

# **Future of Orthodoxy in the Near East**

## **An Educational Perspective**

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### **Introduction**

Because of different political interpretations I will focus in my presentation on the Near East as being the geographical region covered by the Patriarchate of Antioch. The Middle East is a larger space that includes also part of North Africa and has undergone throughout history a different human, political and even cultural experience.

Trying to foresee the future is not an easy exercise considering how much the political scene has been changing in this region starting with the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This region has known, since the 7<sup>th</sup> Century the co-existence of the so-called three Abrahamic religions while its political profile was and is forever changing. Churches of the region had to live under different regimes and the political links that some confessions had with the rulers influenced a lot the inter-religious dialogue and the peaceful co-existence of the believers.

Trying to focus on the experience of Orthodoxy in the Near East is an important exercise because the Orthodox Church existed in the region since the 1<sup>st</sup> Century and has had a continuous presence since then. Focusing on the educational aspect of this presence is a means, for me, to underline how this Church tried, over centuries, to live its mission in the world, and to see how we can build on this experience to prepare for the future in a positive, open, and dynamic way. After a quick overview of the specificity of Orthodoxy in this region, and of the specific and broad understanding of the term *education*, I will focus on the link between these two folders in preparing for the future, by answering this main question: How will Orthodoxy continue to witness in the Near East, bringing to the region peace, hope, and a message of love?

## **Orthodoxy and its Specificity in the Near East**

### *The Historical encounter*

It is not my purpose to go through a historical reading of the life of the Antiochian Church (that I will refer to as the Church in this text) in the past twenty centuries. But it is important to underline the following facts:

- a. From the very beginning the Church had to deal with different religious groups living in this region. The rise of Islam and the different schisms that the region had to encounter were direct reasons that weakened the social and religious witness of the Church.
- b. The political impact on the life of the Church, gave, as of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, a new shape to the relation between the political hierarchy and the Church organization. This relation influenced directly some church policies as well as church relations.
- c. With the Crusades, the religious profile of the region changed drastically and the conflicts began to have a new dimension, where politics and religious matters became so closely imbricated.
- d. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a new turning point in the religious profile of the region, when missionaries from the West founded educational institutions adopting proselytism as the basis of their relations with local confessions.
- e. Finally, because of fast demographic changes in the region and a large Christian population displacement towards the Americas and Europe, Christians became a minority in the region and Orthodoxy became the largest confession of this minority.

### *The Co-Existence Paradigm*

This rapid overview of the changes that have occurred in the past twenty centuries is the background of the relations that have evolved since the 7<sup>th</sup> Century between Christianity and Islam. The relations between the believers of the two religions were based on a co-existence paradigm set by Islamic principles towards Christians and Jews.

At the same time, Christians of the region played an important role in the new Islamic State, having a constructive cultural, social, and pedagogical

presence on the human scene. Religious dialogue between Christians (mainly Orthodox believers) was launched very early and documents from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century show the importance of this dialogue; Saint John of Damascus was one of its pioneers.

Nevertheless the relations between the two religions have known, across successive centuries, difficult and sad episodes that have led to a serious lack of confidence in the pacific co-existence paradigm. This legitimizes the question: What about the future?

### *The Leadership Role*

After the rise of Islam and because of the different schisms that occurred within Christianity, Orthodoxy in the Near East tried to preserve a leadership role based on the fact that orthodox believers are culturally and historically rooted in the region. One of the main aspects of this leadership was the educational role that was played by Orthodox scientists, linguists and philosophers. Openness was one of the main features of the relation between citizens; the monasteries were places where people from different confessions came seeking the acquisition of knowledge.

This specific aspect made the orthodox believers an important component of the multicultural society of the region, even if their economic, political and cultural position depended on the prevailing atmosphere. This is why, keeping themselves highly competent in different service fields, was the response of the Orthodox to the changing world in which they had to live from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century till now.

Once again, the question is: will such a policy be a way for Orthodoxy to maintain its presence in the region focusing on its service for and witness in the society?

### **Education's Impact on the Future**

At this stage it is important to mention that nowadays Education is much more than just seeking for a diploma, or having specific technical skills. Education is becoming more and more a style of life, a way to prepare the future, an assuming of leadership role. Taking this into consideration will imply adopting new policies on more than one level.

### *Education as a Personal Dimension*

The first and basic level is the personal dimension of Education. Being a minority, the Orthodox will have to be aware that making themselves indispensable in their human environment is the way for them to be considered as an important component of the society. Their knowledge and skills could be reflected through other people too. This is why, educating themselves to be problem solvers, critical thinkers, open minded to bridge the gaps between different currents and confessions around them, is their road map to specificity.

It is worth mentioning that this cannot be only a personal effort. It is a community endeavor. Orthodoxy has to be aware, through a critical assessment of its history in the last three centuries, that the absence of institutions ready to carry this mission had a devastating impact on its specificity and leadership role in the region. Even when the political turmoil of these centuries caused drastic changes in the region's profile, Orthodoxy did not make the needed efforts to maintain its internal force and cohesion.

This is why the founding of the Saint John of Damascus Institute of Theology and later, the University of Balamand may be considered as a turning point for the future evolvement of the Orthodoxy's role in the Region.

### *Education as a National Endeavor*

On the other hand, involving itself in education is, for Orthodoxy, a national endeavor. It is the occasion for Orthodoxy to spread its witness by trying to make its approach adopted on a wider level.

Orthodoxy claims to have a specific anthropology rooted in the way it considers the human being as the ultimate objective of Redemption and Resurrection. Asking people to adopt "love and service" as a motto is the basis for this educational paradigm.

Orthodox institutions, and Orthodox partners in national decision making, will be asked to convey this message that implies respecting the principles of liberty and rights. This message goes beyond the legalistic aspect and focuses on what is more human and ethical.

### *Education as a Cultural Component*

Finally, it is as important to stress the cultural component of education. Orthodoxy is responsible for maintaining the cultural specificity of the region by steering away from alienation. Orthodoxy has to witness existentially the continuity it maintains with its local roots, far from any identification with an outside culture. This is true of the fine arts, literature, philosophy etc. This does not mean to freeze our heritage as a type of idolatry. On the contrary, we have to be part of the continuously evolving civilization that we witness in our daily life. It is up to Orthodoxy to bridge, critically, this gap between the local culture and the unfolding aspects of civilization.

All these efforts have a theological foundation that we are not always aware of. Orthodoxy is confronted with all these challenges and is asked to deal with them promptly, using its force which is rooted in centuries of experience, and its creativity which is based on what the Lord said: "Behold, I make all things new".

### **Future of Orthodoxy: a Traditional Way to Preserve Creatively**

Preparing for the future cannot be a wishful thinking attitude. It has to go through a series of efforts internally and externally, adopting a critical attitude on one hand, and a creative policy on the other.

#### *Strengths and Threats*

The first realistic step will be in recognizing the importance of the inherited strength of Orthodoxy in the Near East, based on centuries of openness, conviviality and witness to the Lord, far from the fundamentalist attitude prevailing in some confessional currents. Recognizing this strength means to adopt its basic attitude while being aware of the changes that have occurred in the last fifty years mainly.

In fact, during these years the world went through drastic changes in communication, media, educational systems, technological innovations, and even new paradigms in the relations among countries, communities and human beings. All these changes affected the region, and sometimes in a negative way, creating a reaction to what is considered as an alienation to the western civilization. Christians in the region are facing serious threats and they have often to fight to prove their good will.

Orthodoxy is aware of these threats and based on its experience, the Church is maintaining its guidelines related to its relation with other confessions. But these guidelines need to go through an “aggiornamento” to adopt a proactive attitude involving the believers in the life of their nations and proposing a comprehensive cultural endeavor.

### *Weaknesses and Challenges*

As I mentioned earlier, Orthodoxy lost its initiative because of the historical circumstances, and this is now its main weakness. The Orthodox Church is not playing any more its leadership role among other Christian confessions even though it is the largest community in the region and has belonged to this land for twenty centuries.

Because of its history, Orthodoxy has to face now the challenge of rediscovering its role and this can be done only if the Orthodox Church will adopt a new look at how it will educate the people, how it will communicate with others, and how it will address the problems related to the human welfare in the region.

Ignoring the urgency of taking such a stand will be disastrous for the future of Orthodoxy in the region. While maintaining excellent relations with the sister Churches, the Orthodox Church has to take the lead in proclaiming that Christianity is rooted in the region, that it is not a western phenomenon and that it does not take its instructions from foreign entities. It is a fundamental issue that goes beyond ecumenical relations.

### *What to adopt*

Having said all this, the practical question to address is the following: What steps to adopt to ensure the future of Orthodoxy in the Near East while preserving its specificity? What role may education play in this strategy? How does such an action plan relate to the relations between the different Christian denominations?

It will be difficult to put a list of actions to take, because there is a need to study all the components of the new situation before taking firm and futuristic decisions. But it seems to me that the first priority is the adoption of a critical attitude towards the actual stagnation in the vision the Orthodox Church seems to have of its role. Revisiting the concepts that form the basis of

the education delivered by the Orthodox Church spheres (University, Institute of Theology, Seminaries, and Schools) will be perhaps the second priority. It will not be less important to take an aggressive attitude adopting a communication strategy introducing the role, positions, attitudes, teaching, etc., of the Orthodox Church.

It is clear that such a strategy is based on a totally new approach to education as mentioned earlier. Orthodoxy has to overcome its classical position towards religious and theological education; adopting new pedagogical trends is a must because of the role that educated people will play as leaders. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church has a say, because of its anthropological stand, not only in matters related to religious education but to general education as well, and it does not have to be shy in proclaiming its view on educating citizens according to its principles.

Finally, asking Orthodoxy to regain its leadership in the region within the Christian family is not an attack against the other denominations. On the contrary, because of its historical background, the Orthodox Church may play a unique role in defending the Christian existence in the region as being a part of its culture. The conviviality experience of Orthodoxy in the Near East is strength for all Christians, and it is important to reinforce the spirit of unity while being aware of the specificity of the larger Christian group of the region.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude I will just say, that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, for many reasons, mainly political, will be a turning point for the Near East. One cannot stay indifferent while facing such critical situations. Orthodoxy as being the Christian denomination rooted in the region since the First Century has the duty to prepare the future of its existence in this land.

The future of Orthodoxy in the Near East is not only a social presence of a confessional group in midst of other groups. It is the witness for specificity, a service to be rendered to the community, a way to preserve God's will. Working for this future begins now.

Thank you.