INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN EUROPEAN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Dr. David PESTROIU
pestroiu@gmail.com
University of Bucharest,
Faculty of Orthodox Theology

Abstract:
In a pluralist religious environment, the need of the dialogue is unavoidable. Europe doesn't offer just the premises for this plurality, but a global values system, of rights and fundamental freedoms, which define an advanced society. Nevertheless, major dangers as the secularism, communism, self-sufficiency, threaten get this society ill. Christianity, through its big branches: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant implements the right solution along these challenges: the religious dialogue. The circulation of values, in a space of interculturality, as the European one, must have in the centre the faith in Jesus Christ, sacrificed and resurrected for all the mankind.
Key-words:
Dialogue, religions, Europe, pluralism, post-modernity.

The contemporary European society is defined, first of all, as a community animated by commune values as human rights and liberties, but basically a pluralist one. The ethnic variety is a proof of the cultural and religious diversity in the European area. The pluralism shouldn't be considered as a dividing factor, but rather as a binding one. And the one that offers a real opportunity for mutual acquaintance, helping us pass over the frictions in our history, is the intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

In a pluralist society, the dialogue is vital. Both cultures and religions try mutual evaluations regarding their pertaining to perennial values, for developing, afterwards, a common language: a language of tolerance, understanding and good neighborhood. In this context there is the danger of assimilation and syncretism. Unfortunately this danger is highlighted by global factors as secularization which leads to leveling the knowledge.

Since the ages of time, the religions took stand in antagonic and belligerent status. The religious intolerance was promoted both among

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the major religious currents (e.g. Christianity and Islam), and mainly among different groups making part from the same religion. According to W.E. Swing, in every major religion there is an express commandment to, at least, avoid contaminating with other divinities and to persecute as much as possible the preachers of the other religions[1]. The religious crumbling, as well as the not that pleasant memories of a dishonorable past of religious led wars, make the accomplishment of interreligious dialogue a tough challenge.

The starting point in the interreligious dialogue is the finding of the pluralism and a good pertaining to it. There is increasingly emphasized the tendency of a dangerous relativism, which leads to the idea that all the religious forms are pathways to the same God. For Christians, it's unthinkable to formulate truthful religious system without having Jesus Christ as a central piece, the absolute Truth. Then there is the danger of exclusivism: for Cardinal Suenens "*not the diversity is bad but the diversity which slips into exclusivism*" [2]. The religions are viewed as dangerous forms of idolatry. From Karl Barth , who distinguishes between religion and faith, to Knitter who postulates the famous dictum: " *Jesus against the religions*", the exclusivism encourages a type of religious fundamentalism, somehow similar to Islamic extremists. On the other hand, if we consider the Christianity as the only reviled religion, we must demonstrate that Christ's sacrifice has an universal disposition, being the only one able to offer the chance of redemption.

Regarding the pluralist relativity and the discretionary exclusivism, there is a hopeful concept which offers the chance of a real dialogue: I am talking about inclusiveness. After the Vatican II council, the Catholics talked about the other religions having saving abeyances. Talking about the default faith in other religions Karl Rahner emphasises a mysterious work of the grace, even if Christ is not accepted as the Saviour. Hereby a new concept is defined: the anonymous or latent Christianity which necessarily requires the wish of being brought to light.

In the latter case, the interreligious dialogue circumscribes to the larger missionary intercessions, developed by the Christian communities, which include the evangelism, conversion and the life in Christ toward the accomplishment condition in God's kingdom. Fr. Prof. Ion Bria shows that:

> "*the Orthodox theology operates in the theological, bilateral and ecumenical dialogue, regarding the unity of the churches with certain ecclesiological concepts and notions: local*

[1] W. E. Swing, 1999, pp. 57-58.
[2] Leon Josef Suenens, 1973, p. 117.

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church, universal church, pentarchy, iconics, ecumenical council"[3].

This way the proper frame is set. At the other end, for some of the contemporary denominations, "the monolog, the commandment, the enforcement, the threat doesn't make anything else than not being able to respect the face of God in human, in human soul"[4].

A starting point in approaching interreligious dialogue is suggested by Anca Manolescu in the mentality transformation:

> "*we don't have, currently, the ability to plug our selves to our `seniority`, transcendent dimension. We seem to have forgotten that, basically, this is the purpose of every religion. But we can, at least, credit this possibility: we can acknowledge, we can research, we can try to open our selves intellectually to visionary philosophies, metaphysic doctrines and contemplative experiences of the traditions which talk about getting these dimensions. We can go, through study, towards the transcendental verticality, the place where there is the topic of the universality of religio*ns"[5].

The interreligious dialogue circumscribes to some default rules. First of them is the mutual respect, which considers the dialogue partner: not a possible convert, but an equal. This thing implies a condition of ecclesiological kenosis, and the denial of any proselytising forms. It is permitted the common prayer as long as some values, on which a consensus was reached, are included. The questions and the queries are accepted, but the polemics must be avoided. It is desirable that the defining principles for every participating confession to be systematically and accurate exposed, and the persons involved should have the capacity and necessary authority under a mandate established by the hierarchic ruling.

Even if the rules would be respected, we can not overlook the fact there are some real difficulties in the dialogue approach. The first problem is of ontological nature. The dialogue itself is extremely fragile. They discuss a lot about the dialogue but they dialogue a little and vainly. The training of the dialogue and the availability to dialogue are missing. Different Christian confessions must understand the necessity of the dialogue; identify ways of communication with each other and with other religions which they come in contact.

Another problem is the understanding of each confession's missions, in the context of the appearance and local development, but

[3] Ion Bria, 1989, p. 179.
[4] Petru I. David, 1998, p. 323.
[5] Anca Manolescu, 2005, p. 35.

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universal scale expansion too, a natural consequence of the globalization. The religious feelings interpenetrate with the ethnographic traditions, with the set of values of local cultures, constantly animating the national ideals. These can be laid stress on in an unitary Europe, as symbols of the pluralism, marking the own identity of each region, nation and culture.

Finally, the third challenge- and the most important- is the one related to the purpose of the dialogue. The incipient stage of the enthusiastic promoters ecumenism of the church union syncretism was overcame. The correct observation of the fact that dialogues wouldn't be able too soon to bring the religious unity, determine most of people reiterate the theme of their uselessness. Up against this trap, we must show that the religions in general, and especially the Christian churches must accommodate their discourse to the global human problems as secularization, nihilism, moral crisis, ecological crisis, social inequality, violence and abuses, unemployment, poorness, exploitation, etc.

The Cardinal Francis Arinze shows a few of the objectives of interreligious dialogue:

> *"Interreligious dialogue helps each participant to grow in his own faith when he encounters another of another religious persuasion and confronts his faith with that of the other. Dialogue between religions can promote cooperation in society and better mutual understanding and respect among people"*[6].

It's noticeable the fact that this author assigns a very important role to spiritual life, which is regarded as the essential frame for developing efficient religious dialogues:

> *"In interfaith dialogue, as well as in the inculturation process, the missionary, theologian, or Christian community and the Spirit act as partners. There is always collaboration among these agents; the Holy Spirit is the internal agent, guiding the efforts of the external agents of evangelization. The techniques and human efforts toward inculturation and dialogue are fruitful due to the discreet action of the Spirit; also, it is the Spirit alone who changes people's hearts, minds, and attitudes (metanoia) so that true inculturation and open dialogue can succeed"*[7].

James Kroeger, in his excellent work *Living Mission*, identifies four different ways to perform the religious dialogue, giving the highest importance, as expected, to the spiritual life, as a self experience: 1. Dialogue of Life (where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and

[6] Francis Cardinal Arinze, 1990, p. 51.
[7] *Ibidem*.

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preoccupations); 2. Dialogue of Action (in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people); 3. Dialogue of Theological Exchange (where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values); 4. Dialogue of Religious Experience (where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute)[8].

To spoke coherently about an *inter-faith dialogue* we should at first clarify the coordinates of the *intra-faith dialogue*. In Europe's case, a continent defined culturally by Christianity, we shall analyze some aspects dialogue's ontology between Christian groups. As we know, there are prestigious ecumenical organisms, as The World Council of Churches or The Conference of European Churches. Many of their members are engaged in bilateral dialogue. The important fact is that

> *"Dialogue's unity has its roots in the church's unity, which is not a consequence of thinking, but a reflex of the mystical unity of The Holy Trinity"*[9] .

The basis of dialogue is, therefore, ideal love, after the Trinitarian model:

> *"In the Church everything is dominated by love. All distinctions are distinctions of the grace. They aren't juridical distinctions, they have a spiritual authority"* [10].

Showing this kind of love we observe important steps were made to achieve communication links between churches: the finish of the conflict and seeing the others as partners, not as enemies, mutual information regarding the serious problems of the mankind: atheism, nihilism, self sufficiency, poverty, unemployment, challenges of bioethics, ecological crisis, etc; ecumenical visits and exchange of experience between hierarchs, teachers, students, books, magazines and any kind of information; common ceremonies with a religious character where spiritual kinds that meet unanimous acceptance are promoted; the print of some ecumenical editions of holy texts (Holy Scriptures); partnership between monasteries, parishes; the promotion results obtained by ways of efficient publicity.

Of course, the accumulations till now give us hopes, but there is a long way till speaking about concrete results of the dialogue, especially at the doctrinal level. A major difficulty is the way to report to the term „church": this is associated with the idea of keeping the

[8] James H. Kroeger, MM, 1994, p. 89.
[9] Ierom. Teofan Mada, 2009, p. 189.
[10] Dr. Alexandros Kalomiros, 2005, p. 87.

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absolute truth in matters of faith. There from, the tendency of each Church to see themselves as the „real church", while for the dialogue partners just a partial membership to this term is recognized. Analyzing Sf Ciprian's diction: „outside the Church there is no redemption", Metrop. Antonie Plamadeala thinks that here resides :"the most important barrier for actually starting the ecumenical dialogue" [11]. By the orthodox view, the Bishop Lazar Puhalo states some more situations that make the communication between churches so difficult:

> *„The limits of ecumenical dialogue for us should be to teach the "faith once delivered" (Jude 1,3), to preach the proper understanding of the Gospel, to confess the Sacred Tradition and to expand the role of our faithful in the sanctification of creation. Involvement and cooperation in ecology, issues of social justice and human rights should be done within the framework of our own doctrine, not within the framework of the Ecumenical social ideology. The role of the Orthodox Church in this world is to teach and to sanctify and to redeem*"[12].

The foundation of the European Union created the premises for new connections between the Christian Churches of Europe:

> "*The theme 'Europe', lately, seems to be important not only for politicians, but, more and more, for the Churches of Europe. The Churches are called to contribute to this process. An important challenge for the Churches, regarding the complex process of European integration, is just acting together"[13].*
>
> *Regarding that, Antonie Plamadeala shows:*
>
> *„The confessions, from this point of view, are not different entities that coexist, but a single entity divided, that naturally and permanently tends to restore the unity. We are distant brothers, but brothers nevertheless*" [14] .

To try to encourage the reconciliation in common mission in a secularized Europe, the study committee of the CEC (The Conference of European Churches) released some guidelines. The first of it states that

> "*Churches shouldn't perform a missionary activity against another church, but rather, through a reconciliation process, one besides and for the other*" [15].

First of all, the Churches have a duty to heal the spiritual wounds of the autonomous world, victim of the postmodern civilization. Fr. Prof.

[11] Dr. Antonie Plămădeală, 1979, p. 27.
[12] Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, 2009, p. 31.
[13] Constantin Pătuleanu, 2006, p. 135.
[14] Dr. A. Plămădeală, 1979, p. 56.
[15] *Documente internaționale referitoare la prozelitism*, 1998, p. 35.

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Dr. Nicolae Achimescu performs an excellent X-ray of the present situation:

> *"This overtechnologised civilization stranded away from God, threw Him away, and not only that. It wandered away from everything that is ontological, it's anti-ontological, mechanical, and it creates only a world of frictions. The mechanicity, technicality and automatism of this civilization are against the organic, cosmic and spiritual component of every existence. The economy and planning are not mechanical and virtual. The economy really has purely divine and existential basis. The human itself has the duty to evolve economically. But breaking the economy from the soul, and making the ultimate principle of life, the technical character that life is getting instead of an organic one, turn the economy into a mechanical and virtual life"* [16].

Churches are not allowed to retreat inside this new cybernetic culture, but have a duty to use the technologies to transmit their message to the entire world, and especially to the most vulnerable of all – the youth. A teacher of orthodox theology said that:

> *"Our Church has the ability to reveal a deep understanding of its solidarity with the world, because it concerns the relation between the sacred and the profane in the light of its beliefs about human deification and the transfiguration of creation"*[17].

After all of the above, there is a new circumstance determinant for the mission and the dialogue: globalization. In his excellent study on this subject, Prof G. Mantzaridis says that

> *"if the Orthodox Church will settle for a conventional presence and testimonial in the world, if it won't rise to the contemporary challenge with the universal spirit of Christ and of the Apostles, it will leave the contemporary men helpless and it will succumb as a result of the homogenization promoted through globalization. If, on the other hand, will have the courage to promote, in a self criticizing and modest manner, both at the individual, and at the community level, the spirit of its traditions, it could offer the truth of ecumenism in response to the chimera of globalization"* [18].

It's also needed a reevaluation of religions common strategies against secularization: throughout the two millenniums of Christianity there were noted the devastating interferences of political leadership

[16] Pr. Nicolae Achimescu, 2006, p. 406.
[17] Pr. prof. univ. dr. Ilie Moldovan, 2009, pp. 427- 428.
[18] Georgios I. Mantzaridis, 2002, pp. 180-181.

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against the Church. Now is the time for the Churches, through the work of the real spiritual life, to transform the world of politics, through reducing the effects self-sufficiency and enhancing the community's role. Also, Churches can contribute to the stopping of the nationalism phenomenon, a real obstacle in the way of European integration. Unfortunately, at this moment we are witnessing a recurrence of this phenomenon, having a religious substrate also.

We can notice the danger of the „other pole": by being outside its own religion or even on a critical position against it, the contemporary man is tempted to import easily ideas and dogmas of other spiritualities, making his own syncretic religious system. Fr. Prof. Dr. Gh. Petraru observes that

> "*in the secularized Occident a strange phenomenon is taking place, that being the proselytism of the Asian religions which also demonstrate a missionary consciousness and a claim of universality, although the religious secrets of the Far East represent in Europe or America a vulgarization, a betrayal of the essences and spirit of those religions*" [19].

This new forms of syncretism are even more dangerous than materialism and atheism, because those generate a convenient religion, built on everyone's wishes. The umbrella under which these are developing is the New Age movement, the real "supermarket of religions", where everyone can borrow and use as he pleases any dogma or religious practice. In the secularized Occident, syncretic religious manifestations determined an unexpected revival of occultism, based on the increasing opposition to the traditional Church and promoting the old or new heresies, just from the desire of alterity. From this point it's just a small step to faith's ideologization. A contemporary apologist of Orthodoxism said:

> "*The biggest danger that awaits us is that to turn our thirst, our desire in a different kind of ideology. Our biggest duty, all that we form this orthodox culture, is that art and faith to be the main form of expression, free of any ideology*" [20].

The European cultural spirit propagated, at first, the idea of God's glorification as a motivation of art. Gradually, the esthetic types diversified in new creative manner, casting aside the ethnic criteria. Soon it reached the state of openly opposition, of denigrating God, in the same time with the idolizing of art its self. The explication for this fact comes from the fact that the human tried to express himself in an independent way, setting aside his relationship with his Creator. In our

[19] Pr. dr. Gheorghe Petraru, 2006, pp. 341-342.
[20] Christos Yannaras, 1995, p. 70.

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days, we can, once more, see a tendency to idolize the science and technology, sports, having fun or different leisure activities and even the promoters of these activities – the so-called "stars". The reaction of Churches didn't take long: most of them centered on a obvious social message, carrying weight only on the level of their presence in the society. But the purpose of Christianity, much deeper, is linked to its eschatological coordinate; for this reason a transformation of the human kind is more than necessary.

The context of a consumption society generates in humans the urge to create for himself a state of paradise in this earthly life, disregarding the eternal life. That is why, Churches see themselves pushed to the side of the social life, as they are regarded as obstacles in the way of globalization. The religious values made room, mostly, for the economical ones, inclusively in the field of cultures and civilization's evaluation. This king of mercantile mentality settled inside postmodern man, which doesn't consider himself a member of any religious institution, but states that he is a believer. The expression "believing without belonging", that we owe to G. Davie, is truly deifying. The false syncretism of the postmodern man ends, invariably, in individualism. By taking just certain coordinates from different religions, he doesn't hesitate to express his disapproval towards those that remain. Therefore, it's continued with a complete disapproval for the religion and setting himself above it. This way becoming a kind of "miniature god", humans, often, show an unreasonably high concern for their physical aspect, combined with a terrible anguish in the face of death and suffering.

Facing these challenges we should hear the opinion of militant ecumenist:

> *„As Christians we need to rediscover the renewing simplicity of the Gospel, to lighten the burden and too much material wealth, to build communion links in the whole of Europe and in the entire world. The whole of Europe has enormous potentialities, in the measure that we give as Christians. It depends on us what role and how much commitment we want to dedicate to the world of the third millennium. We have the possibility to do it since Christ has extended to us this mission: we need to believe and trust that "to be one so that the world may believe' is a commandment that Christ asks of us to fulfill in this third millennium. It is important that Europe lives its own faith, working to transmit with its own example, the spirit of missionary service to the whole world"*[21].

[21] Pietro Di Majo, 2007, p. 24.

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An open subject where the Church can implicate in a constructive way is the legislative one. Referring to this, Cardinal Ratzinger (now the Pope Benedict the XVI) sets four major objectives: 1.Basing the law on moral principles, involving, especially, the reason and liberty, in the face of the danger of dictatorship; 2. The common respect for God and moral values, even in public, with tolerance for the minority of atheists; 3. The denial to consider atheism as a starting point for public law; 4. The recognition and protection of the consciousness, human rights and freedoms of science:

> "*We should protect and develop this conquests of the modern era without contradicting a reason, without transcendence and a basis, that destroys from the inside its own freedom*" [22].

Europe opens the chance for religious dialogue between Christianity and Islam, having in mind the ever growing presence of Muslims within its borders. There is, on the other hand, a mutual desire of acquaintance, in the lack of politically commanded hatred like in the old days. Christians could rediscover, assuming from the Muslims, "the intense feeling of God's transcendence, the obedience to His will, the shyness in communicating with Him, mobilization of the entire psychosomatic being in prayer" [23], while the Muslims would win the calm of overcoming all fundamentalisms. Together, we could find ways to resolve more efficient the moments of moral, ecological, spiritual or economical crisis. Unfortunately, is very difficult to talk to the fundamentalists because they see the dialogue itself as a sign of weakness[24].

The field where religious dialogue can make important steps is the cultural one:

> "*No matter what perspective a community has on life, it's important to admit the number of common faiths, values altitudes which everyone shares and supports along with the others, since pluralism exists for a diversity of cultures, subcultures and fragments of culture meet permanently, change or modify their practices and altitudes. There is no culture untouched or unaffected by others' influence. Every culture contains elements that link it to another*" [25].

In this context, Christianity –and especially Orthodoxy- can appreciate and assume many defining elements from other spiritual cultures. But, equally, must know and expand the capacity of sharing to

[22] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; Damaskinos, mitrop. al Elveției, 2002, pp. 26-30.
[23] +Anastasios Yannoulatos, 2003, p. 145.
[24] Arij A. Roest Crollius, S.J., 1998, p. 71.
[25] Pr. Mihai Himcinschi, 2006, p. 134.

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others its own set of values, based on divine revelation, which tops off in Christ, the Embodied Son of God. His Love, extended even over His enemies, is above any conjunctural ideology, positioned under the famous *do ut des*. Swinging from Barth's exclusivism to Rahner's inclusivism, the Christian soteriology is self defined, inevitably, through religious dialogue and reconsideration of alterity. Thus the danger of a sterile confrontation between ecclesiastical institutions is surpassed, through a real exchange among cultures, nations and regions of Europe, each keeping its defining values and so its own identity.

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