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The Ecclesial Perspective in the Dialogue Between Theology and Science

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Abstract

This material holds that the dialogue between theology and science must take into account the ecclesial experience. This implies the assumption of several premises: the Incarnation of the eternal Logos and the fallen condition of the world, the limitations of the discursive theology and science, the Patristic tradition as the genuine pattern of dialogue between theology and science and the need for an ecclesial participation in Christ - the Truth.

Keywords:

Theology, science, dialogue, Orthodox Church, Patristic tradition

I. The ecclesial approach regarding the relationship between theology and science

There are now many approaches regarding the relationship between theology and science, grounded in different perspectives. There is an approach regarding the relationship between different religious traditions (Jewish, Muslim, Oriental traditions) and contemporary science. There

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are also many works on the relationship between Christian theology and science. Unfortunately, an approach regarding the relationship between theology and science from the perspective of the Orthodox Tradition, assumed from an ecclesial perspective, has not yet been developed. Even in cases where the Orthodox approach is formally invoked in research regarding the relationship between theology and science, the ecclesial dimension is missing.

In order to approach the dialogue between theology and science from an Orthodox perspective it is imperative to assume and capitalize the genuine identity of theology. Theology does not limit itself in its academic and rigorously conceptualized expressions. Theology involves an experience of prayer and liturgical life lived in the fullness of the Church. The living event which substantiates the identity of Christian theology is Jesus Christ, the Truth of the entire world and Truth of each of us. Jesus Christ, the Logos of all creation, through His Incarnation in history, makes possible the existence of theology as an act of life materialized in the immediate experience of the Church.

An ecclesial hermeneutics of the typology of the relationship between theology and science can not ignore the mystery of the Incarnation and the condition of the fall, which also manifests itself in relation to philosophy and science. Science represents a form of knowledge consecutive to the *garments of skin*, it is an expression of knowledge marked by the fragmentation produced by sin. The object of research in science is the intelligible comprehensive world, in its present form, marked by the reality of the falling into sin. Science has no access to the study of reality before this moment.

Even theology, in its discursive form, can not express itself on the world before sin. Through contemplation, theology as a spiritual view, may describe that reality. If in theological literature different models of the relationship between science and theology are presented, the ecclesial assumption of this dialogue proposes a relationship that is not mediated and conceptualized by a particular scheme. It is very important to affirm in the relations between theology, philosophy and science that no abstract scheme can actually mediate these relations, precisely because of the risk of their leveling and of diluting of the Christian witness. The ecclesial approach to the relationship between theology and science insists that this type of dialogue can not be mediated and is not exhausted within conceptual schemes and methodologies.

An intellectual scheme in the relationship between theology and science, no matter how sophisticated it may be, is deficient and presents the risk of creating multiple confusions. A relation between Orthodox theology on the one hand, and science and philosophy on the other hand, can not ignore the liturgical dimension of the ecclesial experience. Discursive scientific knowledge can not reach the natural contemplation of the rationalities of creation. The ecclesial experience shared in the comprehensive Tradition of the Church and rooted in the Revelation, expresses the significant criterion of a genuine articulation of Orthodox theology with science and philosophy.

The Orthodox approach of the relationship between theology and science implies the assumption of the patristic and ecclesial landmarks. Believing that the dialogue between Orthodox theology and science is not only possible but also necessary, we assert that this dialogue is required to be mediated by landmarks of Orthodox gnoseology structured by patristic thinking and ecclesial life. It is a dialogue which Orthodoxy understands as animated by the mystery of *speaking-with-God*, and whose fruits may be materialized in a more comprehensive understanding of the created world, of man's life and purpose in it, by the edifying spiritual meanings about them, in a clear opening to the scientific spirit.

From an Orthodox perspective, the relationship between theology and science is asymmetrical, as theology does not limit itself to academic theology. Starting from the assumption of the ecclesial perspective, theology is the expression of the living memory of the experience of the Church. An epistemological monism through which theology and science are placed on the same level of knowledge, through a homogeneity and equivalence of knowledge, is overcome. From the perspective of the Ecclesial Tradition, theology is not limited within the boundaries of theological science. That is why the capitalization of a relationship between theology and science from this perspective, can bring a renewed wealth of meanings in strengthening the consciousness of dialogue in this field.

The ecclesial assumption of the dialogue between theology and science involves the effort of identifying the traces of spiritual intentionality in scientific and philosophical thinking. Theology, as an expression of spiritual and ecclesial experience, involves the experience of grace. But this experience of the grace through the Holy Spirit in the mysterious body of Christ, generates a knowledge beyond the logical intentionality. By

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capitalizing the ecclesial dimension in the relationship between theology and science, we insist on the existential effort of intuition of profound realities that are beyond the strictly conceptual approach.

The ecclesial perspective embodied in the relationship between theology and science implies a wisdom as a life event, in a mystagogical key. The affirmation of the ecclesial dimension in the relationship between theology and science, as well as the comprehensive witness of the relationship between Christ - man - world, revealed by the Tradition of the Church, highlights the mystagogical aspect of the ecclesial wisdom. This wisdom is experienced in the life of the Church and it surpasses a philosophical or a scientific wisdom.

The ecclesial dimension of the dialogue between theology and science also presupposes the substantiation in the Spirit of the Holy Fathers of the relationship between reason and faith, as well as the valorization of the mystery of the person. By assuming the mystery of the person, we experience with acuity the consciousness that the person is above the scientific presented objectivity. The mystagogical assumption and development of the dialogue between theology and science goes beyond an external, academic, sociological or cultural approach of this issue.

II. Assuming the comprehensive Patristic Tradition in the dialogue between theology and science

The assuming path of the Holy Fathers and Tradition imposes the requirements of an authentic ecclesial life in which the Nicene Creed can not remain just a simple exterior speech, but it is an act of life practiced in the daily existence. The patristic perspective implies the dialogue between theology and culture, theology being called to answer human needs in a contextual way. The dialogue must not let himself be stopped by extreme attitudes such as intimidation or fear, or conversely by contempt and superiority. The dialogue between science and theology doesn't mean concordism or syncretism through which numerous confusions are made. A meeting between patristic gnoseology and scientific epistemology requires the existence and development of spiritual discernment.

Beyond mutual enrichment in the epistemological plan given by a complementary vision regarding scientific and theological knowledge, the

dialogue between theology and science completed in an honest way, could be a mode of developing personal relationships according to the respect of alterity. An opened conscience to creatively assume the limits of human possibilities of research, reached by the profound mystery of creation, is a conscience ready for science. Theology could strengthen this conscience hired in the effort of assuming world's truth.

Orthodoxy affirms the actualization of patristic thought as essential in contemporaneity. This actualization doesn't mean a simple textual appeal to our patristic writings, but more likely a mode that determines a true inner resurrection and sharing the Truth to the world. The Church understood as a lab of resurrection in which, through the Holy Liturgy, is foretasted here and now the kingdom of God, produces a radical *metanoia* through which the human mind is renewed and thus the knowledge doesn't remain the exclusive result of a critical and scholarly rationality which develops scholarly theories, hermetic towards the concrete needs of the human being. A theology based on orthodox Tradition generates a creative thinking, opened towards life and contemporary world needs, and it gives answers by assuming the *same way of life* with the Holy Fathers.

Contemporary science recognizes the rationality and the mystery of the world. Theology, starting from epistemological mutations from the paradigm of contemporary science, can open a honest dialogue with science, but insisting towards the fundamental particularities existent in the orthodox tradition. A profound rationality of the world is not meeting its final purpose in the absence of a Person that generates and recapitulates all the deep reasons of creation. Knowing these final reasons above any scientific objectivity claims, means communion with the deified Logos, imitation of the accomplished communion between the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

The unifying perspective from the orthodox Tradition requires an opening towards the other one. But this opening is not only a formal relationship, animated and supported by mutual interests, but it is strengthened by the power of holiness. The effort to obtaining a holy life requires suddenly both delicacy manifested for the friend, but also the power of confessing the Truth of the Gospel. In the dialogue between theology and science, theology must not be a victim of the concordist temptation or on the other side of the block through which it is closed in a frustrating or aggressive way towards science. Orthodox theology doesn't

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have any ideological position to defend, but only to confess the redeeming Truth of the world. This way the risk of ideology can be overpassed, the one present both in theology and science and through which the distances are invented and amplified.

Consequent to the patristic Tradition, orthodox theology is assuming, always hoping in the chance of God working through anyone, but never giving up to the hope of fullness conscience of the Truth of which she's sharing. This way it can be talked about the catholicity of orthodoxy given by a fullness of the Truth that guides to holiness. But in the same time this catholicity is open because the one who's hired in a real way on the Path of Truth and Life, that guides to holiness, is a creature opened to its friend and to the whole world. The Saint is praying for all his brethren and for the whole creation.

III. Ecclesial experience of the Truth – essential requirement of dialogue between orthodox theology and science

As far as orthodox Tradition says, the Truth can be lived in a most authentic way in the spiritual and ecclesial experience. The Truth of the orthodox Tradition is not requiring accommodation to the requirements of a theory that belongs to any era. That is why orthodoxy doesn't have any resentments towards science development and it doesn't feel the need to adjust its creed according to the rigors of a theory or another, which by time is perfectible. From the ecclesial perspective, apologetics or fundamental theology should be the path of an assuming dialogue in which the large dimension of orthodoxy should be capitalized. In this agreement, Orthodoxy is not a confession among others, neither is Christianity a simple religion among other religions. Orthodoxy is the path of ecclesial experience of the Truth through which the eternal Life is shared, the believer living the condition of son in relation with God, thanks to the Incarnation of Christ, the event that determines history to be assumed in the perspective of the Resurrection.

The specific identity of dialogue between orthodox theology and science can be discerned only by assuming the integrating and unifying perspective of the Holy Fathers, for which the Truth is a central priority in their ecclesial knowledge, thus the Truth that's experimented in a cleric and ecclesial life becomes the fundamental criterion of apologetics. The

autonomous intellect can only perceive forms of truth, pieces of conceptual truths, without having access to the unified contemplation of Truth. A partial knowledge free from the integrality of a cleric and ecclesial vision risks to distort the knowledge of the part. Only a knowledge understood as power of the Holy Spirit can move the hearts and minds of people to receive Jesus Christ as Truth of the world, possible to experiment in the living experience of the Church.

The Truth can't be owned, but shared. Knowledge is not only an effort of finding the truth through an intellect detached from the reality of the studied object, but it is the union of the knowing subject with the to-be-known object. That's why sharing the deified truth is possible only through deep love of the living community in the Church of Christ. In love, the true knowledge of Truth is possible and this knowledge is manifested as love, but outside the accomplished communion of the Holy Trinity extended in the life of the Church, there is no fullness of love. Thus, the Truth can be shared in the experience of cleric power of the ecclesial community. The Truth is revealed in the light of Pentecost paradigm. Sharing the Truth requires passing from death to life, from a life encysted in the limits of decay to a life opened to incorruption, of holy resurrection.

Christ is not a principal truth, quantifiable at the level of a concept and generator of doctrine systems or moral codes. Christ is the personal Truth, of each and one of us and of the entire world, which calls us from death to life and in the same time it gives us the power to resurrect through his victory upon death. Jesus doesn't represent abstract doctrine truths, but He's discovering Himself as The Path that takes to the Father. "I am the light of the world" (John 8, 72). Confessing the Truth is possible only by walking in the light of Christ. Any separation from Christ takes us away from the absolute reality of the discovered Truth in the Son of God. When Pilate asks Christ: "What is the truth?", the Savior doesn't give any definition, but he confesses: "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." (John 18, 37). The essence of the Gospel is confessing the Incarnated Truth that permits sharing the kingdom of God.

When Christ says that He is the Truth, He does it because He is the Life who saves the world, He frees it from the conditions of sin. This way the truth is not an ontological content, assuming that the true life consists in knowing God as a living communion with God. "And this is life eternal,

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that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” (John 17:3). Christ is the Truth because it doesn’t only offer a solution for the temporary existence mode subject to biologic conditions, but it offers the path that takes to eternal life, possible to foretaste even in this existence, here and now.

In the conditions which the relation between theology and science tends to be associated only to the natural effort of proving religious truths through an exclusive rationalist path, for assuming the ecclesial perspective of knowledge, the confession of divine-humanity as a fundamental criterion is imperative. The experience in Christ, God-Human, as Truth of the world makes passing all delusions possible. Father Stăniloae says:

“In this way I knew the Truth. We no longer consider the world as ultimate truth, but Christ, the Son of God, Creator of the world and people, their Redeemer from the power of death and dark perspective of hell [...] I knew that Christ is the Truth from which and towards which all are carried. I knew that those who consider world as an ultimate truth are in a lie, taking the darkness of an atheist culture as light. I knew that those who don’t know Christ as Son of God, incarnated and light of the world, but they judge it as a unique reality, they’re living a big lie. I knew that all the words that sustain this false idea are lies. I knew that, only by having them, we will be in an eternal poverty and death”^{1,2}.

¹ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Isus Hristos, lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului*, Ed. Anastasia, București, 1993, p. 79.

² For further reading: Alexei NESTERUK, *Light from the East. Theology, Science and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003; Alexei NESTERUK, *Universul în comuniune (The Universe as Communion)*, Ed. Curtea Veche, București, 2009; Adrian LEMENI, *Adevăr și comuniune (Truth and Communion)*, Editura Basilica, Patriarhia Română, București, 2011; Adrian LEMENI, coordonator al volumului colectiv *Repere patristice în dialogul dintre teologie și știință (Patristic References in the Dialogue between Theology and Science)*, Editura Basilica, Patriarhia Română, București, 2009; Pr. Răzvan IONESCU, Adrian LEMENI, *Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă-știință (Dictionary on Orthodox Theology-Science)*, Editura Curtea Veche, București, 2009.