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Social Justice from the Perspective of the Contemporary Orthodox Christianity

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Abstract

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This study presents an analysis of the concept of social justice from the perspective of the Eastern Orthodox Christianity, showing the specificity of the Orthodox approach and the elements in common with the Western religious and lay perspective. Social justice is one of the concepts necessary to today's religious and political vision, often used prudently in the East-European area, especially due to the fact that during the communist period it was used as a current slogan, without much coverage in practice.

This concept is an essential component of the prophetic message, in the Hebrew area, but also in the Evangelists' discourse. For the Christians, social justice is a community imperative, resulting from the revealed, divine message itself. The article presents the main elements of this concept, in its historical evolution, its development in the Western, Catholic area, and its comparative approach in the Orthodox area. We have analysed the concept, both theologically, theoretically, and practically, as it can be found in the conception of the Orthodox Church and as it has been promoted by means of the social-philanthropic mission.

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1. Introduction

The present approach also concerns the contribution that the Orthodoxy brings to the construction of a better, juster and more humane world, by Christian humanism understanding the principle of respect and of promotion of man and all that is his, as a special being, created in God's image, with deep spiritual aspirations (Clement, 1988). Consequently, the Church has the awareness that it is her duty to bring *"hope where there is despair; love and communion where there is division and hate; dignity where human dignity has been forgotten or disconsidered"*. (Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, 2007)

Social justice is, from a Christian perspective, a need of any human society, without which one cannot conceive peace and social harmony. It is a fundamental right of the human being, bestowed by the Creator, which refers to the fact that man's dignity needs to be respected, including regarding the access to means supporting man's existence materially. From a Christian perspective, social justice refers to man's equitable access to work and to what is necessary for the daily life.

Consequently, when we talk about this concept, we refer, on the one hand, to the communities' and the states' obligation of excluding no one from the possibility of earning his daily existence, and, on the other hand, to the modality by which, when man finds it impossible to have access to these fundamental rights, he is supported to lead a minimal existence.

At the same time, the whole social-philanthropic activity of the Church is included in the concept of social justice, because this is the aim of the Church, to make equity easier to achieve in the communities made up of or inhabited by Christians.

Having the calling to reveal *"the signs of God's word"* (Mihăiță, 2005: 36), the Church attaches maximal value to the human existence, considering it God's most precious gift, because: *"She sees in man, in each man, the living image of God Himself, an image that finds its full meaning in Christ and is called to find out to a deeper scope its full meaning in Christ, the perfect Image of God, the Revealer of God to men and the Revealer of man to himself"*. (**. 2006: 70)

The Western area is dominated, regarding the social doctrine of the Church, by the documents of the magisterium, and as a historical departure point, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *"Rerum novarum"* is the main reference element. The Orthodox area has no official magisterial document, yet the concept can be found in the episcopal pastoral letters and in the holistic approach of the social policy of the Church. (Heckel, 1978: 21).

2. Social Justice –a Contemporary Doctrinal Necessity

From a practical perspective, social justice has in view the concrete accomplishment of St. James the Apostle's principle, according to which *"faith, if it has no deeds, is dead"* and refers to the solidarity, communion and love that need to dominate the Christian communities or the communities inhabited by Christians, as St. Paul the Apostle said: *"And if one member suffers, every member suffers with it"* (1 Cor. 12: 26) or *"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ"* (Gal. 6: 2).

Supporting those in various difficulties, deprivations and needs is an obligation for every Christian. The fact of materially supporting one's fellow going through a difficult period of his life is a necessity springing from the commandment of love given by Jesus Christ our Lord, but also a practical need having in view the stability, peace and harmony in a certain human community.

No Christian faithful to Christ's teachings can be indifferent to his fellow who is in difficulty and constraint, no authentic Christian can continue his existence without caring for his fellow and without doing something to change his fellow's unfortunate state. (Teșu, 2003: 6: 68)

Thus, *"The Church has rejected the totalitarian and atheist ideologies, associated in the modern times with communism or socialism. At the same time, she has rejected the individualistic capitalism and the absolute primacy of the human labour market. The regulation of the economy only by centralized planning perverts the basis of the social connections, its regulation only by means of the market law cannot achieve social justice, because there are numerous human needs that cannot be met by means of the market."* (***, 1993: 502-503)

Social justice also has in view an equitable repartition of the goods and an adequate reward of work in society, a correct access of the people to the means needed for their daily life, and a system meant to correct the eventual slides of certain inequitable situations.

Man's fundamental duty given by his Creator is to work (Dufour, 2001: 455), but when he cannot do this fundamental human act, he needs to be supported, because without work he cannot have the daily necessities. The Church never tried to promote a certain type of social system or social-political ideology, although there have been cases when Church people have promoted ideologies or social systems, a fact that cannot be considered as ecclesial involvement.

There have even been cases when the promotion of the idea of social justice was considered as a tendency of leaning towards communism or socialism, especially in Eastern Europe, regarding the Orthodox Churches, or in South America, concerning the Catholic Church. To this day, there are enough supporters of Samuel Huntington's civilizational clash theory, or Max Weber's ethical theory (Weber, 2003), which establish a relation between economic performance and the Christian confessional belonging, putting the Protestantism (and, among its various types, Calvinism) on the first position in this sense, then the Catholicism, and, after that, the Orthodoxy. (Popescu, 1998: 72)

This theory is, however, not enough to make a deep analysis of the faith-related psychology and its impact on the economic life, but is rather a theory belonging to the Cold War period, which was justifying *post partum* a state of fact, claiming the superiority of capitalism over communism including with religious arguments.

Regarding communism, we need to affirm that it was not promoted by the Orthodox Churches and even by no Christian Church at all, and it was not an offspring of Christianity, but, on the contrary, Christianity was the fiercest adversary of communism.

The trend of certain clerics - Catholic, South-American leftists - belonging to the so-called theology of deliverance, must be viewed in the larger social-political and economic context of that area, yet with the mention that the Church does not dogmatize, does not ideologize any socio-political and economic theory, and sometimes personal and even sliding are personal options of one or the other of the Church

servants, which means no commitment for the institution, since the Church, on the contrary, often took measures when they became a must. (Dalberg-Acton, 1998: 614)

3. Social Justice – Common Hebrew-Christian Theological Patrimony

Social justice is a Hebrew-Christian concept, because although it has had an amazing development in Christianity, the roots of this concept can be found in the work of the Hebrew prophets who promoted social justice in their writings and activity.

We find, therefore, very topical ideas in the writings of the biblical prophets, who can constitute a source of inspiration for the contemporary social Christian activism, but who substantiate, from a doctrinal perspective, the Orthodox Christian teaching of faith and not only it.

From this perspective, the most eloquent example is that of Prophet Elijah, considered the first and the most important fighter for social justice in the biblical area. The Hebrew tradition records many of his actions; however, from the Holy Scripture, we know about his action in defence of his concitizen Naboth, from whom King Ahab wanted to take away his property, namely a vineyard.

The prophet successfully defends the poor and powerless, whom the king was about to aggrieve, although a king is supposed to be the first example of justice and goodness. This is just an example, but, in numerous other situations, prophet Elijah acts as a defender of justice, which he sees as an expression of God's will, this is why it needs to be respected, because any infringement of it is an impiety against the Creator (1 Kings 21:20-23).

Another example of prophet committed to the promotion of social justice is Amos, who vehemently stands against injustice, against the exploitation of the poor, against the desire of dishonest gain, and against aggrieving the poor and totally defenceless. He establishes a clear connection between social injustice and the infringement of God's will (Amos 5:7, 10-12; 6:4-7; 8:4-7). Another strong example of promoter of social justice is Prophet John, the Lord's Forerunner and Baptizer, who makes the passage from the period of the Old Testament to that of the New Testament. With strong words (Mt. 3:7-8, 10, 12), he criticizes social injustice and those who commit it, showing that they are submitting themselves to an immediate divine justice (Luke 3: 10-14).

Not doing any injustice to God's most precious creature, namely man, is an obligation, since the human being, created in God's image, has inalienable rights. Then, it is only for man that God became a man or was embodied, as we confess in the *Niceo-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith* and, for this reason, man has a special, divine dignity, and infringing it means offending the divine majesty, infringing the Fatherly love of the heavenly Father.

The dignity of being created in God's image, after His endless likeness (Genesis 1: 26, 28), gives man fundamental rights, and violating them leads to God's immediate intervention in favour of the oppressed. Man has been created for solidarity, communion and love (Nellas, 1994: 7), man is a social being (Breck, 2001: 269), and therefore has the duty to militate for social justice.

The human being was created by God, not to launch himself in "*the infinite race after earthly goods, but in the endless race after God's likeness. The race after material goods is a diabolical overturn of the race to which man has been called, of the race after perennial and absolute values, truth, good, beauty, love, holiness...*" (Popescu, 1998: 78-79)

4. Social justice in the doctrine of the Orthodox Church

From the perspective of social involvement, the Orthodox Church has not elaborated a special Body of Doctrine, as the Catholic Church, which has numerous papal encyclicals, or magisterial documents regulating, from a doctrinal perspective, the ecclesial social involvement out of two reasons.

The first is that the commandment of love given by Christ comprises in it the whole foundation of the Christian social involvement, and the second is the fact that the Orthodoxy tends rather towards the liturgical, cultic side, devoid of excessive dogmatization and regulation.

Sure, this does not mean that there are no synodal decisions, pastoral hierarchic letters or other such documents providing clarifications on the social involvement of the Church. The Orthodoxy considers each problem of a human person as being also a problem of the community, and the social Orthodox ideal is that of communion, according to the principle of the Eucharistic Communion. (Zizioulas, 1967)

From this perspective, in the social domain, the Orthodoxy promotes the Eucharistic principle of communion and solidarity, even though the present civilization tacitly imposes that model of “*homo consumericus*” (Lipovetsky, 2007: 7)

The Orthodoxy has always given prevalence to action rather than theory; consequently, it preferred to act, without needing a Body of Doctrine meant to justify its social-philanthropic actions. The supreme reason substantiating the ecclesial activity in favour of social equity is constituted by the Embodiment of God’s Son and by the example of His activity in favour of man (Lk. 22: 27; Mt. 25: 31-41), which makes “*life in the Church, to which each one is called [be]: ceaseless service of Christ and of man*”. (Sorescu, 1997: 187)

We have got used - especially in the theological, but also in the mediatic area - to considering that the Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church are, exclusively, those making great and many philanthropic actions, and the Orthodoxy would prefer the so-called liturgical ghetto. (Bădiliță & Urian, 2003: 148) There is nothing less true than this, since the Orthodoxy, especially the Romanian one, has promoted the acts of spiritual and physical charity, social justice, as the doctrine would put it, since always.

Yet, the Orthodoxy has had a reticence regarding the popularization of its actions, following the principle that good actions are not made for publicity and gaining earthly pride and praises, but they ought to be accomplished by any man, following the all-merciful example of God Himself.

As we move on in this information age, an age in which information is especially short and with a massive emotional impact, the Orthodox Church has begun to make its social-philanthropic activity known, with discernment and yet still with a certain discretion, precisely in order to show that she is not at all unaware of the contemporary man’s needs and aspirations and she is by the side of her sons and daughters during all the moments of their life, and especially during the hard ones.

The Orthodoxy is aware that it cannot solve all the social problems of humanity, it could not, even if she wanted to, because if even the very rich States cannot eliminate social inequality, how could the Church manage to do it, since she does not have their financial and legislative resources!

Yet, the Church continues to do what she must do and what she knows to do, what her Divine Teacher is teaching her, namely: offer help according to her powers, according to the extent of her

believers' involvement, to provide examples, for the people, especially for the believers, to imitate what she does by providing such an existential paradigm.

The Orthodoxy has neither codified nor theorized its social-philanthropic mission, considering that love to one's fellow is an aspect inseparable from the love to God, therefore from the quality of authentic believer, yet she is acting for the better of the society in which she is active.

The philanthropic logic of the Orthodoxy is that man is the most important being in the Universe, and economic activity and profit follow him and are not above him, which is why the famous capitalist expression *time is money* is not relevant for the Eastern area, where man means everything, and time is the greatest gift of God for man, after life.

And while money can be made, time does fly irremediably, and cannot be brought back. The importance of time in the Orthodoxy is given by the fact that it is the framework in which life, the knowledge of God and the practice of His likeness take place. (Lorenz, 1996: 34)

The emergence of a new civilizational paradigm given by the industrialization age, caused major social-economic changes, challenging the Church to an adequate answer, since *a new form of property, namely capital and a new form of work, salarized work, characterized by oppressive production rhythms... determined only by the criterion of profit-increase efficacy had emerged.* (Ică & Marani, 2001: 135)

In the West, the Catholic Church, with an early experience in the capitalist economic development, but also in the effects of secularism and globalization, more marked than in the East, according to its juridist and doctrinal organizational spirit, theorized its social doctrine by means of the encyclicals: *Rerum Novarum* (promulgated by Pope Leo XIII in the year 1891); *Quadragesimo anno* (promulgated by Pope Pius XI in the year 1931); Pope John XXIII's *Mater et magistra*" (1961), and *Pacem in terris* (1963); Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and *Octogesima adveniens* (1971); Pope John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987); or Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate* (2009).

These documents express the Catholic social doctrine from an official perspective, being norms for the Catholic Church, and many of the ideas here have been used as well even by Eastern theologians, yet without being appropriated by the Orthodox Churches, as they also bear the specific mark of the Catholic theology, which in some aspects differs from the Orthodox one.

The Orthodoxy views responsibility to our fellows' needs and even the very need for social equity as coming from the notion of God's image (Lossky, 1993: 144) and from freedom as an inalienable divine gift. (Stăniloae, 1995: 80) There is, and we need to highlight this as well, a common, ecumenical action, too, regarding social justice worldwide, involving all the Christian confessions and a testimony in this sense are the various and increasingly numerous ecumenical reunions and common actions, or the documents of the World Council of Churches.

This main forum of ecumenical Christian dialogue, in which the Orthodox Churches are members, has a specialized department for social mission, and in its important documents, the social problems and the issue of social equity are always present.

As a theologian at the Archiepiscopate of Târgoviște, I would like to highlight that the social activity of this eparchy has in view the intensification, from one year to the next, of the social involvement, in order to support the attainment of a social equity as wide as possible.

Thus His Eminence Father Archbishop and Metropolitan NIFON, Professor at the Faculty of Theology and Education Sciences of “Valahia” University of Târgoviște, in all his pastoral letters emitted on the occasion of our Lord’s Birth and Resurrection, or in the messages issued on various occasions, approached, each time, a complex set of social problems, from the concrete issues of poverty, and social inequity to the problems of the abandoned or lonely children, or the diseased and the elderly from social institutions. (***, 2002-2016)

5. Conclusions

Social justice represents a fundamental theological concept for the teaching of faith of the Orthodox Church, as, actually, of the whole contemporary Christian theology, being very important for today’s social-philanthropic mission.

It refers to the ecclesial activity meant to support the realization of social justice in our world, by means of solidarity and love, in a concrete manner by helping those in need, but also by creating a just, correct and harmonious social atmosphere.

The Christian social justice has nothing violent or revolutionary in it, like the social Marxist politics, but aims to revolutionize the social paradigm by means of inner change, transfiguration and spiritualization, but also by promoting solidarity, by giving rise to a community effort meant to help those in need.

The transformation of the social framework, often affected by inequity, is achieved according to the Christian conception and action by means of the Church, by a common sacramental, spiritual and philanthropic action, which has in view our fellows’ welfare.

The Orthodoxy brings this vision, as a gift and contribution, for our world, which has had enough of the utopic or inefficient ideologies and models that have generated conflicts or tensions and have not managed to create a correct, just, harmonious social climate, capable of giving hope and faith.

The Orthodox Christian has in his conscience the image of the Final Judgement, which, all of it, as it is presented by the evangelist Matthew, has, as its criterion of judgement, the care for our fellow, the way we have manifested our help to our fellows. From this perspective, the Orthodox Christian knows that his salvation, his eternal happiness is related to the solidarity and love for our fellow who is here in need, in trouble or in suffering.

The present study has wished to highlight the general features of the Orthodox conception on social justice and the practical way of accomplishing this desideratum, in the light of my Romanian Orthodox theological, scientific and administrative activity in the framework of the Archiepiscopate of Târgoviște.

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