

# **The Principles of the Sectarian Proselytism and the Mission of the Church**

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**Key words: Mission of the church, proselytism, new religious movements, Holy Mysteries**

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Christian mission has been associated for a long period of time and in a certain social and religious context with the concept of proselytism, but now the contemporary Orthodox theology identifies Christian mission as “the sending of the Church into the world in order to universalize the Gospel and to integrate people in the kingdom of God”<sup>1</sup>. In comparison with the erroneous valences granted to mission by the perception of the neo-protestant groups, which limit this work only to the spreading of the Gospel<sup>2</sup>, Orthodox theology goes further and states the importance of the integration of all the people within the Church, the Mysterious Body of Christ as a missionary goal.

In the same time, when we speak about mission, we identify two of its features<sup>3</sup> (and not two missions, as it was falsely stated), namely: the *ad extra* aspect which targets the spreading of the Word of the Gospel to the entire humankind and the *ad intra* aspect which refers to the permanent care of the Church for its sons.

On the other hand, mission, as I have presented it previously, was deformed and despiritualized, transforming into what we call proselytism today. This is not only a feature of the protestant groups, but a part of their very structure as I will demonstrate later on.

The choice of this theme rests especially in its actuality for the theology of mission, taking into account the fact that the nowadays context is marked by an intense, straightforward and aggressive proselytism directed towards the believers of the Romanian Orthodox Church. In order to counteract efficiently the proselytist actions of any kind it is necessary to have a real knowledge of the principles that fundament these actions. The investigation of these principles will include the identification of the theological actions that are usually invoked on their behalf and which prove an erroneous interpretation of the biblical text. For this thesis I used mostly the analytical method and sporadically, the comparative method. From the bibliography I researched I was able to identify a series of principles that I ordered according to their importance and that I will present within the thesis, together with the doctrinarian conceptions that stand at their basis. Regarding the bibliography, I want to mention the fact that I focused both on the works of the contemporary Romanian theologians and especially of neo-protestant bibliography, especially

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<sup>1</sup> Valer BEL, *Misiunea Bisericii în lumea contemporană*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Dustin WILLIS, Aaron COLE, *Life on Mission. Joining the Everyday Mission of God*, Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2014, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Doru COSTACHE, „Misiune și Evanghelizare”, in *Almanah Bisericesc*, Editura Sfintei Arhiepiscopii a Bucureștilor, 1996, pp. 219-220.

Adventist and Pentecostal. I also wish to mention that the sectarian bibliography is exclusively actual and the cited works are entirely recent issues, published after 2003.

Firstly it is important to mention that the sects that act today within the autochthonous space can be divided into three categories: a. sects of Judaic-Christian inspiration, which focus mostly on the Old Testament to the detriment of the New Testament; b. sects of Oriental inspiration, esoteric, influenced especially by Buddhism; c. sects of scientific inspiration, that target an unnatural emphasis on science to the detriment of transcendence. I will present the relationship between the pseudo/doctrine of these groups and the process of secularization<sup>4</sup> manifested acutely within the postmodern society.

The second chapter of the thesis is constituted of objections to mission which catalogue the main accuses addressed to our Church that come especially from the sectarian environment.

Before the analytical presentation of the principles on which the sectarian proselytism is founded it is necessary to make a few remarks, namely: the violent character of the proselyte actions is founded on an obvious spiritual poorness of the sects that they wish to replace with the aggressiveness of the methods used to attract new followers. This spiritual poorness is due to the ignorance towards the thesaurus of the Holy Tradition, without which the Holy Scripture cannot uncover the deep mysteries of its revealed truths, so much the less the personal presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, in an ecclesial and sacramental manner in the life of the faithful.

The first principle consists in revitalizing the dogma of the Holy Trinity, the vertebral spine of the Orthodox teaching of faith. Of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, that of the Son of God is the most targeted, meaning that the sects introduce a dualist separation between Christ's divinity and humanity. As a reactualization of the Nestorian heresy, it is considered that during His earthly life, Jesus was mostly human, less God, in the sense of the Protestant kenotic theories. The consequences of this dissociation between the two natures of Jesus Christ are very serious for the Christian spirituality, because one cannot talk of the deification or consecration of the human nature of Jesus Christ. This principle also contains the idea which includes Jesus Christ together with the other founders of religions or prophets<sup>5</sup>, which obviously proves that sects do

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<sup>4</sup> Pr. conf. univ. dr. Adrian BOLDIȘOR, „Religia în postmodernitate. Destinul ei într-o lume secularizată”, in *Misiunea Bisericii Ortodoxe în contextul actual*, coord. pr. conf. univ. dr. Nicolae Răzvan Stan, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2016, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Pr. prof. Dumitru POPESCU, „Principii care stau la baza formațiilor sectare și activității lor agresiv-prozelitiste”, in rev. *Ortodoxia*, anul XLIX (1997), nr. 3-4, p.22.

not understand the hypostatical unification of the two natures in the Person of the Incarnated Son of God.

Besides the relativization of the person of Jesus Christ, the sects proceed to diminish the role and work of the Holy Spirit, because in their perception, the Holy Spirit loses the relationship with the entire creation and is confounded with the subjectivity of the isolated believer. Just as Christ separated from the Holy Spirit cannot comprise creation, “both in His quality of Creator and Savior of the universe, so does the Holy Spirit, from the moment when he loses the relationship with Christ, He ceases to be present within creation”<sup>6</sup>.

The Holy Spirit is also relativized through His subjective isolation in each believer, individually. This “confiscation” of the Holy Spirit has consequences which are extremely serious for the spiritual life of the believer, because it configures an unnatural experience, between the presence of the Holy Spirit within him and the absence of the Holy Spirit from creation, which produces a real imbalance in the soul of a person and feeds the aggressiveness of the sects. If we add to this the erroneous conception of the “open revelation”, we will have an accurate image of the relativization of the Holy Spirit and in fact of the whole Holy Trinity.

Another principle that stands at the basis of the sectarian proselytism may be considered the tendency of the neo-protestant groups to relativize the Holy Scripture. Although they assume the exclusive hermeneutical right on the Bible, God’s revealed word, sects have an ambivalent attitude towards it. Firstly, they propose a tendentious interpretation of the Holy Scripture, which is limited to the invocation of certain biblical texts to support their own doctrine, intentionally ignoring the context or parallel places in the Holy Scripture. Then we may speak of the tendency of these sects to introduce erroneous elements based on a defective understanding of certain texts, for example framing the date of Parousia, regarded in a fatalist manner<sup>7</sup>, the one thousand years’ Reign and so on.

I also want to mention another principle that can be defined as the “divine choice”, based on the erroneous theory of predestination. The sects look assiduously to inoculate into the minds of their followers the idea that they are part of those who were chosen by God for eternal salvation, while the rest of the humankind can consider itself lost. In an incipient form, the

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<sup>6</sup> Pr. prof. Dumitru POPESCU, „Principii care stau la baza formațiilor sectare și activității lor agresiv-prozelitiste...”, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Pr. conf. univ. dr. Radu Petru MUREȘAN, *Universul religios al Martorilor lui Iehova. Repere ale unei relații ambivalente cu societatea contemporană*, Editura Andreiana, Sibiu, 2017, p. 56.

concept of the divine election has the tendency to flatter the follower's ego, and the sect, through specific methods, works for an interior destruction that is almost irreversible. The consequence of adopting such an error is the fact that it determines all the supporters of the sect to give up any effort of personal consecration and determines the proselyte activity of the sects.

The doctrinarian motivation of this principle can be discovered in the concept of the irremediable fall of the proto-parents, formulated by the reformers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which led to the appearance of the theory of predestination. Such a doctrine, lacking biblical principles, has two negative consequences: on the one hand it transforms God into an author of the evil and prevents man from having a personal contribution to the process of his own salvation, and on the other hand it obliges sects to adopt a negative attitude towards the world and to promote its apocalyptic ending.

The fourth principle that I want to remark upon is the complete dependency of the sectarian believers on their religious leaders, thus proving a fundamental anthropocentric character, interposing the person of their leader between them and God. In fact, as I will present later on, the justification of this peculation of the believers' piety happens on the background of the rejection of the saints' cult, replacing them with the founders of the sects. "Instead of Christ, as God and Human, they place human instead of Him"<sup>8</sup>.

The principles presented previously, to which we may add others, of little importance, reveal the mentality characteristic to the sects, and also their purposes, which are completely opposite to the Orthodox Church. Although they mime an ecumenical attitude, sects do not intend to have a dialogue with the other Christian Churches, but linger within the narrow and damaging sphere of an aggressive proselytism which destroys consciences.

The last chapter of the thesis comprises the contemporary mission of the Church, more precisely the missionary methods used by the Church, their possible limits as well as considerations for a renewal of mission and pastorship.

I wish to remark one more thing: if the direction of the Romanian missiology was a sectological one until mid90's, lately it focused more and more on the theology of mission. I consider and hope that this thesis succeeds in achieving a necessary and useful symbiosis

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<sup>8</sup> Pr. prof. Dumitru POPESCU, „Principii care stau la baza formațiilor sectare și activității lor agresiv-prozelitiste...”, p. 25.



between the two ways, especially in the contemporary context in which we remark a reactivation of the sectarian proselytism.

In conclusion, I consider that the theme can be thoroughly investigated based on bibliographical sources from the Romanian and foreign theology, and with the help of research one can demonstrate the negative intentions and the unfortunate consequences of the sectarian proselytism. In the same time, credible answers must be formulated, based both on the Orthodox vision of the theology of mission and on the teaching of the Church, and the believers need to be educated for the defense of the truth of faith of the Church, becoming able to reject all the sectarian attacks in a proselyte manner.

In a world that reels from a moral point of view, only the Orthodox teaching, complete and integrating, can assure the link between a complex daily life, but which is defective and the openness to an existence eschatologically oriented. Of course, the teaching of faith must be assimilated and assumed only in an ecclesial environment, because only the Church, understood as mystical body of Christ, represents the time and space par excellence, in which Christ, its Head is present in a real manner until Eschaton. The contemporary man, unbalanced and constantly accumulating various frustrations, feels deeply and really, an acute lack of truth and authentic, values which are enclosed and preserved within the Church. Man's failure nowadays, explains without justifying the failure of the whole postmodern secularized world, which took on as personal endeavour the relegation of the religious from the sphere of preoccupations and constants of the daily life. Of course, this chimerical desideratum that cannot be understood led to catastrophic consequences in the conscience of the already anxious man. The elimination of transcendent generated a terrible phenomenon into the heart of the person, who all of a sudden feels alone in an increasingly bigger world. This contradictory state of loneliness within a society that is more and more dense, is the direct consequence of the alienation up to the complete elimination of God, of whom man felt reasonless impelled, but whose absence is now perceived as a personal failure.

This paradoxical state in which the contemporary secularized man exists continues, naturally, with the following direction: although he accumulates abundant information, leading to a cognitive overcharge, he experiences the feeling that he doesn't know what the souls asks for, directly, to know. Moreover, in the same logic dictated by secularization, which contributed

to his shaping, the contemporary man has many things, but is spiritually poor. The offer of the postmodern world cannot feed authentically the necessity of self-discovery and fulfillment.

In such a world, the Church is called, by the divine providence, to understand and especially to offer the man who is wandering spiritually the true direction. After the communist anomie in which the Church, under the divine providence, took care, as I have already presented, of its sons, now it must exist in an anomaly: although there is religious freedom, without obvious constraints, the contemporary man misses his meeting with Christ. The aggressive proselytism is added to the process of pronounced secularization which embezzles man from his final purpose that is salvation. As I have already presented, the neo-protestant groups, in their heretic proselyte endeavour, masked by a pseudo-mission, attack the very interiority of a person, whom, through manipulative methods, they destroy close to the irremediable pathological boarder. The discernment of the neophyte is disturbed, the conscience is deformed and the will is reduced close to extinction. Within sects, perturbing a legit endeavour, that of spreading the Gospel, is really distractive and harmful. The members of the sect are actually regimented and do nothing else but go and activate according to the imposed cadence. These pyramidal secured structures manage indeed to keep their members close together, but far from Christ. Their programmed submissiveness, their perceptiveness to the orders of the religious leader, transform in aggressiveness and intolerance towards the faithful and the priests of our Church as I have presented within the thesis. I endorse the evaluation according to which the members of the sects are not Christian precisely because they lack what defines Christians that is love. They are capable of empathic feelings only towards the other members of their group, feelings which reconfigure in hate and disdain for the Orthodox.

In this context of the massive sectarian presence and of the intensification of proselytism, the Church is called to an improvement of the character or of the aspect *ad intra* of the mission. The care for its own members must reflect God's care for the Church. To this respect, as I have analyzed, the Church knew a revival after the liberation from the coercions and persecutions of the communist regime. One may observe, objectively, an increase in the social-philanthropic activities, which in fact reflect the divine philanthropy, a significant increase of the cultural and educational actions directed mainly towards children and youth. The presence of the priests in various institutions of the state is really useful, a desideratum fulfilled after almost five decades during which the Church had to limit its activity to the cult. Also, the introduction of the

Religion class in schools becomes in the light of the new postmodern realities an important achievement, with results that can already be seen. The Church in its teaching activity did not limit to the information offered within the school environment that is why it started and supported various catechetical programs. The number of parishes where these catecheses take place is increasing significantly which indicates an authentic care of the Church for children and adolescents, which is also pointed out by this thesis.

Why I wanted to emphasize both within the thesis and here, is the fact that although the Church activates into a secularized world, ambivalent most of the times, one must emphasize, not without modesty, the special work that it does in and for the world. I am profoundly against the pessimistic and unjustified negative tone from my point of view of several contemporary voices who insistently, sometimes similar to the sectarian fatalism announce a gloomy future for our Church because of the secularized semi-agnostic and sometimes anti-ecclesial context in which we live. The church is confessing and martyrical in its nature, built truly on the blood of the martyrs, but this reality should be a positive signal, giving of hope and not generating fears. If our Church passed with dignity, paying the price of martyrical lives, through a period of communist persecution, all the more now it can not only maintain this line, but grow towards the Kingdom.

Surely, some aspects can improve, especially in parishes, an idea which is pointed out in the last chapter. On the other hand, the existence of the message of the Church in mass-media, through its own channels, constitutes a great missionary opportunity.

I consider that the limitations of this thesis are the following: firstly, because it is a theme of missiology, the underlining of the activity of the parishes from diaspora, since they increased in number as a consequence of the multitude of Romanian faithful that live and work outside the borders of the country. Of course, I think that this could be the subject of a separate work. Also, the theme of ecumenism could have been added, especially the relationship between this theme and the Church.

In conclusion, I consider that the novelty of this thesis rests precisely in the actuality of the bibliography, especially that of sectarian origin. Also, I consider that my endeavour to recuperate the sectological aspect of mission proved to be beneficial in the context of the reactivation of the contemporary sectarian proselytism.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**