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PHD THESIS ABSTRACT

**Peace as a norm for optimizing
interreligious relations. Perspectives
missionaries**

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1. The research argument and objectives

There is no doubt that the world of 2022 is living in the tension of socio-economic uncertainty and daily insecurity, a tension caused by a number of political, economic, medical, ideological factors. The experience of the Covid19 pandemic has shown us that, no matter how advanced medical technology is, a virus can "paralyse" the world at the level of communication and relationships. The recent armed conflict in neighbouring Ukraine, which involves two predominantly Christian Orthodox (!) countries in an absurd dispute, is catalysing fears in the minds of Europeans and others of the horror of a new world war fought with weapons of mass destruction. If we also return to the religious conflicts generated by the Muslim militants of the Islamic State and the terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda a few years ago, we seriously wonder what the future will look like.

What is confirmed is that peace is a desirable reality, on which today's political, religious and economic leaders should focus their energies in order to make it a reality. This doctoral thesis - *Peace as a norm for optimizing interreligious relations. Missionary Perspectives* - proposes a theological-missionary analysis of how the missionary dynamics of the Christian Church can effectively contribute to the promotion and implementation of peace in today's global society. Armed conflict is not a novelty in human history, but its forms and rationales have become so complex that even the world's most sustainable democracies find themselves at an impasse in managing it.

On the other hand, globalisation, in its accelerated and universalised flow, has brought the world's religions into close proximity. The relocation of religious cultures to new spaces, some even secularised, such as the West, through the phenomenon of migration, labour market liberalisation, dictated by globalisation and armed conflict, poses a real challenge to the integrity of Christian identity and belonging, regardless of its confessional variations. The challenge is suggested by the fact that through the

'compression of space' different religions intersect in the same geographical area, each claiming to hold the absolute truth, or as Ulrich Beck puts it, the 'clash of religious universalisms' is taking place. The consequences of the concretisation and visibility of religious diversity in the world of the 21st century depend on how religious communities relate to each other, on how each person, who has a particular social, cultural and religious structure, relates to the other. Good coexistence can be achieved, but also conflict at local or even global level.

In this context, the Church, in its missionary nature, has the responsibility to promote love of neighbour and the Gospel of Christ. This is not an easy task in the face of religious alterity which claims to promote the same absolute truth. For these reasons, peace as a social norm, as an existential state, as a relationship with otherness, has become one of the current concerns of the mission of the Christian Church.

Religious and cultural plurality is a reality, and faith communities should teach and convince their followers to accept this fact. Interfaith and interreligious collaboration in peacemaking and peace-building efforts presupposes that all faith communities have acquired and developed the necessary theological and conversational skills that enable them to recognize and respect the integrity of each other's beliefs, practices and life together: "The local Orthodox Churches, in close cooperation with the peace-loving faithful of other world religions, consider it their duty to work for peace on earth and for the establishment of fraternal relations among peoples. The Orthodox Churches are called to contribute to the common effort and collaboration between religions, and thus to combat fanaticism; in this way to work for reconciliation between peoples, for the triumph of the values represented by freedom and peace in the world, for the service of humanity today, regardless of race or religion."

Peace knows no religious boundaries. Religious communities, through interfaith dialogue and collaboration, must strive to overcome misunderstandings, stereotypes, caricatures and other prejudices, whether inherited or acquired. Their voices for peace must be heard in the public sphere (politics, media and economy) and together they must take initiatives to promote justice and peace in the world. The universal message of peace, which each religious faith community embraces, should enable their followers and others to see each other, not as enemies, but as brothers and sisters across religious, national, racial and cultural boundaries. Religious communities, together with other socially dynamic movements, become credible agents of peace after critically examining and evaluating their past and present performance in conflict situations.

Such a critical approach would humble them and help them to recognise that their statements about peace do not always match their passivity, indifference or actions in situations of conflict and injustice. A critical assessment of their present and past performance could free them from the multiple ideologies (nationalist, political, racial and economic) that have used the passion evoked by religious faith to promote their own goals, values and interests.

The complicity of believers and religious communities in acts of violence is also strongly influenced by the collective and personal insecurities and fears that guide their interpretation of religious texts and traditions. It is not uncommon for people in violent situations and conflicts to profess faith in God's peace while giving legitimacy to their violent acts as their contribution to God's cause for the world. In all these situations, such people and their religious communities have forgotten that wars and divisions between people are the most immediate and visible expressions of sin and evil.

In line with what has been briefly stated in order to suggest the research profile of this PhD thesis, we propose the following objectives: a) to conceptualize conflict and peace from a religious-Christian, social, political point of view; b) to identify the causes of religious conflicts in the context of the radicalization of some religious cultures as a response to globalizing trends; c) to critically argue how religion is a source of violence or peace; d) presenting the development of missiological frameworks on peace promotion in inter-religious relations, with reference to the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Busan - South Korea, 2013) and the Pan-Orthodox Synod of Crete in 2016; e) setting the norms of inter-religious dialogue as a tool for promoting peace and confirming Christian identity.

2. Relevance and topicality of the topic researched

The research on peace as a norm for optimizing relationships is relevant to the study of Christian mission in that it highlights the multi-religious, psycho-social and cultural context in which the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed and in that it essentially maps past, present missionary methods related to religious otherness, suggesting the missionary paradigms that are emerging for addressing religious conflict in the future.

Peace is a desirable reality that calls the Church to contextualize its mission. Christian churches cannot ignore the fact that today's world is highly complex,

interdependent, multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and irreversibly pluralistic. In such a context, in order to be agents of reconciliation and peace, they must find ways to communicate and collaborate with people and communities of other faiths, ideologies, cultures and beliefs. Such collaboration cannot be simply an exchange of ideas and a comparison of different theologies, nor a matter of political and social expediency. It requires religious communities not to give up their unique and particular claims about the origins of peace and how it can be fully established in the rhythm and life of today's and tomorrow's world, but to develop a dialogical theology of engagement and cooperation with other religious communities whether Christian or non-Christian. The Church in its missionary dynamic must reflect on how the fullness of the world, in all its irreducible diversity, reflects the dynamic presence of God's transforming grace.

One of the best collections of statistical data providing a panoramic analysis of the state of religious conflict in today's society is by Isak Svensson and Desiree Nilsson, both researchers in the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Switzerland.

It should be noted that there are five publicly available related datasets on religious conflict that have made significant contributions to the field of religious conflict research.

First, the influential study by M.D. Toft reports important trends in religious civil wars in general and the role of Islamist conflicts in particular. However, his data is limited to armed conflicts with the highest level of combat deaths, i.e. more than 1000 per year, which is a minority of all armed conflicts. Furthermore, while Toft distinguishes between identity-based (peripheral) and issue-based (central) religious conflicts, his data makes no further distinction between different types of religious issues or their importance. According to M. D. Toft, a religious conflict is defined as peripheral when combatants "identify with a particular religious tradition and group themselves accordingly, but the rule of a particular religious tradition may not be the subject of dispute." Within the cases that Toft defines as central religious civil wars, conflicts in which the rules of a religious tradition are part of the disputed issue, there may be variation in the salience of religious claims, a nuance that Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data adds to the field. In addition, by defining "central" in terms of issues and "peripheral" only in terms of identity formation, Toft's dataset does not sufficiently account for interactions between issues and identities; for example, civil

wars over a central religious issue might be fought between parties from the same - or different - religious traditions.

Secondly, J. Vullers, B. Pfeiffer and M. Basedau contribute by adding the peace dimension to the study of religious conflict and by using a broader conceptualization of religious violence. The comparative strength of their data is therefore a deeper level of nuance and recognition of the positive, peace-building potential of religious dimensions. However, their dataset is geographically and temporally limited as it is only available for developing countries and for the period 1990-2010. Furthermore, as this dataset focuses on the country-year level, it is well suited for country-level analyses, but cannot be used in the same way to explore variations in religious dimensions between different rebel groups.

Third, N.P. Gleditsch and I. Rudolfson's data identify insurgent groups with Islamist ideologies in armed conflict over a long period of time, using conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. Thus, its main strength lies in its breadth, but a limitation of the data is that it is thematically limited, in that it focuses on Islamist groups rather than other religiously defined types of conflict, and does not provide disaggregated data on religious aspects.

Fourth, M. Isaacs' dataset focuses on the relationship between violence and religious rhetoric over time at the ethnic group level. It has the advantage of relying on time-varying measures of religious claims and rhetoric. An additional strength is the use of a disaggregated level of analysis by examining religious dimensions at the organisational level. However, it only includes religious organisations representing ethnic groups.

Fifth and finally, the dataset of I. Svensson has a global coverage and includes information on some of the religious dimensions that RELAC includes, but is limited in its temporal coverage as it is only available for the period 1989-2004.

In conclusion, while all of these datasets are valuable for the systematic examination of religion and conflict, they also suffer from a number of limitations and restrictions.

3. Structure of the paper

The PhD thesis presentation is structured in 4 chapters, each chapter containing a series of sub-chapters that elaborate on the themes analysed. What we intended was

to provide a logical framework in the approach to the theme, with inflections in various thematic registers in the sphere of sociology, psychology, politics, culture, with the specification that the stake of the analysis is missionary.

Thus, Chapter I - The Conflict-Peace Polarity. Theoretizations and conceptualizations - opens our analysis by specifying the descriptive elements that interweave the meaning of peace and conflict. In this vein, we first undertake a sociological and religious analysis of peace, highlighting its applicability in the global, multiplex and multipolar world of the 20th century. 21ST CENTURY. In the same section we provided a conceptual framework of conflict and its components (action, incompatibility and actors), with the empirical data of religious conflict according to Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC).

Chapter II - Religious Diversity and the Sources of Religious Violence - introduces the topic under investigation in the context of contemporary society. We emphasize that we have insisted on the idea that modernity is a driving force of pluralism, which has catalyzed the cosmopolization of the world in the transition from relative homogeneity to relative cultural and religious heterogeneity. We also addressed a theologically sensitive but necessary sub-theme of the framework, namely whether religion is a source of violence or peace. We felt that the thorny issue raised by Ulrich Beck should not be missing from the course of analysis in this second chapter: the preference for peace over truth in the clash of religious universalisms in cosmopolitan society?

If the first two chapters, as we have seen, represent a theoretical analysis of how current religious violence challenges us to readjust peace in its effectiveness in defusing conflictual tensions, the following two chapters are intended as an application of missionary methods in promoting peace in the experience of the Christian's relationship with religious otherness. Chapter III - Mission of the Church as a vector for promoting peace - explores the following themes: the particularities of Orthodox Christian mission; the urgency of a dialogical dimension of mission; a biblical perspective of peace as inclusion; peace in the documents of the 10th Busan meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC); reflections on peace in the documents of the Pan-Orthodox Synod of Crete (2016), missionary principles in the theological assessment of peace from an Orthodox Christian perspective. One topic we found it useful to address is the Russia - Ukraine conflict, with the caveat that we did not produce an x-ray of this unfortunate critical situation, but limited ourselves to presenting reactions

from the World Council of Churches and the recent 11th Assembly of the WCC in Karlsruhe, Germany (2022).

Chapter IV - Dialogue as maximising reconciliation and peace: missionary assessment - is reserved for missionary analyses of the relevance of inter-religious dialogue as an instrument for the realisation and application of peace and reconciliation. One aspect we have insisted on is overcoming the tension between mission and interreligious dialogue by recourse to the Trinitarian paradigm of the dialogical dimension of Christian mission. In the last two sub-chapters we have presented the principles of interreligious dialogue (a. trust built in other members of the religious community; b. mutual exploration of theological sources and frameworks; c. conducting interaction through appropriate and accessible channels of communication; d. symmetry reflected in the corresponding relationship between dialogue participants; e. the ability of participants to take risks in interreligious dialogue; f. the mutual interaction between dialogue actors and their interaction with their own religious communities; g. the dynamics of action in dialogue) and a critical analysis of the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue through the challenges it raises: representativeness and authority in interreligious dialogue; the risk of elitism in interreligious dialogue; the emphasis on formalism in religious debates; the minimisation and relativism of differences between religions; the antagonism of attitudes towards interreligious dialogue.

4. Current state of research and methodology

The research is interdisciplinary in nature, since it is impossible to analyse peace from a missionary point of view without reference to the social context in which it must be promoted. For this reason, the use of empirical sociological data on religious conflicts and the pluralistic and political context of the contemporary world was absolutely necessary. We would like to point out that our analysis was intended to be a research at the macro level and not at the micro level, in the sense that we did not focus our attention on the experience of a single country or continent with peace and religious conflict, but wanted an extension to the global level in order to observe the phenomenon in its relevance. What is happening in the theatres of operations in the Middle East has a ripple effect on the whole world, all the more so as we are talking about a cosmopolitan and interdependent world at all socio-economic levels.

While the Orthodox Churches, out of a lack of congruence of unity and disconnection with the reality of contemporary challenges, affirm that peace is an integral and indispensable element of the Christian Gospel, they have not sufficiently reflected - in a morally coherent manner - on the nature of peace and peacemaking and how peace affects, in practical terms, their life and witness in the world. Orthodox theologians have observed that a mere theoretical presentation of the Orthodox understanding of peace is not a sufficient expression and witness: 'It is not enough for us (Orthodox) to limit ourselves to a mere theological presentation, to describe and prescribe the Orthodox vision of justice and peace. We must also mobilize and work together for God's purpose of overcoming injustice and establishing justice wherever possible, as well as overcoming forces, which threaten peace on earth.

The contextualization of peace and peacemaking and the critical appreciation of ecclesial actions or inactions to promote peace compel the Orthodox Church as a whole, especially in today's context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, to explore different but complementary ways of relating their liturgical and spiritual experience and faith to the complex and interrelated problems of the world. Such an intention evokes accusations that the Church is moving from the spiritual to the political realm, an activism alien to the Orthodox spirit. Orthodox theologians, because of the close association of many Orthodox Churches with the state and their long-standing oppression by totalitarian regimes, have not adequately and critically reflected on the reflexive relationship between self and society and the Christian imperative of simultaneous transformation by God's grace and Christian discipleship of both. Oppressive, unjust and violent social structures have endangered the humanity of the oppressed, and a just society risks being corrupted by unjust and greedy egocentric individuals. Fr. Stanley S. Harakas notes with regret the undeveloped status of social ethics in Eastern Orthodoxy especially as it relates to peace studies: "There are few Orthodox writers and thinkers who have dealt deeply and thoughtfully with these issues. Fewer still, if any, have provided a theoretical basis for an authentic and consistent Orthodox Christian social ethics. Because of this, there is a danger that our social concern will become the object of mere sloganeering and, worse, the tool of alien forces. For example, peace as an ideal for the Christian Church is almost self-evident. However, there is no coherent body of Orthodox studies on peace. Few, if any, Orthodox theologians have addressed the issues of pacifism, disarmament, nuclear war, just war theory, peace movements, etc. There is a danger that in this matter we allow ourselves to be simply used as a propaganda

outlet." Not a comforting warning, but a realistic one. Theological-dogmatic reflections on peace must also be launched into the ethical-social spectrum. This lamentable situation, in the words of another Orthodox scholar, Grant White, "must not become an excuse for inaction in the face of suffering of immeasurable proportions."

Today, however, we note the contribution of Christian theologians and missionaries who have initiated a complex approach to peace - phenomenological, political, social, religious - and whose analyses, incidentally, I have also used in my doctoral thesis. Among the professors of missiology in Romania who have approached the problem of peace and conflict from a theological point of view, we mention Pr. Conf. Cristian Sonea, Pr. Prof. Gheorghe Istodor, Pr. Prof. Ion Bria, Prof. Corneliu Constantineanu, who passed away in 2022.

From a methodological point of view, our choice was to use three methods that interfere in the development of the analysis: the historical method (through which we explored the metamorphoses of theological thought with reference to the issue of conflict and the value of peace, as well as the history of social changes that led to religious conflicts); the systematic method (through which we rendered the background theological and sociological analyses of peace and conflict); the comparative method (which facilitated us to approach in a multi-analytical perspective the way peace is perceived in different religious cultures).

The literature used in the argument is largely in English, as it provides us with some of the most competent and complex analyses of religious conflict and peace-promoting trends in the world today. We have not excluded the analyses of Romanian theologians and missiologists, whose reflections on religious conflict and the Church's contribution to peace promotion are substantial to our analysis. Thus we have used information provided by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC). We also considered it appropriate to dwell on the armed tension in Ukraine, which is taking place in the vicinity of our country's neighbourhood, by referring to the documents of the last two World Council of Churches (WCC) assemblies in Busan (2013) and Karlsruhe (2022), to the reactions from representatives of the WCC, but also to the way the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Synod in Crete reported on violence, inter-religious relations and peace.

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