

# CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH DIALOGUE

## REFLECTIONS

*Metropolitan Athenagoras of Belgium<sup>1</sup>*

Allow me from the outset to confess that, while interfaith dialogue is an area I am personally interested and invested in, it is not a subject that I have explored or experienced in an official capacity. Nevertheless, I am both aware and proud of the fact that the Orthodox Church has historically been very sensitive and respectful in its relations with members of other faith communities, especially the Jewish tradition, with which we have so much in common as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Thankfully, however, our Church has generally not had to regret or repent of its attitudes and actions against members of the Jewish faith. On the contrary, there are some beautiful pages in the history of relations between Orthodox Christians and Jews. Indeed, interfaith openness and understanding has historically characterized the approach of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

For example, well before the unprecedented atrocities of the twentieth century, in the mid-sixteenth century, Ecumenical Patriarch Metrophanes III (1520-1580) published an encyclical letter to his faithful in the Church of Crete after reports circulated that Jews were being mistreated.

Furthermore, in the early nineteenth century, Ecumenical Patriarch Agathangelos (1826-1830) was approached to intervene

---

<sup>1</sup> His Eminence Metropolitan Athenagoras Peckstadt is metropolitan of Belgium and Exarch of the Netherlands and Luxemburg (Ecumenical Patriarchate).

and advocate for the social and legal protection of the Jewish community in the Greek city of Ioannina.

More recently, during World War II, when the Jewish people underwent the shameful holocaust of the Nazi regime, there are numerous stories of Orthodox clergy that reveal how our Orthodox leaders overcame evil by good and fear with faith. The story of Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Zakynthos (1890-1958) is only one striking illustration.

Finally, in our own day, our spiritual father, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, has faithfully maintained and even reinforced numerous initiatives to bring people of all faiths together through interfaith dialogue. After all, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has pioneered such dialogues since the late 1970s and which continues to this day under the chairmanship of His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel of France.

Historically, of course, the Eastern Church has affirmed this vision of tolerance and dialogue ever since the Edict of Milan issued by the Emperor Constantine in 313 – a courageous proclamation and pledge for peaceful coexistence among all peoples of the Roman Empire, irrespective of religion and race. How amazing that, at a time that people consider “*the dark ages*”, there was such legislation about religious freedom. And how ironic that, in an age like ours that people consider “enlightened,” we are witnessing less openness to dialogue and less tolerance of diversity in a world of more conflict and greater persecution.

Today, anti-Semitism is also an undeniable reality among advanced people and civilized nations. Nonetheless, the racial prejudice and religious intolerance that we increasingly observe throughout Europe and the rest of the world is – ultimately and

unfortunately – a denial of our identity as Europeans, as Christians and as human beings created “in the image and likeness” of God. When we close our eyes and minds and hearts to our Jewish brothers and sisters – indeed, to people of all other religions as well as to all people of good will – then we are essentially closing our souls and our selves to God.

On a European level, the way that religions are viewed from a European point of view, is something that preoccupies our societies. In the Charta Oecumenica, in chapter 12 (Encountering other religions and world views) there is a recognition of the religious plurality in Europe and a definition of the tasks of the signatory churches to “take seriously the critical questions of others and try together to conduct fair discussions with them”. Therefore, the Conference of European Churches has requested the Churches in Dialogue Commission to devote attention to dialogue between different religions and to reflect on what is required for there to be a fruitful coexistence between the religions in Europe. In order to promote this fruitful coexistence there are certain prerequisites, one of which is to clarify one’s own understanding of other religions.<sup>2</sup> The same Commission has been examining a series of church statements on the Theology of Religions and have made a statement which presents some of the points which European churches seem to agree such as the “assumption that God’s saving will is universal: God wants to lead all people into fellowship with His truth and that the creaturely nature of human beings and their being in the image of God is the basis for respect a priori for all religious beliefs.”<sup>3</sup>

As Orthodox Christians, we strongly believe that other religions should not be simply rejected as wrong, but considered in

---

<sup>2</sup> Statement adopted by the CEC Churches in Dialogue Commission at its 5th meeting in Pullach/Munich, Germany (25-27 June 2008)

<sup>3</sup> [http://cid.ceceurope.org/fileadmin/filer/cid/Doc\\_Various\\_Documents/CiDStatementonThR.pdf](http://cid.ceceurope.org/fileadmin/filer/cid/Doc_Various_Documents/CiDStatementonThR.pdf)

the perspective of their relation to the Logos of Christ. As Metropolitan George Khodre of Mount Lebanon states "God has also revealed Himself in these Scriptures. Our God is a hidden God and it does not benefit us to define objectively the intensity of the Divine Presence in the Abrahamic Bible..." We have come to this view, not simply through an abstract theological or even philosophical reflection, but rather through our long experience living next to or among people of different religions. The Middle East Council of Churches in its Fourth General Assembly declared that if the Christian faith is authentically lived, then Christians have the responsibility to struggle for the rights not simply for a particular group, but also for the dignity of each and above all, for the integrity of those who are victims of injustice. "This responsibility of all people in every society, regardless of color, race and creed, becomes a spiritual dimension, a fidelity in Christ, who calls us all to assume on behalf of everybody all true human solidarity. In this way the Orthodox people learned to approach other religions not simply in an abstract theoretic view, but from their spirituality. This approach could be a specific Orthodox contribution to the theology of religions, or even to the very delicate issue of the Christian mission among other religions.

If we truly desire to move forward all together and provide future generations with a better understanding of peaceful coexistence it is mandatory to learn about one another. Even the Political Bodies of the European Union have realized the importance of knowing one another, for that provides a secure path to overcoming possible strives in contemporary multicultural society. The Orthodox Church has offered its full cooperation in overcoming such obstacles, by working on a basis of mutual understanding and transparency with the European Institution, especially so in the light of the implementation of Article 17 (3) of the New Lisbon Treaty that affirms cooperation and an open,

transparent and regular dialogue with Churches and religious associations.

When we are no longer open to dialogue with our Jewish brothers and sisters, then we are destroying the common roots that we have as “people of the Book,” as “descendants of Abraham,” and as “chosen by God.” Moreover, for us as Christians, we are disregarding and disrespecting the apostolic conviction that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.”

This is why I believe that I am personally interested and, in fact, invested in interfaith dialogue. For I am convinced that it is the only way out of the many impasses that we face in our world, including religious oppression in the Middle East and Northern Africa, religious persecution resulting in the global refugee crisis and especially the Mediterranean, as well as religious intolerance and inequality escalating in so many of our civilized and sophisticated societies. It is my humble and sincere prayer that all religious leaders – and, gradually, all religious believers – will continue to be engaged in inter-religious dialogue.