

CATALYSING HOPE FOR JUSTICE

*Essays in Honour of C.I. Itty
To commemorate his Sixtieth Birthday*

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THE CHALLENGE OF RACISM

Some aspects of Orthodox Belief and Experience

Reflection and Action

In our ecumenical intercourse, when questions of social ethics are discussed, a frequent problem is the relation between theological reflection and social action. Again and again this brings us back to the hoary old discussion represented by expressions such as *bios theoretikos* and *bios praktikos*, *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, “mysticism”/“contemplation” or “action”, “spirituality” or “struggle”. The discussion has been brought to a critical pitch in recent years with the “conflict” between a vertical and a horizontal dimension. There is an overreadiness on the part of some to leave the *theoria*, the contemplation, to us of the Orthodox persuasion – not without complicity on our part – and an equal readiness to corner “action” for themselves.

We still have not found a generally satisfying answer to this tension between the dimensions. Probably we shall never find it, by way of general consensus. To a false question no correct answer can be given.

In another connection we have already stressed that in the context of the Church’s liturgical understanding of humanity, world, society and history, any division between verticalism and horizontalism is not merely absurd but actually heretical.¹

I should like to add the provocative question, how far “reflection”, deliberately extended interminably, may expose us to the danger of avoiding those concrete tasks which are very clearly and perceptibly laid upon us by the Word of God. Conversely we may ask how great the danger is if we choose the path of reflection to read – or indeed force – into the Word of God those things which it suits the Scriptures to find there. I am not of course making a plea against theological reflection, but rather expressing my hope that in this time of great crisis the Holy Spirit may lead us in the “way” which is also *the truth* and *the life* (John 14.6)! In dealing with questions of racism and apartheid in the world today we cannot rest content with mere reflection, for at stake are the life and death of individuals or even entire peoples against whom other individuals or peoples are daily sinning.

Discrimination as to Race, Language and Culture

It is well known that racial discrimination often goes hand in hand with

discrimination as to language and culture, which might be regarded as equally vicious, if not worse than the first. For discrimination against a language and a culture means not just the devaluation of biological characteristics but the wronging of humanity itself by an assault on the dignity of the human psyche in all the concrete aspects of cultural life.

When we read that Christ “welcomed” people (Rom. 15:7), it is the whole person who is welcomed, not an isolated individual shut in on him/herself but a fullness of personality in which, and thanks to which, the actual person is specifically himself or herself. Welcomed, healed and sanctified – this is the outcome both for human beings as such and also for those elements which particularly appertain to humanity, whether a language or a civilization, whether affluence or misery.

There are countless examples from scripture and tradition which witness to this general redemption and therefore to the fundamental exclusion, in principle, of any kind of discrimination in language or culture – unless of course there is in a particular culture some element which can be regarded as incompatible with the Christian message and should therefore be rejected. At times the Church shows an almost “childlike” pleasure in contemplating the many-coloured mosaic that comes into being as a result of the synaxis or gathering together of all the peoples with their languages and cultures.

“When He came down He confused the tongues,
The Most High divided the peoples;
When He distributed the tongues of fire
He called upon all to unity;
With but one voice we glorify
The All-Holy Spirit.”

(Orthodox hymn for Pentecost)

Incarnation of the Word in all Times and Places

Even in the Church, however, there has been discrimination as to language and hence also as to people, despite the pleasure in diversity just mentioned. Here is an instance. In 1985 we celebrated in the East and in the West the eleven hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Methodius. Many of us had occasion to reflect on the hard struggle the two Greek brothers, Cyril and Methodius, had to conduct against those clerics and theologians of the West who, as is well known, recognized only Hebrew, Greek and Latin as the languages “sanctified” by God (the Triglossites or “Pilatists”) and who therefore allowed only those three languages for the worship and proclamation of the Church. We owe it primarily to this struggle that Saints Cyril and Methodius, the apostles of the Slavs, renewed and brought to flourishing maturity the eastern Patristic theology of the “incarnation” of the Word of God in all times and places.² The Christian West was clearly not ready to accept and develop this theology. Only when we come to Martin Luther does a breach with western thought and practice establish itself, though

mainly in the field of language. The West, in its colonial, cultural and missionary expansion, clung largely to its old modes of thought with its ideal of westernizing life throughout the globe. It was only the decline of the age of colonialism that compelled a change — duly taken into account also by Vatican II — towards the theology of the incarnation of the Word in all times and places — as advocated by Cyril and Methodius and, in our own day, by the World Council of Churches.

Racism — a Heresy?

To this question the answer of the *Kairos* document¹ and of other statements is “Yes”. The same holds good for the system of apartheid which is looked at by many from the standpoint of the *status confessionis*. This fact clearly confronts us with many important questions of a theological and ecclesiological kind, but also with some that are practical, indeed existential.

Let us set on one side the theologians’ reactions, important though these may sometimes appear to be, and confine ourselves for the present to two official texts which throw more light both on reflection, or *theoria*, and on action, or *praxis*. One is more than a century old, the other was formulated in 1986.

An Orthodox Testimony from 1872

As far as we are aware, this was the first occasion in the history of the Church when a Synod was convened with racism as the only item on the agenda, resulting in its official condemnation as a heresy and cause of schism! We refer to the Holy and Great Synod of Constantinople, held in August/September 1872.

Brief historical review

The genos ton Orthodoxon (Orthodox family) — in this context the community of Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire — was increasingly beginning both to disintegrate, under the influence of growing national self-awareness and of the struggles for liberation, and to become antagonistic. This made the Ecumenical Patriarchate realize the danger that racial and ethnic or national interests would lead to a conflict with fundamental principles of an ecclesiological kind or relating to canon law. Thus, first of all, the patriarchate opposed the Greeks who already in 1833 declared the “Church of Greece” to be independent (autocephalous), and had thus separated the church of the newly founded Greek state from the Patriarchate, making it self-governing. The tension lasted till 1850! Then in the 1860s a similar conflict cropped up with the Romanians and the Bulgarians. The age was one in which the whole of Europe had been convulsed by nationalism, while new theories sought to provide a “scientific” basis for racism and to give it some warrant (e.g. I.A. Gobineau, H.S. Chamberlain, etc.); and in the light of this trend the Ecumenical Patriarchate felt obliged to convene an “Oecumenical” (i.e. pan-Orthodox) Synod. This the Sultan however

forbade — tension within the Orthodox fold was more than welcome to him. Because of this, the Ecumenical Patriarchate convened the “Holy and Great Synod” of Constantinople in 1872.

Central to the problems facing the Synod was the concept *phyletismos*. Etymologically this is literally “racism”. In context, however, it also meant a nationalism — *ethnikismos* — with strongly marked overtones of race or racism. A new term was coined to include both elements: *ethnophyletismos*. On the one hand this gave expression to the idea of *ethnos* (nation) and *ethnikismos* (nationalism), on the other to that of *phyle* (race) and *phyletismos* (racism). I think this compound term appropriate enough for several of today’s current conflicts where both racial and national interests are operative, or where national and other sectional interests are camouflaged in racial terms.

The Synod set up a commission which prepared a commendable analysis of the problems, based on the biblical message, the fundamental ecclesiological doctrines and the canon law of the church. Using that memorandum, the Synod at its third and final session, on 16 September 1872, dealt with the problem and formulated its Oros (dogmatic “definition”) censuring and condemning racism. *Inter alia* the text runs:

We renounce, censure and condemn racism, that is racial discrimination, ethnic feuds, hatreds and dissensions within the Church of Christ, as contrary to the teaching of the gospel and the holy canons of our blessed fathers which support the holy Church and the entire Christian world, embellish it and lead it to divine godliness.⁴

A Condemnation — not a Solution

Regardless of the details that led to that condemnation, and of the self-righteousness displayed by one party or another, this decision was important. It was perhaps the first of its kind, and on the part of the Church it was historic. As a result of the Synod’s Oros, Orthodoxy had gained a solid theological and ecclesiological and legal basis on which it could have securely stood to answer effectively the challenges of a racism which was determined more by cultural and nationalistic than by biological considerations.

Nevertheless it must be said — and on the strength of this particular example — that the decisions of Synods are bound to remain largely ineffective unless they touch the overall context of “secular” realities, i.e. those directly concerning the life of human beings and of nations. This very example from 1872 shows clearly that in coming to grips with acute questions relating to life the Church cannot and must not ever dispense with prayer nor, at times, with statements true to its confessional status, nor again even with disciplinary measures — but that if these are to be formative vital forces promoting changes of structure and situation they must take effect by way of action appropriate to each circumstance. Only so will evil be dealt a blow at its heart.

An Orthodox Testimony of 1986

As we all believe and confess, the Church of Christ is 'catholic'. So there is a "catholic" dimension also both to racism and to opposition thereto; for no church can claim that racism does not concern it; types of racism are to be found everywhere; no local church can remain apathetic to the troubles of other such churches which are suffering acutely from problems related to racism; racism is not just an error; mostly it is anchored in very particular concrete ideological and political, and socio-cultural and economic circumstances which nowadays in particular are interwoven on a world-wide scale and therefore concern us all, directly or indirectly.

In the light of this, the Orthodox Church has shown increasing interest in the complex of problems racism represents. Our Church is preparing for a panorthodox "Holy and Great Synod" which is to deal with current questions affecting the inner life of Orthodoxy and its relationship to the *oikoumene*, together with the basic questions of concern to the human community as a whole.

The first, pre-Synodal Panorthodox Conference (1978) already included in the Synodal agenda the following subject: "The Contribution of the Local Orthodox Churches to the Implementation of the Christian Ideals of Peace, Freedom, Fellowship and Love among the Peoples of the World, and to the Elimination of Racial Discrimination". In February 1986 the inter-orthodox preparatory commission dealt with this subject in depth and prepared a preliminary paper in which the following was stated, on the basis of biblical and patristic anthropology:

"The Orthodox Church does not accept racial differences, even in attenuated form, insofar as these imply the assumption of a hierarchy among human races with consequent gradations in their rights. Proclaiming the pressing need for total removal of discrimination and for permitting development of all the earth's inhabitants on a universal scale, the Church's support is not confined to abolishing distinctions based on the colour of a race and confined only to certain specific areas of our planet, but extends to combatting any discrimination that is to the disadvantage of various minorities".

This holds good all the more since — as the Paper goes on — appeals for solidarity among the peoples and for mutual fellowship remain empty words so long as "hunger and absolute poverty" are perpetuated and haunt whole masses of human beings or entire peoples... — inadmissibly — pointing "to a serious crisis of identity in the Christian world and especially in the highly developed parts of it. For

- hunger threatens "the life given by God for whole peoples in the developing countries" — indeed it would be truer to say that it "completely demolishes the dignity and sanctity of the human person", while
- "the economically well-developed Christian world distributes and

administers material goods unjustly, even frequently in criminal fashion, thus affronting not just the image of God in every human being, but God himself, who has identified himself with that person.”

In the light of this dreadful situation, “inertia and indifference in any individual Christian, and generally in the churches, amount to a betrayal of Christ himself and a lack of active faith.”⁵

Further Statements

In December 1985, the Theological Faculty at Athens arranged an international symposium. Well-known theologians from the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions took part. The symposium unanimously adopted a message. Its basis was the speech of the apostle Paul on the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-34). Here are some paragraphs from it.

1. God has made from one (blood) every nation of men..(verse 26) – from the blood of Adam – and has called upon all peoples to renew themselves by washing in the blood of the cross and partaking of the one cup of the community of love with God and their fellows. Consequently no-one has the right to ignore the inner unity of the human race by appealing to racial, social or any other differentiations. Nor has anyone the right to impose structures or conditions which do violence to life and promote injustice and the exploitation of one person by another or contempt for human rights.
2. The same God has “determined the bounds of their habitations” (verse 26) and no-one has the right to threaten these bounds and violate them, or to cause uncertainty and insecurity or mistrust and anxiety. What is more, no-one has the right to cause invasions and wars that result in the murder of human beings. On the contrary it is everyone’s duty to promote solidarity among all nations and to defend peace; and it is a particular task of the Christians also to bear witness to that peace which “passes all understanding” (Phil. 4:7) – the profound reconciliation of human beings with God and their neighbours.
3. On the Areopagus the Apostle Paul also preached about the day that was coming when God would “judge the *oikoumene* with righteousness”, for which reason “he now commands all men everywhere to repent” (verses 30f). This call to *metanoia* is at the same time a summons to Christians to participate dynamically and responsibly in the renewal of all humanity and in the restructuring of life in such a way that in the present world – and particularly in the world of the future, which will be dominated by technology – the *koinonia* of persons and their participation in the mystery of the freedom and love of the Triune God, and the hope of resurrection, will not be lost.⁶

Autenergeia and Synergeia

The call to awake from inertia, directed mostly at Christians in the

developed countries as a summons to repentance and active love, should equally be heard as an encouragement to both people and peoples who are victims of oppression, racial discrimination, exploitation, poverty, injustice and marginalization. Heed should be paid to the testimony of history, which clearly indicates that in such situations the last word lies with struggle. Opinions may differ as to the means and methods employed in the struggle, but there can be no doubt as to its necessity. Nor, to be sure, are the situations and conditions everywhere identical; but evil is the same in essence in all times and places, no matter the forms in which it manifests itself.

For instance, the South African system of apartheid is intrinsically something new and unique but it is certainly not something entirely unheard of in the history of humanity. We could for example draw on our own historical experiences and point to the centuries of Turkish rule over our own people and others of the Orthodox faith. At that time a system similar to apartheid was practised in many places, we may say, by a mostly forced separation of the Islamic and Christian populations in villages which were isolated from each other. Yet even in towns where there were mixed populations the "walls of partition" were mostly built high. They might not be visible walls, but despite that they were not responsible for any less discrimination. Here the predominant factor was the difference in faith, but the racial element was not wholly lacking. The lives of the subjugated were daily exposed to the arbitrary will of the ruler and to the possibility of unpredictable death. Were these peoples to be asked today to give expression to this particularly tragic historical experience, with our present problems in mind, their response would have to be somewhat along the following lines:

1. Foreign rule and oppression have, it is true, always been interpreted as a warning from God and as a call to *metanoia*, but they have never been accepted as a historical *fait accompli* requiring our total surrender. On the contrary, liberation has never ceased to be our ultimate objective, whether our behaviour was passive or active — that is, sometimes biding our time and putting a brave face on the situation, but sometimes also entering into direct conflict and open struggle, with repeatedly countless victims to show for this.
2. No-one in power has ever voluntarily relinquished either power or privilege in favour of those without power; freedom, dignity and justice have never been freely bestowed but have had to be gained by hard struggle in all times and places.
3. It is only occasionally that effective help has been given to the oppressed from "outside", and where this in fact has happened, self-interest has always played a part. For this reason *Autenergeia* and *Synergeia* — self-energising, or activity on one's own initiative, and collaboration — remain the only way out of the impasse, the only means of exodus for those who are slaves.
4. During the period of the great affliction, our clergy — and especially the

monks — always demonstrated complete solidarity with the people, even helping to organize the protracted, armed struggle for liberation. Indeed, for the most part they were the leaders in the struggle. At that time, liberation theology and liberation in action were inseparable. To this day we have noted no voice coming from the clergy or from theologians, historians and politicians, or from the people, which would have regarded such behaviour on the part of the clergy as open to question. On the contrary, there is unanimous grateful acknowledgement of their participation in the struggle and equal unanimity in the criticism directed against those few clerics who held themselves aloof, for whatever reasons, from that adventure with its inevitable spilling of much blood.

5. This much has to be said: our real tragedy, a tragedy for the laity and above all for the clergy, lay in our inner divisions and tensions, for we knew very well that according to the Gospel we ought to have been loving the enemy we were killing! The examples are countless of that truly tragic tension.

In this present context one thing stands out in particular. Those people, even if they sometimes considered their struggle to be a “holy” one and “knew” that God was on their side, never lost their awareness that all this was not happening in the “divine ambience” but was a sinful activity even if also a necessary one. So there was no question of an unthinking, jingoistic glorification of the struggle, but rather a conscious sinning (trusting in the mercy of God!) with liberation as the aim, and an act of self-sacrifice in order to secure for the coming generations a life that would be free and fit for human beings.

Martyrion and Martyria

The historic witness of Orthodoxy closely associates Martyrion (martyrdom) and martyria (witness). To our brothers and sisters who are faced today with the challenge of discovering how best to combat racism and apartheid, we can offer only our hope and our desire that they may continue to be spared further painful Martyrion but without, on the other hand, having to bear a defective or false Martyria to their faith and hope: being enabled rather — in the midst of oppression — to keep on firmly having “faith and hope in God” through Jesus Christ, through whom we have “confidence in God” who “raised him from the dead and gave him glory” (1 Peter 1:21).

We know, of course, or at least can more or less imagine, how difficult it is to bear such Martyria in the existing situation. We also know how odd or even absurd some calls made by the *oikoumene* may sound in the ears of our brothers and sisters who are actually engaged in the struggle — for instance the call to respond to the Lima documents and to cooperate in carrying out the reception process! There is no doubt that Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry as a whole contains a radical rejection of racism and apartheid. But of this there are also direct or indirect indications, for instance in the

paper on Baptism (Sections 2.6 and commentary, 1), the Eucharist, *passim* and also quite specifically (Section 20, but also 21, 22, 24, 26), and the Ministry (Sections 1 and especially 2.50).

Questions and statements, however well justified they may be, certainly do not entitle us to make simplistic transpositions and overstatements which could give the impression that there is a danger of trying to fight the one heresy by means of another. This certainly does not apply to the system of apartheid, in its nature and its operation as racism, and as the expression of a crass capitalism bent on exploitation – a totalitarian, anti-Christian and quite simply demonic phenomenon which is as transparent as it is cruel. It applies rather to the exegetical method used for instance in the Kairos document, and many similar arguments which prompt us to point out that besides the timeous (Kairos) there is the untimely, the Akairon, the opposite of Kairos, and that we are all constantly dependent on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in seeking to recognize the signs of the Kairos and discern the “spirits” (1 Cor. 12:10) and distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:14), before we draw conclusions that could lead to a whole people’s dicing with death. We desire this support from the Holy Spirit for ourselves and for all concerned with the problems of racism and apartheid, but above all for all those who are directly affected by those problems.

NOTES

This contribution, dedicated to C.I. Itty, stems from a paper given at a session with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC (Consultative Group on Social Thought and Action) on 8-9 April, 1986.

- 1) Papaderos Alexandros. “Liturgical Diaconia,” in *An Orthodox Approach to Diaconia*. Consultation on Church and Service, Orthodox Academy of Crete, November 20-25, 1978, WCC/Geneva 1980, p. 23.
- 2) Papaderos Alexandros, Kyrillou kai Methodiou ton Agion Ierapostolon Meneme kai Ypomnese, Salonica, 1986; cf. Meyendorff I., “Christ and Word: Gospel and Culture”, in *International Review of Mission* No. 294 (1985), pp. 246-257.
- 3) *Challenge to the Churches . . . The Kairos Document and Commentaries*, WCC, Geneva 1985.
- 4) For the full text and more information on that historic Synod, cf. Maximos, Metropolitan of Sardes, *The Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Orthodox Church. A Study in the History and Canons of the Church*, Salonica 1976, pp. 303-308.
- 5) See original text in *Episkepsis*, No. 354, (1.4.1985), pp. 11-17. French translation in the French edition of that Bulletin (354/1.4.1986, pp. 11-17); German translation in KNA-Dokumentation No. 4 (11.6.1986), pp. 1-12.
- 6) Original text in *Ekklesiastike Aletheia*, Athens, 221 (January 1986) p. Further comments by orthodox theologians on the problem of racism can

be found in: *Orthodox Thought*. Reports of Orthodox Consultations organized by the World Council of Churches, ed. G. Tsetsis, WCC, Geneva 1983.

- 7) More on this problem in Papaderos Alexandros, "*Skizzen aus dem Leben kretischer Priester*", in *Wenn theologie praktisch wird . . .*, "Festschrift" for H.J. Quest, ed. J. Sonnenberg, J.F. Steinkopf Verlag, Stuttgart, 1983, pp. 230-245.

(Translated from the German. WCC Language Service)