can also assist the economic and political endeavour. Only together can believers, regardless of their Christian religion or denomination, bring stability, peace, harmony and a transcendent perspective of the efforts of building the unified and unique European space, giving the world the opportunity to experience the sharing of supreme love.

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