

ROLES OF THE DIASPORA CHRISTIANS IN MISSION AND EVANGELISM FROM AN AFRICAN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

JOHN N. NJOROGE¹

ABSTRACT. This paper will focus on the specific roles that the diaspora orthodox Christian can play in mission and evangelism today. The main objective is to bring into the attention, and especially from a missiological point of view, the fact that the diaspora Christians can have an active role to play in the mission of the church. The active Orthodox Church missions has been understand to mean overseas mission and especially in Africa, Asia and in the Albania. However, in the course of the orthodox Christian migration history, there has been missiological connection between the diaspora Christians in the hosting countries and their respective home countries. The focus of this paper is on this missiological connection and how it can translate to an active role of the involved Christians to the mission of the church in Africa. The paper tracks the mission praxis of the diaspora Christians in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: roles, diaspora Christians, mission and evangelism, philanthropic works, diakonia, witness.

Historical Survey of the Diaspora Orthodox Christians in Africa

Orthodoxy in African is witnessed in three main categories, name; the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This paper concentrates only to the orthodox Christians under the jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa have its headquarters in Alexandria, Egypt and extend its ecclesiastical jurisdiction into the entire Africa. It serves the eastern orthodox churches which comprise Greek speaking and Russian speaking orthodox faithful mainly living and working

¹ Kenya Methodist University. E-mail: ngigenjoroge@yahoo.com

in major African cities as well as the native African orthodox communities. Most of the native Orthodox Christians are in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Congo, while significant number of Greek and Russian Orthodox Communities are in South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.²

Throughout history, the Alexandrian church has been known for; a) its involvement in the ecumenical councils and its great contribution to the formation of the Christian doctrines through its bishops like Athanasius the Great (AD 298-373), b) formation of the Nicene-Constantinople's creed and Christian doctrines like that of incarnation, c) allegorical method of interpreting of the Holy Scriptures through its famous catechetical school; through which the first Christian philosophers like Clement of Alexandria and Origen successfully explained the biblical faith philosophically and systematically, d) monasticism, whereby ordinary Christians like Antony the Great (251-356) took a total commitment to the following of Christ (Mk 19:17-21) and made it to the desert to live a life of asceticism and contemplation. Monasticism inspired many people like St. Pachomius (292-346) who developed the cenobitical or communal monastic way of life which has influenced the world monasticism. According to John Baur (2005), the Arabic conquest marked a turning point in the history of the church in Egypt because the implementation of Islamic policy was discriminative to the minority who opt to remain Christians. This kind of legislative policies affected also the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, and because of persecutions the Patriarch and a large number of Christians fled Egypt. However, after the Turks took Egypt in 1517, and Persecutions were over, the patriarchate re-opened with few Greek speaking followers.

The decline of orthodox Christians in Egypt made the patriarchate look beyond to other orthodox Christians living in Africa. These other orthodox Christians were mostly the Greek communities who had settled in major African cities for farming and trade. They had come into Africa after they fled Greece during the Turkish occupation. The first such community in sub-Saharan Africa settled in Beira, Mozambique in 1899 where they built an Orthodox Church and school. In most case these Greek communities had their own churches, cultural centres and schools. Although for years these communities were not open to the native Africans, their presence attracted very few Africans either because of intermarriage or interest in becoming orthodox Christians. Those who showed serious interests were allowed to join the Greek schools and learn the Orthodox faith, Greek language and culture. The best example is the Ugandan students

² Njoroge John. 2014. Article: Ecumenical Dialogue in the perspective of the Patriarchate of Alexandria in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism; Resources for Theological Education*. Volos Academy Publication: Volos (in cooperation with WCC publication, Geneva and Regnum Books International, Oxford) 327 – 332.

who joined a Greek school in Moshi Tanzania. This school belonged to a Greek community of sisal farmers and they had a Greek priest by the name Fr. Nikodemos Sarikas, who cooperated with Fr. Ruben Mukasa Spartas of the Orthodox Church in Uganda.

Over the years, both the Greek and Russian communities have opened up and more interaction with the native African Christians is much visible. Currently the Greek Orthodox Christians are the majority recorded as follows in South Africa (138,000), Zimbabwe (3,000), Cameroon (1,200) Zambia (800), Uganda (450) and Kenya (100).

South Africa has the largest diplomatic communities from Russia and other traditional orthodox countries like Bulgarian, Romania and Serbia. South Africa has had three Russian orthodox churches but the most known is St. Sergius of Rodonezh the wonderworker in Midrand a suburb in Johannesburg³. This church was consecrated on 2nd March 2003 by then the DECR Chairman Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad (now Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia) co-celebrating with then Metropolitan Seraphim of Johannesburg and Pretoria (the Patriarchate of Alexandria)⁴. This church has been an icon of attraction to orthodoxy for many people in South Africa and neighboring countries.

According to the latest estimates, up to 5,000 Russian-speaking people currently reside in South Africa; majority of whom came to ⁵South Africa from the former USSR in 1990s.

There is a Romanian Orthodox Community in South Africa. The Romanian parish of St. Andrew the Apostle was started in the year 2000 by the Romanian believers from Johannesburg⁶. These churches are under the jurisdiction Greek Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, however now with the contradictory issue of recognition of Ukrainian Autocephaly by the patriarch Theodoros II, and even having 102 native African clergymen⁷ joining the Moscow patriarchate it

³ Russian Orthodox Church in Midrand South Africa; Available at www.jozirediscovered.co.za accessed on 28th October 2021.

⁴ A talk with the rector of the Church of St. Sergius of Radonezh in Johannesburg (South Africa), Archpriest Daniel Lugovoy. Available at: http://www.spc.rs/eng/whether_africa_or_russia_orthodox_parish_life_basically_same. Accessed on 28th October 2021.

⁵ A talk with the rector of the Church of St. Sergius of Radonezh in Johannesburg (South Africa), Archpriest Daniel Lugovoy. Available at: http://www.spc.rs/eng/whether_africa_or_russia_orthodox_parish_life_basically_same. Accessed on 28th October 2021.

⁶ Romanian Orthodox Parish 'St. Andrew the Apostle' in Johannesburg South Africa; Available at <https://ropasa.co.za>, Accessed on 28th October 2021.

⁷ Moscow "adopted" 102 clergymen of the patriarchate of Alexandria, forms exarchate of Africa" in Orthodox Times new. Available at www.orthodoxtimes.com Accessed on 13th January 2022. This has also been an agenda of the Patriarchate of Alexandria synod meeting in Alexandria from 10th -12th January 2022.

would be an interesting topic that would change the history of the orthodoxy in Africa. There are also native African orthodox believers in the diaspora. Majority of these are students who went to study in America and Greece and decided to remain in the host countries even after their studies. This area of native African orthodox believers in the diaspora hasn't been paid attention to particularly on their role in mission of the church.

Diaspora Christians Attachment to their Home Countries

Diaspora Christians are uniquely attached to their home countries in various ways which are missiological in nature. The ways through which the diaspora Christians are attached to their home countries and as well as to the host countries is a paradigm that require to be studied for the sake of active mission of the church.

The fundamental attachment thriving almost among all those living in diaspora is identity. Identity starts with seeking self-identity and acceptance in a new context. Self –identity can be understood in the context of feeling of the *'one-self'* and fundamentally the value that defines who we *"are"*. This is achieved by looking for people of the same cultural values, languages, nationality or even peers in a given fora of life, who either affirms the inner feelings of the "self" or contribute to value addition to the same. When this feeling is affirmed or added value to achieving it, one creates high levels of *"sense of belonging"*. This has been well demonstrated when one observes the patterns of the orthodox Christians in African diaspora.

Creating Greek, Russian or even Romanian speaking community goes beyond the Eucharistic gathering on Sundays or feast days in the orthodox liturgical tradition. This brings about the sense of belonging to a community because they share the joy of communicating in their native languages, to help children develop their home language skills and culture(s). This is why these communities do keenly observe national holidays, conduct festive concerts, and host cultural events as per their home countries. These activities are normally understood by the hosts but not by the natives of the hosting countries. The natives of the hosting countries feels what is going on within the diaspora orthodox communities is alien to them, minimizing missional curiosity. This challenges the diaspora orthodox Christians to open up more to the natives in order to raise the missional curiosity that pave ways for conversion to orthodoxy.

Another fundamental promoter of self-identity and sense of value is the family. Diaspora orthodox Christians like any other persons in the diaspora do keep a very close connection with their families and relatives back home. This is achieved through different means like visits by family members and hosting relatives as they seek employments in the hosting countries. When this is successfully achieved it brings a strong sense of value and dignity to the person in the diaspora, while the same reciprocate to the members of the family back in the country of origin. The sense of value and dignity is God's gift to humanity despite place of origin or residence, class or race, gender or even religion. God created every human person with special values and worthiness which emanates from being created in the Image and Likeness of God⁸.

Additionally, diaspora Christians are attached to their home countries through observing religious and cultural festivals. One of the strongest area of attachment is the orthodox faith, which is imbued to the language and patriotism. According to the Romanian community in South Africa adherence to the faith brings them together "*Through the sustained material and moral efforts of the parish with its organized spiritual, social and cultural activities, has contributed in keeping of the Romanian Orthodox faith and values among the believers and within the framework of South African society*"⁹. This trend has propagated different orthodox churches in the diaspora to give more emphasis on nationalism over evangelization and witnessing of the orthodox faith in the host countries. The best examples are the different orthodox churches in the United States of America and the importation of orthodox clergy to serve the diaspora communities from the country/ national church of origin. While on one hand this is an advantage to the diaspora Christians in regard to their attachment to their home countries, on the other hand, it is a disadvantage to the witnessing of the mission of the church in the hosting country. This comes along because of the given priorities by the diaspora Christians which necessary are not missional in nature.

Diaspora Christians' Priorities and the Mission of the Church

In most cases, the diaspora Christians are concerned of their own welfare in the host country; these includes (a) livelihood, meaning work/employment, actually this is one of the primary reason for migration from their countries of origin to the hosting countries, (b) legality of their residency and work (c) welfares of their families back home and, (d) sustainability of their identity through faith. As far

⁸ See the story of creation in Genesis 1: 26-27.

⁹ Romanian Orthodox Parish 'St. Andrew the Apostle' in Johannesburg South Africa; Available at <https://ropasa.co.za>, Accessed on 28th October 2021.

as the mission and witnessing of the orthodox faith in the hosting country is concern, the leaders of these diaspora communities are called to direct their adherents to the apostolic nature of the church. According to metropolitan John Zizioulas, the apostolicity of the church doesn't mean only the historical continuity and unbroken lineage of bishops to the apostles and the apostles to Christ, thus forming the so-called apostolic succession, rather the apostolicity here means and emphasizes a collegiality of persons with an eschatological function¹⁰. Eschatological function denotes the original apostolate of Christ's teachings and His '*calling and sending*' the twelve to proclaim the good news to the world as per the great commissions¹¹. The twelve disciples form the inward layers of the teachings (*didascalias*) of the church and they even today remain in the church as the pillars of the church; *and the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb* (Rev. 21:14). Furthermore Archbishop Anastasios Yiannoulatos enlightens: apostolicity of the church implies having an "apostolic fire and zeal to preach the gospel 'to every creature' (Mk 16:15), because it nurtures its members so that they may become 'witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8)¹²". This new understanding of the apostolicity of the church as an actual mission endeavor of the church highlights a significant approach to mission and its purposes in the world today. This approach reminds the Orthodox Christians that they are called to participate fully in witnessing the gospel because the gospel is for all peoples and therefore, never will the mission of the church end unless all peoples (sheep) are brought into the fold (church) of the good shepherd (Christ) (John 10:1-17). This implies that diaspora Christians have a critical missiological role to play in the hosting countries.

Missiological Roles of the Diaspora Orthodox Christians in Africa

Over the years the diaspora orthodox Christians have been depending on the home country or canonical ecclesiastical jurisdiction for spiritual nurture and care during their stay in the host countries. For example, the ecumenical patriarchate has been in charge for non-traditional orthodox ecclesiastical jurisdictions like the Americas and Australia. It only in 1921 during the decline of the Greek communities in Egypt, the patriarchate of Alexandria extended its

¹⁰ Zizioulas John D, *Being As Communion; Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002) p 173.

¹¹ See Matthew 28:20:16-20, Mark 16: 14-20, Luke 24:44-49 and John 20: 19-30.

¹² Yainnoulatos Anastasios; "Orthodox Mission: Past, Present, Future." *In Your Will be Done: Orthodox in Mission*, ed. George Lemopoulos. Katerini, Greece: WCC Publications, Geneva 1989.

jurisdiction to the rest of Africa which was then under the Patriarchate of Constantinople¹³. Before the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, became missional active in 1947, after the acceptance of the native Africans orthodox communities by the synod, the Greek and Russian communities had their mission activities focus within their communities. Mission activities were organized in a way they meet their cultural, educational and spiritual needs. They had constructed schools, cultural centers and churches. These communities were receiving Clergy to minister to them either directly from their countries of origin or from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. For example in 1908 such a priest, Father Nicodemus Sarikas, was sent to a Greek community of immigrants in Johannesburg, South Africa¹⁴ as mentioned above.

For many years these communities exercised “*self-focused internal mission*”, without focusing to the external mission outreach to the native Africans. This has made the orthodox faith in Africa to look like it is only a faith of the immigrants. One can argue that, the time these communities have been Africa could have been sufficient enough to witness to the African native communities the orthodox faith. Today, there is a call for these communities to change their missional focus and propagate for integration of these communities and the rest of African society. The point of witness would be where individuals from some of these communities opens up and create interest to evangelize to the African native communities. In the African orthodox history, his has taken places in two ways: i) through intermarriages between Greeks and Africans as well as Russians and Africans. Through intermarriages some Africans have been introduced to the orthodox faith. ii). A Greek priest by the name Fr. Nikodemos Sarikas cooperated with Fr. Ruben Mukasa Spartas of Uganda and facilitated Ugandan students to join a Greek School belonging to a community of sisal farmers in Moshi Tanzania. Later, some of these students went to Greece to study theology either in the university of Athens or Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Their presence in Greek churches caused enthusiasm for Greek Church mission in Africa. In fact, their presence rekindled once the forgotten or inactive aspect of the orthodox missionary work¹⁵.

¹³ A. Tillyridis (Archbishop Makarios of Kenya) article, *Chronology* in the Yearbook and Review 2012 p 48. Also see Hayes Stephen article: A History of the Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa; (originally published in *Missionalia*, the journal of the Southern African Missiological Society) available at: <http://www.orthodoxytz.com/OrthodoxMission.asp> lastly accessed on 20th January 2015.

¹⁴ See Hayes Stephen article: A History of the Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa; (originally published in *Missionalia*, the journal of the Southern African Missiological Society) available at: <http://www.orthodoxytz.com/OrthodoxMission.asp> lastly accessed on 20th January 2015.

¹⁵ Kallistos Timothy Ware (Metropolitan of Diokleia), *The Orthodox Church*, (London: Penguin Books, 1997) p. 190.

Conclusion

In the modern times there is a paradigm shift where the “*mother church*” in the country of origin is looking upon the diaspora Christians for a missional identity abroad or in the world ecumenical forums. This has changed the missional focus and the role of the diaspora Christians to a more ecumenical, financial and geopolitical support for the “*mother church*” in the country of origin. Africa still needs an active missional engagement from the diaspora orthodox Christians. The point of engagement would be active cross-cultural integration of the orthodox faith. Cross-cultural integration creates a platform for communal relationship in terms of Eucharistic celebration, communal identity as orthodox Christians and learning from each other.

As Africa aspire for a more “*witness-oriented*” approach to mission engagement, it is critical for both the diaspora Christians and native Christians to collective focus to witnessing the orthodox faith in the continent. Africa as a continent and as a people, there is immersive denominational and religious competitions which are leading to misleading theologies which need’s response from the Orthodox Church. There is also inter-orthodox tensions among the Patriarchate of Alexandria, Russian Patriarchate and the native African clergymen who wishes to crossover to Moscow patriarchate because their missional grievances hasn’t been addressed by the local church bishops. This require educational training and formation for the orthodox clergy and laity. Currently, there is no theological training taking place in the orthodox seminary in Nairobi because of financial constraints. It is possible for both the diaspora and native Christians to own and support theological training in Africa.

Mission of the church is characterized by what Fr. Ion Bria calls “*liturgy after the liturgy*”¹⁶, a paradigm that combines Eucharistic celebration and philanthropic diakonia that promotes human dignity in mission. Diaspora Christians are called to play an active role in the philanthropic diakonia, where following the teachings of St. Basil the Great (330-379 AD) we fulfil our moral and missional obligations even outside the walls of the church buildings. In one of his homilies, Constantelos quotes:

“What are you going to tell the Judge [God] when He asks you about your selfish style of life? The bread you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the luxurious garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of the person who is naked; the shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the gold [money] you keep locked away is the money of

¹⁶ Bria Ion, Go Forth in Peace; *Orthodox Perspectives in Mission* (Geneva: WCC Mission Series, 1986) p 38.

the poor; the charities you do not distribute are injustices you commit, injustices for which you will be judged. Basil called upon all the faithful to feel embarrassed hearing about the philanthropic accounts of the Hellenes [pagans], and urged them to imitate the philanthropic work of the early Christians"¹⁷

This concludes that the roles of diaspora orthodox Christians in the mission of the church are divine, relational, equitable, communal and contextual just like African women using mortar and pestles collectively.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bassiliadis Petros, *Unity and Witness; Orthodox Christian Witness and Interfaith Dialogue; Handbook on Missiology*. Epikentro, Athens 2007
- Bria Ion, *Liturgy after the Liturgy; Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective*. WCC Pub., Geneva 1996.
- Bosch J. David, *Transformation of mission; Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Orbis Books, New York 1991.
- Demetrios, J. Constantelos: *Origins of Christian Orthodox Diakonia: Christian Orthodox Philanthropy in Church History in Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 52:1 -4 2007.
- Ware, Timothy, *The Orthodox Church*. Penguin Group, London 1997.
- Yiannulatos Anastasios; *Orthodox Mission: Past, Present, Future.* In *Your Will be Done: Orthodox in Mission*, ed. George Lemopoulos. Katerini, Greece: WCC Publications, Geneva 1989.
- Zizioulas, D. John (Metropolita of Pergamon), *Being as Communion; Studies in Personhood and the Church*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1985.

Articles and Journals

- Tillyrides A. Makarios (Metropolitan of Nairobi), *Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa; Orthodox Archbishopric of Kenya and Irinoupolis: Chronology in the Yearbook and Review* 2012.
- Hayes Stephen, *A History of the Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa*; (originally published in *Missionalia*, the journal of the Southern African Missiological Society) available at: <http://www.orthodoxytz.com/OrthodoxMission.asp>. Lastly accessed on 20th November 2021.
- Njoroge John, *Eastern Orthodox Churches in Africa in the Anthology of African Christianity*; Regnum Books International, Oxford, 2016.

¹⁷ Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Origins of Christian Orthodox Diakonia: Christian Orthodox Philanthropy in Church History in Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 52:1 -4 2007.

- _____, *The Ecumenical Dialogue in the Perspective of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria All Africa in the Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism Resources for Theological Education*, Volos Academy Publications in cooperation with WCC publication and Regnum Books International, Volos, 2014.
- _____, in *the Handbook of Theological Education in Africa: Regnum Books International for South Africa*, 2013.
- _____, *The Orthodox Church in Africa and the Quest for Enculturation: A Challenging Mission paradigm in Today's Orthodoxy*, St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly Journal Vol.55 No.4, 2011.