
HISTORY, MISSION AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

Beginning with the Apostolic Age, the missionary work of the Church had at its core the process of witnessing the divine-human identity of Our Saviour Jesus Christ. The Christian identity of each member of the Church is produced and developed *hic et nunc*, even in our times, based on this fundament. The unanimous ecclesial consciousness considers that God, Who created the time and later the seen world, also gave to the history the possibility to open toward eternity, as a fulfilment of the divine plan, and the capacity to receive and to be sanctified through the Incarnation of the Son of God and the descend of the transcendence into immanence. From that point, the time and the history are parted in two. Nothing from what is specific to the history is foreign to God and all that is the will of God, through Christ, is fulfilled missionary in the historical context. Our study aims to prove that the apostolic mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the unity of the Romanian nation were not foreign to the work and to the presence of the Holy Trinity, during the historical and missionary events and that the Christian and national identity are complementary on their path to eternity.

Keywords: faith, witnessing, time, nation, eternity

1. The mission of the Church as historical challenge

Published in Sibiu, during World War II, the book of Father Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului* (Sibiu, 1943) – *Jesus Christ or the Restoration of Man* – is a Christological challenge in a well determined historical context.

The mission of the Church, as a historical extension of the Kingdom of God, has as its direct and immediate aim to fight against the historical prolongation of evil in society; therefore, the adversity of the unfaithful is, in fact, a state of being profoundly at strife with the Head of the Church Himself – our Saviour Jesus Christ (Luke 2.34).

Before the Incarnation, although God had never totally abandoned the world of corruption, of sin and of death (Hebrews 1.1-2), the history of the human kind was opened to the divine Revelation in stages, for man to desire and to know progressively the soteriological ascension. Thus, we can rightfully affirm that history is the beginning of the gradual Revelation, and that its end is the beginning of the perfect Revelation. History is the interval between A and Ω

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(Apocalypse 21.6), because Christ is the beginning of the history of creation, as the One *through Whom all things were made* (Creed art. 2), but also *the end of this world* (Mathew 24.3), meaning the end of historical time. Because He is all these, there is no historical person on Earth, beginning with the old Adam and until the end of times, who can equal His historical dignity, and embrace history between the limits of Revelation (from the first day of the creation until the Second Coming), such as Christ embraced it on the Cross of Golgotha.

As Son of God the Father, Word or Logos, the Reason or Wisdom of the Father, He becomes *the door* for the Revelation entering, at the birth of history, the created world; Saint John the Evangelist affirms that *all things were made through Him* (John 1.3). But, as Son of the incarnated God, He also becomes *the door* for history and time to enter, compressed, into eternity (John 10.7).

All those who enter this door of salvation, dying and rising with Christ at their Baptism, will also enter the eschatological door of the Kingdom, all of them named “gods by grace” (Psalm 82.1, 6). Thus, the Church, in its missionary activity, is responsible not only for the events happening *hic et nunc*, but also for all those that will happen in the Eschaton. The duty of preparing the future is that of the Apostolic Church, even if all are seen now *through a glass, darkly, but then face to face* (1 Corinthians 13.12).

Starting from the contemporary missionary involvement, but in an eternal perspective, the Church is stamping the human being with the seal of the real meaning of human existence: the Christian identity. And, since this Christian identity was brought by the Son of God made Man, and shared to the people within the Church through the Holy Mysteries, the history of the world receives, through that Christian identity, the seal of an authentic Christocentrism. Without that, the world would remain forever sunk into the autonomy of a purely temporal Arianism. The proof for the pure, anthropocentric historical immanence is brought by the Gospel of Luke related to the Resurrection of the Lord, in Chapter 24, verses 13-35. The two disciples, Luke and Cleopas, could not go beyond the historical events related to Jesus of Nazareth: His wonderful deeds, the taking, the crucifixion, and the death of Christ under Pontius Pilate. In their minds, and according to the limited claims of a history disrobed of the mantle of Resurrection and of the eternal life, all should have ended there, because a human being enters history at birth and leaves it at death. Receiving the Revelation of the Resurrection through the Holy Mysteries, the Apostles on the road to Emmaus overcome the narrow limits of an autonomous, selfish, and limited history, of mere stories that could have easily become myths after several centuries, capable to deceive and delude the human spirit.

By His Resurrection from the dead, the Saviour does not exclude history, but assumes it in a full, transfigured way, with all its problems, tribulations and deficiencies. The mission of the Church asks the same thing from us, laymen and clergymen alike. Following the model of Christ, we cannot be inconsiderate in front of the events which occur under our eyes, from the poor and sick people of society to the high world governments. The *non-combat* attitude in respect to what happens in the history of the contemporary world is not from God, but is a

kind of spiritual neutrality whereby we give tacit support and approval the daily evils in the world. We cannot agree to this state of spiritual neutrality, because even the devil is not spiritually neuter. A Christian's missionary attitude can only be YES for the affirmative things, meaning divine things, and NO for the negative, evil, degrading things in the society, meaning those coming from the devil (Mathew 5.37).

History is a chain of inter-human actions and challenges, and neutrality in front of their problematics can be interpreted as indifference for the divine and personal Model the Saviour embodied and left us to fulfil (Mathew 25.45), as help for our contemporaries. "I must participate as a factor in history, noticing its problems seriously. We don't see man as an individual disengaged from any relations. He is part of a society, and his joys, troubles and problems are caused and sustained by this society, which also has, at any moment, its content of concrete concerns..., for establishing certain conditions of organising the community at a certain point in time. This is how one's role as a spreader of the Revelation forces you to be a factor of history." [1]

God, through Jesus Christ, descends into history as a perfect factor of the Revelation. Through mission, Christians themselves also become factors for the dissemination of this divine Revelation, by getting involved in history, as far as *action* is concerned, and by breaking out of its narrow frame to an eternal, meta-historical perspective, as far as the *effect* is concerned. History means the inter-human relation, as a *me-you* dyad; meta-history means the *me-you-Him* relation, as a triad. God, as Him, elevates us, *me* and *you*, from the purely contextual and limited setting of time and space, through a relationship of communion in love, not through duty or any exterior constraint, because through grace God assists our interactions with our fellow men, based on the acceptance given by our human free will. "Answering the call of our fellow men, experienced in the second person, we continue the history and, at the same time, the creation. History, in its living core, is an unaltered continuation of the creation." [1, p. 34]

Only within an autonomous and exclusivist history, human actions and inter-personal relations can be considered *ad se*, and not related to an other-worldly canon; they can be considered self-sufficient, but they risk being the source of some passionate initiatives and tendencies, which cannot be stopped by themselves anymore, because their initiators consider themselves replacers of God.

The mission of the Church in the world is a historical act, from the Holy Apostles until the end of times. The spread of the faith is done contextually, taking into consideration time and space. The Apostolic mission is unique in its content, but various in its implementation forms, permanently exposed to a dual direction: horizontal and vertical. If its dimension remains anchored in the exclusivist, horizontal plan, "history is completely sinful and, since there is no escape from it, there is no possible elevation to the deed cleansed of sin. And yet, history is the necessary environment where, under the present conditions, the Revelation is made known to people. Not every man participating to the

horizontal history receives the Revelation, but, outside of this participation, there is no possibility for anybody to reach the Revelation.” [1, p. 37]

Unlike the Protestant doctrine of a purely horizontal perspective on the mission and history, the Orthodox spirituality also looks very carefully to the vertical arm of the Holy Cross. For *every good dispensation and every perfect gift* comes thence, through the human nature of the One crucified on the Cross. There is no perfect revelation outside the divine-human Person of our Saviour Jesus Christ and outside His Church, whose Head He is.

Being in a state of helplessness caused by complete horizontality, Protestantism refulated by embracing the doctrine of predestination, which is a doctrine of uniformity of all those *foreknown* by God (Romans 8.29) and thus *fore-chosen*, who would exist in another history, outside the current one, a type of history or world which were parallel to that of those who were not, are not, and will not be *foreknown*.

This is where we are led by the exclusivism of a horizontal history in which human persons are but successive and monotonous, but perfectly identical, items, with no hierarchy and no difference when it comes to gifts and qualities. There is no wonder that the communist and collectivist system of total uniformisation among people was generated in this space of the Reformation, and later generalised, but also rejected as unsatisfactory, by the Eastern Orthodox spirituality, at the end of the 20th century.

The world, through the cosmic Church in which God reveals Himself, offers the human spirit a purgative possibility based on ascetic, successive ascension in an epectatic rhythm. “It has the mission of a bosom into which were the Revelation descends, and through which it is transmitted. There is no incompatibility between the Church and the Revelation, but no identity either. History does not save, but we can be saved within it. Whoever endeavours, within it, to faithfully fulfil his legal duties, being a good father, an honest merchant, a worthy clerk, without being saved through that as such, does no evil; on the contrary, he is an instrument for the preaching of God.” [1, p. 42]

The Gospel of Christ is fulfilled in history, not outside it; therefore all those who perform an evangelising mission in the world conjugate the new law with the old habit of the sin, so that the latter may come, through free and conscious assumption, to abandon corruption and to obtain atonement.

The Gospel and the world are not two realities which are closed to each other, but they interact theandrically, so that the world discovers its real meaning and direction. Obtained as a result of good mission and efficient evangelisation, faith helps us in our historical ascension, as in a process of spiritual education and guidance toward the goal of true communion with the Holy Trinity, in the Kingdom of God. The lack of this spiritual dynamism is a sign that God is not present and not working in my life or the life of the community where I live, therefore neither is He present in the history I live in. The historical process of personal salvation equally requires the horizontal relation with the fellow men, and the help of God on the vertical level of the transcendence. There is no authentic revelation outside of history. God descends into history to announce us

the Gospel, to suffer, to die, and to rise for us. The Church does not listen to any announcement or message that does not descend into history. The Saviour is not only human; neither is He an angel or a demon. He is not even God alone, but God-Man, a Hypostasis with two natures, who can only thus save the fallen history of the world: a Person with two natures who unites, undergoing no confusion, no change, no division, no separation, two planes of existence: Heaven and Earth, God and man, eternity and history.

Saint Paul condemns the lack of intersection between the two planes, the heavenly one and the earthly/historical one, in the context of the mission in Galatia, showing, on the one hand, that his message is not strictly historical, i.e. it does not come from a merely historical person born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but from an Apostle sent *not of men, neither by man* (Galatians 1.1). On the other hand, he condemns any other message, with no historical involvement, pretending to be an angelic gospel: *But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach any other gospel unto you than the one we have preached unto you, let him be accursed!* (Galatians 1.8), because the angels are not historical persons, i.e. they are not born in bodily form, they are spiritual beings, and particularly because they were created before the historical time of the created world (Genesis 1.1). However, they can descend into history, if God's eternal plan allows it, as in the case of angelophanies, but not through a message *ad se*, yet through a message entirely received from God and entirely transmitted to people.

By our own involvement in the well-being of society and of my fellow men, I also actively participate in God's cooperation and involvement in the history of the world, in its progress if I do the good, or regress if I promote evil, because not everything taking place in history is of good quality. However, the purpose of history is fulfilled through the missionary propagation of faith. If I do the good, the quality of the human is increased, because *ethics always strengthen the ontical*. "History makes us responsible to one another for eternity, and this is forcing us to take care of our descendants, passing our faith to them. The history as a whole could not be given a more serious reason and a deeper meaning than to forever unite, based on responsibility and gratitude, the entire human kind." [1, p. 43]

2. The Religion and the religions

The human reason permanently oscillates between an absolute religious formula, which, for the Christians, is associated with the dogma, and the demonic deceiving of a teaching contrary to the divine Revelation, i.e. between The Religion and the religions of the world. On this theme, the position of the Protestant theologian Karl Barth [2] is interesting. He writes in his *Dogmatics* that *Christianity is not the Religion that condemns the other religions*, and that the entire history is an affirmation of the selfish human will, and thus it has no value and nothing good in it.

The dialectic theology sees all religions as attempts or aspirations of man to obtain his own salvation by himself, as the vanity of humanity whereby it builds its own watchtower toward Heaven: *Come, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top [may reach] unto heaven; and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered upon the face of the whole Earth* (Genesis 11.4).

The divine providence is the one preparing God's revelation into the world. If it is clearly proven that the Logos, Who existed from the beginning in God (John 1.1), and through Whom everything was created, has always been present also in the world, then the Christian faith is **The Religion par excellence**. This is the dogma par excellence, as mentioned by Saint Irenaeus of Lyon: "we preserve **the rule of the truth** stating that 'there is only one God', Almighty, 'Who created all things' through His Word, 'planned it all, and created all things so that they might exist' (2 Macc. 7:28; Wisdom of Solomon 1:14), as the Gospel says: 'by the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth' (Ps. 33:6), as well as: 'All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made' him; and without him was not anything made that was made (Jn. 1:3). Nothing is excluded from this 'all': the Father made through Him *all things in heaven and on earth*, either visible or invisible (Col. 1:16), either sensitive or intelligible, either temporal, in view of a certain 'economy', or eternal (II Cor. 4:18). He did not make them through angels, nor through any Powers separated from His will, because God needs nothing; He makes all through His Word and Spirit, He ordains all, governs all, and gives life to all. He made the world – because the world is part of this 'all', and He also made man (Gen 2:7). He is *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob* (Ex. 3:6, Mt. 22:29). There is no other God above Him, no Principle, no Power or any *Plerôma*. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3). By maintaining this **rule**, we can indisputably prove that, no matter how abundant and variegated were the words of heretics, they have strayed far from the truth. In fact, almost all the heretics state that there is only one God, but they change him through their perverted doctrine, ungrateful to their Creator, as the pagans are in their idolatry. On the other hand, they mock the creation forged by God, rejecting their own salvation and becoming their own dire accusers and fake witnesses. They will be resurrected in body to recognise the power of the One Who shall resurrect them from the dead, but they will not be among the righteous ones due to their unfaithfulness." [3].

God, the Father, the most apophatic Person of the Holy Trinity, did not speak directly to the world about any religious system, about the salvation of the world, and His eternal Kingdom, but entrusted His Message to His Incarnated Son, Our Saviour Jesus Christ. His Gospel was preached and taught by the Holy Apostles to all nations, to the end of the world (Mathew 28.19-20).

If we, the Orthodox, and traditional Christians in general, do not question the theological status of the direct revelation *in and through* Jesus Christ, the problem of the indirect revelation remains an open issue, namely: how much do, for instance, Philosophy, Natural sciences, technology, Medicine, etc. comprise and express, to a greater or lesser degree, the knowledge/expression of God in

the world. After all, existential knowledge is essential to contemporary man, meaning the vivid and personal relation with a real God, present in His own creation, and the possibility of a connection between Christianity and other religions, between the Judeo-Christian revelation and the cosmic revelation.

The perspective of a cosmic revelation is always subject to a pantheistic risk, because man has no source from which to gain the consciousness of his personality, as separated from God's absolute, threefold-hypostatic personality. The religions which depend strictly on the cosmic revelation are tributary to a rational conception on the world and the things in it. Thus, the confusion between man and God, or the denial of His personal existence arise, especially in Asian religions. They are all based on the monistic theory related to the primacy of essence to the detriment of the person. It is contrary to our faith to believe that some impersonal essence should be the cause of personal existences, of the infinite irrational world, or even of time itself (although some theories in modern Physics do claim exactly that, without having any solid evidence to back this hypothesis). If human consciousness could generate by itself religious ideas of absoluteness and eternity, the logic of Christianity could be easily overthrown, i.e., for instance, the religious idea descending into consciousness would have generated Christianity, and not the Person of the Son of God, incarnated as a historical Person in the world. Thus, there is no tangential point between history and Revelation, nor between God's miracles and human reason. This attitude, in an increasingly secularised society, tends to become a collective consciousness through the unjustified aggressiveness of social networks, which, in the end, are willing to accept only the historical presence of Jesus of Nazareth, without any divine foundation. In this case, Christianity becomes only a seen expression of a progressive religiosity [4], a superior stage in the history and spirituality of the world, while the History of religions – a field of study, including the study of Christianity, but without taking into consideration the fact that Jesus Christ brought forth and developed the doctrine itself. That warrants the attitude of considering the Christian religion equal to the other religions in the world, and not The Religion revealed in history par excellence.

The Gospels are not books of theological speculation; they are, first and foremost, historical documents based on bearing witness to seen things (I John 1.1-3) [5]. In fact, the Gospels are historical accounts whose veracity is confirmed by the very fact that they are given by 4 different Evangelists corroborating one another. Therefore, the first two aspects of the mission, evangelisation and witnessing, are the proof for the synthesis between history, identity, and Revelation. "It was ordained by God to witness Christ in more than one Gospel. Due to the fact that more people wrote about His life, with some additions and differences in the details, but in fact presenting Him similarly, it was proven that His life was not one man's invention, but known by more people as identical in its essence. The differences in details are a consequence of the incapacity of memorising all the great richness of the Saviour's words and healings during 3 years." [5, p. 5]

Therefore, by being incarnated in time and history, the Son of God (Galatians 4.4) transforms all these into a way of salvation for the entire human race.

Time is a key concept for understanding two of the most complex systems of human thought: Philosophy and Theology. Time, as normally conceived, in a linear and mechanical fashion, passes uniformly and indefinitely, always the same (and I am here referring to classical, Newtonian mechanics, not to the non-homogenous time of Einstein's relativity). It is a continuous present by its appurtenance to eternity. The investigation of the relation between time and revelation, in the Biblical paradigm, and secularised time, in the postmodern paradigm, a contemporary missionary challenge, aiming to highlight the will and the work of God in each historical event, in spite of the postmodern concept of chronological time in eternal expansion, which is completely insufficient. Through creation, time opens to God and is ordered in divine intimacy for the world to enjoy His hospitality. Eternity, in this scenario, appears as a intrinsically liturgical time in which the God-Man gives Himself and becomes our guest in history.

“Jesus Christ manifests His divine power or His divinity not only as human gentleness and humbleness, but also as acts of direct power overcoming the acts of human power, i.e. in miracles, although these acts were also performed in the human body, and could be seen by people as such. These acts made Christ an exceptional person, but in history and among people: a Person with exceptional power and influence, such as there has never been another one alike in all history. He was perceived as a Person higher than the purely historical ones, not only at the end of His life on Earth and after the Resurrection, but even the very beginning of His public activity.” [5, p. 14]

Historical time is the most precious thing in man's life, therefore, contemporary man always complains about the lack of time, in the shadow of an imaginary future, juxtaposed onto the historical illusion of the world. But what raises ever more interesting questions in the realm of thought might be expressed as the (re)definition of the anthropological status of the human identity.

3. Conclusions

It takes a lot of courage, as well as the revival of a new ethical and spiritual profile of the contemporary missionary, for the promotion of the Christian ontology mirrored in what we are calling nowadays Christian and ecclesial identity, proposed as a theme for meditation to an ever more secularised society.

The Christian identity is a topical missionary theme, and a not at all easy responsibility for those carrying out the holy work in the missionary space of a pluralist religious society. The approach of some terms is not easy, e.g.: Christian community, inter-personal relations, common responsibility, life in Christ, etc.

The spiritual preparation for the acquisition of the Christian identity and of the national unity, and most of all, the consciousness that this unity is both necessary and in accordance with the divine plan, involve detachment from evil and sin, and promoting a spiritual-pneumatic dynamism, under the guidance and through the implication of the Church in the process, as the unique tangible model of unity with God and with one's fellow men, deserving of public credibility.

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