

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS COUNTRY
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON OTHER RELIGIONS

Fordham University | January 28, 2014 | New York City



Archbishop ANASTASIOS (Yannoulatos)
of Tirana, Durrës, and All Albania, Primate of Albania
Professor Emeritus, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
Honorary Member, Academy of Athens

Archbishop Anastasios' presentation of the 2013/2014 Orthodoxy in America Lecture
and this lecture booklet were made possible through grants received from
the Nicholas J. & Anna K. Bouras Foundation, Inc., The Kallinikeion Foundation,
and members of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS COUNTRY
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON OTHER RELIGIONS

In the second half of the twentieth century, and especially from 1967 to 1990, Albania was mired in absolute religious darkness. All shrines were abolished; most of our churches were either demolished or converted into warehouses, factories, cinema or stables. Throughout this Balkan country, there had prevailed an aggressive, totalitarian communist regime that imposed a comprehensive constitutional ban in 1967 on all expression of religion. The communist government boasted that its initiatives were historically “original and unprecedented.” Indeed, never in history and nowhere else in the world had anything of the like been ventured.

In the first part of my address, I will briefly summarize the missionary effort starting in 1991 to rebuild the Orthodox Church of Albania from the ruins left behind by this atheistic persecution. I shall also refer to the harmonious coexistence of our Church with the Muslim majority of our country. The second part will present a view of other faiths through an Orthodox ecumenical lens as well as through my personal experience, and finally propose three key biblical concepts with which to advance our theological reflection. It is my conviction that theological thought provides the stable ground for missionary ministry and pastoral outreach and, by the same token, that missionary ministry and pastoral effort revitalizes theological thought.

ALBANIA AFTER ABSOLUTE ANTI-RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

1. The reconstitution of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania from its ruins

Until 1990 I had not dealt specifically with Albania. My interest had focused on Africa, and I was in Kenya in early 1991 when I was informed that the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate appointed me Patriarchal Exarch in Albania in order to explore what remained after the totalitarian atheistic persecution and what could be done to reconstruct the Church of Albania. My surprise was immense and my reservations numerous.

In July 1991, I arrived in Tirana. We were greeted at the airport by a small group of elderly and tormented people, who led us to the ruined cathedral, which for decades had been used as a gymnasium. From that very first moment, I wanted to define the essential message of my mission. So I asked everyone to take a candle and asked how they say the words “Christ is Risen” in Albanian. I proceeded to light the candle, chanting “Krishti u Ngjall” (“Christ is Risen”)! One after another, the faithful few that were present lit their candles and responded in tears with the words “Vërtetë u Ngjall” (Truly He is Risen)! Since then, the phrase “Christ is Risen” became the slogan with which we have carried on all these years. This illumined the heavy autumn melancholy and dark cold winter that followed. And it now dominates the spiritual spring eventually granted to us by God.

As Patriarchal Exarch, I visited as many cities and villages where Orthodox groups had formerly existed. Many of our services were held outdoors under trees or in the ruins of old churches. The Liturgy and sermons were the basic means for gathering the faithful. The heart of my preaching, catechetical effort, and pastoral outreach was that Christ is the light of the world, that the Gospel is the source of truth and joy, and that there is hope despite the fact that everything seems so dark.

On June 24, 1992, at the suggestion of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of

Constantinople, elected me Archbishop of Tirana, Durrës, and All Albania. I was already fully aware how harsh the landscape was and how absolutely no infrastructure existed. Many friends insisted that I should not make the mistake of accepting. The ground was extremely slippery and hostile; the old system of the atheistic regime remained very strong and active; their mistrust of Greece, where I was born, was hardened and so failure was certain. Finally, after eighteen days of agony and prayer, I decided to accept the risk with the conviction that the most crucial issue at that historical moment was obedience to the will of God and not any success in itself. In the spiritual life, what is particularly vital is freedom from fear. “Love casts out fear,” even the fear of failure.

The Orthodox in Albania do not comprise the majority of the population as in other Eastern European countries; nor, however, are they a small minority as in some ancient Orthodox patriarchates. It is estimated that they make up about 22 percent of the total population in Albania. In addition, the Orthodox communities do not share the same ethnic origin. Apart from the Albanians, there are also Greeks, Slavs, and others. Some of these have sought attachment to churches of other Balkan countries. I insisted on the unity of all Orthodox regardless of origin. My motto: “A forest is not more beautiful when it has only a single species of tree, but all species of trees must be free to develop according to their abilities, beneath the light of the Sun of Righteousness.”

The primary concern of the Christian missionary effort throughout the centuries has been the erection of places of worship in order to celebrate the holy sacraments and offer unceasing hymns and thanksgiving to God. Thus, we began a systematic and persistent reconstruction of destroyed churches and construction of new ones. We repaired 160 churches; another 150 new ones were built, many of them quite imposing in their structure. The new Cathedral in Tirana is considered one of the most beautiful buildings in Albania. I insist that truth, love, and beauty have to coexist in any Christian mission. At the same time 60 destroyed cultural monuments were restored, and 70 buildings were

established for the administrative activities of dioceses, schools, medical centers, and various institutions.

These lifeless numbers conceal significant hidden struggles, reactions, pains, and frustrations. We struggled day and night to raise funds and worked hard with many coworkers. Thousands of workers were involved with these vast building projects, which in turn employed and supported their families while generally helping the country's economy.

Meanwhile, our attention focused on the creation of local clergy. A seminary started functioning in 1992 in a hotel, and after five years it developed into a higher-education Theological Academy on our own private campus. Thus we were able to train and ordain over 150 Albanian clergy. Then we established the Holy Synod and organized about 460 parishes in various cities and villages. Moreover, we drafted a new constitutional charter of the Church in accordance with regulations of the modern Republic of Albania. This includes significant new details about the Orthodox Church, such as the participation of laymen, laywomen, and young people on various boards and committees. At the same time, we reached a formal agreement with the government, which was approved by parliament and became state law. This ensured the autonomy of our Church's administration and activities.

One large vacuum in our Church was the lack of Christian literature in the Albanian language. Personally I believe that this vacuum—and especially the delay in translating the Bible—was a factor that contributed to the Islamization of thousands of Albanians during the 400 years of the Ottoman rule. We began working systematically on translations into Albanian, and created a publishing house with its own printing press. We also established a radio station, website, and means for social media.

In the transitional period of the last decade of the twentieth century, from extreme communism to modern democracy, young people faced another large void. From the former illusion of a “communist paradise,” many were led to an expectation of a “capitalist paradise.” Thus, a large vacuum of moral values was created in the conscience of many people. We turned our attention especially toward the younger

generation. Thousands of young people responded to our call and, as we often repeated, young people are not just the future but the present of our Church.

Our fundamental priority was the development of a dynamic liturgical life and Orthodox spirituality. We insisted on the principle we formulated in the ecumenical movement in 1974, “the liturgy after the Liturgy”—that is to say, that our entire life should be transformed into a personal “liturgy,” where we would share in thanksgiving with the others the gifts given to us by God.

Along, then, with the reconstruction of church buildings, our Church developed special initiatives in the wider Albanian society, for instance: a) in matters pertaining to social welfare, offering thousands of tons of food, clothing, and medicines, even constructing a basketball court and a flower garden at the prison in Tirana; b) in the health sector, creating four clinics and the Diagnostic Medical Center, which in the last twelve years has served over 1,300,000 patients, regardless of their religious beliefs; c) in the field of education, establishing kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools, professional institutes and, recently, a university; d) in rural development, instituting programs for water supply and roads; and e) in culture and ecology, starting new initiatives. With all these activities, the Church conveys the Gospel of love—whether silently or symbolically—to different levels of society. Furthermore, in 1999, when thousands of refugees from Kosovo, all of them Muslims, flooded Albania, the Orthodox Church collaborated with other European Churches to support and assist some 33,000 refugees.

In this broader program, many excellent collaborators from Albania contributed, together with a small group of dedicated “coworkers in the Lord” from Greece and the United States. The number of foreign coworkers at various periods ranged from only three to five (for clergy) and five to eight (for laymen and laywomen). I always remember them with heartfelt gratitude. All the aforementioned projects were completed with generous donations of many millions of dollars from numerous sources, to which we reached out for specific programs.

In order to gather all these resources, the Archbishop was obliged to become an “international beggar.” To the thousands of known and anonymous donors, our thanks are profound.

One of the most difficult and crucial challenges of mission through the ages has always been to secure the financial autonomy for the local Church. Many predicted that the prestigious program undertaken would collapse without an Archbishop who could secure funds. Thank God, we have already proceeded to a large investment in renewable resources. We are building two hydropower stations, which will provide the necessary resources in the future for the continuation of the pastoral and social work of the resurrected Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania. It will also financially support the Orthodox missionary efforts in poorer regions.

Overall, in an age of uncertainty and turmoil, the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania has stimulated the faith, love, and hope of the Orthodox people and, more generally, the Albanian society. As is widely recognized, the presence and action of the Orthodox Church throughout all these years since 1991 has contributed substantially to the broader reconciliation and peaceful religious co-existence, as well as the spiritual and social development of Albania.¹

2. Coexistence with the Muslim majority

Christianity had spread throughout the region of the current Albanian state from the earliest Christian times. However, from the end of the fifteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, Ottoman rule was imposed and most of the Albanian population converted to Islam. After the establishment of the democracy in 1991, the majority of the population was either Muslim or atheist. Before the persecution, according to the last official statistics from Italian authorities in 1942, Sunni Muslims constituted 54.17 percent, the Bektashi 14.83 percent, Orthodox 20.7 percent, and Roman Catholics 10.3 percent.² From the second half of the twentieth century, as we have already noted, atheism was severely imposed.

An important foundation for stabilizing peaceful religious coexistence in the country was established in 1998 by the Constitution of

the Republic of Albania, which was formulated with the assistance of Western experts as well as observers from our Church. It specified that “In the Republic of Albania there is no official religion” (ARTICLE 10§1); “The state is neutral on questions of belief and conscience and guarantees the freedom of their expression in public life” (ARTICLE 10§2); “Everyone is free to choose or change his religion or beliefs, as well as to express them individually or collectively, in public or private life...”. (ARTICLE 24§2)³

The demand for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence is of paramount importance for the development of the country. Relations among Christians also proved very positive in the creation of a united Bible Society for the translation and dissemination of the Holy Bible.

a) Relations with Muslims were initially based on the assumption that, in the pluralistic society of Albania, where there was still a strong presence and influence of the old atheist and entirely secularized intelligentsia, the primary contribution of faithful Christians and Muslims was to demonstrate that religious faith was vital for a free democratic society. Religion is not a byproduct of the moral, philosophical, or sentimental life of humankind, but an independent and primary phenomenon related to the specific category of the Holy, the Sacred.

Christians and Muslims agreed that, in a modern free society, we must articulate and cultivate moral values of common consensus. Above all, we must develop the conviction that humanity is not independent in the universe and that the individual interests, as well as the worship of money, pleasure, and power cannot be the new idols, the only criteria for contemporary society.⁴ Finally, religion cannot be allowed to become confounded with the machinery of terrorism and fuel violence. Personally, I have never refrained from repeating that violence in the name of religion only violates the essence of religion.

Nevertheless, there was no room for substantial theological dialogue. Our stable common ground was the acceptance of freedom of conscience and the emphasis on the various international declarations pertaining to human rights, which provided an opportunity for a “dialogue of life.” The basis of religious coexistence was not “theologi-

cal dialogue,” namely conversations on the mystery of God (such as the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Quran, or Muhammad), but our perceptions of humanity and respect for the religious freedom of every person.⁵

There was great need for a careful and as objective as possible study of Islamic views on humanity.⁶ Beginning with the Quran: In his farewell pilgrimage to Mecca, Muhammad declared, “O people! We have formed you out of a single man and a single woman. And we have made you many nations and tribes, so that you may know each other. The most honored among you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous.” (CHAPTER 49.2 THE ROOMS, VERSE 13) Based on this conviction, later Muslim thinkers emphasized firstly the social nature of humanity, its connections with the political, economic, social and cultural world, and on the other hand our direct link to and dependence on God.⁷

Islam also affirms the human dignity of those who adhere to the other monotheistic faiths. It respects and safeguards the rights of non-Muslims (Dimis), who are “the protected.” The Quran sometimes refers generally to non-Muslims and at other times specifically to followers of Jesus. These Quranic passages occasionally seem to demonstrate compassion, while on other occasions clear opposition toward Christians is evident.⁸ For example, the sacred book of the Muslims states: “O believers! Do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are in fact allies of one another.” (CHAPTER 5, THE TABLE SPREAD, VERSE 51)

Occasionally, then, Muslim authorities have the discretion of interpreting the Quranic verses according to the prevailing conditions and selecting the desirable interpretation. But the Islamic sentiment is intolerant towards polytheists and atheists.⁹

In its communication with the rest of the Islamic world, the leading class of Sunni Muslims in Albania reflects the more moderate and generally conciliatory trend, rather than the more absolute and fanatical one. This has contributed to our peaceful coexistence.

As for the other Muslim group, the Bektashi, they combine elements of the Shiite Islamic tradition with Christian and even Indian philosophy and mysticism. They were always flexible and open to people of other

religions, especially Orthodox Christians. Most became Muslims only in the nineteenth century.

b) Without negative sentiments for other beliefs, we Orthodox have had to testify to the Christian perspective that all humanity came from one pair of human beings created by God. (GEN. 2:7, 21-23) Therefore, all people regardless of race, color, gender, language, and education are endowed with the dignity of divine origin. The human being was created “in the image of God” and called to move toward “the likeness of God.” Western Christian thought stressed the human intellect and will as the characteristics of the divine image, whereas Eastern theology especially emphasized freedom and love.

We were obliged to emphasize the radical truth highlighted by Christian theology—that the Son and Word of God became human. As Jesus Himself assured, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (JOHN 10:10) He came to offer this “abundance of life,” namely “the most honorable and perfect participation in the life of the Spirit,” in the words of St. Cyril of Alexandria; this is the fullness of life that extends to eternity.¹⁰

While proclaiming the Christian faith in the multi-religious society of Albania, we stressed that the Gospel is not another “theory,” but the preeminent News; that the Son and Word of God, who became human and arose from the dead, is always with us. The Christian faith stresses the incarnation of God, who “is love,” but at the same time offers divine grace, a transformative journey to “deification” by grace.¹¹

Within this theological perspective, we endeavored to promote peaceful coexistence with our Muslim fellow citizens. Obviously every person is free to accept or reject this message. But Christian revelation continually proclaims it in love—through teaching and Church feasts—with the assurance that the freedom of love is never bound by the beliefs of others. As St. Maximos the Confessor affirms, “Blessed is the one that is capable of loving everyone equally.”¹²

Finally we agreed with the leaders of other religions not to permit fundamentalist ideas or extreme circles to affect members of our communities. Furthermore, we created the Interfaith Council of Albania

and participate in the World Conference of Religions for Peace, more commonly known as “Religions for Peace,” based in New York.

In times of internal crisis within the country, we united our voice and efforts to support and assist the vulnerable. Indeed, we generally found that the specific issues leading to creative dialogue today between the various religious communities include: the protection of the natural environment, discouraging violence everywhere, poverty, reconciliation among nations, development, global justice, bioethics, and especially peace on the local and global levels.

II

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON OTHER RELIGIONS

Our active participation in the Pan-Orthodox events, inter-Christian theological assemblies, general inter-religious relations, and the daily coexistence with people of other faiths encourage us toward an ongoing search for theological understanding of the global religious experience in the context of our Christian faith. This topic is also a central issue for theology in our times.

1. An Orthodox understanding of other religions

In the Western world, the debate on the theological understanding of other religions has been mainly seen through the lens of Christology. In the Orthodox tradition, however, all these issues are always considered in a Trinitarian perspective.

a) The constant starting point for any appreciation of this subject is, first, the certainty that God’s glory—related with His providence—radiates in the world through the divine energies for all creation and especially humankind. Secondly, all human beings, as already observed, have a common origin, share a single human nature, and have a common destination.

The Christian faith emphasizes that God is inconceivable, unknowable, and inaccessible in His essence. At the same time, however, biblical revelation transcends the impasse of the incomprehensible nature of God the Father, clarifying that while the essence of God remains unknown, the divine presence is actively revealed in the universe through the

manifestation of the divine energies. When God is revealed through various epiphanies, it is not God’s essence but His glory that is manifested; because it alone is able to be shared by grace.

The glory of God embraces the world and all things. So all people can absorb something of the radiance of the Sun of Righteousness and participate in the love of God.

The great misadventure of human disobedience did not interrupt the radiation of the divine glory, which continued to fill heaven and earth. At the same time, the fall did not destroy the divine image in the human being. What was wounded, without being completely destroyed, was the human ability to understand and comprehend the divine message properly. God never ceased to care for the entire world, which He created. Not only were human beings searching for God, but also God did not cease to seek human beings.

b) In the Christological doctrine, there are two main keys to understanding our theme: the incarnation of the Son of God and Christ as the “new Adam.” Through the incarnation, the Son and Word of God was united with all human nature. As St. Gregory of Nyssa explains: “We have often repeated that the entire human nature was mingled with this Body of Christ.”¹³ By assuming human nature, Christ granted inconceivable value to our nature, to every human person, sealing our freedom and dignity. The understanding of the divine Word’s activity prior to the incarnation and the work of Christ after the Resurrection comprise the two pillars of the Orthodox liturgical experience. This intense eschatological hope is encapsulated in the stunning expectation expressed by the Apostle Paul: “For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (EPH. 1:9-10)

Jesus Christ did not exclude believers of other religions from His concern. As the evangelists inform us, he communicated with people of different religious traditions (such as the Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion) and expressed admiration for their faith. (SEE MATT.

8:10 AND 15:28, LUKE 7:9) He stressed the gratitude of the Samaritan leper, while his conversation with the Samaritan woman revealed profound theological truths. (JOHN 4:4-30) He promoted the deeds of a heterodox, the “good Samaritan,” as a model for the new dimension of love, of which He preached. And referring to the end of the world, the divine Judge identifies Himself with the “least” of this world, (MATT. 25:35-40) regardless of race or religion.

c) A reflection on other religious experiences from a pneumatological perspective opens new horizons in our theological approach. Orthodox theological thought regards the activity of the Holy Spirit as beyond definition and description. Along with the “economy of the Word,” it also looks—filled with hope and humble expectation—to the “economy of the Spirit.”¹⁴ Nothing can limit its energy: “The Spirit blows where it wills.” (John 3:8) The action and the cohesive strength of the love of the Trinitarian God work in a way that surpasses all human thought and understanding. Everything noble and good can be considered an energy of the Holy Spirit. Wherever we witness an expression or reflection of the Spirit—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness” (GAL. 5:22)—it may be possible to discern traces of the energy of the Holy Spirit. And many similar experiences can be found among people belonging to other religions.¹⁵

d) The phrase “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” (outside the Church there is no salvation) was born in the West. It never constituted the center of Eastern theological thought, even if it was adopted in a limited and specific sense. On the contrary, both older and recent Orthodox theologians stressed that the grace of God acts “even beyond the limits of the visible Church.” A renowned theologian and academician, the late Prof. John Karmiris, boldly expressed the following view: “Not only Christians but also non-Christians, unbelievers, and pagans can become ‘fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the same promise in Jesus Christ.’ (EPH. 3:6); even heathens and heterodox can belong to the Church invisibly on the basis and because of their faith and the gift of divine grace, which is granted to them and bears a quasi-ecclesiastical character.”¹⁶

Thus, rather than stressing the negative “outside the Church,” Orthodoxy underlines the more positive “through the Church.” Salvation occurs in the world “through the Church.” As a “sign” and “image” of God’s Kingdom, the Church is the unitive axis for the entire process of recapitulation. Just as the life of Christ, the New Adam, has global consequences, so too the life of His Mystical Body, the Church, has global reach and power. Its prayer and concern embraces the whole of humanity. The Church offers the Holy Eucharist “for the ecumene” (the whole world) (Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom), acting on behalf of the whole world and radiates the glory of the living Lord to all of creation.

The Orthodox stance is critical of other religions as philosophical systems and organic entities. However, with regard to people living within other religions and ideologies, it has always retained an attitude of respect and love, in accordance with Christ’s example.

By preserving the divine “image,” humanity continues to receive the messages and energies of the divine will, but often is not capable of perceiving these correctly. To use an imperfect analogy from modern technology, if a television receiver is not well connected, it transmits deformed images and sounds. In fact, many audial and visual distortions may be due to various faulty transmissions.

2. Three biblical concepts which advance our theological reflections

In my final section, I will focus on three biblical concepts, which I believe open the horizon of our thought in considering the universal religious experience. These are: the Word, Love, and Light.

a) *The Word (Logos)*. The term “Word” invokes a vast wealth of human thought. Known as “Logos” in the pre-Christian era, it is widely used in Greek philosophical terminology with its manifold conceptual content.¹⁷ It was also employed in the translation of the Old Testament into the Greek of the Septuagint; the living God speaks to people and the divine “Word” is revealed in action.

The radical change in the meaning of this term occurs in St. John the Evangelist with his revealing sentence: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (JOHN 1:1) Despite

external affinities with ancient Greek philosophy and Jewish development by Philo of Alexandria, the main representative of Greek-Jewish philosophy (first century BC to first century AD), the term “Word” assumes new meaning in John’s Gospel—an explicitly new theological content. The Word is Jesus Christ, the creator of the universe, the light and life of humankind, who was incarnate for the salvation of the world.

The apologists of the first Christian centuries developed with particular attention this teaching about the Word, offering significant theological opinions. Most of them, in referring to the relationship of the Logos to the Father, adopt the model of the “immanent and spoken” word (*spermatiko logos*). The philosopher, Justin Martyr (100?-165) wrote: “All writers were capable of seeing everything darkly through the germinative principle (that unites them all).”¹⁸ “Everything that the ancient philosophers spoke correctly and declared truthfully, they did so insofar as they discerned and beheld the Word partially.”¹⁹ He did not hesitate to affirm: “Those who lived in accordance with the Word are Christians, even if they are regarded as atheists.”²⁰

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) speaks in similar fashion when he states that philosophers received “sparks of the divine word.”²¹ This is how he underlines both the capacity and limitation of Greek philosophy; he believes that “philosophy seeks to know the truth.”²² For him, in the ancient history of religion, knowledge of truth comes directly from God; indeed, he calls it “a preparation for the fulfillment in Christ.”²³

For the historian Eusebius of Caesarea (265-339), “the heavenly Word of God” guides humanity “by acting over all and for all...while also granting an intellect to all people as a guide to see His wisdom.”²⁴ Eusebius accepts the universality of divine revelation “to all nations and all people,” acknowledging an innate religious experience everywhere.²⁵ All God-loving people of all ages, “who are witnesses to justice,” are considered “Christians in practice.”²⁶

Equally inherent as human reason are the wisdom of peoples, the institution of moral regulations, and the wider search for truth. As St. Paul, the Apostle to the nations, writes: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever

since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” (ROM. 1.19-20) Referring to the persistent human search of truth, St. Gregory of Nyssa (334-394) will dare to declare: “The discovery (of God) lies precisely in the constant search; the search is no different than the finding.”²⁷

St. Paul emphasized that the conscience, guided by this innate moral law, is also related to the Word. He said: “When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness.” (ROM. 2.14-15)

b) *Love*. Closely connected to human reason is the “tendency toward good.” A very important key to understanding the human religious experience is provided by St. Basil the Great (330-379), who extends the concept of the germinative principle to the human ability “to appropriate good.” “Love of good is not something that can be taught; rather it is innate to human life. For the seed of the Word (*spermatiko logos*) has been deposited within us and contains the cause of appropriating good.”²⁸ The Evangelist John formulated the boldest and most sublime definition of God in his letters: “God is love, and one who abides in love also abides in God and God abides in him.” (1JOHN 4:16) So when Adam was created “in the image of God,” the capacity to love and be loved became a fundamental element of our spiritual DNA.

The well-known “golden rule” of all main religions could be considered to be a prelude to the Christian teaching about love.²⁹ In Jewish thought, the phrase is often repeated: “What you hate, do to no one.” (TOBIT 4:15) Or the words of the great Rabbi Hillel (first century BC to first century AD): “Do not do to others what you would not want done to you.”³⁰ One of the most exceptional and beautiful verses of ancient Greek literature is found in the tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles (496-406 BC): “My nature is not to hate the others, but to love them.”³¹

The complete and final definition of love has been given by Jesus Christ. He reversed positively the old principle of the golden rule. “And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them” (LUKE 6:31; SEE MATT. 7:12) And he has expanded in the Parable of the Good Samaritan—an adherent to another faith—as well as in the image of the Last Judgment. And of course we have the ultimate example of His life and death on the Cross. Wherever, then, such behavior exists, the human heart is mystically coordinated with the divine will.

c) *Light*. Almost all religions have as their basic position the concept of light and its relationship with the Supreme Being. The concept of light was adopted in a direct way by Jesus. As the “Word by whom all things were made” (JOHN 1:3) and as the second person of the Holy Trinity, Christ “was the true Light, which enlightens every person coming into the world.” (JOHN 1:9) He also unequivocally and repeatedly declared: “I am the light of the world.” (JOHN 9:5) A Light that directly relates to life: “I am the light of the world; whoever follows me shall never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (JOHN 8:12) At the end of the history of salvation, creation will have God Himself as its light. (REV. 21:23) So from the natural light here, which alternates with the shadow of night, we will move to the light that knows no evening, which is God Himself. (CF.1JOHN 1:5) We Christians proclaim that Christ is “light from light,” that the entire Holy Trinity is light: “The Father is light; so too the Son is light; and the Holy Spirit as well is light.”

The nature of created light has always been the focus of scientific research. In fact, scientific progress is associated with this search. The new scientific achievements, along with the surprise that they inspire, further broaden the biblical concept of light and the allegorical implications of the unimaginable scope of the uncreated or preexistent light of Christ. As science informs us, light is an electromagnetic wave that is transmitted with tremendous speed. Yet, it simultaneously contains the nature of particles.

The explosion of scientific knowledge in relation to the nature of created light offers new dimensions for the symbolism of the amazing energies of divine light in the world. The quantum of light, the

elementary particle of light energy, the photon, holds a special place among the molecules of matter and energy that make up the world.³² In the form of photons or electronic waves, light exists and acts even in the most remote areas of the universe, far beyond our imagination, even in what we believe to be darkness. In similar fashion, the divine light acts even in situations, persons and places, which the human brain cannot imagine. The light of Christ, the light of the Holy Spirit, is understood and known with regard to its energies, much like the natural light; nonetheless, it simultaneously remains incomprehensible and inaccessible with regard to its essence. “God is called light not in regard to His essence, but in regard to His energy,” as Saint Gregory Palamas says (fourteenth century).³³ And while God’s essence remains inaccessible, all those who desire it can participate in its energies, provided that they have the will to receive it.

* * *

In concluding this evening’s address, I propose that we direct our attention to our own responsibility for the transmission of the Gospel in the contemporary world. Christ clearly stated that not only He but all those who dwell “in Him,” His true disciples, are also “the light of the world.” (MATT. 5:14) What at first glance appears white in the phenomenon of light is actually a synthesis of various colors. And the light of Christ, which we are called to transmit, may be analyzed in various ways and colorations in life. So we are called to offer all colors of the spectrum of this light:

The light of peace with ourselves, with those around us, with the whole world.

The light of justice, struggling for a just society on local and global levels.

The light of truth, to explore history and analyze social reality.

The light of creativity, which encourages original thinking in the sciences and culture.

The light of hope for the unity of all in a harmonious concert of differences.

The light of the resurrection, which knows no evening and reveals the final overcoming of sin and death through the power of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.

The light of love, with the meaning and the power given by Christian faith and the living example of all those who have experienced it—something that no other social institution can ever replace.

The pre-eminent mission and obligation of the Church is to transmit in every corner of the planet the full spectrum of this light of the Resurrected Christ, to connect all people to the source of the Word, love, and light—to Christ.

NOTES

1 J. Forest, *The Resurrection of the Church of Albania*. WCC, Geneva, 2002. Lynette Hope, *Resurrection: Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania 1991-2003*. Ngjallja, Tirana, 2004. *Restoration of the Orthodox Church Monuments in Albania*. The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, Tirana, 2005. *2000 years Christian Art and Culture in Albania. International Symposium organized by the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church* (Tirana 16-18 Nov. 2000), Tirana 2006. *Construction Work of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania during the years 1992-2012*. Published by the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania Vol. . Tirana 2012. Anastasios (Yannoulatos), Archbishop of Albania “The Church of Albania. History and Spiritual Tradition”, *The Splendour of Orthodoxy 2000 Years. History, Monuments, Arts. Vol. II. Patriarchates and Autocephalous Churches*. Ekdotiki Athinon, Athens 2000, pp. 486-506. Archbishop Anastasios, *In Albania: Cross and Resurrection*, Livanis Publications, Athens 2011 (2nd edition 2013); English translation forthcoming by St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014). Archbishop Anastasios, *The Reconstruction of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania 1991-2012*, (in Greek and Albanian) 2nd edition, Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, Tirana 2013.

2 Al. Popovic, *Islam Balkanic*, Berlin 1986, p. 138.

3 *Kushtetuta e Republikës së Shqipërisë*, otim i Qendrës së Publikimeve Zyrtare. *Constitution of the Republic of Albania*, published by State Publications Center. Tirana 2005.

4 On the coexistence of Christians and Muslims in general, see Archbishop Anastasios, “Christians and Muslims in Europe today,” in *Proceedings of the Academy of Athens*, vol. 76, no. 2, pp. 581-594. Also see Anastasios Yannoulatos, “Developing Shared Values and Common Citizenship in a Secular and Pluralistic Society: How Religious Communities can contribute,” in *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: a Desk Book*, eds. T. Lindholm, W. Colterham, Junior, and Bahia G. Tachsib Leek, Netherlands, Kluwer Law International, Provo, Utah, 2004.

5 For the Orthodox stance on Islam, see Anastasios Yannoulatos, “Byzantine and Contemporary Greek Orthodox Approaches to Islam”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 33:4 (1996) pp. 512-528.

6 It remains an axiom for Islam that humanity constitutes a “sacred sign.” According to the Muslim philosopher Ibn’ Arabi, the Arabic term aya (sign) simultaneously denotes the clear evidence of something, its manifest power and the explicit sign of its presence. See M.D. Ibn’ Arab’s *Fuṣus al-Hikam*, traduction française et notes par M. Burckhardt Titus, sous le titre *La sagesse des Prophètes*, Paris, éd. Albin Michel, 1955.

7 Humanity has an inherent dignity, a moral value, which the various Declarations of Human Rights call “reason and conscience.” See Ihsan Hamid Almafregy “L’Islam

et les droits de l'homme," *Presentation to the congress of experts at the Unesco Division of Human Rights and Peace*, Bangkok 3-7/12/1979, p. 33.

8 "You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers to be the Jews and those who associate others with Allah; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, 'We are Christians.'" *Quran*, chapter 5, The Table Spread, verse 82.

9 Certain passages in the Quran insist on "the immutable word of God": "And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and actively sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give zakah, let them go on their way. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful." *Quran*, chapter 9, The Repentance, verse 5.

10 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. P. Pusey, vol. 2. Oxford 1872, p. 220.

11 A. Theodorou, *The Teaching of the Greek Fathers of the Church to John of Damascus on the Deification of Man*, (in Greek) Athens, 1956. G. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 1997.

12 Maximus Confessor, Centuries on Love, I, 13. *Philokalia of the Neptic Fathers*, (in Greek) vol 2, Astir: Athens, 1975, p. 5.

13 Gregory of Nyssa, Homily on "Everything is obedient to him," *Migne PG* 44:1320. Elsewhere he explains that "the Word of God was fully commingled with and entirely received human nature so that, by being commingled with divine nature, humanity may be co-deified by becoming cosanctified with the firstfruits of divine nature." Treatise against Apollinarius, in *Migne PG* 45:1152.

14 George Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit," In *Ecumenical Review* 23 (1971), pp. 118-129.

15 A first analysis from an Orthodox perspective may be found in Anastasios Yannoulatos *Various Christian Approaches to the Other Religions. A Historical Outline*. Porefthentes Editions, Athens 1971. Also see Anastasios Yannoulatos, "Emerging Perspectives on the Relationships of Christians to People of Other Faith—An Eastern Orthodox contribution," in *International Review of Mission* 77 (1988), pp. 332-346; and *Facing the World. Orthodox Christian essays on Global Concerns St. Vladimir's Seminary*, Crestwood N.Y. - WCC Geneva 2003, pp. 127-153. Other interesting articles may be found in *Theologia* (Part I), vol. 84, no. 2, April-July 2013 (in Greek). For the position of Western theologians (K. Rahner, J. Dupuis, G. D' Costa, W. Pannenberg, Cl. Pinnock, J. Hick, R. Pannikar, S. Mark Heim,), see the study of Veli Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism. The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions*, Ashgate Burlington, Vermont, 2004.

16 J. N. Karmiris, "The Universality of Salvation in Christ," *Proceedings of the Academy of Athens* 1980, vol. 55, Athens, 1981, pp. 261-289; See also by the same author, "The salvation of those outside the Church," in *Proceedings of the Academy of Athens* 1981, vol. 56, Athens, 1982, pp. 391-434.

17 Such as in Herclitus (540–480 BC), Plato (427–347 BC), Aristotle (384–323 BC), the Stoics (4th-3rd century BC), and the Neoplatonists (1st century BC).

18 Justin Martyr, *Apology II*, xiii, 5, in *Migne PG* 6:468. For more on the Christology of Justin, see Demetrios Trakatellis, *The Pre-existence of Christ in the writing of Justin Martyr*. Harvard Dissertations in Religions 6 Missoula; Scholars Press, 1976.

19 *Apology II*, x, in *Migne PG* 6:460. Yet, Justin himself did not indiscriminately adopt everything formulated by reason or philosophy in the past. As he noted: "Although they came to know everything through the Word, who is Christ, they also frequently spoke erroneously."

20 *Apology I*, 46, in *Migne PG* 6:397. Still, he insisted that Christ is the criterion for the values of all prior religious life. Justin concluded his study of the "germinative principle" with a fundamental distinction, emphasizing the difference between the "seed" and its actual fulfillment. He differentiated between the innate energy and the energy of divine grace: "For the seed and imitation of grace is one thing, while the participation in the Word by divine grace is another." *Apology II*, xiii, 6, *Migne PG*, 6:468.

21 "Although they received a great deal of inspiration from the divine word, the Greeks expressed very little of the truth." *Stromaties* 6,7, in *Migne PG* 9:281.

22 Clement, *Stromaties* (1,5 *Migne PG* 8:728): "We could say that the Greeks had a simple philosophical search of the truth and the nature of things (namely, the truth about which the Lord said: I am the truth), inasmuch as they disciplined the intellect to prepare for the fulfilment in Christ and arouses their wisdom in order to generate the pursuit of genuine philosophy."

23 Op. cit.

24 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Treatise on the Gospel IV*, in *BEPES* (Greek Fathers), vol. 27, p. 145.

25 Eusebius, *Church History I*, ii, 7, in *BEPES* (Greek Fathers), vol. 25, p. 69.

26 Eusebius, *Church History I*, iv, 6, in *BEPES* (Greek Fathers), vol. 19, p. 207.

27 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on Ecclesiastes*, 7, W. Jaeger, vol. 5, pp. 400-401.

28 Basil the Great, *Greater Rules*, in *BEPES* (Greek Fathers), vol. 148, pp. 1-8.

29 In the classic Hindu book, *Mahabarata* (XII, 114, 8), we read: "This is the summary of obligation: never do to others something that would hurt you if it was done to you." When Confucius was asked if "there is a word, which might be used as a

practical rule for one's life, he responded: "Is not that what mutuality means? Therefore, do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you." (Sayings 15, 23) From the extensive Buddhist literature, I simply quote the phrase of the Tripitaka (Sami ata Nikaya V): "A situation that pleases me must also please others; A situation that is unpleasant and does not bring me joy, I can never impose on someone else."

30 Rabbi Hilel, Sabat 31a.

31 Sophocles (496-406 BC), *Antigone*, verse 525.

32 "Quantum electrodynamics describe the interactions of the photons with matter. Accordingly, the photon creates electromagnetic energy. It may seem incredible, but light is actually into matter." G. Grammatikakis, *The Autobiography of Light*, University Publications, Heracleion Crete, 2006, p. 17.

33 Gregory Palamas, *In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, (in Greek) III, ii, 14 and III, ii, 13.