

# Mission(s) and Politics: An Orthodox's Approach

*Athanasios N. Papathanasiou*

## Introduction

Since the focus of my paper is mission, allow me to begin with two clarifications. It is wellknown that many, especially in Europe, are uncomfortable with the concept of mission inasmuch as they identify (in a rather essentialist manner) mission with colonialism. Since the 1960s, the notorious “guilt feeling” has very often led them not only to reject colonialism (which is the right thing to do) but also to repudiate any concept of mission. But the repudiation of mission *per se* is extremely problematic because it fails to account for all the radically different approaches to mission. The sense of mission that I advocate is a witness and invitation that is given freely and a participation in a global dialogue, a dialogue that enriches humankind. Mission has profound anthropological importance, and this must be understood by all, be they religious, atheist, or agnostic. It has to do with the human's fundamental ability to choose his/her own spiritual orientation, to opt for the meaning of life, to change him-/herself. In other words, mission reminds us that we are not immovable boulders nor rolling stones but (as Terry Eagleton has said), “we are clay in our own hands.”

In this process of self-shaping, action and passivity, the strenuously willed and the sheerly given, unite once more, this time in the same individuals. We resemble nature in that we, like it, are to be cuffed into shape, but we differ from it in that we can do this to ourselves, thus introducing into the world a degree of self-reflexivity to which the rest of nature cannot aspire. As self-cultivators, we are clay in our own hands, at once redeemer and unregenerate, priest and sinner in the same body.<sup>1</sup>

In this regard, mission resembles politics since both deal primarily with human responsibility and the human ability to make decisions and through them to inoculate creativity into the determinism of the natural world.

My second clarification has to do with the reservation of certain Orthodox theologians about mission. They do not reject mission, but they conceive it as something secondary; as something that does not define the identity of the Church and is not a decisive component of it. To the contrary, I believe that

---

<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford & Victoria: Blackwell & Malden, 2000), 11.

mission concerns the very being of the Church since it does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the entire creation. The Church is not the end; it is not the Kingdom of God; it is the sign, the foretaste, the herald and deacon of the Kingdom. In that sense, the Church does not have a mission; it is mission.<sup>2</sup> That is why mission has no temporal or geographical limitations. It is directed both to human contexts that have come to know Christianity and those that have not. After all, since as early as 1963 the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism has made it clear that Christian witness is about "mission in six continents."<sup>3</sup>

In this contribution I will approach mission as the specific actions of proclaiming and inculcating the Gospel in diverse contexts (actions that imply both evangelization and solidarity indiscriminately). This approach moves beyond talking about mission in the abstract, as the salvific task of the Church at large. So, I will take into account the varied historical experience of missions as well as the theologies of mission and will try to delineate current quests.

### What Kind of Politics?

I now come to my subject and pose one key question: Does the proclamation of the Gospel have a political dimension? My answer is that the proclamation of the Gospel *is* a political act, but this requires clarification. The Gospel has a political character in the sense that it gives meaning to human life and calls people to make decisions. The real question, then, is not whether the mission has a political dimension, but what kind of political dimension it has. There are enormous differences between various strands of theology here, and interpretation always plays a crucial role. For example, Trinitarian doctrine may be interpreted so as to inspire a type of anarchist, direct democracy (based on the – let us say – egalitarian community of the three Persons), or, on the contrary, to reinforce absolute monarchy and authoritarian regimes (based on the so-called monarchy of the Father). So, I take the responsibility to point out here what seems to me to be the key features of the political dynamics that are brought out by missionary work.

2 See Athanasios N. Papatheanasiou, "The Church as Mission: Fr Alexander Schmemmann's Liturgical Theology Revisited," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 60 (2010): 6–41.

3 Kenneth R. Ross, Jooseop Keum, Kyriaki Avtzi, and Roderick R. Hewitt, eds., "Mexico City 1963: Witness in Six Continents," in *Ecumenical Missiology: Changing Landscapes and New Conceptions of Mission* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2016), 82–5.

As I said earlier, the proclamation of the Gospel recognizes each person's ability to choose his/her own spiritual orientation. The call to a personal conversion is the backbone of the Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Even when an explicit invitation from the Church does not exist at all, God's unseen invitation to conversion is always taking place. God desires every human being in every culture, to hunger for true love and thirst for true life, and therefore God acts both manifestly and in secret to invite people to the Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> The task of the Church therefore is to serve the mission of the missionary God and to affirm both that Christ works inside and outside the boundaries of the institutional Church and that God identifies with those in need. This is a political choice that every human being is called upon to make at his own risk and at his own cost, even if it breaks with his cultural tradition or social reality.

This emphasis on the responsibility of the human subject obviously flows into the church's traditional system of government, i.e., *synodality* (or collegiality). At the same time, however, it reminds us of modern liberal democracies and their fundamental view that every adult corresponds to one vote, that everyone is equal before the law, and that everyone is entitled to basic freedoms. Of course, those who deal with political theory know that these things are very complex and that there is a vast literature regarding democracy, its types, their virtues, and their drawbacks.<sup>6</sup> Capitalism tends to transform the citizens into consumers and to replace politics with marketing. The human being often surrenders not merely to outer oppression, but to its own enslavement through the narcissistic pursuit of individual success.<sup>7</sup> Besides, in representative democracy, political pluralism is a blessing. Nevertheless, participation in the decision-making process is very often replaced by the authority of elected elites or may be subjected to the power of a parliamentary majority that disdains the axiom that human rights exist for all and are

---

4 See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "An Orphan or a Bride? The Human Self, Collective Identities and Conversion," in *Thinking Modernity: Towards a Reconfiguration of the Relationship between Orthodox Theology and Modern Culture*, ed. Assaad Kattan and Fadi Georgi (Balamand: St John of Damascus Institute of Theology, 2011), 133–63.

5 See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "If I Cross the Boundaries, You Are There! An Affirmation of God's Action Outside the Canonical Boundaries of the Church," *Communio Viatorum* 53, no. 3 (2011), 40–55.

6 See, for example, Frédéric Worms, *Les Maladies Chroniques de la démocratie* (Paris: Éditions Desclée de Brouwer, 2017); John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009). For an affirmation of liberal democracy from an Orthodox point of view, see Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 55–146.

7 Cf. Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Eric Butler (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 9–15.

not dependent on majority's options. At the same time, the great advantage of democracy is the fact that self-criticism belongs to its very being, together with its capacity to reform itself and heal its maladies.

The Christian understanding of humans as relational beings (as beings who live authentically insofar as they love) and of every person as the image of Christ excludes totalitarianism from its midst and at the same time endorses the concerns outlined above and a critical reception of democracy. Moreover, there is another point that, in my view, is particularly relevant to the political implications of Christian witness and its dialogue with liberal democracy: the appraisal of the human subject cannot only be expressed as equality before the law. If class inequality and social injustice run rampant, then individual rights exist in theory but not in practice. A child, for example, has a legal right to attend school, but in practice s/he will do so only if s/he is not forced to drop out of school or college because of poverty. In Betty Smith's work, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), Johnny, a son of Irish immigrants, goes for a walk with his daughter, Francie. He shows her the hansom cabs and explains that in free America everyone can ride a Hansom cab, after paying the fare of course. Francie then asks what kind of freedom it is when it is only enjoyed by those who are not poor. Johnny cannot answer the question but triumphantly asserts instead: "Because that would be Socialism, and we don't want that over here." "Why?" insists Francie. "Because we got Democracy and that's the best thing there is."<sup>8</sup> Already in Johnny's last sentence we not only meet an ideological disconnection of civil rights from social justice, but we also hear the argument that his brand of democracy represents a universal good. We will deal with this a little later.

Tangible acts of love are the criterion of the Last Judgment and thus the criterion of the attitude of Christians in history. Mission cannot, therefore, preach eschatology as an ontological theory without concern for the "least" of Christ's brothers and sisters (cf. Matthew 25:40), the unprivileged and the marginalized. This means that missionary work must develop in two ways. It must be practised as *inculturation* (i.e., turning the culture into the flesh of Christ), but it cannot be limited to inculturation: inculturation must be combined with *liberation*. Cultures are not monolithic; every culture contains structures of humanity and inhumanity, but the Church cannot take up forces that produce inhumanity. I would say therefore that inculturation is the politics of incarnation, while liberation is the politics of resurrection. The grandfather of "Liberation Theology," Gustavo Gutiérrez, has aptly noted that the mission of the Church includes both *proclamation* and *denunciation*:

---

<sup>8</sup> Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), 166–8.

The realization that the Lord loves us and the acceptance of the unmerited gift of the Lord's love are the deepest source of the joy of those who live by God's word. Evangelization is the communication or sharing of this joy. It is the sharing of the good news of God's love that has changed our lives. The proclamation is in a sense free and unmerited, just as is the love that is the source of our proclamation. [...] The language of prophecy denounces the situation of injustice and exploitation [...] and denounces as well the structural causes of this situation.<sup>9</sup>

Father George Florovsky, a leading Orthodox theologian in the 20th century, emphasized the double task of mission (proclamation and denunciation). He did not articulate a political approach to mission yet he laid the theological foundation for it:

The first task of the Church in history consists in proclaiming the Good News. And the proclamation of the Good News inevitably conveys pronouncing a judgment on the world [...]. [The Church] does this by word and by acts, for the true announcing of the Gospel consists precisely in the practice of the new life, in the demonstration of faith through its acts [...]. Conversion is a new start that must be followed by a long and difficult race. The Church needs to organize the new life of the converted. The Church needs to show the new mode of existence, the new mode of life that is of the world to come. God claims the entire person and the Church gives witness to this total claim of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Christian must be a new creature. This is why a Christian is unable to find a stable place within the confines of the "old world." In this sense the Christian attitude is always revolutionary by its relation to "the old order" of this world.<sup>10</sup>

Identifying the inhumane forces in each particular context is a matter of carefully studying and respectfully becoming familiar with each culture so that the missionary can truly understand the real situation and not simply reproduce his/her own homeland and society's stereotypes. It is, therefore, important to look at the subcultures of the culture in question and discover the voices of the "least" of Christ's brothers and sisters who are crying out against their own society. I refer you, by way of example, to the traditional Korean mask dance, which has been used by the lower classes to critique the ruling elite.<sup>11</sup> There is also the traditional ritual in Africa of spirit possession in which women who are oppressed by their husbands pretend to become possessed by a spirit that

9 *Gustavo Gutiérrez, The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 16.

10 Georges Florovsky, *The Body of the Living Christ: An Orthodox Interpretation of the Church*, trans. Robert M. Arida (Boston: The Wheel Library, 2018), 83–4.

11 Hong Jei Lee, *The Comparative Study of the Christology in Latin American Liberation Theology and Korean Minjung Theology*, PhD diss. (University of Glasgow, 1990), 196–7; <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2397/>.

is respected in their tribe. The spirit ostensibly speaks through the woman and publicly castigates the authoritarian husband, without the husband being able to retaliate.<sup>12</sup> What is of special importance here is that missiology has recently acknowledged that the marginalized and the unprivileged are not only the recipients of the mission but also agents of it. The 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, Republic of Korea (2013) *defined* and affirmed the “Mission from the Margins.” The document reads:

We affirm that marginalized people are agents of mission and exercise a prophetic role which emphasizes that fullness of life is for all. The marginalized in society are the main partners in God’s mission. Marginalized, oppressed, and suffering people have a special gift to distinguish what news is good for them and what news is bad for their endangered life. In order to commit ourselves to God’s life-giving mission, we have to listen to the voices from the margins to hear what is life-affirming and what is life-destroying. We must turn our direction of mission to the actions that the marginalized are taking. Justice, solidarity, and inclusivity are key expressions of mission from the margins.<sup>13</sup>

In my opinion, the recognition of the marginalized as agents of mission (in collaboration with all people who stand in solidarity with them), somehow echoes the practice of the ancient Church and specifically the role of the seven deacons who came from the underprivileged members of the community and contributed greatly to the missionary opening up of the Church (Acts 6:1–6, 8:4).

12 Heike Bahrend and Ute Luig, “Introduction,” in *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa*, ed. Heike Bahrend and Ute Luig (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), xvii.

13 *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes (CWME)*, World Council of Churches, [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Together\\_towards\\_Life.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Together_towards_Life.pdf), par. 107, p. 39 (accessed 25 November 2020). As Rev. Deenabandhu Manchala states: “In order to understand the reasons for this attempt to re-imagine mission from the margins, we must recognize a few common features of the experience of those on the margins. First, these groups of people are a part of the church in many contexts around the world that unfortunately experience discrimination and marginalization right within it. Secondly, they have also been victims of churches’ missionary expansion and theologies that took shape amidst and legitimized historical processes of discrimination and oppression of the weak and the vulnerable. And thirdly, these groups of people have been generally referred to or seen as recipients or objects of churches’ mission. Therefore, it is unique that these marginalized sections, the former victims, former objects of mission, now attempt a missiological reflection, not as a reaction to what mission has been to them in the past but of what they imagine God intends for the whole world and creation today.” See Deenabandhu Manchala, “Mission from the Margins. Toward a Just World,” *International Review of Mission* 101, no. 1 (2012), 153–4.

In fact, missionary activity faces many predicaments, dilemmas and temptations, however. One problem, for example, is posed by widespread missionary tactics throughout history to win over the sovereign and the ruling class of the people they are addressing. This of course makes sense, but it entails an enormous risk: the mission is considered to be a success if the leader is converted, regardless of what kind of politics s/he practices (or, at best, with the hope that Christian faith would later soften the heart of cruel sovereigns or make legislation more humane). The history of missions in Byzantium and medieval Western Europe is full of such cases. Let us nevertheless mention, by way of example, some attitudes in modern times, when the issue of democracy became central in the life of Western societies.

In China, in the 16th century, the distinguished Jesuit Matteo Ricci addressed the elite. In Korea, however, at the beginning of the 20th century, Protestants turned to poverty-stricken people and thus Minjung theology, Korea's liberation theology, began.<sup>14</sup> In 19th-century Africa, missionaries "almost inevitably tended to concentrate their attention and their powers of persuasion upon royals."<sup>15</sup> Another example, not immediately connected with the missionary field but certainly crucial for a Christian approach to politics, comes from Europe. With the emergence of the Nazi regime in Germany, Protestants all over the world found themselves divided. Some denounced Nazism as an anti-Christian ideology while others were charmed by Hitler as a virtuous leader: he neither drank nor smoked, encouraged modesty among women and was not a communist. Only those directly opposed to the Church were considered anti-Christian.<sup>16</sup> We can find a similar attitude everywhere, including the Orthodox world in the 20th century, when pro-fascist and anti-Semitic sentiments found expression in Orthodox movements in traditionally Orthodox countries like Romania.<sup>17</sup>

It may be helpful here to illustrate a contradiction hidden in the very being of traditional Orthodox thought. In much traditional theological literature, the "irreverent" ruler is usually seen merely as the leader who opposes right doctrine. But this overlooks the fact that the truly irreverent leader is first and foremost s/he who disregards justice. It is indicative that St. Nicodemus the Athonite (1749–1809) limits the duty to resist ("We must obey God rather than

14 Bong Rin Ro, "Korea, South," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000), 545–6.

15 Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 307.

16 William Loyd Allen, "How Baptists Assessed Hitler," *Religion Online*; <https://www.religion-online.org/article/how-baptists-assessed-hitler/> (accessed 25 November 2020).

17 Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 60–3.

men”; Acts 5:29, RSV) only to those instances in which the ruler turns against the faith. But when Nicodemus looks for hagiographical passages to depict the unworthy ruler, he comes up against a different sense: in the Bible, the unworthy ruler is the one who tramples on social justice – not only Orthodox dogma. Nicodemus thus quotes from the prophets: “Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not come to them” (Isaiah 1:23, RSV). “Her princes [of the country] in the midst of her are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain” (Ezekiel 22:27, RSV).<sup>18</sup>

At this point, I suppose all our thoughts turn toward the emblematic phrase “liturgy after the Liturgy.” Coined in the 1970s, this “catchphrase” has been a major contribution of Orthodox theology to global Christianity. It emphasizes that what was made manifest during the celebration of the Eucharist within the ecclesial gathering needs now to be practiced as an “exodus,” by witnessing through word and deed in everyday life. This “exodus” means actual solidarity with the weak and a break with the forces of intolerance, oppression and social exclusion. In my opinion, this stance entails something extremely important and yet often overlooked. The “liturgy after the Liturgy” does not envision simply the Christianization of the whole of society; it also represents the Church’s vision for how a society ought to act in a public sphere in which both Christians and non-Christians freely coexist.

In our time, it seems that all theologians subscribe to the idea of the “liturgy after the Liturgy.” But I do not think it is quite that simple. Many see the Church’s celebration of the Eucharist as completely sufficient and thus treat the Church’s “exodus” as something additional or secondary. But the formula “liturgy after the Liturgy” means precisely the opposite: that witness – opening up toward the world – is a *continuation* of (and not an accessory to) the Divine Liturgy. If there is no continuation, then the very validity of the Divine Liturgy is cast into doubt.<sup>19</sup> It is no coincidence that this concept of the “liturgy after the Liturgy” was formed in the field of mission in 1975 by the pillar of mission, Anastasios Yannoulatos, Archbishop of the Orthodox Church in Albania since 1992.<sup>20</sup>

18 See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, “Αντίσταση, λαϊκή εξέγερση, επανάσταση: Έρωτήματα για την κανονική παράδοση” [Resistance, Rebellion of the People, Revolution: Questions for the Canonical Tradition], *Synaxi* 146 (2018): 71–83.

19 See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, “Social Engagement as Part of the Call to Deification in Orthodox Theologies,” *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 57, nos. 1–4 (2016), 87–106.

20 Ion Bria, “The Liturgy after the Liturgy,” *International Review of Mission* 265 (1978), 86–90.



Diametrically opposed to this concept of the “liturgy after the Liturgy” are Neo-Pentecostal theology and the “Prosperity Gospel,” which see the Church’s mission exclusively as individual redemption from the devil and his wicked spirits, who bring poverty and sickness as just punishment to those who are not faithful Christians. According to this view, there is no such thing as social injustice, since the poor themselves are at fault. Interestingly, we find similar views among Orthodox Christians who attribute society’s misfortunes either to the will of God or the personal laziness of the poor – apparently contrary to the teachings of the Bible and the church fathers, who interpret social injustice as opposition to God’s will.<sup>21</sup>

### Anthropology and Politics: A Perennial Crossroads

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union (i.e., since the 1990s), political scientists have examined the question whether liberal representative democracy is a universal human good or – to the contrary – a product that only makes sense in Western culture. If the values of democracy are not universal, then their application to other cultural contexts is nothing more than cultural imperialism. Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama triggered the discussion, and a tsunami of critique, refutations and elaborations followed. I will remind the reader here only that Huntington claimed that the fall of the dictatorship in Portugal in 1974 fired a global wave of democratization that reached Latin America and Asia in the 1980s and Eastern Europe and Africa in the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy is, in fact, the final stage of human political development.<sup>23</sup> I am not going to take up the particular discussion of these much debated views but will only deal with the question of the universality of liberal democracy in connection with mission. This question is perennially important for Christians, in spite of the changes that have been taking place on the global level. The current neo-colonialism differs from classical colonialism (which collapsed after World War II) in that neo-colonialism does

21 See Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, “Liberation Perspectives in Patristic Thought: An Orthodox Approach,” in *Hellenic Open University: Scientific Review of Post-Graduate Program Studies in Orthodox Theology* 2 (2011), 419–38.

22 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). According to Huntington, the first wave of democracy sprang from early 19th-century reforms in the USA and affected several countries until the emergence of 20th-century totalitarianisms. The second wave started after the World War II and ended in the early 1960s.

23 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

not need Christian missions as one of its vehicles; advanced technologies and globalized stockexchange market are sufficient weapons or perhaps its new expansionist religion.

The question pertains to mission diachronically in the sense that mission by its very nature requires an encounter between cultures. But many of the theologians who discuss the relationship of Christianity and democracy take modern political Islam into account, but –surprisingly enough – they are rather unaware of the field of mission’s vast experience (both positive and negative, past and current), and are thus deprived of an enormous amount of research material. For example, in the *vita* of the 9th century Byzantine missionaries Cyril and Methodius, we find Cyril’s dialogue with the Khazars of Crimea regarding their hereditary monarchy, which the Khazars had and the Byzantines (to the Kazars’ surprise) did not:

Having boarded a ship, Constantine set out for the land of the Khazars by way of the Meotis Sea and Caspian Gates of the Caucasus Mountains. The Khazars sent a cunning and resourceful man to meet him, who entered into conversation with him and said to him: “Why do you follow the evil custom of replacing one emperor with another of a different lineage? We do this only according to lineage.” The Philosopher said to him: “Yet in place of Saul, who did nothing to please Him, God chose David, who was pleasing to Him, and David’s lineage.”<sup>24</sup>

Moving now to the modern age, the 19th century was marked by the missionary messianism of Americans in particular. Many missionaries believed that their mission was to spread the Gospel, science and democracy around the world. The eminent American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote sarcastically in 1937 that American missionaries were eager to give light to the Gentiles but used lamps made in the USA.<sup>25</sup> The echo of the Social Gospel in America was still strong and made the German theologian Karl Heim comment: “The kingdom of God means nothing more than the League of Nations, democracy and the coming of militant capitalism.”<sup>26</sup> And in our time, Ian Buruma, assessing the American mindset, has scathingly pointed out that “the difference between selling the gospel, agricultural machinery, or a political candidate is

24 Marvin Kantor, trans., “The Vita and Life of Our Blessed Teacher Constantine the Philosopher, the First Preceptor of the Slavic People,” in *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes* (Ann Arbor MI: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1983), 45; <http://macedonia.kroraina.com/en/kmsl/index.htm>.

25 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 179.

26 Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 65.

not always obvious in the United States. For all mix show business with popular sentiment, the reassuring air of the regular guy, and the braggadocio of the carnival huckster.<sup>27</sup>

But neither have European missionaries escaped this kind of fair vitriolic criticism. “When your fathers fixed the place of GOD,” wrote T. S. Eliot at the same time as Niebuhr,

And settled all the inconvenient saints,  
Apostles, martyrs, in a kind of Whipsnade,  
Then they could set about imperial expansion  
Accompanied by industrial development.  
Exporting iron, coal and cotton goods  
And intellectual enlightenment  
And everything, including capital  
And several versions of the Word of GOD:  
The British race assured of a mission  
Performed it, but left much at home unsure.<sup>28</sup>

The export of democracy together with the Gospel, during the colonialist missions, has haunted the whole discussion. But some elaborations are quite necessary. Two different issues are involved here. On the one hand, we have to trace the politics that derive from the Gospel itself. On the other hand, we have to consider the political system of the missionary’s homeland whenever the missionary considers it to be the proper application of the Gospel in social life. Despite being a widespread belief, it is not true that every mission was simply a tool of colonial states. Of course, many were just that. But, for example, non-conformist missionaries – i.e., Protestants who were in favour of separating church and state and who were persecuted in their homelands – are a different case. They were not financed by the state, and they emphasized individual freedoms in particular. Already in the late 18th century, the catalyst for modern mission, William Carey, urged the British to boycott products made in India under inhumane conditions,<sup>29</sup> and there is a strong movement today to support global fair trade.

---

27 Ian Buruma, *Taming the Gods: Religion and Democracy on Three Continents* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16.

28 T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from *The Rock*, II,” in *Collected Poems 1909–1935* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), 100–1.

29 Darren Cronshaw, “A Commission ‘Great’ for Whom? Postcolonial Contrapuntal Readings of Matthew 28:18–20 and the Irony of William Carey,” *Transformation* 33, no. 2 (2016), 115–8.

Nonconformists (i.e., non-state-supported Protestant denominations) historically suffered from discrimination and persecution by governments and state churches. Thus they fought for religious liberty and against state interference in civil society. [...] Nonstate missionaries moderated colonial abuses, particularly when abuses undermined conversions and in British colonies [...]. To reach their religious goals, nonstate missionaries punished abusive colonial officials and counterbalanced white settlers, which fostered the rule of law, encouraged less violent repression of anticolonial political organization, and facilitated peaceful decolonization. Of course, Protestant economic and political elites were as selfish as anyone else. Protestant slave owners fought slave literacy, and Protestant settlers exploited indigenous people; however, when missionaries were financially independent of the state, of slave owners, and of white settlers, missionaries undermined these elite co-religionists in ways that fostered democracy.<sup>30</sup>

We have to take the complexity of the whole issue under serious consideration. On the one hand, numerous missions served colonialism while, on the other, several missions cultivated respect towards cultural otherness. The case of the Protestant missionary Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) in China and his clash with other missionaries who could not share his respect for Chinese culture is indicative.<sup>31</sup> As the colonization of mind and cultural imposition, missions have really deep roots; but the trends in favour of contextualization were intensified especially after World War I. This merciless war between (so to say) Christian states filled the European soul with a new bitter feeling that it no longer made sense to offer Christianity along with the political and economic implications of desolate European civilization. At the same time, this bitter feeling contributed to a liberating shift. The ecclesiastical centres of Europe thus began to acknowledge the need for missionaries in the Third World to maintain, as far as possible, the traditional structure of indigenous societies and shape local churches with indigenous features.<sup>32</sup> In missionary discourse, the need for respect towards the culturally other had been stressed by some already in the middle of the 19th century<sup>33</sup>, but after the subversive World War I it began to touch the metropolitan church centres.

As I said, the notion of conversion lays crucial emphasis on the importance of the human person. Consequently, this emphasis proves to be a catalyst for the evaluation of every regime. The capacity for self-orientation implies the

30 Robert D. Woodberry, "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 246.

31 J. Herbert Kane, "The Legacy of J. Hudson Taylor," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8, no. 2 (1984), 74–8.

32 Ronald Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London: Longmans, 1952), 232.

33 See, for example, Wilbert R. Shenk, "The Contribution of Henry Venn to Mission Thought," *Anvil* 2, no. 1 (1985), 25–42.

human subject's ability to judge his or her own culture, even to break from specific institutions of his or her culture. The purpose of this break is not the exit of the human subject from its culture and from its societal relations but their reorientation. No matter how difficult it may be in reality, conversion does not ask the human subject to become a fleshless (that is, cultureless) phantom, but to insert new meaning into common life. This inevitably implies a dialectics of affirmations and negations of customs, institutions and concepts. Of course, to what degree any conversion is genuine or false (colonization of mind) is an open question, as is every human action. But what interests us here is conversion as a basic anthropological capacity. This capacity emerges as a real revolution in contexts where the human subject has atrophied within a powerful hierarchical or collectivist system, such as the caste system in India or Confucianism in the Far East (or even in traditionally Orthodox countries when a strong sense of collectivism identifies religious identity with ethnic DNA at the expense of personal conversion).<sup>34</sup>

An early manifestation of this issue (somehow like an introduction to or anticipation of political theology) has been the missionaries' stance pro or contra slavery. Mark Twain's work, *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, written in 1869, is typical. In this work, the American author denounces Belgium's brutality in the Congo. Twain admits that these cruelties came to light only through missionaries, who were the only ones to stand in solidarity with the indigenous people.<sup>35</sup> Twain's testimony is important because he generally disliked missionaries, regarding them as fugitives from life and accusing them of serving "the Blessings-of-Civilization Trust," as he called imperialism.<sup>36</sup> It goes without saying that not all missionaries had the same views. The Dutch Reformed Church, for example, supported apartheid in South Africa.<sup>37</sup>

The missionary work of translating the Bible and other texts into vernacular languages contributed to strengthening the self-confidence of the receivers. Translations not only conveyed the message the missionaries wanted to spread but also gave the indigenous people new possibilities for expressing themselves in every field. For the Orthodox Church, the case of Saint Nicolas Kasatkin, missionary to Japan (1836–1912), has been exemplary. The tiny Orthodox Church

34 See Athanasios N. Papathansiou, "Signs of National Socialism in the Greek Church?," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 57, nos. 3–4 (2013), 461–78.

35 Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule* (Boston: P. R. Warren, 1905), 6–7.

36 Mark Twain, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," *North American Review* 531 (1901), 165.

37 Woodberry, "The Missionary Roots," 245, 255.

in Japan was aptly called “the Church of the Translations.”<sup>38</sup> Yet Protestant missions played a special role in this matter. Protestants’ firm conviction that everyone should be able to read the Bible in his/her own language – and, by extension, leaflets and newspapers – led to a particular emphasis on cultivating the conditions necessary for democratic governments in the Third World.

It is an established fact that, in many colonies, colonial governments implemented educational programmes for the locals. The missionaries’ educational programs, however, tended to be more radical, in that, while governmental programs were aimed at men, missionaries included women.<sup>39</sup> Through their educational and publishing programmes, missionaries obviously seek to spread their own particular views. But, as I said earlier, the crucial point here is that these programmes unleash a valuable force that often transcends the missionaries’ visual horizon or intentions. Many anti-colonial independence movements in the Third World came together through the very means provided by their access to the written word and the exchange of ideas.<sup>40</sup> In the 32 years after the introduction of the printing press in India in 1800, three British missionaries managed to print over 212,000 books in 40 languages, as well as newspapers that could be read by anyone. Hindi and Muslim publishing endeavours began later as a reaction to Christian literature. It stands to reason that the decisive factor in emancipation was not printing itself but the spirit that accompanied this publishing activity: the Gospel emphasis on the human subject. In the Far East (China, Japan, and Korea), printing existed 600–800 years before it existed in Europe. Its use, however, was limited to the elite.<sup>41</sup> Very interesting initiatives took place in Africa as well:

---

38 Charles F. Sweet, “Archbishop Nikolai and the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission to Japan,” *International Review of Mission* 2 (1913), 144; cf. Athanasios N. Papathanasiou “Tradition as Impulse for Renewal and Witness: The Introduction of Orthodox Missiology into the IRM,” *International Review of Mission* 393 (2011), 203–15.

39 Tomila Lankina and Lullit Getachew, “Mission or Empire, Word or Sword? The Human Capital Legacy in Post-Colonial Democratic Development,” *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 2 (2012), 465–83. Especially for India: Tomila Lankina & Lullit Getachew, “Competitive Religious Entrepreneurs: Christian Missionaries and Female Education in Colonial and Post-Colonial India,” *British Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 1 (2013), 103–31. The Catholics also developed an extensive printing operation, sometimes before the Protestants, but they mainly addressed the local elites. See Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots,” 256.

40 James S. Coleman, “The Problem of Political Integration in Emergent Africa,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1955), 54.

41 Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots,” 250.

The first newspaper intended for black readers, the *Umshumayeli Wendaba* (“Publishers of the News”), written in Xhosa, was published as an irregular quarterly in 1837 and printed at the Wesleyan Missionary Society in Cape Colony. *Isigidimi samaXhosa* (“The Xhosa Messenger”), the first African newspaper edited by Africans, was first released in 1876 and printed at the Lovedale Mission Press in South Africa. In 1884, the English/Xhosa weekly *Imvo Zabantsundu* (“The African Opinion”), the first black-owned and controlled newspaper in South Africa, was published. On the contrary, in regions where Protestant missions were less active, the first newspapers appeared only at the beginning of the 20th century, and no indigenous newspapers were created before WWI. The first paper in Ivory Coast to be owned and edited by an African, the *Éclairteur de la Cote d’Ivoire*, only appeared in 1935.<sup>42</sup>

### Current Issues

I will now touch upon some indicative examples of current discourse between non-Western cultures and Western-style democracy. I will refer to three contexts: the Far Eastern, the sub-Saharan African and the Latin American. Each of them needs extensive discussion of course, but I feel that even a few words are useful here, so that we take into account the fact that every culture is an active process (and not a static essence), every culture has to be in dialogue with itself and other cultures, and the Church has to be ready to accept their wisdom and enrich the articulation of the Good News in human life.

In the Confucian tradition of the Far East, the principle of “one person, one vote” remains difficult to digest. Governance must be exercised by the virtuous, i.e., an elite. But some Confucians who are interested in a synthesis of Confucianism and democracy argue that, in order for the virtuous to emerge, every individual must participate in the public square. So it is argued that

It is [...] possible that Confucian values can emend the less positive features of Western-style democracy, such as rampant individualism and the lack of commitment to family and community. Democracy, when forged with Confucian ideals, could result in a system of individualism, participation, consensus, and authority. In Confucian Democracy, for example, Sor-Hoon Tan proposes an alternative to liberal democracy. Tan argues that unlike a liberal democracy that operates under the constraints of interest groups, Confucian democracy is capable of promoting both individual freedom and the common good. Confucianism may also be capable of strengthening democracy. For example, Yung-Myung Kim writes that the Confucian emphasis on social order and respect for authority, harmony,

---

42 Julia Cagé and Valeria Rueda, “The Devil Is in the Detail: Christian Missions’ Heterogeneous Effects on Development in sub-Saharan Africa,” VOXeu CEPR, <https://voxeu.org/article/christian-missions-and-development-sub-saharan-africa> (accessed 25 November 2017).

and consensus may aid in the survival of burgeoning democracies. Fetzer and Soper contend that, like other religions, Confucianism can bend to emerging democratic trends. Conversely, Confucianism can “temper the excesses” of individualism and promote more consideration of past generations.<sup>43</sup>

In my opinion, the critical question here is whether the so-called “Asian values” (understood as the justification of authoritarianism after their renowned contribution to the “economic miracle” of Far Eastern countries since the 1970s) will prevail, or whether they can be oriented to new syntheses like the one described above.<sup>44</sup> What is of special importance is the fact that right now Chinese Christian theologians are making fascinating attempts at critically applying the concept of inculturation (with important political implications, even if they are not voiced loudly), advocating for the place of Christian theology in the public sphere. At the same time, it has been suggested that the ecclesiastical community takes the place of the biological family, which stands in the Confucian tradition as the political subject.<sup>45</sup> The emergence of the faith community (based on free choice) seems to be an important step. Yet my own skepticism here is whether this transition reinforces the role of the church leader in the way the absolute power of the father is understood in the Confucian family. In this case, the political implications will again lean towards authoritarianism.

In sub-Saharan Africa, things are quite different. The human subject is emphasized in the pre-Christian African tradition, but not as the autonomous individual of the European enlightenment. To exist as a human subject without a community is inconceivable. The *sui generis* African personalism endowed Africa with a unique political path through history. As Nelson Mandela aptly noted:

Then [before colonialism] our people lived peacefully under the democratic rule of their kings [...]. There were no classes [...] and no exploitation of man by man. All men were free and equal and this was the foundation of government. [...] The council was so completely democratic that all members of the tribe could participate in its deliberations. [...] There was much in such a society that was primitive and insecure and it certainly could never measure up to the demands

- 
- 43 Nicholas Spina, Doh C. Shin and Dana Cha, “Confucianism and Democracy: A Review of the Opposing Conceptualizations,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2011), 155.
- 44 Mark Richard Thompson, “Pacific Asia after ‘Asian Values’: Authoritarianism, Democracy, and ‘Good Governance,’” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 6 (2004), 1079–95.
- 45 Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology. Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 92–105, 146–59.



of the present epoch. But in such a society are contained the seeds of a revolutionary democracy [...].<sup>46</sup>

Mandela captures the African variety. Traditional African societies existed in two different types: centralized societies and non-centralized or stateless societies. Wherever a leader existed, his power was often limited by councils of elders or assemblies of all adults, while stateless societies enjoyed a kind of immediate democracy. Decisions were usually not taken by a majority but by consensus (unanimously).<sup>47</sup> Mandela apparently exaggerates when he describes traditional society as classless, but it does seem that there was a combination of equality before the law and social justice, which was disturbed when colonialism introduced the ideal of individual freedom alongside competitive capitalism.

There has been a great deal of debate about the political evolution of Africa from the 1950s until today. As we know, the states that emerged after colonialism have been plagued by a nightmarish alternation between authoritarianism, democracy and dictatorship. The colonial disintegration of the traditional African political model altered the way leaders emerged, the councils' control over the royal authority passed away, and the artificial creation of states brought various tribes into conflict. Africa's great contribution to the current global discussion about the nature and problems of democracy are the tug-of-war between representative democracy and immediate democracy on the one hand and majority or consensus on the other. Right now there is an extensive debate among African scholars, to which I cannot go into here (I will only note that I am already working on this).<sup>48</sup>

In Latin America, liberation theology inspired political initiatives and experimentations. It is well known that there, in the 1970s and 1980s, the "ecclesial base communities" tried to apply types of Christian socialism. What is less wellknown, however, is that the path toward "ecclesial base communities" had already been blazed four centuries earlier by Catholic missionaries. In 1537, the Catholic bishop Vasco de Quiroga, inspired by Thomas More's *Utopia*,

---

46 Quoted by George B. N. Ayittey, *Indigenous African Institutions* (New York: Transnational Publishers, 2006), 105.

47 M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Introduction," in *African Political Systems*, ed. M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 5; George B. N. Ayittey, *Indigenous African Institutions* (New York: Transnational Publishers, 2006), 106–41.

48 Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "Is a Dialogue between 'African' Anarchism" and Orthodox Anarchist Principles Possible?" in *Anarchism and Orthodoxy: Contemporary Approaches to Orthodox Theology and the Issues of Freedom and Power*, ed. Davor Džalto (forthcoming).

established two model indigenous communities in Mexico. They were classless communities, with processes of direct democracy, distribution of profits as needed, free medical care, 6-hour workdays, etc.<sup>49</sup> Seventy years later (in 1609), Jesuit missionaries established an autonomous, very successful Christian welfare state in Paraguay<sup>50</sup> (the case became widely known through the film *The Mission*, written by Robert Bolt and directed by Roland Joffé). This state survived for 150 years until it was overthrown by Christian colonial troops.

The Latin American missionary experience was truly multidimensional and has a lot to teach us, despite the decline of liberation theology in the 1990s. Two questions are of special importance, in my opinion. First is whether the missionaries practised inculturation, taking into account pre-Colombian elements of immediate democracy in indigenous communities.<sup>51</sup> The second question is whether the attitude of the missionaries towards the converted Indian Americans was paternalistic or, on the contrary, led to their emancipation and their acceptance as true and responsible participants in democratic processes.

### Conclusion

In a world where the economy now appears to be swallowing up politics, where the esotericism of the New Age ignores history, and where nationalisms are being emboldened, Christian mission is very important. Human life needs the witness that the blessed ones are those who bring the light of the future Kingdom into history, *hungry and thirsty for righteousness*.

---

49 Bernardino Verástique, *Michoacán and Eden: Vasco de Quiroga and the Evangelization of Western Mexico* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2000).

50 Walter Nonneman, "On the Economics of the Social Theocracy of the Jesuits in Paraguay (1609–1767)," in *The Political Economy of Theocracy*, ed. Mario Ferrero and Ronald Wintrobe (New York: Pargrace Macmillan, 2009), 119–42.

51 See, for example, Lizzie Wade, "It Wasn't Just Greece: Archaeologists Find Early Democratic Societies in the Americas," *Science AAAS*, 15 March 2017, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/03/it-wasnt-just-greece-archaeologists-find-early-democratic-societies-americas>.