

The Orthodox Understanding of Marriage in the Ecumenical Context

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Abstract

This article deals with interchurch and interreligious marriage as a challenge to Orthodox theology and its self-conscience. The canons of the church came into being at a time when the church identified itself with history, and the Empire with the kingdom of God. Their purpose was to strengthen the historical construction of the church and the Empire. In such a context, the “other” was a threat to the historical existence of the church. Eschatology offers a different perspective, seeing the whole world as a church “in becoming.” Mixed marriages pose the following questions: How do we understand ourselves? How do we understand others? Our tradition has been challenged with new events and new realities, demanding bravery to solve them.

Keywords

Council, eschatology, kingdom of God, marriage, eucharist, church, communities

In 2016 the Orthodox Church witnessed the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church on the island of Crete. It was a council that was meant to be ecumenical. The absence of some churches and other controversies leave the final judgment of the character of this synod to history and the conscience of the Orthodox.

The synod issued six documents attempting to present the Orthodox position on many issues. One of these documents was entitled “The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments.”¹ This document fired up discussion to the point that the Georgian

¹ “The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments,” Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/marriage>. Even the pre-Conciliar document on marriage was not signed by the Patriarchates of Antioch and Georgia, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/preconciliar-marriage>.

Church officially refused to participate in the council, declaring acceptance of mixed marriages to be improper.² The problematic part of the document was section II, paragraph 5:

Concerning mixed marriages of Orthodox Christians with non-Orthodox Christians or non-Christians:

- (i) Marriage between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians is forbidden according to canonical *akribeia* (Canon 72 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council).
- (ii) With the salvation of man as the goal, the possibility of the exercise of ecclesiastical *oikonomia* in relation to impediments to marriage must be considered by the Holy Synod of each autocephalous Orthodox Church according to the principles of the holy canons and in a spirit of pastoral discernment.
- (iii) Marriage between Orthodox and non-Christians is categorically forbidden in accordance with canonical *akribeia*.³

Polemics within the Orthodox churches on this issue invite theologians to discuss marriage in a new light. This paper tries to understand and answer some crucial questions concerning these issues from the experience and tradition of the Orthodox Church, believing that this outcome could be beneficial in the ecumenical context as well.

Marriage and Church Today

In the First Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:11-15), Paul speaks to a very small community with a strong eschatological hope that things change and will change. Only in this way can we understand his advice that two people should continue to live together in marriage even if one of them is not baptized. In this context, Paul's message becomes clear: "For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy" (1 Cor. 7:14). In the case of Paul, he was speaking about pagans. Translated into today's language, we get an idea of how radical Paul was. He envisioned interreligious marriage (Christians–pagans), and not an inter-Christian one. Community "in becoming" needed every member to grow more and more. State religion, which is what Christianity would become in 387 CE, had different motives and goals, namely the protection of society. The church travelled a long way from having been a persecuted community to becoming a worldwide society.

² "The Georgian Church withdraws from the Pan-Orthodox Council," <https://georgianorthodoxchurch.wordpress.com>.

³ "The Sacrament of Marriage and its Impediments."

But in Paul's epistle we can feel the tension between eschatology and history. At one point, eschatology is seen as hope in a future being unveiled (the church could grow and include more of the world), and history is seen as respect and responsibility for the family (human persons) which because of faith should not be destroyed. We are witnessing here a dialectic between history and eschatology, between the church and human life. We do not have here a "maximalist" position vis-à-vis the church, which would identify church and history and lead to the destruction of marriage in order to preserve a "pure" community. Also, by calling two people "husband" and "wife," respectively, Paul *recognizes the reality of marriage*⁴ between the baptized and non-baptized member, between the Christian and the religiously "other."

The connection between marriage and the eucharist is alluded to some time later with reference to the story of the marriage at Cana⁵ (John 2:1-11). Saint Ignatius from Antioch insisted that every marriage should be by the consent of the bishop.⁶ He probably had in mind not mixed marriages but primarily homogenous marriages that would safeguard his small community.⁷ In the Empire, secular marriage was a matter for the law. A church blessing was for members of the church who wanted to christen their marriage, to introduce it "into Christ."

At the beginning, the church did not "join" two people in marriage but rather ratified the marriage,⁸ christened it.⁹ The sacrament was not identified with the rite as it is today but with the mystical union of the couple "in Christ" as one flesh.¹⁰ Every Christian couple that wanted to get married needed to go through the formalities of the secular society. Then, through their joint participation in the regular Sunday liturgy, their civil agreement became also a "sacrament."¹¹ It is when the clergy began to exercise the juridical function of joining two people as man and wife that the marriage ritual began

⁴ Γρηγόριος Δ. Παπαθωμάς, *Κανονικά Άμορφα* (Κατερίνη: ΕΠΕΚΤΑΣΗ, 2006), 239.

⁵ John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 2000), 21.

⁶ St Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 3:2. The ideal of St Ignatius was an "ordered sexuality" that would bring unity of community: see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 58.

⁷ Dejan Mačković, "Socijalni kontekst bogoslovlja Sv. Ignjatija Antiohijskog [Social Context of Theology of St. Ignatius of Antioch]," *Srpska Teologija Danas* 2012 (2013), 288–302.

⁸ Alvan Smirensky, "The Evolution of the Present Rite of Matrimony and Parallel Canonical Developments," *St Vladimir's Theological Journal* 8 (1964), 38–47, at 39–40.

⁹ Philip Lyndon Reynolds, *Marriage in the Western Church: The Christianization of Marriage During the Patristic and Early Medieval Periods* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), xix.

¹⁰ Smirensky, "Evolution," 43.

¹¹ Meyendorff, *Marriage*, 21–22.

to be something separate from the eucharist.¹² And that separation¹³ is connected with the decision of Leo the Wise in 893 CE, which required that all legal marriages be performed in the church.¹⁴ Because of this law, marriage has, since the 9th century, moved from a sacrament to a more juridical issue,¹⁵ and the church needed to adjust.¹⁶

Mixed Marriage

As we see in the New Testament,¹⁷ mixed marriage was a reality for the early church. It is obvious that at the beginning the church tolerated these marriages, and only later, after the church became the religion of the Empire, did it become the servant of the emperor's policy forbidding mixed marriages through ecumenical and local synods.¹⁸ While in the grips of the Empire,¹⁹ the church at the same time experienced a great change from the leadership-based group toward larger groups. Leadership is a small-group, situation-based, temporary phenomenon, while larger groups are generally structured according to the principles of power, domination, or contractual domination. In other words, the church changed from loosely organized communities into a more structured and defined institution.²⁰ This process has changed the centre of gravity for the Christian congregation. Its priority shifted from mission²¹ to identifying and safeguarding that identity. Becoming part of the Empire, the church identified history with eschatology, and God's kingdom with the Roman Empire,²² producing a new ethos of the "Christian ritual's anchoring in historical

¹² Smirensky, "Evolution," 40.

¹³ In the period from the 8th to the 16th centuries, there is only one indication in prayer books (*Trebnycs*) that the wedding service was incorporated into liturgy (Codex 973, Sinai): see Nenad S. Milošević, *U Dubu i Istini: Liturgičko-kanonske teme* (Beograd: PBF/ITI, 2011), 40.

¹⁴ Slaves continued to be married through secular marriage only: see Smirensky, "Evolution," 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Old Testament examples: Gen. 26:34, 41:45; Lev. 24:10; 1 Kgs 3:1; Ezra 10:18-44; Neh. 13:23-30; Ruth; New Testament: Acts 16:2.

¹⁸ Janković Dimitrije, "Mješoviti brak u pravoslavnoj crkvi," *Istočnik* 3 (1902), 51–55, at 54.

¹⁹ Sergije Viktorovič Troicki, *Crkveno pravo* [Church Law] (Beograd: Pravni fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2011), 94–95.

²⁰ See Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²¹ This process has been testified in Paul, but we could expand it to the church before 387 CE and the church after 387 CE: see Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1978), 176–77.

²² Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), 27.

events.”²³ In that context we can understand the canons that forbade mixed marriages as being at the beginning primarily for the members of the clergy, since the clergy’s mission could be more difficult if they were living in a mixed marriage. The church still did not practise, however, the exclusivism that would soon forbid mixed marriage to all faithful. The canons came firstly to warn parents about their children’s marriage (Laodicea 31, Cartagena 29) and then finished up with exclusivism (VI, 72) – forbidding mixed marriages to everyone.

Emperor Constantine in 339 CE imposed the death penalty on Christians who married Jews.²⁴ Justinian’s *Novel* 154 (535–56) forbade “illegal marriages.”²⁵ The council in Trullo (681 CE) was invoked by Emperor Justinian II to face the difficulties caused by the Muslim and Slav incursions.²⁶ Justinian II wanted to show his personal concern for the good ordering of the polity, like his predecessors: “At the council the opening address by the Emperor stated that the decay of general moral standards demanded urgent attention and stressed the need to eliminate Jewish and pagan elements.”²⁷ In that context, Canon VI, 72, can be understood as the Empire’s desire imposed upon the church to homogenize the population in the face of those who threatened the Empire from outside.

The canons that speak about mixed marriages are Laodicea 10, 31; Cartagena 21; and Chalcedon 14; VI, 72. The most important is likely VI, 72, which speaks about the faithful in general:

Let no Orthodox man be allowed to contract a marriage with a heretical woman, nor moreover let any Orthodox woman be married to a heretical man. But if it should be discovered that any such thing is done by any one of the Christians, no matter who, let the marriage be deemed void, and let the lawless marriage tie be dissolved. For it is not right to mix things immiscible nor to let a wolf get tangled up with a sheep, and the lot of sinners get tangled up with the portion of Christ. If, therefore, anyone violates the rules we have made let him be excommunicated. But in case persons who happen to be still in the state of unbelief (i.e., infidels) and to be not yet admitted to the fold of the Orthodox have joined themselves to each other by lawful marriage, then and in that event, the one of them having chosen the good start by running to the light of truth, while the other, on the contrary, has been held down, by the bond of delusion for having failed to welcome the choice of gazing, at the divine rays (whether it be that an infidel woman has looked with favor upon a man who is

²³ Bruce Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, Minn.: Pueblo, 2000), 179.

²⁴ Janković Dimitrije, “Mješoviti brak u pravoslavnoj crkvi,” *Istočnik* 4 (1902), 79–83, at 82.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 24–25.

²⁷ Ibid.

a believer, or vice versa an infidel man upon a woman who is a believer), let them not be separated, in accordance with the divine Apostle: “For the infidel husband is sanctified by the wife, and the infidel wife by the husband.” (1 Cor. 7:14)²⁸

All these canons that we have listed here took place when marriage was in the hands of the state and not the church. Their character communicates to us the nature of the relationship between the church and the Empire, where the church supported the decisions and interests of the state. In that sense, the church did not recognize any marriage that was not recognized by secular authorities. Nikodim Milaš, on Canon VI, 72, wrote that the church distinguished between schismatics and heretics:²⁹ marriage between schismatics and Orthodox is allowed, while marriage between heretics and Orthodox is not.³⁰ Is it possible to assume then that, according to the law, at least in the 7th century the church christened secular marriage between schismatics and Orthodox through the eucharist? If we take a look at this canon we will notice that mixed marriage is not forbidden for liturgical or eucharistic reasons. Mixed marriage is defined through the image of the wolf and the sheep, which testifies that this canon came primarily to homogenize and defend the population against the threats outside.

In reality, Canon VI, 72, has in most cases not been applied, especially when the interests of the Empire needed a different attitude. Russian prince Vladimir in 988 CE married Anna, sister of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II.³¹ The outcome of this case can be seen as “eschatological,” in that the whole of the Russian nation was baptized after that. Up until the Fourth Crusade, Roman Catholics were considered schismatics and marriage was permissible. After 1204 everything changed and Catholics become heretics,³² a decision approved by the synod in Constantinople in 1756 under Cyril V.³³ Soon after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, a difficult historical situation directed the Ecumenical Patriarchate to forbid mixed marriages in order to protect “the Rum Millet [Μillet των Χριστιανών].”³⁴ Protestants were considered as heretics, as testified by several

²⁸ Quoted from *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans. D. Cummins (West Brookfield, Mass.: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 2005).

²⁹ Based upon the definition of St Basil the Great in his Canon II.

³⁰ Nikodim Milaš, *Crkveno Pravo* (Knjiga V, ISTINA: Beograd-Šibenik, 2004), 684.

³¹ Dimitrije, “Mješoviti brak,” 82.

³² *Ibid.*, 104.

³³ Lewis Patsavos, “Mixed Marriages and the Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 23:3-4 (1978), 243–56, at 248.

³⁴ Γρηγόριος Δ. Παπαθωμάς, *Κανονικά Άμμοφα* (Κατερίνη: ΕΠΕΚΤΑΣΗ, 2006), 239. *Millet* represented a kind of autonomy for a religious community within the Ottoman Empire, i.e., a right for a particular group to rule itself under its own religious laws. Christian Millet or *Rum Millet* was one of them.

synods throughout the 17th century. Still, the interests of the Empire did not follow the church's decisions. Peter the Great, after his conquest of Sweden, asked the church's permission to allow marriage with Protestants in order to convert them to Orthodoxy. The synod approved this in 1719,³⁵ insisting that marriage needed to be consecrated by an Orthodox priest and children needed to be baptized in the Orthodox Church.³⁶ In the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1781, Emperor Josef II allowed mixed marriages, and that law was imposed on the Orthodox Church under his rule.³⁷ In Serbia, Emperor Dušan (14th century), through his Canon 9, forbade marriage with non-Orthodox.³⁸ After the liberation of Serbia from the Turks, the state issued a law in 1853, which recognized the decisions of the Russian synod from 1719 concerning mixed marriages.³⁹ The decisions of this synod were sent to other Orthodox churches in 1721.⁴⁰ In 1869 the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople (Istanbul) forbade mixed marriages on the basis of the canons of the ecumenical synods.⁴¹ Almost ten years later, a synod in Constantinople (1878) declared that the church did not approve mixed marriages but tolerated them "in order to prevent unfortunate consequences from occurring."⁴² It seems that the church realized that intra-Christian marriages should not be encouraged, but that their hindrance "has always been utopian."⁴³ From this brief historical survey, the main mechanism in the life of the church becomes clear: *when the state demands something, the church obeys.*

The Pan-Orthodox Pre-Synodal Conference in Chambésy in 1982 declared that each church should decide for itself concerning mixed marriage.⁴⁴ The Serbian Orthodox Church had its own rules: marriage between Orthodox and non-Orthodox should be blessed in the Orthodox Church.⁴⁵ The non-Orthodox person must sign a statement

³⁵ Dimitrije, "Mješoviti brak," 123.

³⁶ Ibid., 122.

³⁷ Ibid., 125.

³⁸ *Zakonik cara Stefana Dušana* (Novi Sad, 2013).

³⁹ Dimitrije, "Mješoviti brak," 123.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁴¹ Demetrios J. Constantelos, "Marriage in the Greek Orthodox Church," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25 (1985), 21–27.

⁴² Patsavos, "Mixed Marriages," 249.

⁴³ Lewis Patsavos, "A Canonical Response to Intra-Christian and Inter-Religious Marriages," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 40:3-4 (1995), 287–98, at 293.

⁴⁴ Viorel Ionita, *Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church: The Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Meetings since 1923 until 2009*, Institute for Ecumenical Studies, University of Fribourg, Switzerland (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, 2014), 155.

⁴⁵ Dimšo Perić, *Crkveno pravo* (Beograd: 1999), 297.

before the priest that they are not going to work against the Orthodox faith of the spouse. Also, the non-Orthodox person needs to declare that their children will be raised in the Orthodox faith. From the other side, the Orthodox person needs to promise that they will work constantly “in a cordial manner” to convert their spouse into Orthodoxy (chapter 115).⁴⁶ After these statements are signed, the priest will send the request to the bishop, who decides whether such a marriage can take place.⁴⁷

Different Perspectives

We can say that there are two approaches to understanding the sacrament of marriage. One is “maximalistic” and implies that the person wanting to receive the sacraments of the church needs to be a zealous Orthodox Christian.⁴⁸ This first approach to the sacraments has practical implications for mixed marriages. In this conception, mixed marriage cannot be performed in the church because of a lack of eucharistic communion. And even if two people enter into a mixed marriage through a secular ceremony, the Orthodox partner should go through confession, repentance, and *epitimia* (penance).⁴⁹ The conclusion is that the problem of mixed marriage does not exist for the church because *it is impossible*.⁵⁰ This approach is historical because it defines the church within its historical existence and canonical borders with no sense of a mission. The lack of mixed marriage is a protection for those borders of historicity.

An alternative approach to the historical one is the eschatological approach. Saint Basil the Great, in his Rule 9, forbids a woman to leave her husband because of uncertainty about what is going to happen in the future: “επειδή είναι **αβέβαιο** το πώς θα καταλήξει [for the reason that it is *uncertain* how it will end up].”⁵¹ This beautiful thought expresses the living eschatological hope that we found in the apostle Paul. The identity of the church lies in the coming age,⁵² in faith and hope that God will gather all the people in

⁴⁶ Branko Cisarž, *Crkveno pravo II* (Beograd: 1973), 185.

⁴⁷ Perić, *Crkveno pravo*, 298.

⁴⁸ Nenad S. Milošević, *U Dubu i Istini: Liturgičko-kanonske teme* (Beograd: PBF/ITI, 2011), 121.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Prodromou I. Akanthopoulou, *Κώδικας Ιερών Κανόνων και Εκκλησιαστικών Νόμων [Code of the Holy Canons and Church Laws]* (Thessaloniki: Adelfon Kiriakidi, 2000), 523. In English: “Neither is the wife of a faithless husband commanded to separate from him, but, on the contrary, she has to stay with him owing to the fact that the issue of the matter is *unknown/uncertain* (αβέβαιο).”

⁵² Παντελή Καλαϊτζίδη, “Αντι Εισαγωγής Η Ορθοδοξία και το Ισλάμ από τη νεωτερικότητα στην παγκοσμιοποίηση” στο: *Ισλάμ και Φονταμενταλισμός Ορθοδοξία και νεωτερικότητα* (Αθήνα: ΙΝΔΙΚΤΟΣ, 2006), 24. The church’s identification with the prevailing social systems and conformism led to fruitless theology separated from the world and real challenges: see Michael Plekon and Alexis Vinogradov, *In the World of the Church: A Paul Evdokimov Reader* (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 2001), 89.

his kingdom (Matt. 25:32).⁵³ This faith should revolutionize our ideas and actions. If the church builds itself on history, then any change to its historical being would be considered a threat to its identity. The identification of the church with the “first Christians,” the Roman or Byzantine Empires, Russian Empire, rural communities, and so on, is nothing but a return to an idealized past, an identification with history. Such an identification hinders any theological dialogue between the church and the modern world.⁵⁴

If the church builds its identity on the kingdom of God, it means that the church builds itself on the hope of gathering and saving all. In that sense, to accept the other that differs from us does not threaten the church’s identity but essentially *is* the church’s identity. In that sense, intra-Christian marriage is primarily and deeply a theological issue, and not just a pastoral one as some might think.⁵⁵ Without this eschatological perspective, the church is going to be identified with the past and with its canonical borders, and nothing outside exists (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Eschatology offers a different perspective in seeing the whole world as a church “in becoming.”

Mixed marriages pose these questions: How do we understand ourselves? Do we recognize the Orthodox Church as a historical reality, or are we in the process of ever-becoming? Is Orthodoxy something achieved, a finally and historically defined reality? Alexander Schmemmann talks about “orthodoxy” and the authentic tradition of the church. In this idea, the reunion of the churches is not a reattachment to the historical Orthodox Church but a movement toward “orthodoxy.”⁵⁶

To conclude, we have a purely historical approach⁵⁷ to the sacraments, on the one hand, and an eschatological one, on the other. The canons of the church came into being at a time when the church identified itself with history, and the Empire with the kingdom of God.⁵⁸ Their purpose was to strengthen the historical construction of the church and the Empire. In such a context, the “other” was a threat to the historical existence of the church. From the other side, accepting the eschatological approach, the non-Orthodox partner should be treated as a member of the “potential” church or the

⁵³ Bishop Kallistos Ware, “Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All?” in *The Inner Kingdom: Volume 1 of the Collected Works* (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 2004), 193–215.

⁵⁴ Καλαϊτζίδης, “Αντί Εισαγωγής Η Ορθοδοξία και το Ισλάμ από τη νεωτερικότητα στην παγκοσμιοποίηση,” 25.

⁵⁵ Nicholas Krommydas, “Pastoral Response to Intra-Christian Marriages: An Orthodox Perspective,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 40:3–4 (1995), 343.

⁵⁶ Nicolas Afanasiev, *Tradition Alive* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 5.

⁵⁷ Milošević, *U Dubu i Istini*, 34.

⁵⁸ Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, 27.

church “in becoming.”⁵⁹ In that sense, mixed marriage is a huge opportunity to open up our theology and also to describe the true nature of the church.

Eucharist and Marriage

The early church believed that nonbelievers (non-Christians) were sanctified through their union with the believer. This hopeful practice should return.⁶⁰ But some authors claim that this kind of understanding leads to a marriage that, according to the church, is incomplete since it cannot be sealed through the eucharist.⁶¹ Marriage has been performed without the eucharist for more than a millennium. There is a hope that at some point the couple will seal the marriage through the common cup. We need to offer some faith to the present ecumenical dialogue, that at some point there will be results. As we said above, the common cup represents the expectation and hope for the future.

Concerning the eucharist in the marriage between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians, we need to raise various questions. Is a baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity and Jesus Christ confessional or not? Are we baptized in Christ or into a particular denomination/confession? Which Spirit baptizes us, the Spirit of the church or some other? I imagine that we all accept that baptism is a baptism “into” the church and not “into” the denomination. Throughout history, the church received adherents from sects – and even from heresies – not by way of baptism. Georges Florovsky concluded that the church therefore obviously meant that they have already been “*actually baptized* in their sects and heresies.”⁶² If that is the case, it would be very difficult to defend the position according to which the eucharist is only for those baptized in the Orthodox Church.

Such an understanding proves that the Orthodox Church defines itself as one of many Christian denominations. Through baptism people are incorporated into Christ; but still it seems that “there is a graduated membership within the body of Christ.”⁶³ The *Introductory Reports of the Interorthodox Commission*, after providing many examples from history, concluded that the only thing the church demanded from people outside its borders for them to be

⁵⁹ The body of Christ consists of *the whole world* (οικουμένη) that “has been invited to become a Church”: Γρηγόριος Δ. Παπαθωμάς, *Κανονικά Άμμορα* (Κατερίνη: ΕΠΕΚΤΑΣΗ, 2006), 234.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Milošević, *U Dubu i Istini*, 120.

⁶² Georges Florovsky, “The Limits of the Church,” in *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, ed. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (London: T & T Clark, 2019), 247–56 (emphasis added); <http://orthodoxyandheterodoxy.org/2012/06/28/the-limits-of-the-church-by-fr-georges-florovsky>.

⁶³ John E. Lynch, “Mixed Marriages in the Aftermath of ‘Matrimonia Mixta,’” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11 (1974), 637–59, at 647.

accepted into the Orthodox Church was “that they should have been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity.”⁶⁴ Do we have a vision concerning trinitarian non-Orthodox and their baptism? And if we accept baptism in Christ’s body, why should we deny communion in that body? “There can be imperfect communion which is still communion.”⁶⁵

Interreligious Marriage

The world has reached 7 billion people. In such a world, as of 2010, we have 2.2 billion Christians (32 percent of the world’s population), 1.6 billion Muslims (23 percent), Hindus (15 percent), nearly 500 million Buddhists (7 percent), and 14 million Jews (0.2 percent). In addition, more than 400 million people (6 percent) practise various folk or traditional religions.⁶⁶ At the same time, migration is a reality in today’s world, and more people are migrating than ever before – twice as many now as 25 years ago: “Nearly 200 million people, or one out of every 35 people around the world, are living away from their homelands.”⁶⁷

All these statistics are a strong indication that interreligious marriages will probably be a reality in more multi-ethnic societies. Today’s answer to this difficult question is very simple: “While an Orthodox Christian may marry a non-Orthodox Christian who has been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity (One God-in-essence-in-three persons), provided the marriage is solemnized by an Orthodox bishop or priest, marriages between Orthodox Christians and members of non-Christian religions are not permitted.”⁶⁸ And while these marriages are not permitted, they are a reality. Some authors express a more severe view of these marriages:

In the eyes of the Orthodox Church today, an Orthodox Christian who contracts an interreligious marriage, whether with an atheist or a member of the Jewish, Muslim, or any other religious faith, commits self-excommunication. He or she is not allowed to remain in sacramental union with the Church, is deprived of the Eucharist, and is prohibited from serving as a sponsor at baptisms and weddings.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *Towards the Great Council: Introductory Reports of the Interorthodox Commission* (London: SPCK, 1972), 47.

⁶⁵ Ruth Reardon, “Mixed Marriages: The Cost of Eucharistic Division,” *Ecumenical Review* 44:1 (1992), 65–72, at 68.

⁶⁶ Pew Research Center, “The Global Religious Landscape,” 18 December 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec>.

⁶⁷ Daniel G. Groody, “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees,” *Theological Studies* 90 (2009), 638–67, at 638.

⁶⁸ Demetrios J. Constantelos, “Marriage in the Greek Orthodox Church,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22:1 (1985), 21–27, 25. See also Bassam Nassif and Pekka Metso, “The Issue of Mixed Marriages: Canonical and Pastoral Perspectives,” in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education*, ed. Pantelis Kalaitzidis et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications/Volos, Greece: Volos Academy, 2013), 794–808.

⁶⁹ Constantelos, “Marriage,” 25.

The reason this author cites for this practice is “the spiritual welfare of the faithful.”⁷⁰ We should only insist that the marriage be performed in the Orthodox Church and that the couple should be made aware of all difficulties that could come. In the words of Thomas Hopko,

We have been called to evangelize and serve to all people: to testify to them unconditionally, with no attempts of domination or discrimination, and even without the wish to convert or change them personally, for the reason that it is not in our domain but God’s. Ours is to proclaim the Gospel, to witness the truth, to serve everybody and to be ready to suffer all of the consequences which such behavior will probably produce.⁷¹

We should transform these words into actions and strong faith in God, imitating his love and sacrifice for the whole world.

Conclusion

Interchurch and interreligious marriage stand as a challenge to our theology and our self-conscience. We would, in fact, rather avoid the discussion on this issue because it is too painful. In the ever-changing world, we have been confronted with living persons having mixed marriages. For that reason, we have approached this issue in order to solve it and find modalities enabling life to flow freely. Unfortunately, this only shows more clearly that in the ecumenical movement, we do not have a clear vision. We do not see the real people, but only institutions that struggle for their own interests.

Our readiness to solve the problem when it comes to the personal level (interchurch marriage) could provide good guidelines in our attempt to show more courage and vision in the ecumenical movement. Today’s issue of Christian unity needs authentic courage. The world, or the Empire, does not demand today’s pursuit of unity. Paul Evdokimov rightly noted that Christianity in today’s world is “on the margins of society, not as a participant but more as a spectator.”⁷² This fact somehow encourages us, because today’s church has more freedom to act in the way it should and not as a result of different pressures from political powers.

The mission of the church is not to convert people; I personally believe this. It is our mission to spread “Orthodoxy,” in which we should all be immersed. As more Christian denominations struggle seriously to implement the values of the kingdom of God

⁷⁰ Nassif/Metso, “The Issue of Mixed Marriages,” 803.

⁷¹ Tomas Hopko, “Pravoslavlje u postmodernim pluralističkim društvima,” in *Crkva u pluralističkom društvu*, ed. Fondacija Konrad Adenauer (Beograd, Zrenjanin: Hrišćanski kulturni centar, 2009), 278.

⁷² Paul Evdokimov, *Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 2001), 93.

within the constraints of history, they will be closer to “orthodoxy.” Our tradition has been challenged by new events and new realities, demanding bravery. In that sense it is quite empowering to read about primitive Christians and the reasons for their persecutions from the Jewish point of view:

The persecutions cannot be explained solely by reference to the peculiarities of Messianic beliefs of the Christians, since peculiarities of Messianic belief seem to have been matters of comparative indifference in the first century, *provided* they did not lead to peculiarities of practice. What we must find, therefore, is some peculiarity of primitive Christian practice sufficient to explain the persecution. This peculiarity, I argued, was Jesus’ *teaching of freedom from the Law and the libertine consequences which he and his followers drew from it.*⁷³

⁷³ Morton Smith and Gershom Gerhard Scholem, *The Reason for the Persecution of Paul and the Obscurity of Acts* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 262.