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DOCTORAL THESIS

Abstract

PhD supervisor

Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Habil. Gelu Călina

PhD student

Constantin C. Andrei

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**THE CULT OF THE DEAD IN THE GREAT RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD.
MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVES**

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Abbreviations

pr. - priest

prof. - professor

univ. - university

dr. - doctor

drd. - CANDIDATE

I.B.M.B.O.R. - The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church

Keywords

Cult of the Dead, Cult, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Missionary, Asleep, Death, Resurrection, Dying, COVID-19, Religious Dialogue, Monotheism, Trilateral Dialogue.

The cult of the dead is one of the oldest forms of religiosity that seeks to commemorate the dead by honoring them by the living. In this way, the care for those who have left this earthly life is based on the belief that the sleeping ones have a continuous existence and, more than that, they can influence, more or less, the lives of the living. Thus arose the honoring or veneration of ancestors. Basically, in many religious communities a new vision of death has been created. In this sense, the cult of the dead took on a special dimension, generating a wave of customs and traditions specific to each people or each religious group. However, some traditions and customs become common ground in dealing with the mystery of death. Anchoring at this point was made possible by man's belief in a life that extends over time and surpasses this biological death. Life after death, as can be seen in many of the world's religions, represents a new view of life and the very purpose of man present in the passing world.

The subjectivity of some regarding the less correct interpretation of emphasizing the practical ritual of body care is distinguished today as a deficient objective within the crises of the 21st century. Although in past times there has been too much emphasis on the care of the bodies of the dead, to the detriment of spiritual care, yet today one sees a major lack of missiological applicability even in this form, especially when the crisis caused by fear or by the events generated by the wars is present in the current reality, a reality lacking more and more of the religious character of everyday life. Thus, the vision of death changes radically, especially in the current general context, thus becoming a simple form of remembrance of a sad passage to the world beyond. In this sense, the religious message that reveals care for the deceased acquires, today, new valences that tend to capture and fuel everyone's daily life with fear. For this reason, the mission of missiology today becomes a necessity that has the essence of updating all methods and practices in the sphere of creating a type of interreligious dialogue based on the main characteristic of the cult of the sleeping ones. That is why the mission of the Church becomes increasingly difficult if a process of ennobling and renewal is not urgently started through catechesis, which must be based on updating and commemorating death, but especially eternal life. The ultimate goal of belief in the immortality of the soul

must be reflected in the daily living of each of us. Eternal life must constantly be a primary and guiding goal in living earthly life¹.

Through the present study, I intend to capture both the decay of man's image and vision of the cult of the dead in today's times, as well as the power of communication of monotheistic religions through a dialogue, having in the foreground the cult of the dead, as it is found in the great religions of the world. I also aim to highlight the importance of tradition and the cult of the sleeping by reviewing some events, customs, practices and beliefs reflected within the various faiths that over time have been focused on common mortuary rituals and practices.

The methodological part presented in this thesis has as its main objective a universal aspect valid throughout history, namely: having the past as its objective, missiology has as its purpose not only the knowledge of the missionary past itself, but also its valorization through the help given to understand as much as possible well the present, especially since the present is largely the follow-up and consequence of the past, but taking into account the updating and streamlining of work methods. In other words, missiology gives us answers to the questions that humanity today asks of the past, present and future. Also here I emphasized the importance of the critical method that acts on a double level: that of the authenticity of the documents (dating, author, etc.), established by external criticism, and that of the veracity of their content (reliability of testimonies, the extent and limits of the information transmitted, etc.), established by internal criticism; the two levels of the critical method involve confronting and evaluating different sources². Taking into account all this, I have revealed the importance of the fact that all religious historical events must be analyzed in their context, that is, one must know both their causes and their consequences. In other words, there must be a correct interpretation that outlines the real picture of the events as they are to be understood today. Therefore, their adaptation to the current social context must be done responsibly, taking into account the practice of the cult of the dead nowadays. Even if, often, the interpretation of the events takes on a hypothetical character, still the in-depth understanding is elucidated when the existence of a large number of documents attesting to their originality and practicability is guaranteed.

The scientific research addressed has in mind the analysis of human behavior regarding the cult of the dead, an analysis that foresees both the historical past of civilization

1 Pr. R. MUREȘAN, „Misiunea Misiologiei. Câteva considerații actuale privind Misiologia ortodoxă”, în: *Studii Teologice*, nr. 1, 2006, pp. 204–206.

2 Jean-Claude Larchet, *Ce este teologia...*, p. 120.

and the meaning of practicing a funeral cult and the opening of a dialogue based on the mission correlated with the history of mankind. Also, a comparative analysis of the spiritual capacity and applicability of a cult of the dead, both in the past and especially nowadays, updated by the problems generated by the crisis in the current context, can be seen.

The core of this cult of the dead is related to the human soul. More precisely, the desire of the Orthodox Church is to save people's souls through the sublime teachings and practice that it reveals every time through worship. On the other hand, the salvation of the soul is also reflected in the eternal happiness of the soul. This fact implies the honoring of bodies because they are sanctified through the Holy Mysteries and through "life in Christ" (Philippians 5, 21; Galatians 2, 20). Also, each body represents the house of the soul and the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (I Corinthians 3, 16).

Like other religions, the Orthodox Church has in mind the treatment and understanding of mysteries that are really difficult to explain, especially in today's context. For these reasons, the Orthodox Church ordered, based on the truest revelational testimonies, to perform funeral services, as well as services that prolong, somewhat, in the memory of the faithful, through prayer, the communion with the sleeping ones. All this was substantiated through the observance of certain days in which to commemorate those who have passed from earthly life. In this way, I captured, in separate chapters, the days on which the public commemoration of the dead is made, as well as the days on which their private commemoration is carried out. All these memorials, prayers and alms made by the living for the sleeping ones take place on the occasion of funerals, but also on the occasion of the services ordained by the Church, with the aim of saving the souls of those who have left this world. Belief in the salvation of souls gives us the deepest feeling that sheds light on the communion of the living with the sleeping.

The cult of the dead represents one of the most important realities of the Old Testament, in the missionary context of the chosen people. Israel had a special attitude of care towards her sons, that is, both for the living and for those who fell asleep in the Lord, ordering, for the latter, a truly special cult full of special meanings. This attitude of care also extended to the other nations through the example and dignity they showed as God's people. The communication between God and His people determined the transmission of the divine message and teaching to all other nations. Thus, the cult of the dead was shaped and promoted, both through teachings about the reality of death, resurrection and eternal life, and through the existence of traditions and customs that have lasted until today. Their exploitation

was possible because the core of this cult of the dead is linked to the human soul, which is more valuable than everything in the world. In this way, I captured, in separate chapters, the prophetic mission of the chosen people, mission models and the communication of the Word in the Old Testament. I have also dealt separately with aspects of the cult of the dead in the Jewish view, emphasizing the Jewish view of death and resurrection, care for the sleeping, and funerals and mourning specific to the people of Israel.

According to the teaching found in the Old Testament, man is the mediator between Divinity and the cosmos, the priest of the Creator's creation and the prophet of God's will.

Being created in the "image of God" and in communion with the Gods in Paradise, the first man could know the divine will directly. But, losing communion with the Divinity due to the fall into sin and disobedience, the human being was forced to make use of those through whom the Creator of the world deigned to further discover His will. Thus, the need for intermediaries between people and God arose. These are men chosen by Him, having faith and fearing God, and known throughout history as the prophets of the Old Testament. They had a special role in preserving the monotheistic faith and preaching the messianic idea based on the redemption of humanity through the Incarnation of the Word of God. At the same time, these prophets are the ones who announce the messages received from God Himself, prophetism being like a religious institution specific to the people of Israel. This religious institution was foretold by God to His people (Deuteronomy 18, 15-22), developing together with Samuel and lasting until the time of Nehemiah (approx. 5th century BC). The main mission of Jewish prophetism was to preserve and develop the knowledge of the Creator and faith in Him, through the Old Testament Law, among His elect.

The Creator chooses a people that he makes a missionary people. This choice provides for the people of Israel to be a blessing to the other peoples. The reflection of this reality led to the conclusion that the chosen people have a completely and completely special mission, both for the marginalized among them, widows, orphans, foreigners or the poor, as well as for the other nations. Human history capitalizes on this fact to highlight the idea that the chosen people have an essential role because the Creator of all has a plan with the other nations as well. Basically, the people of Israel had the duty to carry out this plan of Divine Providence.

The capital mission of the chosen people before all nations can be focused on three essential aspects: the presence of the Creator, Old Testament ethics and monotheism. Thus,

Israel represents a mediator who must bring everyone to God and pray for all mankind, being an intermediary for everyone, just as Abraham was³.

In the Old Testament, the way of communicating divine messages is unique and special. This takes place in two different forms: both verbal and written. At the beginning of the visible world, communication from the Builder was direct, without the need for anyone's mediation. In Heaven, the communion and communication between man and God was direct, having a continuous character. This direct relationship between God and men was altered by the fall into sin of our ancestors. However, direct communication has not completely ceased, but has acquired a new, particular form. Basically, God no longer communicates with people in general, but only with certain chosen ones.

The whole dialogue of man with God and the communion between Creator and creation was the basis of the revelation of the teaching by which people could win the lost paradise. For this reason, the cult of the dead is one of the teachings formulated on the basis of God's Revelation. This worship brings to light the divine regard for both the living and the sleeping.

Capitalizing on the teachings about death, resurrection and the afterlife, a series of funeral traditions and customs have developed that tend to have a particular complexity. In this sense, the chosen people put into practice the realities less known to other nations regarding the cult of the dead.

In the Old Testament, people valued life above all else. And taking someone's life was considered a terrible act, akin to the destruction of an entire world. Instead, saving one life can be considered similar to saving the whole world.

In the thinking of the chosen people, death, like life, has a particularly important meaning and is part of a divine plan. Based on this reality, Jews have a firm belief in a life beyond the grave, in which those who have lived a life pleasing to God here on earth will be rewarded in the next life.

In Judaism, funeral practices are extensive, but they are not an expression of the fear of death. In essence, Jewish practices regarding death and mourning have a dual purpose: to show respect for the fallen and to comfort those left in this passing world who will miss the departed in the eternal.

3 Arhimandritul Cleopa ILIE, *Ne vorbește Părintele Cleopa*, vol. 4, ediția a 2-a, Editura Mănăstirea Sihăstria, Neamț, 2004, pp. 26–27.

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Among the many teachings of the chosen people, it is easy to see that one of the most important found in the Old Testament and which continues to this day is the one related to the resurrection of the dead. The entire scripturally grounded doctrine developed various customs and practices that spread, in one form or another, throughout the world. A noteworthy and common custom of the people of Israel was the tearing of clothes. When a person first heard of the death of a relative, then naturally he expressed his initial grief by tearing his clothes. This way of compassion full of heartache had a special meaning. The tearing of the clothes was done near the heart if the deceased was a parent, or on the right side of the chest if it was other relatives. This tearing of the garments was called *keriyah* the mourner reciting a prayer of blessing describing God as the "True Judge". This fact represents an acceptance of God taking a loved one.

Considering the above, the teaching of the Old Testament gives us an overview of the cult of the dead in the Old Testament, the resonance of the theme throughout the Old Testament confirming the centrality and missionary importance of the chosen people.

Taking into account all the previously mentioned, it can be deduced that the subject under research falls within the context of scientific research in the field of theology. Moreover, the missionary perspectives of the cult of the dead in the world's great religions include aspects of the cult of those who are asleep in the Lord capitalized mainly in the Old Law.

Just as the other monotheistic religions promote the cult of the dead and funeral rituals, giving them a special status, so Islam claims a special importance for this funeral cult, practiced and valued in the life of the Muslim community. As we noted in the study, Muslims consider death a natural thing. But in addition to this ever-present phenomenon in history, I have also noted and elaborated several subdivisions or implications of death. Thus, we brought to the fore the revelation of some current phenomena involving the causality of death. More specifically, I evaluated topics related to suffering, abortion, euthanasia, post-mortem examinations, organ transplants and burial from the perspective of the Islamic mission. I have developed these current aspects in several sub-chapters related to the first chapter of the scientific paper. In this case, Islam offers the teaching that life on this earth is transitory because the life to come

is the eternal abode where each person will reap the fruits of their efforts resulting from living the earthly life. The Muslim must not resist death or fight against it, but accept that death is just something to be accepted, being only a part of the divine plan. Basically, the Islamic faith envisages life as sacred and the gift that God (Allah) gives to all human beings. In this sense, termination of pregnancy is generally not permitted in the Islamic framework. We also noted that post-mortem examinations are not permitted as these processes could inevitably delay burial, especially since the dead should be buried within 24 hours. In addition, the Islamic faith holds that it is possible for the deceased to experience pain following medical procedures. Regarding organ transplants, the opinions of specialists are divided. For various reasons, many oppose organ donation, arguing that life is a gift and no one has the right to "donate" any body part to another. However, a growing number of Muslims are of the opinion that, in cases where they can save human lives, organ donation is accepted based on the Islamic doctrine that: necessity permits the forbidden. Cremation of any human body is not permitted in Islam because every human being is dignified as a human being. No circumstances can allow the cremation of the human body.

Also in the missionary framework of the Islamic vision regarding the cult of the dead, I revealed some important aspects of the Islamic tradition. In this endeavour, I have called upon the knowledge of learned Islamic scholars, with the help of which I have elaborated and transposed the doctrinal elements of Islam concerning resurrection, judgment and eternal reward. Practically, the second chapter was impregnated with various doctrinal teachings that underline the framework and importance of the cult of the dead, as it is perceived within the Islamic space. In this chapter I have dealt primarily with the Islamic eschatological concepts of death, resurrection and Judgment Day. Secondly, we examined one of the most disputed topics of Islamic thought, the one related to tombs and sanctuaries, but also the one related to the cult of saints.

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topics of Islamic thought, the one related to tombs and sanctuaries, but also the one related to the cult of saints.

The research conducted during this pandemic period has made it possible to answer the questions of the Islamic world. First, religious practices carried out in large groups of people, without maintaining adequate social distance and adequate personal hygiene, can contribute to the intensification of the transmission of pathogenic viruses, especially those transmitted by airborne droplets. It cannot be unequivocally stated that communal religious practices become a special plan that contributes to the spread of disease. Restrictions on community religious practices should primarily aim to educate about preventing the transmission of infectious diseases and not completely close access to the place of worship. Conducting sacred religious rites during a global pandemic, such as the Islamic pilgrimage, may contribute to an increase in the number of deaths among participants in these rites. However, the direct cause of the pilgrims' death was an infectious disease, and not the mere act of participating in the pilgrimage and religious ceremonies. Failure to maintain proper social distancing and proper hand hygiene contributes to the uncontrolled transmission of the virus. The research conducted also showed a significant influence of the opinion of the Muslim clergy on society. The views expressed by the Shiite clergy that there was no possibility of contracting the disease COVID-19 during prayer were not only at odds with the state of scientific knowledge, but above all extremely harmful to the population. It misled the population and thus could have contributed to the increase in the number of cases of the disease. Ultimately, the decision to close mosques to the public was particularly difficult to accept, not only for the clergy, but also for the Muslim faithful eager to practice the religion's ordinances. All religious communities around the world have had to face this problem. Restrictions on the use of places of worship have left believers of all faiths feeling abandoned by their religious leaders and alone in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. These limitations showed people how important religion is in life, especially when health and life are at risk⁴.

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 was a surprise for the whole world. Although the population has become accustomed to the threat to security, it is understood as a threat to peace caused by terrorist attacks or armed conflicts.

The problem of threats to public health continued to grow. Until a few years ago, one could not imagine such an intense escalation of a virus, which causes an infectious disease, against which modern and technological medicine is almost powerless. There were concerns about

4 Kristina MURPHY et alii, „Why people...”, pp. 460–463.

refugees and migrants from regions with poor health status and ineffective medical systems. Meanwhile, the casual mobility of modern society has contributed to the extremely rapid transmission of the COVID-19 disease around the world. The issue of the spread of the threat to health safety in societies will need to be carefully considered due to the significant disparities in health protection in different parts of the world. Moreover, population mobility is greater than ever and it is obvious that it will continue to increase⁵.

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Based on the research carried out during this difficult period, it must be stated that the Muslim community's approach to the pandemic caused by COVID-19 depends on three factors. The first is the religious commitment of the respondents. This period showed that the higher the religiosity and strong adherence to the religious practices of Islam, the lower the acceptance of pandemic restrictions⁶. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 was a surprise for the whole world. Although the population has become accustomed to the threat to security, it is understood as a threat to peace caused by terrorist attacks or armed conflicts.

The second important factor is distrust towards the decisions of politicians who have interfered too intensively in religious life. People who participated in religious life indicated that the clergy were too docile with politicians. The imams tried not to question the validity of the restrictions introduced. Shiite clerics saw the COVID-19 pandemic somewhat differently. Some of them have questioned government and medical decisions in public, official statements. The third factor is the subjective assessment of world events.

In conclusion, we can affirm that this doctoral research in Orthodox theology represents a living testimony that reflects the importance, actuality and missionary aspects of the cult of the dead, taking into account the fact that it will be able to influence future monotheistic interreligious dialogues.

The present work presents itself as a presentation of the cult of the dead reflected in the great religions of the world and is intended to be seen from a missiological perspective. That is why, in the chapters of the work, I analyzed the Christian, Muslim and Jewish vision of the cult of the dead and the mission of each in this complex process of practicing the cult of the sleeping.

5 Anthony GIDDENS, „Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age”, în: *Polity Press*, vol. 37, 1991, pp. 38–39.

6 Kristina MURPHY et alii, „Why people...”, pp. 462–464.

At the end of this paper, I presented a series of points that could be found, in one form or another, on the agenda of future interreligious meetings. Although there is the possibility of approaching some far-reaching subjects for the times in which we live, there is still the possibility that in the future what is imperatively necessary to be clarified at the planetary level can be discussed and clarified, i.e. to choose a theme regarding the cult of the dead. This fact would have a special effect because many of today's believers need encouragement and peace of mind especially when reference is made to the practice of funeral worship. Discussing such a topic would lead to many favorable responses related to the current problems of the post-modern world. Among the most necessary points that could be addressed in the future could be the following topics that would be discussed in future international interreligious conferences. In this sense, solutions should be found in the possible unfortunate situations that may appear in the near future, a future that tends to face unprecedented situations that are a novelty nowadays. A new scientific approach must be sought regarding the causes of the emergence of novel situations. It must also analyze to what extent the various funeral customs and practices can influence the human consciousness of our days in the sense of awakening a lost or misunderstood interest starting from the meaning of life and death. It must be investigated whether there can be a modern conception of the cult of the dead and funeral customs, or whether it can be a question of a correct meaning and a re-actualization of the past. It is also useful to study what predictions can be made for the near future taking into account both the current situation and the historical past of the cult of the dead. It is a broad exploration of the topic that encompasses the idea that the suppression of part or all of the funeral cult may be a current or viable solution for the present or future. Another question that could be put on the agenda of future interreligious meetings would be: how can we preserve the core of this cult of the dead taking into account the history of religions and the role of mission in the context of a crisis or strong crises? Looking at it as a whole, it must be investigated whether fear is a factor influencing people's decision today to practice or not the cult of the dead. Given all the above, it is imperative to be able to explore whether the restrictions can reduce the importance of practicing a correct funeral service. Last but not least, it should be followed whether epidemics or diseases are a decisive factor in maintaining respect for the body of a deceased person.

Finally, I would like to note that the mission and the cult of the dead represent the foundations and pillars of the monotheistic interreligious dialogue, especially through the multitude of topics that can be addressed in the future interreligious gatherings of the great

monotheistic religions of the world. Capitalizing on all the information presented so far, I want to affirm that humanity must be guided by the mission given by Divinity and respect the traditions and customs specific to the cult of the dead, which have been preserved throughout time, history being a living witness of today's reality.

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