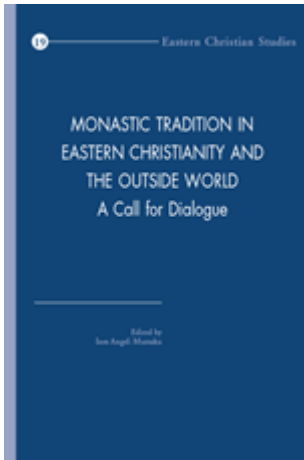


Ines Angeli Murzaku (ed.)



Review:

Monastic tradition in Eastern Christianity and the Outside World. A Call for Dialogue

Peters Leuven – Paris – Walpole,
MA – 2013, pp. 286.

Reviewed by
Mihail-Liviu Dinu

The present volume by its inner-essence of Christianity dialogue and by its ecumenical interdisciplinary, lends itself to several conclusions, which must be understood as multiple aspects that create the image of what Christian monastic tradition means in today's word.

The present work is structured on three vast chapters; each of them



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tries to deliver the core aspects of understanding monasticism. It must be pointed out that the editor of this project, Ines Angeli Murzaku, a very well know American Professor of Ecclesiastical History, shows a real approach of the inter-Christianity and inter-religious dialogue, which has proved very fruitful in the inner-essence of Eastern Christianity.

According to the editor, this project starts at the Greek monastery of Mother of God at Abbot of Grottaferrata, near the city of Rome, keeping in mind the words of Saint Cyprian of Carthage: "*They do not speak great things, but live them*".

The purpose of such a project, I believe, starts from the fact that monasticism is not a phenomenon particular to east of west Christianity. Similar forms of monasticism are to be found in other types of religions, particularly those of Asia.

From the *introduction* the editor warns that the principle of "*imitatio Christi*" is foreign to Eastern Christian spirituality, instead of it, there is a way for the human person to participate in the very life of the Holy Trinity. This participation through the Holy Spirit or through Grace is called in the Orthodox theology "*theosis*".

The essays which make up the first part of the volumes focus particularly on Eastern monasticism, in his journey to achieve "*theosis*". According to *Professor James R. Payton, Jr.*, from Redeemer University College, Ontario, Canada, the monastic life starts from the beginning of Christianity, and we observe it from the late of the 4th century, and those communities' role was to offer to Christian society a spiritual wisdom and experience to sanctify it. Nevertheless, the communities' goal was to fulfill the divine expectation: to attain likeness to God. With help from Church Fathers (like Saint Ignatius of Antioch, Saint Jerenom, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and *Saying of the Fathers* ...) the professor understands that there are three ways, or patterns in the monastic life: the first is to grow in the practice of piety, as the monks were like spiritual athletes, the second dealt more specifically with monks who had fallen into sin. The monastic community was seen as a whole, and this

direction sees the way that Jesus, the incarnate Son, overcomes sin and death. In the third pattern, monks were admonished to be like God in showing their love towards sinners.

From that facts, the theology of Maximus the Confessor comes as a conclusion: “*Only God is good by nature, and only the one who imitates God is good by will*” – Byzantine monastic literature teaches that lover towards other must become a way of life, a mark of those, who are already bearing God’s image, seek to grow in His likeness.

The article of Professor *Theodore Damian* shows that monasticism is a phenomenon that powerfully influences the bi-millennial Church life and history. The author focuses on three elements of ascetic life: the desert, the pure heart and dispassion, and silence (*hesychia*). The power from the desert comes from a Christic model which is also related to Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness by which, through fasting and vigilance, Christ defeated the devil. The desert is the place for humans to rebuild the word and human life, the location of silence where a human person becomes so powerful, but also a place of confrontation: with evil and with passions, and with the self. Part of this discipline is the purification of the heart and dispassion. The professor concludes that the monastic life is there for the word as a holy and silent sign and as an inspiration for the new vision of how we can position our self in relation with God, with others and why not with the whole word.

The second part of the book focuses more on the western monasticism, and the editor just made a soft transition from the east side with three articles, and the last two are exclusively from the western sides. Also, the professor, *Enrico Morini*, well known by research focuses on Greek monasticism and the relations between Greek and Latin Churches; he took us into a geo-ecclesiological paradigm, the one that proves that back in the history the south of Italy was jurisdictional an enclave of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Furthermore, the Italo-Greek monasticism it is on the frontier between the Latin and Greek

monasticism, and today we saw in it a bridge that bound the two monastic experiences. Consequently, the professor states that Greek monasticism is the only one that gives more than it receives. In other words, if it gets material assets, e.g. *hospitality*; it is asked to share in exchange a liturgical experience and a spiritual teaching.

The motive of East-West dialogue is tracked by Professor *Ines Angeli Murzaku*, with a particular focus on the Monastery of the Mother of God of Grottaferrata. This article offers a historical development of the jurisdiction of the monastery during the centuries. Grottaferrata bears a dual memory to both united and divided Church. The Monastery was founded at the beginning of the eleventh century-1004, exactly fifty years before the schism between Eastern and Western Churches, by Saint Neilos, a Greek abbot from Calabria and established there the monastic rules of Saint Basil the Great. Therefore, the call of the Monastery's past, present and future are to encounter the dialogue between the Greek-Catholic Churches and its original roots; for that reason, we may find the Monastery as a living nexus between East and West. The inner center of Monks life, namely the *Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom* is rooted in the Constantinople tradition, established in southern Italy when the region was ruled by the Byzantines. The liturgy took on certain features of its own and thus came to be called Italo-Byzantine: an Italian variant of the Byzantine. The author affirms that Grottaferrata is a constant reminder of the first millennium united Christendom, and her monastic tradition is not a parallel development but part and parcel of the same Christian Tradition.

A next article is a personal approach and a living dialogue of Professor *Gregory Glazov*, and his vivid journal, with a personal note, has the role to observe that the Church message was veiled and subversive, and only for the targeted believers. The Church had in that period the role to stay along with the community of Christian and to inspire them and motivate to the great feeling of freedom, which is part of Its teaching. Thus, the

believers, the priests, the monks, and nuns were the target of communist dictatorship. Some of them will end in prisons, and even the father of the professor was part of that infamous process. This article explores, in particular, the role which monks played in helping people commit themselves to the joy of Resurrection. It is to be pointed out that this role was their end then. Nowadays, the struggle with persecution and fear of prison is not a concern but a part of the experience.

The next composition belongs to *John A. Radano*, who provides from the very beginning the position of Holy See towards ecumenism, and particularly to the Orthodox Churches. Starting with the Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegration*, the Catholic Church committed itself to the modern ecumenical movement, and the monasticism is an important factor to promote Christian unity. It is important to underline that in recent times, even in the Protestant world, the monastic life has come back (e.g. Taizé Community in France, or The Grandchamp Community of sisters at Lake Neuchatel). The task for dialogue appears in the second part where there is a presentation of the Benedictine order and the valuable contribution of two Orthodox leaders, Patriarch Atenagora I and Pope Shenouda III, both with the monastic background.

The last essay of *Dermont Quinn* is a journey to the Irish monasticism who swept into Ireland in the 6th century. Besides that the roots of the Celtic monasticism were influenced by the mystical theology of Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. The European setting of a dialogue between Irish monasticism and continental Europe must be founded in the centuries after the fall of Rome when frightening Christians – *peregrini pro Christo* - found a refuge in the country. The author emphasizes the dialogue between *cult* and *culture*, and in the fact that culture sometimes is a product of monastic impulse, but for a while, the monastery and the culture were not so much “in dialogue”. The Ireland experience of monasticism remains a “*desert into ocean*” as sometimes, the

desire for solitude and wilderness - of monks -, can be a hard and rewarding side of Irish monasticism.

The third and the last part of the book are an exciting inter-faith engagement and openness from the Pan-Christian monastic word with other religion, particularly with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Professor *David Bertaina* starts with a legend that shows the early forms of dialogue between Christians and Muslims showing their common roots. The recent dialogues have increased substantially since the beginning of the twenty-first century. From the idea of encounter, they develop four forms of dialogue: life, spirituality, action and theology.

The article's author explores several Islamic and Christian texts to show the continuity and the respect for each other. Medieval monastic stories should be the ground for future dialogue. The professor stresses the fact that western culture promotes religious pluralism within a secular context. Christian monks living in Islamic lands were faced with similar forms of plurality, and yet they can dialogue because they share civilization and a common language and way of thinking.

The following article by Professor *Thomas Matus* shows that the mystical tradition of Orthodox Church offers to Christianity a way to approach Hinduism. Here the *hesychasm*, translated as "to be quiet" is understood as mystical quiet. While the Yoga it is a way to understand the union "to join, yoke together", as it refers to the union between body and soul; and Raja-Yoga it is translated as the yoga of the king, the initiation granted to noble souls. Our author brings from Christian side as for example - Evagrius Ponticus, who believe in the contemplation of God in the light of self, more close to the way that it is the Pantajali's definition of yoga. From this essay, we understand that analogies of mystical experience are sometimes a basic foundation for the interreligious dialogue.

The last essay of the book, write by *Rita M. Gross*, a professor with considerable experience in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. From the beginning, the author places the two religions on

different grounds. Gross suggested that many leaders of many religions have realized that it is important to come and understand one another's religion, like in the very beginning the first step was the meeting between Thomas Merton and Dalai Lama. The professor said that learning about other traditions enhance your tradition, which is why Max Mueller, the founder of the discipline of comparative studies in religion said famously, "*to know one religion is to know none*".

I discovered this book with joy and happiness, and during my reading, it was a remarkable synthesis of an unedited, wide thematic and with interconfessional openings. The editor opens a new perspective that faces today's world, and maybe the next challenge for a future edition will be the promoting of peace as an alternative of today's persecution of Christians in the Middle East.

Moving from Eastern Christianity where the monastic life is more doxological shaped, we discover in the West the Grottaferatta Monastery, as a bridge from East to West. On the same river bank, we will hear some songs like the one from Taizé: *Laudate Omnes gentes*.

I recommend this volume to future theological scholars and to everyone who wants to enrich him/herself with a wide perspective of what monastic life means today. Besides, the force of analysis and synthesis is to be remarked, and the capacity of the author to surprise the biggest problems of the approached study, the clear style and the will of the editor to present such an approach that is similar thematic to the contemporary ecumenical shape.