

Ioan Filimon

## Interreligious Dialogue as a Missionary Imperative in a Postmodern Society

### Abstract

In the postmodern society, the globalization process is creating new and urgent problems for the entire mankind, being imperative that the various religious communities look together for effective answers. For facing these realities, there seems to be only one solution: the way of dialogue, in general, and of religious dialogue, in particular. The present paper aims at analysing interreligious dialogue, emphasizing its overwhelming importance in the given context. The first part presents the Christians' attitude to unchristian religions in the light of the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition; the second part explores aspects of interreligious dialogue from an Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant perspective; while the third part analyses the missionary



Ioan Filimon is PhD Candidate at the Doctoral School of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the "December 1<sup>st</sup> 1918" University of Alba Iulia, Romania

imperatives of society nowadays. The paper ends with a few observations and conclusions.

## Keywords

Ecumenism, Religions, Orthodox Mission, Christian Confessions, Conflict, Cooperation

## 1 Introduction

One of the most important challenges of the present postmodern society is that of the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Today, everywhere in the world, the contemporary socio-political change generates a new situation in daily life, in the sense that one cannot refer to a certain territory and a unique religion, but one can easily find what would be called a pluralist religious landscape.

The issue of inter-human collaboration, of cooperation among religions, both at a local and at a global level, is becoming more and more difficult to articulate, especially due to the tense conditions appeared after the tragic event in the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and also due to the experience of redefining certain borders: the closest examples being the war between Russia and Ukraine, the war between Israel and the Palestinians, the crisis in the Middle East, the tensions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, Syria and Nigeria, or the terrorist group ISIS, which operates in different places on the globe. "All these centres of war are underpinned by religious ideologies, which, going beyond the strict sphere of the way of reaching the divine state, have become ideologies that nurture political ambitions, do electoral propaganda, or justify murders

and massacres with a political and religious character"<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the tragic events which we have passively witnessed in the recent years, just as the ones we are forced to see today, prove that the absence of dialogue among the world's religions may lead to a greater suffering, materialized in the beginning of a new world war.

The solution to this reality which postmodern society has to face would be only one: the way of dialogue in general, and of religious dialogue in particular, regardless of the fact that "the witness through dialogue comes from the Christian or Jewish world, from Islam, Hindu India, the Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Shinto areas, or from the contemporary tribal populations"<sup>2</sup>. Today, the ecumenical, as well as the interreligious dialogues, are considered missionary imperatives, which have the same attitude of openness towards one's fellows and of respect for some cultures which have long been considered hostile, foreign and inferior. This unlimited and mutual openness seems to be the only alternative in order to overcome ethnic, religious, social and economic conflicts, terrorist and fundamentalist acts, which have troubled mankind since its beginnings and which have been a cause of suffering in its entire history<sup>3</sup>. The theologian Hans Küng underlines: "There cannot exist peace among nations without peace among religions. There cannot exist peace among religions without dialogue among religions. There cannot exist dialogue among religions without the analysis of theological foundations"<sup>4</sup>.

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1 Emil Jurcan, "Dialogul inter-religios în lumea contemporană," in: *Orizonturi Teologice*, year III, N° 3, (2002), p. 84.

2 Nicolae Achimescu, *Religii în dialog*, (Iași: Trinitas Publishing, 2006), p. 10.

3 Gianfranco Maronese, "Dialogul dintre oameni," in: *Pax et Unitas*, N° 3, (2004), p. 4.

4 Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, translation from German by John Bowden, (SCM Press, 1991), p. 105.

In this context, the representatives of the great religions should find ways and develop strategies, methods and instruments which support overcoming today's conflictual situations, which have certain religious reasons. First of all, one should develop and explain the foundation of interreligious dialogue, which is the *theology of love* (I John 4, 16). In other words, one should develop the common teaching on God as eternal Father of all people, Who loves them all, and Who expects from them, as His sons, the answer of their love towards Him and towards themselves. Another aspect of the closeness between religions might be the minute analysis of the uniqueness of the human person, to whom God gave value and dignity in such a way that no one can question, deny or annihilate. Thus, "developing a common anthropology, as a result of such a dialogue, and transmitting it forward as efficiently as possible to the representatives of these religions, would have a positive impact on the general atmosphere in the world"<sup>5</sup>.

## **2 The attitude towards non-Christian religions from the perspective of the Holy Scripture and of the Holy Tradition**

The issue of the attitude and relation of the Christians to the world's religions is stringent for contemporary missiology, as a matter of fact, it has always been a delicate issue in Christian history. In a world which has become more and more segregated from a religious point of view, and not only, it is natural to ask the following question: what might be the position of the authentic Christian towards followers of other religions in a postmodern society? In order to answer this challenge we must make a short biblical and patristic excursion

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<sup>5</sup> Editorial, "Necesitatea dialogului interreligios," in: *Teologia*, year VII, N° 1, (2003), p. 8.

into the Christians' relations to the people with other beliefs, from an Orthodox perspective.

Many times it has been argued that the notion of "dialogue" is not to be found in the Bible, and consequently dialogue would lack biblical authority. Although "the noun 'dialogue' does not exist in the Bible, the friendly relations and the frequent personal meetings suggested by the active verb clearly stand out in the pages of the Holy Scripture. God's connection to His chosen people and to the other nations, the relations and real obligations involved in His covenant with Noah and Abraham, the activity of kings and judges, of prophets and priests, the book of Job, the writings of prophets, and certain Psalms in which is presented the return of the people to God, all these do not suggest a monologue at all"<sup>6</sup>, but the contrary. Besides, in the whole New Testament there are forms of dialogue. Thus, in it we discover different moments in which the Saviour comes into contact with people: the dialogue with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman, with the centurion and with His own disciples in the entire period of His earthly activity. There are also situations in which He refuses to enter a discussion, His presence dividing the people, which is why no one can exaggeratedly claim that everywhere in the Holy Scripture there is only dialogue<sup>7</sup>. Professor Terry Muck and his wife, Professor Frances Adeney, claim that in the Bible there are 239 contexts referring to interreligious encounters, enumerating them chronologically<sup>8</sup>.

In order to understand the religious foundations of making the most of the other religions from an Orthodox point of view, we must analyse the doctrinary ideas specific to the Orthodox

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley J. Samartha, "Dialogue as a Continuing Christian Concern," in: *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 23, N° 2, (1971), p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-first Century*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 379.

Church which can be a basis for dialogue. In the Orthodox tradition the problem of the dialogue with other religions is dealt with in reference to the Holy Trinity<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, the *Holy Scripture* presents the existence of only one God: "For I am the Lord God, and there is none other God beside me" (Is. 45, 3), this unique God, "Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephes. 4, 6), Who created the universe and Who works continuously in history. As there is only one God, in the Holy Scripture the common origin of the whole mankind is highlighted: "in God's image and likeness" (Gen. 26-27)<sup>10</sup>. Man's fall into sin did not completely destroy God's image in man, he suffered, but his capacity to receive and understand God's message addressed to him was not completely destroyed. All the people are connected through their intangible dignity and their divine origin, which are never lost. In mankind's history God never ceased to take care of the world He created, on the contrary, He supported and guided it. From the Scripture we find out that God made several covenants with mankind: with Adam and Eve, with Noah and with the new mankind saved from the great flood (Gen. 8; 9, 12), with Abraham (Gen. 12) etc., covenants which continue to be important and valid. The last, definitive and eternal "new covenant" was achieved through Jesus Christ, the new Adam. However, all the people are in relation to God through an older covenant which He Himself sealed. On the other hand, we have examples of people in the Old Testament who respected the divine commandments, knowing Him and being in relation to God, although they were not Israelites: Enoch, Melchizedek, and Job. The entire Holy Scripture shows God's universality: "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 23, 1) "for the Lord is a great king over all the

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<sup>9</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the world: orthodox Christian essays on global concerns*, translation by Pavlos Gottfried, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), p. 139.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

earth" (Ps. 94, 3) and "His kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 102, 19). The prophets announced very clearly God's plan to gather the whole mankind on the last day, "this is the purpose that the Lord hath purposed upon the whole earth, and this is the hand that is uplifted against all the nations" (Is. 14, 26) or "For from the rising of the sun, even unto the going down thereof...My name has been glorified among the Gentiles. And in every place incense is offered unto My name, and a pure offering; for My Name is great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty" (Mal. 1, 11)<sup>11</sup>.

The theological analysis of the other religions must be done from the perspective of the essential Christian principle, that of the *Incarnation of the Logos* in the name of all the people from all times and all places: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3, 16) or "That was the true light which lights every man that comes into the world" (Jn. 1, 9) or "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1, 14). These verses of the Gospel according to John determine the essential Christological foundation of the highest religious inspirations of mankind. Through the Incarnation, the whole human nature was brought to God, re-establishing thus man's initial communion with God. Through His acts and His sacrifice, Christ destroyed "the works of the devil" (I Jn 3, 8), the demonic element contaminating all religions<sup>12</sup>.

On the other hand, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself showed much love and meekness towards the ones outside the Christian community. Christ the Lord did not avoid to pay His attention to people with different beliefs. In certain situations, during His earthly life He talked to people with different religious traditions, such as the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4, 1-42), the

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

Canaanite woman (Mt. 15, 21-28 and Mk. 7, 24-30) and the Roman centurion (Mt. 8, 10 and Lk. 7, 5), which He helped. He expressed His admiration and respect for their faith, which He had not found in Israel: "... I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Mt. 8, 10; Lk. 7, 9). Christ the Lord pointed out the gratitude of the leper who was healed, who was a Samaritan, and in the talk with the Samaritan woman He revealed to her the truth that God is Spirit (Jn. 4, 4-30), using in a parable even the image of the good Samaritan as a good example for the fundamental principle of His teaching on the new dimension of love. "He, 'the Son of Man' Who at the Last Judgment will reveal Himself to 'the few' of this world (Mt. 25) regardless of race or religion, urges us to approach each human person with love and genuine respect"<sup>13</sup>. In addition, in the Acts, "the first book of ecclesiology"<sup>14</sup> we are told about the faith of the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10, 1 - 36), teaching us that "in every nation he that fears Him and works righteousness is accepted with Him" (Acts 10, 35). Then, Saint Paul affirms that "in times passed God suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless, He left not Himself without witness, in that He did good..." (Acts 14, 16) or "That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us" (Acts 17, 27), showing that the early, and especially the apologetical, tradition of the Early Church remarked the possibility of the natural knowledge, and thus partially of the truth revealed outside the revealed Christian tradition<sup>15</sup>.

Since the beginning, through the Holy Apostles and their followers, the Church has always been involved in teaching the

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<sup>13</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, "Orthodox Relations with Other Religions," in: *Sourozh*, N° 85, (2001), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Georges Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World - The Economy of the Holy Spirit," in: *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 23, N° 2, (1971), p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Remus Rus, *Concepția despre om în marile religii, teză de doctorat*, (Bucharest: 1978), p. 191.

Gospel to non-Christians, and in integrating through grace and faith those who received the Christian teaching and the grace of the Holy Mysteries. The purpose of evangelization was the conversion to Christ through religious argumentation. An important moment in the Christian preaching to the people having a different faith is represented by Saint Paul's Areopagus speech (Acts 17, 22-31). In his speech, just like in other Pauline texts, one can notice "the existence of two great axes: one of continuity and one of discontinuity. Discontinuity highlights the radical and absolute novelty of Christ and of the Resurrection, through which is created the separation from the world of the old, idolatrous, natural religions, a world of sin and death, whereas continuity highlights the homogeneity of God's saving plan, Who allowed the manifestation of false religions up to Christ, calling through Him, after His Resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit, all the peoples and all men to a renewed life, reconciled with God through the sacrifice of His Son"<sup>16</sup>. In any spiritual communication there always intervenes a critical moment. During his encounter with the Athenians, after the dialogue, Paul the Apostle makes a direct confession. In his sermon, after referring to a common religious foundation, he goes to the essence and core of the Gospel: the importance of Christ's personality and work<sup>17</sup>. But the discourse of Saint Paul the Apostle in Areopagus caused perplexity and even ironies among the inhabitants of Athens. Influenced by "the Stoic pantheism and the hedonism of the decadent Epicureanism, the inhabitants of the capital of the ancient world showed little inclination to assimilate the high truths of Christian religion. If for the Hebrews the preaching of the crucified Christ was

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<sup>16</sup> Gheorghe Petraru, "Dialogul interreligios în perspectiva teologiei Bisericii Ortodoxe," in: *Dialog Teologic*, year II, N° 4, (1999), p. 102.

<sup>17</sup> Anastasie Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ's way: an Orthodox understanding of mission*, (Brookline Massachusetts/Geneva: Holy Cross Orthodox Press/World Council of Churches Publications, 2010), p. 229.

foolishness, for the Greeks this was pure madness ( I Cor. 1, 23)"<sup>18</sup>.

Another significant point for the interreligious dialogue from an Orthodox perspective is the teaching on the *Holy Spirit*: "Who are everywhere present and filling all things" (the prayer to the "Heavenly Emperor"). The Holy Spirit continues to work for the salvation of every person and of the whole world as "Spirit of holiness, of power, of truth, of peace and of justice". Everywhere we find love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith (Gal. 5, 22), there are traces of His work, and many of these elements are present in the life of many people belonging to different religions. We advance in every effort, even in the interreligious dialogue, asking for the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit<sup>19</sup>.

As concerns the *Holy Tradition*, there are many examples of the way in which Christians have regarded and related to other religions. In the following section we are going to refer selectively to a few opinions of Christian thinkers from different epochs, taking into consideration that their point of view also expresses the opinions of other Holy Fathers of the same period. Relating to the opinions of the Holy Fathers, we can identify three contemporary models of evaluation of other religions specific to the modern theology of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism<sup>20</sup>.

Religious *exclusivism* affirms that non-Christians will be lost, as there is no salvation outside the visible Body of Christ, the Church. This concept is associated to Saint Cyprian of Carthage,

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<sup>18</sup> Stelian Tofană, "Apostolul Pavel la Atena. Dimensiunea teologică a Cuvântării din Areopag (Fapte Ap. 17, 15-34)," in: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Series Theologia Orthodoxa*, year L-LI, N° 1, (2006), p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the world: orthodox Christian essays on global concerns*, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> The systematic typologies: exclusivism - inclusivism - pluralism appear for the first time in Alan Race's book, *Christians and Religious Pluralism. Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London, SCM Press, 1983.

due to his famous statement: "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*", which came to be used by extension for any form of Christian exclusivism, including the interreligious one<sup>21</sup>.

The second term, *inclusivism*, is used to affirm that non-Christians can be saved despite the religions they practice, but only through God's mercy. The one who promotes this perspective is Saint Justin the Martyr and Philosopher. In the context of the universal creative work of the Word, Justin appealed to a Stoic concept, "*logos spermatikos*", considering that each part of the world contains a seed of the Logos, the Logos being the Father's Son<sup>22</sup>. For St Justin, each man can take part in the Word: "For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word, seeing what was related to it. But they who contradict themselves on the more important points appear not to have possessed the heavenly wisdom, and the knowledge which cannot be spoken against"<sup>23</sup>.

This theory of the "seminal logos" became the main approach used by the Apostolic Fathers in their attempt to formulate a theological point of view regarding Christian faith and non-Christian religions<sup>24</sup>.

The third method through which Christians see their relation to non-Christian religions is that of *pluralism*. From the perspective of this concept, non-Christians can be saved through the religion they practice, as non-Christian religions can also contain saving truths. In his work, "*Against Celsus*",

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<sup>21</sup> Dorin Oancea, "Teologia Religiilor în Biserica Primară: Athenagoras, Sf. Justin Martirul, Origen," in: Nicolae Moșoiu (coord.), *Relevanța operei Părintelui Profesor Ion Bria pentru viața bisericească și socială actuală. Direcții noi de cercetare în domeniul doctrinei, misiunii și unității Bisericii*, Sibiu, Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” Publishing House, (2010), p. 270.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>23</sup> St. Justin Martyr and Philosopher, *Apologeți de limbă greacă*, PSB 2, (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1980), p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Hendrik Kreamer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), p. 147.

Origen asserts that pagans too have access to the knowledge of God<sup>25</sup>.

From a theological point of view, the attitude of the Orthodox Church to other religions has always been a positive one, without diluting the role of Christ in the economy of salvation, moreover, this attitude being used as a bridge and as a means of bringing together Christians and non-Christians.

Consequently, all the nations of the world, regardless of their religious beliefs, have been, according to the Christian teaching, "fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the Gospel (Ephes. 3, 6), and they had the law of God written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness (Rom. 2, 13-15)"<sup>26</sup>.

### **3 Aspects of the interreligious dialogue from an Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant perspective**

The issue of the relations between the Christian Church and non-Christians has existed since the first centuries, when the Church had to face paganism, and in connection to the Mediaeval Muslims. Today, due to the different cohabitation conditions, the religious leaders and the followers of all religions are obliged to show openness towards one another, joining hands to accomplish the great challenges of our time: peace, agreement and collaboration among the peoples of the world<sup>27</sup>.

Sometimes practiced with good results in interconfessional milieus, dialogue is requested today also by some of the leaders

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<sup>25</sup> Origen, *Scriveri alese. Contra lui Celsus*, PSB 9, (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1984), pp. 235-236.

<sup>26</sup> Damaskinos Papandreou, *Dialog als Leitmotiv. Die Orthodoxie an der Schwelle zum dritten Jahrtausend*, Athen, 2000, p. 253.

<sup>27</sup> Ștefan Resceanu, "Temeiuri pentru dialogul interreligios," in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, year XXVI, N° 1-2, (1974), p. 25.

of the great religions, especially Christians, hoping thus to collaborate fruitfully for the good of mankind, in a time like ours, when the danger of a war is imminent. In the last period, in the three great Christian denominations there have appeared certain attitudes regarding the issue of interreligious dialogue, but one cannot refer to a common perspective in this respect, not even inside each of these denominations<sup>28</sup>.

Being sensitive to the messages of the times, at present, the Orthodox Church develops monotheist interreligious dialogues with Islam and Judaism. The most numerous meetings which were centered on the interreligious dialogue, as well as the relations between Orthodox believers, Jews and Muslims, took place at the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy (Geneva), at the initiative of Metropolitan Damaskinos Papandreou of Switzerland.

As to the dialogue with Judaism, after a preliminary meeting in Geneva in 1976, there have been eight meetings<sup>29</sup> on contemporary topics.

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<sup>28</sup> Emilian Vasilescu, "Cadrul și perspectivele dialogului interreligios," in: *Ortodoxia*, year XXIII, N° 1, (1971), p. 133.

<sup>29</sup> The first meeting took place in Lucerne, Switzerland (16-18 March 1977) on the topic "The Law in the Christian-Orthodox and Jewish Understanding". The second meeting took place in Bucharest, Romania (29-31 October 1979) on the topic "Tradition and Community in Judaism and the Orthodox Church". The third meeting was organized in Athens, Greece (21-24 March 1993) on the topic "Continuity and Renewal". The fourth meeting was held in Jerusalem, Israel (15-17 December 1998) on the topic "The Encounter of Orthodoxy and Judaism with Modernity". The fifth meeting was in Thessalonica, Greece (27-29 May 2003) with the topic "Faithfulness to Our Sources: Our Commitment to Peace and Justice". The sixth meeting was held in Jerusalem, Israel (14-15 March 2007) on the topic "Religious Liberty and the Relationship between Freedom and Religion". The seventh meeting was in Athens, Greece (10-12 November 2009) on the topic "The World in Crisis: Ethical Challenges and Religious Perspectives". The eighth meeting took place in Thessalonica, Greece (6 June 2013) on the topic "The Spiritual and Physical Environment: Respecting Our

The Orthodox Church has had meetings with representatives of Islam and dialogues in different forms ever since the first decades of its appearance. Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos has distinguished five stages of the Orthodox-Muslim dialogue. The first stage lasted from the middle of the eighth century up to the middle of the ninth century A.D., the Byzantine attitude being rather one of "taunting and underestimating"<sup>30</sup>. The second stage extended from the middle of the ninth century to the middle of the fourteenth century, when the strategy adopted by Byzantines was an offensive one, publishing several works about Islam. The third stage of the confrontation with Islam lasted from the middle of the fourteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth century and stands out through "calm and objectivity"<sup>31</sup>. The period of the Ottoman domination, which followed from the middle of the fifteenth century up to the middle of the twentieth century, interrupted the dialogue which had begun, the Eastern Church going through grievous experiences. The fifth stage of the dialogue between Orthodox and Muslims is in the contemporary epoch, in the last three decades the dialogue being mostly promoted in university milieus, by representatives of both religions<sup>32</sup>.

The interest of the Orthodox in the dialogue with Islam has manifested even more powerfully starting with the year 1986, after the collaboration of the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy with the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (Amman, Jordania). So far

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World, Respecting One Another". See also <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/inter-religious-dialogues-organized-by-the-ecumenical-patriarchate> (accessed in 27.04.2015).

<sup>30</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the world: orthodox Christian essays on global concerns*, p. 104.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

there have been twelve<sup>33</sup> academic meetings on important contemporary topics<sup>34</sup>.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate also played a major role in organizing some Conferences and Interreligious International Meetings<sup>35</sup> between Jews, Christians and Muslims. The result of

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<sup>33</sup> The first meeting was organized in Chambésy, Switzerland (17-19 November 1986) on the topic: "Authority and Religion". The second meeting was held in Amman, Jordan (20-25 November 1987) on the topics: a) "A Model of Historical Co-existence between Muslims and Christians and its Future Prospects" and b) "Common Humanitarian Ideals for Muslims and Christians" (Symposium). The third meeting was held again in Chambésy, Switzerland (12-15 December 1988) on the topic "Peace and Justice". The fourth meeting was held at the Cultural Center Kemal Ataturk in Constantinople (10-14 September 1989) on the topic "Religious Pluralism". The fifth meeting took place in Amman, Jordan (26-28 July 1993) on the topic "Youth and Values of Moderation". The sixth meeting was in Athens, Greece (8-10 September 1994) on the topic "Education for Understanding and Cooperation". The seventh meeting was held in Amman, Jordan (3-5 June 1996) on the topic "The Educational System in Islam and Christianity". The eighth meeting took place in Istanbul, Turkey (3-5 June 1997) on the topic "Perspectives of Co-operation and Participation between Muslims and Christians on the Eve of the New Century". The ninth meeting was organized in Amman, Jordan (10-12 November 1998) on the topic "Muslims and Christians in Modern Society: Images of the Other and the Meaning of Co-citizenship". The tenth meeting was in Manama, Bahreïn (28-30 October 2002) on the topic "Principles of Peaceful Co-existence". The eleventh meeting was in Tripoli, Libya (10-12 September 2003) being an Invitation by the "World Islamic Call Society". The twelfth meeting was held in Athens, Greece (11-13 December 2008) on the topic "Inter-Religious Training Partnership Initiative" (Organized with the "World Islamic Call Society"). See also <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/inter-religious-dialogues-organized-by-the-ecumenical-patriarchate> (accessed on 27.04.2015).

<sup>34</sup> Damaskinos Papandreou, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

<sup>35</sup> The first conference was held in Istanbul, Turkey (9 February 1994) on the topic "Peace and Tolerance I: The Bosphorus Declaration". The second interreligious meeting was organized in Brussels, Belgium (19-20 December 2001) on the topic "The Peace of God in the World". The

these Declarations is expressed in the position and the appeal in *the Declaration in Amaroussion*:

"We repudiate all forms of nationalist, racist, religious, social and other discrimination, by means of which morbid religious intolerance and fanaticism is harboured, together with the proclivity of seeking to find justification for bellicose conflicts and organized terrorism, to the obvious immense detriment of the peaceful coexistence of all human beings and all people. Therefore, we launch an appeal to the spiritual leaders of all religions to undertake the necessary work and to cooperate in achieving the defusing of these perilous confusions, in order thereby to achieve the truly credible furtherance of God's will that peace, social justice and respect for fundamental human rights will prevail"<sup>36</sup>.

The result of the interreligious dialogue of Orthodoxy with Judaism and Islam is a stronger interreligious collaboration, through which participants will be able not only to overcome the painful experience and the tensions of the historical past, but also to approach together the modern social problems that constitute a threat to man and to the world. "After dialogues with Judaism and Islam, the experience of Orthodoxy has constantly developed and in many cases it was revealing for the positive perspectives of a sincere dialogue and of a genuine intention of religious collaboration concerning the spiritual

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third Interreligious Conference took place in Amaroussion, Greece (10-11 August 2004) on the topic "Religion, Peace and the Olympic Ideal". The fourth conference was held in Istanbul, Turkey (7-9 November 2006) on the topic "Peace and Tolerance II: Dialogue and Understanding in South-eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia". See also <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/inter-religious-dialogues-organized-by-the-ecumenical-patriarchate> (accessed on 27.04.2015).

<sup>36</sup> *The Amaroussion Declaration, Interreligious Conference „Religion, Peace, and the Olympic Ideal“* (Athens, Amaroussion, 10-11 August 2004), in: Chryssavgis John (ed.), *In the World, Yet Not Of the World. Social and Global Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 312.

values related to God, man, and the world, as well as the claims of the postmodern man regarding the protection of peace, of social justice and of human rights"<sup>37</sup>.

Concerning the interreligious dialogue in the Roman-Catholic Church, through the document "*Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions*", approved by the Second Vatican Council on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1965, the Roman-Catholic Church has radically changed its position to the people of other religions and their salvation. From the exclusivist teaching – "there is no salvation outside the Church" (that is the Catholic Church) – it came to admit the fact that God acts in all religions and that He exerts His will for salvation also outside Israel and Christianity (the inclusivist position).

Just before issuing this document, the Roman-Catholic Church paid special attention to people with other religious beliefs, founding a "Secretariat for non-Christians", presided by Cardinal Paulo Marella, through Pope Paul VI's Apostolic letter "*Progreidente Concilio*" of May 19<sup>th</sup>. The role of this secretariat is to inspire, stimulate and coordinate the actions of the Roman-Catholic Church in this delicate field of the dialogue with non-Christians<sup>38</sup>. This secretariat was renamed "The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue" by Pope John Paul II on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1988.

The Roman-Catholic Church continued to develop its thinking regarding the people with other beliefs in documents such as the Encyclical "*Evangelii Nuntiandi*" of Pope Paul VI, promulgated on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1975, which underlined a theology of evangelization and inculturation, as well as the encyclical "*Redemptor Hominis*" of Pope John Paul II from March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1979, which approaches the issue of evangelization and salvation. As one needed guidance with changed attitudes, the

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<sup>37</sup> Damaskinos Papandreou, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>38</sup> Emilian Vasilescu, *Cadrul și perspectivele dialogului interreligios*, p. 134.

Secretariat for non-Christians drew up a document entitled "*The Attitude of the Church toward followers of other religions: Reflections and orientations on Dialogue and Mission*", issued on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1984. In the same practical line, in 1985 Vatican issued a document of great religious and political importance, entitled "Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman-Catholic Church", which was destined to be a practical support in the pastoral and missionary theology. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1990, Pope John Paul II published on the same topic the encyclical "*Redemptoris Missio*", in which he highlighted the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Saviour, without repeating the idea of *Nostra Aetate* which affirmed salvation in other religions. In May 19<sup>th</sup> 1991, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) issued "*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*", which attempted to establish the thin line between dialogue and preaching<sup>39</sup>.

In the Roman-Catholic Church, a special attention is paid to the relation with the Jews. Structurally, this is reflected in the fact that the dialogue with the Jews is realized by a separate Commission for religious relations with the Jews, thus adopting a clear position against any form of anti-Semitism.

As to the attitude of Protestant theologians on the issue of relating to followers of other religions, they are also divided, oscillating between the most syncretist to the most conservative and fundamentalist positions. In earlier times, liberal Protestant Theologians such as Frederick Schleiermacher, John Hick, Paul F. Knitter and others envisaged a large openness towards non-Christian religions, at the risk of religious syncretism. On the other hand, representatives of

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<sup>39</sup> Gideon Goosen, *Bringing Churches Together. A Popular Introduction to Ecumenism*, revised and enlarged edition, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), p. 139.

"dialectic theology"<sup>40</sup> such as Karl Barth, Hendrik Kraemer, and others, adopted an attitude which was characterized as "rigid", in the sense that these theologians make a clear distinction as a gratuitous saving gift from God, and non-Christian religions, as a weak result of human efforts to reach the Absolute. In this last case, one cannot refer to the possibility of salvation outside the Christian revelation, but there is even no point in looking in the religions outside the Christian revelation for any value important for the process of salvation. However, in Protestantism there appeared a third attitude, that of the missionary-ecumenical orientation, which oscillates between the two poles. Some of the supporters of this orientation, such as Paul Tillich, John Robinson, Joseph Sittler and others, are seeking to establish connections between Christianity and the non-Christian world through theories such as that of a "latent Church" in the bosom of paganism (Paul Tillich) or that a "cosmic Christ" (Joseph Sittler). Other representatives of this orientation, such as Visser't Hooft, Lesslie Newbigin, Gerhard Rosenkranz and Stefan Neill, admit the existence of profound piety in non-Christian religions and ask for dialogue and collaboration with non-Christian religions, but consider that these must be limited to clearly defined fields: cultural and social ones, avoiding doctrinary discussions<sup>41</sup>.

The great Christian denominations consider that in the non-Christian religions there are high moral principles, resembling in certain ways those of Christianity, and consequently there can be a fruitful collaboration for the benefit of mankind. Therefore, they regard with a lot of benevolence the contacts with the representatives of non-Christian religions and make everything possible in this respect, manifesting at the same

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<sup>40</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, "Facing People of Other Faiths From an Orthodox Point of View," in: *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 38, N° 1-4, (1993), p. 135.

<sup>41</sup> Emilian Vasilescu, *Istoria Religiilor*, Third Edition, (Bucharest: Didactică și Pedagogică Publishing House, 1998), pp. 409-410.

time the concern for the preservation of the integrity of the Christian message, which must be guarded against any attempt of religion relativism and syncretism<sup>42</sup>.

Thus, at the end of the twentieth century, the perspective of Christians on followers of other religions changed. Regarding Judaism, Christians underscored again the fact that they were God's "chosen people" which should transmit in history the message of revelation. The early Christian Church was formed on the basis of the Jewish community, Virgin Mary was born in this blessed people, and the Lord Christ Himself, through His sacrifice for mankind, included the Jewish people, and killing Him did not come from a people, but from the entire mankind, for its sins. As for Muslims, they must be respected as ones who were formed on the basis of the revelation of the Holy Scripture and of the Judeo-Christian Tradition, and who kept the monotheistic conception on God, even if they did not understand the Christian Triadology, this being the tense point in interreligious meetings. As to polytheist religions, even if there are not many common doctrinary points, the fact that they search Divinity, which they identify with the idea of an absolute Good, represents a positive element which imposes respect<sup>43</sup>.

#### **4     Interreligious dialogue, a missionary imperative of our postmodern times**

The current historical situation, as well as the theological imperatives of Christian faith, make it necessary for Christians to be concerned with cultivating and continuing the interreligious dialogue. Consequently, one of the essential tasks that we, as Christians, have in this respect is to acknowledge

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<sup>42</sup> Emilian Vasilescu, *Cadrul și perspectivele dialogului interreligios*, p. 139.

<sup>43</sup> Emil Jurcan, *art. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

this fact, to treat very carefully the possibilities and issues concerning dialogue, as well as to analyze the implications of dialogue on the life of the Church in a pluralist world<sup>44</sup>.

Thus, there are three solid theological reasons for which dialogue is and should be a missionary imperative for Christians. Firstly, through Jesus Christ, God Himself entered into a relation with the people of all faiths and all times, offering the Gospel of salvation. From this perspective, the Incarnation of the Saviour represents God's dialogue with the world. Secondly, the attempt to achieve a real community, absolutely indispensable from the perspective of Christ's Gospel, through forgiveness, reconciliation and a new creation, leads inevitably to dialogue. Christ's peace and love ask us to find again the communion with all our fellow beings, regardless of their faith, in order to become all together citizens of "God's house". Thirdly, but not less significantly, there is Jesus Christ's promise about the fact that the Holy Spirit will reveal the truth to us: "when He, the spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak" (Jn. 16, 3).

This promise makes it necessary for us to enter a dialogue with the others, but also stimulates us to continue without fear, with hope and full openness. Certainly not because the dialogue would represent the only way of searching the truth, for discovering the truth can fail even in the dialogue. There can appear possibilities of error, distortion or confusion in the dialogue, just as in other circumstances. Likewise, there is no guarantee that this dialogue will automatically lead the participants to the plenary truth. But the way in which truth is revealed, understood and shared in the Holy Scripture clearly shows that "the things to come" must be sought in the sphere of

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<sup>44</sup> Stanley J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue. Ecumenical issues in inter-religious relationship*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1981), p. 1. See also Nicolae Achimescu, *Religii in dialog*, p. 15.

the personal relations with God and our fellow beings. As a result, the dialogue with followers of other beliefs and ideologies must be ultimately regarded as one of the possibilities opened to us by the Saviour and which must be exploited<sup>45</sup>.

In the contemporary postmodern society, the process of globalization creates new urgent problems for the whole mankind, and that is why it is imperative that the various religious communities should look together for efficient answers. From this perspective, the most practical problems for a creative interreligious dialogue are the new challenges which mankind has to face in an intensive manner, due to globalization: ecological problems, poverty, reconciliation, justice, peace etc<sup>46</sup>.

In the great *religious plurality* nowadays religions must be taken into consideration. The followers of a religion must not ignore the fact that there followers of other religions who live with them in the same community, town or country, and who are their partners and interlocutors on matters of politics, culture, education, religion or other fields. Accepting and respecting the followers of a different religion involves an effort of understanding their religion and the necessary openness in order to collaborate with them. Therefore, the interreligious dialogue is postulated by the plurality of the religions in the world<sup>47</sup>.

A fundamental element of our time is the imperative of the *peaceful coexistence* in a multicultural society. We live in a world thirsty for contacts, meetings, understanding, harmony, unity and collaboration. In general people want to meet, to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-14.

<sup>46</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, "Problems and Prospects of Inter-religious Dialogue. An Eastern Orthodox Perspective," in: *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 52, N° 3, (2000), p. 355.

<sup>47</sup> Cardinal Francis Arinze, "Dialogul interreligios, o necesitate a timpului nostru," in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, year CXVI, N° 7-12, (1998), p. 109.

listen to one another, to participate and see what they can do together, especially in order to build a more constant and lasting peace. Postmodernity, with its communication facilities : e-mail, chat, phone, fax, video interphone, radio and TV sets, walkie-talkie etc., assigns dialogue, as a form of human interaction, a role which is more important than ever in history, offering people the possibility to communicate information to one another<sup>48</sup>. We must also be aware of the danger represented by the replacement of the live dialogue among people with the dead dialogue, achieved through the current technology. In this respect, "a decisive role is played by the interreligious dialogue, whose aim is to make mankind aware of the personal character of the relations with the divinity and of human relations as well"<sup>49</sup>. People are increasingly aware of the fact that they need one another and that they must build a more harmonious community in the whole world. In this world, which is in permanent movement, religions can no longer be isolated, isolationism being more and more condemned. The followers of the various religions are called to meet, to try to understand each other better and to wonder what they can do together as believers in order to make this world a better place to live in<sup>50</sup>.

Another missionary imperative of our time is to approach in common certain challenges and major problems, the most important being the ones connected to *justice* and *peace*, issues which do not respect religious boundaries. In conflictual situations some people are discriminated because of race, religion, language, social status or sex. Besides these, there are situations of refusing to practise the solidarity between poor and rich, at a national or international level, and the refusal of

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<sup>48</sup> David Pestroiu, "Cadre actuale ale dialogului interreligios," in: *Buletinul Centrului pentru dialog între științe și teologie*, year VIII, N° 1-2, (2011), p. 129.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>50</sup> Cardinal Francis Arinze, *art. cit.*, p. 109.

the rich to accept the fact that the owning of wealth, even if justified, involves having social responsibilities, taking into account the universal destination of earthly goods. Then, there are acts of discrimination against women and children, going sometimes up to being condemned to practice prostitution to the benefit of one's masters. One must also not forget the modern plague caused by AIDS and by drug abuse, which causes physical and moral suffering, in some cases reducing people to the condition of slaves. Thus, the followers of the various religions cannot remain indifferent to such challenges and problems, convinced that only through religious cooperation will they find the lasting expected result<sup>51</sup>.

A harsh reality of the world nowadays, which interreligious cooperation is called to stop is *violence* in all its aspects. Most of the times there is a tension which flares up in violence, because of ethnic or racial causes or due to some unhealed wounds. Sometimes violence is generated by economic frustration, unemployment, poverty and the marginalization of some groups of society. Other times, violence bursts out because of the political factors used by certain persons interested in personal purposes. A particular type of violence is the one caused by religious sensitive issues which are misinterpreted. Authentic religion does not constitute the cause of violence, but if religion is used to motivate engaging in violent acts, results can be disastrous, as for religious reasons some people would not hesitate to give their life. In the world violence took the form of civil wars, terrorist attacks or acts of religious fanaticism, such as ethnical cleansing, all these leading to terrible massacres and even to genocide. Violence manifested in the name of religion needs to be criticized and condemned. Spiritual leaders have the profound duty to warn their followers about the use of violence as means of propagation or defence of a religion, but also to make personal declarations

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

when such abuses occur. When facing such realities, religious leaders are called to join their efforts in promoting repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, love and unity<sup>52</sup>.

Apart from meeting the stringent challenges of postmodern society, we are aware that for those who have the pastoral responsibility for their community of faith, the challenges or the attempts to have interreligious dialogues are first of all of a *spiritual* nature. His Beatitude Daniel, The Patriarch of Romanian Orthodox Church distinguishes four of these<sup>53</sup>. The first challenge would be that of *loving one's neighbour*, through which we wonder whether we have the capacity to receive the foreigner who belongs to a different ethnic group and has a different religion. The second challenge is that of a *spiritual awakening*, when we are surrounded by people with different religious beliefs and we can learn from them certain values which we have forgotten or which we have cultivated too little, such as the fervour in prayer, the practice of fasting, the joy of hospitality and the central importance of family in one's life, the profound dimension of communitary life, the harmony of the relations with others. The third challenge is that of the *loyalty towards one's own religious identity*, when we ask ourselves again whether we can remain the same when everything is different around us, whether we can keep our religious identity being part of a minority, whether we can remain non-practising Christians in a religious context where practising religion is essential for human existence. The fourth and the last challenge is that of *human solidarity*, through prayer and actions with the Christian minorities in distress or even persecuted in different countries of the world<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>53</sup> His Beatitude Daniel, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, *Provocările dialogului interreligios*, Conference at "Notre Dame" Cathedral in Strasbourg on 11 April 2011, in: *Ziarul Lumina*, Regional series, year II, N° 89 (1893), 16 April 2011, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

In this dynamic and promising context, religions are called to bring an effective contribution to achieving, extending and completing this process of cooperation in the world today. However, in order to make this contribution, they must first act in a unity. Or, for this purpose, interreligious dialogue is absolutely necessary, as it is the most adequate and efficient method of bringing the religions closer and reaching a consensus about the means of fulfilling this contribution. In the context of the spirit of our epoch, open and universal, religions can no longer be in isolation. The times today demand all religions to get closer to one another, to know each other better and unite their efforts in order to support contemporary mankind in its aspirations to brotherhood, peace and happiness<sup>55</sup>.

## 5 Conclusions

The problem of Christians' attitude and relation to people of different religions is a stringent one for the postmodern society. Besides, it has always been a delicate issue in Christian history. In contemporary society, the process of globalization creates new urgent problems for the whole mankind, therefore it is imperious for the various religious communities to seek together reliable answers. Christians have first of all the moral obligation to engage in a dialogue with people having different religious beliefs, showing an attitude of respect towards the other one's personality and in the spirit of Christ's humility: "Today, in the vast metropolis we call earth, in a new emergent culture, in religious and ideological fermenting, *dialogue* appears to us as *a new possibility and challenge*. Living together and sharing human adventure, looking towards the global communion of peace, justice and brotherhood, each person and

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<sup>55</sup> Corneliu Sîrbu, "Pentru un dialog interreligios rodnic," in: *Ortodoxia*, year XXVII, N° 2, (1975), p. 373.

each tradition is obliged to offer everything they have inherited best in the past, and in the light of others' experience and criticism, to cultivate the healthiest seeds of truth they possess"<sup>56</sup>.

Moreover, as Christians, through our witness as dialogue, we make Christ the Lord Himself known: "Go therefore and teach all nations" (Mt. 28, 19). Through this, Christ teaches us to come out of isolation and confess Him through dialogue unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Hence, interreligious dialogue is considered a missionary imperative of postmodern society, being the only alternative for overcoming the ethnic, religious, social and economic conflicts, the terrorism and fundamentalism which have troubled mankind from the beginning and which have been a source of suffering in its entire history.

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<sup>56</sup> Anastasie Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ's way: an Orthodox understanding of mission*, p. 226.

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