

**ATHANASIOS K. DEVETSIDIS**

**The contribution of the  
Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO)  
topolitics, religion and civilisation all over the world  
over the twenty years of its existence**

**Participation in the international essay contest on:  
«The social values of Christianity in politics and the contribution of  
the IAO to the promotion of such values»**

## THESSALONIKI 2013

### *Introduction*

In an era of upheaval and generalised socio-economic crisis, as a result of the relativisation of values and the increased barriers to citizen participation and expression in politics, it is imperative to mobilise institutions in order to smooth oversocial malfunctions. In this regard, as a way out of the multifaceted crisis our planet is going through, the role of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy can be recast and its influence extended.

The Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (hereinafter IAO) consists of parliamentarians representing countries with Orthodox presence.

Since its establishment in 1993, the Assembly has been called upon to deal with enormous geopolitical changes in the wake of the collapse of real socialism, which unavoidably provided a new basis for religious freedom and civilisation. On the other hand, the victory of “free economy” makes it inevitably necessary to promote social justice over the triumphant neoliberalism, while it is deemed essential to avoid a policy favouring the so called “Shock Doctrine” in the exercise of fiscal and financial policy.

In this context, the IAO remains deeply devoted to the high ideals and values of the Orthodox teaching and faith, thus demonstrating that the Eastern Christian tradition is a key stability factor in pan-European integration (Resolution A’ adopted during the 8<sup>th</sup> GA, 2001).

Given that “*politics set the bounds of ecclesiastical jurisdiction*”, the IAO applies—quite legitimately— a neutral policy with respect to open ecclesiastical issues, since its purpose, as an exclusively political institution, is neither to manipulate the ecclesiastical mind-set nor to achieve the religious legitimisation of its power (Conclusions of the 14<sup>th</sup> GA, 2007). However, the parliamentarians, men and women, forming the Assembly are members of the Christ-named crew of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Orthodox Church who actively engage in the protection of Orthodox Christians’ rights all over the world, giving special attention to the conservation of cultural heritage (Churches, Pilgrimages etc.) in regions facing an increased risk of violence, war, civil conflicts etc. (Resolution B’ adopted during the 8<sup>th</sup> GA, 2001).

Moreover, through the special subjects it focuses on in its conferences, one-day seminars and annual General Assemblies, the Assembly seeks to bring its exclusive political character to the forefront, namely its continued interest and efforts in support of peace-making and a just solution to open international issues such as the termination of the Turkish occupation in Cyprus and the Middle East conflict etc. (Resolution C' adopted during the 8<sup>th</sup> GA, 2001).

At this point, it should be pointed out that the achievement of IAO's statutory objectives is a constant challenge, given that problems remain despite the sincere efforts to promote certain issues. Furthermore, citizens' lack of global information by the media, especially the so called "new media" (the social media, free journalism in the blogosphere etc.) has proven to be an extremely difficult affair.

Nonetheless, IAO's contribution to bringing specific issues to the forefront, especially the role the Church is called upon to play), using experts' intuition and an interdisciplinary approach in an effort to keep pace with global developments, has been considered as significantly positive. This is clearly reflected in the main subject of the 11<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the IAO for the year 2004, "Security with Freedom", as well as in its conclusions regarding the purifying and saving work of the Church, which –as is known– seeks to create the perfect man.

The challenges posed by globalisation, technological advances, information society and the subsequent abolition of "territoriality" (as defined by Ferdinand Tönnies) establish a new framework of action through the "death" of distance, the creation of low cost intercontinental telecommunication systems and real-time information about the developments taking place in the «global village», constituting a solid basis for the encouragement of mutual understanding between peoples and nations.

Therefore, there will always be opportunities to bring the spirituality and the depth of the Orthodox Christian mind-set to the forefront through the numerous writings of the Church Fathers.

### ***IAO's initiatives in its 20-year history - A review***

The most important element in the Assembly's 20-year history is the fact that its activity is beyond formalities and forms. The IAO is present when and where necessary.

A typical example is the Resolution on “The challenges faced by the Orthodox population in Kosovo and Metohi”(Belgrade, 2009), which condemns discrimination on religious grounds, declares the right to safe living conditions and underlines that monasteries and monuments, as part of world heritage, must be preserved and protected.

**Sub-proposal A.** In this context, it would probably make sense to establish, within the IAO, a permanent special sub-committee on peace, taking also into account the collaboration with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for the promotion of the “Olympic Truce” ideal as an excellent opportunity to cease fire and begin peace negotiations with the *a posteriori* participation of IAO’s counsellors and external partners in humanitarian missions carried out with the contribution of the organs of the External Mission, in order to ensure mutual financial and technical assistance to the new mixed scheme.

Moreover, it is not by chance that the IAO shows continued interest in issues related to education in dealing with important social problems and ecological disaster, which reminds us of the importance of education as formulated by Constantine Oikonomos of the Oikonomoi: *the purpose of learning is to adorn the mind with knowledge and the heart with kindness and justice, to instill in people honesty, thirst for knowledge and love toward man, to familiarise them with true philosophy, namely the knowledge of beings and themselves, the knowledge of God, which is the real fruit of education.*”(Krikonis, 2004: 464).

Moreover, the Declaration elaborated by the Presidents of the Education Committees in Crete in 2002 puts particular emphasis on the need for a humanistic education, fully respecting religious diversity in a spirit of *synallilia* (namely reciprocity), mutual understanding and solidarity. The initiatives undertaken in this framework should revolve around the following axes: i) adaptation to local habits – a practice the Church has always followed, ii) the perception that doctrines reflect the teachings of the Church, are life models and examples, do not aim at establishing new limits on human life and are not “moral formulas”.

**Sub-proposal B.** In conformity with the guidelines of the 2002 Declaration on the involvement, jointly and in a coordinated manner, in matters such as IAO’s conferences and member meetings as well as the development of an IAO external partners network for matters related to the training of teachers, it is suggested

to conclude MOUs with the Interorthodox Centre of the Church of Greece and other similar Educational and Cultural Foundations of the Churches of the IAO Member-States in order to promote know-how, utilise all talents within parishes, shed light on distinguished volunteers involved in the social work of the Church and encourage the involvement of talented unemployed theologians, with a view to establishing “focal points of research” on religious education and promoting the social work of the Church by increasing synergies between the Church and the State through Parishes, Archdioceses and the Civil Society.

Apart from this, it is clear that the IAO, through its work and presence at the international *fora*, endeavours to deescalate the tension caused by globalisation, while condemning ethnic and religious outbursts, violence, prejudice and fundamentalism (cf. General Principles on the Protection of Religious Freedom and Traditional Religions, as formulated at the meeting held in St Petersburg on 23 June 1999, which clearly define the need to protect religious heritage and to recognise religious freedom as a constitutionally guaranteed right).

As is known, the Holy and Great Synod in Istanbul (then Constantinople) in 1872 and the Synodic Act of 1928 clearly condemned ecclesiastical racism or “ethnophyletism” as encouraging discrimination against believers, secularisation and absolutisation, and leading Church members to an unacceptable segregation on grounds of race, origin, language etc., while in fact the Church has always used local habits, experiences, traditions and languages as a means to spread to all men the message of redemption and salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The exemplary manner in which parliamentarians appeal to the positions of the Church Fathers in their daily activities should remind us of the teachings of Prophets and Apostles, in their endeavour to honour the value of the human person, for a fair society in which nobody is excluded.

To this end, it is worth noting the classic statement of the Sociology of Religion that Christianity transformed and reconstructed all negative institutions of the Ancient World by sanctifying the State, the Law and the institutions of marriage and family, thus providing social welfare models (Yioultsis, 2002:160).

In this respect, it would be appropriate to draw a parallel with the significant contribution, from an ontological, ethical, existentialist and, finally, humanist and social point of view, of the teachings of Orthodox Christianity on crucial life issues,

especially some borderline situations of the human life cycle, such as bioethics matters.

Consequently, it is worth noting the Declaration of the Basic Principles of Bioethics based on the Orthodox Tradition (as adopted during the IAO 9<sup>th</sup>GA in Bucharest in 2002). A key point in this text that should be highlighted is Plato's statement that "(...) all knowledge (science), when separated from justice and the other virtues is seen to be cunning, and not wisdom", given that, as stressed in the 6<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the Declaration, "(...) A characteristic of the explosion of biomedical sciences is that its correct application is a greater achievement than its emergence". Deontology is therefore understood as a lived experience.

In this context, this essay suggests, in the sub-section with the proposals on IAO's future prospects, to broaden and enrich Lifelong Learning programmes in formal education (by teaching the subject of Religious Education and providing further training to theology teachers), general education for adults, and vocational education and training through courses on ethical reflection taught by theologian researchers (cf. sub-section "*...Expanding our horizons through an andragogical approach*").

To conclude this subsection, it would be useful to provide an overall evaluation of IAO's achievements, in terms of its work and presence in the public sphere (one-day seminars, conferences, events etc.), bearing also in mind its statutory principles and fundamentals. The Assembly:

1. records in a satisfactory manner and evaluates in a transparent way all changes occurring in Europe and elsewhere,
2. supports with sincerity and respect the role of the Orthodox Christian civilisation as a binding and unifying force among the peoples of Europe and between the European and other civilisations, and
3. defends with zeal and honesty human rights and religious freedom for all peoples.

However, there is still room for improvement, especially with regard to IAO's performance and efficiency, in full compliance *inter alia* with its goals and objectives. This can be achieved by:

1. promoting the ecumenical and unifying spirit of the Orthodox faith and spirituality,

2. strengthening cooperation with international organisations such as UNESCO, OECD, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and directly with the European Commission, to ensure respect for religious diversity in Europe and avoid the relegation of faith to the private sphere.
3. establishing, implementing and encouraging educational cooperation programmes through the exchange of theologian and other scientists specialised in relevant Social and Human Sciences from IAO's founding members (Greece and Russia), to defend the Orthodox mindset against the homogenisation and neutralisation forces of globalisation.

***Paths of dialogue, mutual understanding, reconciliation and democracy – IAO's contribution to democracy, civilisation and social cohesion***

*“Come now, and let us reason together saith the LORD...”*(Isaiah. 1:16-18).

Taking action against discrimination, overcoming stereotypes, having a genuine and sincere desire to meet with the “Stranger” and love yourself as your “Neighbour” (*perichoresis*), showing true respect for diversity and dialogue with the “Other” characterise IAO's “connection” with the corresponding Inter-parliamentary Assembly on Islam and interaction with the Jewish community (cf. Gary Vachicouras, *To the Dialogue of the Orthodox Church with Judaism and Islam – Faithful to the Orthodox tradition and commitment towards the future*).

The draft Cooperation Agreement between the Parliamentary Union of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Member States (PUIC) and the IAO on Islamic-Orthodox Parliamentary Dialogue is indicative of IAO's efforts towards this direction.

It is important to note, at this point, what we have already mentioned in this essay: people should preserve their special identity, “the world's peoples have the right to seek their future in their own cultural achievements, traditions and beliefs” and “the parliamentary structures that are established to discuss issues which go beyond the narrow limits of current political activities and approach the modern world through the prism of culture and history can prove useful in many different ways”.

In any case, the political nature of inter-parliamentary cooperation is not overlooked, since it is expressly stipulated that “both organisations fully understand that their dialogue excludes the possibility of any discussion on each Party’s faith”.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the Conclusions of the International Political Conference “Nation, Religions, Orthodoxy and new European reality» , which took place in Athens in 2005, where among other things it is stressed that “Europe’s future cannot be based on the falsification of European history, the womb of global history, with its roots in Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome and the Christianity, or on half-truths, supposedly promulgated in the name of coexistence and tolerance” (Athens, 17-19 April, 2005:9)

In our living ecclesiastical tradition, therefore, “the hierarchy of beings and ontological unity safeguard the de-idolisation of the world and its material possessions, and this is why there is a way to combine worship with asceticism and the concern of history for the common use, the protection and the promotion of material possessions” (Bria Ion – P. Vassiliadis, 1989:113).

Another interesting partnership, which confirms IAO’s dialectal character, is the visit of the IAO International Secretariat to the seat of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) in Johannesburg, South Africa, to submit a proposal of partnership (IAO 2010 Information Bulletin, p. 6).

***Priorities in consolidating brotherhood among peoples in an era characterised by the “fall of certainties”***

As an international political organisation, the IAO should anticipate, cater for, take into account, plan and reflect of the future, especially the effects of political decisions on building a new Europe and other issues.

The main subject of the 18<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, held in Paris in 2011, reflects the fact that real social welfare is for all people without exception, reminding us the well known dual scheme of love and social solidarity towards Christians and the “Other”.

Given that the Church Fathers give to work an ethical dimension by considering it as an offer of abilities, talents and endowments to the community (not providing them is criticised by the Church Fathers), the main concern of the

parliamentarians-members should be how to deal with the phenomenon of the alarmingly high unemployment, especially among the young.

**Sub-proposal C.** To promote forms of labour that stimulate production (cooperatives, solidarity schemes, non-profit collectives of mutual assistance etc.), ensure moderation in labour, give priority to manual and intellectual labour over capital, develop a social conscience about the relationship between man and the natural environment based on critical thinking, with full respect for the latter, by reinvesting in human resources and returning all surpluses to the local community.

These complementary objectives can be achieved by focusing on a new “more ethical narrative” on economy in general and the forms and means of production in particular, by finding new ways to arrange life issues, with a substantial change in people’s mentality through the so called “third sector”, that is Social and Solidarity economy. (This is the spirit of the Resolutions IAO adopted during its 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> GA on the crisis of the international system of values as a challenge for Orthodox Christianity and religious values in a world of economic crisis respectively).

***Proposals on IAO’s future prospects and actions, in a spirit of encouragement, optimism and hope – Expanding our horizons through an andragogical approach***

As an international parliamentarian institution and a purely political body, the IAO should prevent and remedy problems, as well as help citizens, institutions, employees’ associations, the civil society, the world of business and economy in general to develop specific attitudes and skills, towards an open and comprehensive society, where nobody is excluded or marginalised.

To this end, here are some proposals for the optimum use of laymen holding degrees in Theology and other Social and Human Studies in the development of educational programmes, the establishment and participation in schemes of direct democracy and social and solidarity economy in the framework of the EU 2020 Strategy, under the auspices and with the political contribution of the IAO.

These proposals seek to fulfill the need to understand citizens’ rights and obligations, as IAO’s findings show that it is necessary to develop skills of coexistence not because we are supposed to be tolerant of others but because our neighbour is, *inter alia*, our saviour.

Apart from this, they will raise awareness of our responsibility towards future generations and ensure transparency in decision-making, comprehensive information about politics and science as well as support to the social work of the Church by applying the principle of subsidiarity and institutional coordination. The results, under ideal circumstances, may be spectacular, especially as regards prevention, consolation (*paramythia*) to the weak, public awareness raising and respect for the distinctive role of each institution (cf. use of the spiritual meaning of “repentance” for improving living conditions, as a means to pursue “Orthodox Spiritual Life” not a fake social peace).

A. IAO proposal to the Council Europe for the development and improvement of the Council’s Lifelong Learning programmes<sup>1</sup> to promote active EU citizenship by establishing committees and groups of personalities (GoPs) working on specific deliverables (educational products, elaboration of educational material, programmes, books, meetings) and by disseminating general education programmes for adults and special further training programmes for high school teachers and teachers/trainers of adults on everyday ethical and social issues European societies face.

The concept of active EU citizenship fits very well with Church Fathers teachings on *acedia* (sloth). The importance of active citizen participation and the responsibility of democratic institutions are further explained in IAO’s 2012 Information Bulletin (p. 84).

This proposal gives priority to the ethical dimension of labour as discussed by the Church Fathers and its relation with contemporary concerns about degrowth and the “third sector” of economy, *inter alia*, through the prism of rediscovering moderation in economy, production and labour relations, but also about the immediate protection of and respect for the material world and the natural environment, by adopting a radical attitude and, above all, by changing our mentality towards irresponsible human behaviour against the “Creation” (*ktisis*), given that human activity is responsible for climate change and its effects (for further information on the continued interest of the Orthodox Theology in the natural environment, see the minutes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Pan-Hellenic Interdisciplinary Conference “God-*Ktisis*-Man”, Evros 15-06-2010).

---

<sup>1</sup>([http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/completedactivities/Illequity\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/completedactivities/Illequity_EN.asp))

A similar proposal for expanding general education and counseling programmes for adults may be submitted to the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission.

**B.** Proposal to the European Parliament, the European Council of Churches (ECC) and the European Commission for the establishment of a “Sub-Directorate for Religious Affairs” in the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission, in cooperation with EUROSTAT and the ECC.

Proposal for the establishment of an entity carrying out research studies on religiousness and churchness at European level, under the auspices of the IAO and in cooperation with other European or inter-parliamentary institutions, with a view to monitoring the influence of religion in the modern European social fabric (in particular, the effect of the Orthodox faith, tradition and life) and preventing catastrophic worships.

It is to be noted that in the Orthodox world, Christianity has always been a social event experienced as a public and collective phenomenon, not as something relegated to the private sphere. However, due to the complexity of modern life, individualism has been accentuated, while various syncretistic, socialistic and secularising tendencies or phenomena of idealisation, one-sided moralisation or de-juridification of faith has led the modern man to absolutisation or relativisation, making it necessary to assess and understand the specific attitudes adopted by society and its members.

Such an initiative is also compatible with the objectives of our Organisation about recording and assessing qualitative and other changes in Europe, but also with shedding light to the role of Orthodoxy and its contribution to building an ecumenical spirit of unity and collaboration among peoples, as it will create a *defacto* need for communication and contact with personalities and institutions, thus provoking an even greater activation of the Orthodox world, through the optimum use and the mobilisation of people and resources, as well as of the laymen who hold Theology degrees in Europe (Theology expresses a view on cultural events with ramifications in world history, because what we record has a global character).

Finally, it will contribute to shaping a strategy aimed at strengthening or concluding agreements with other international organisations for the

protectionandthe consolidation of a new common European cultural framework combining a variety of national, religious and other elements.

## **ACRONYMS**

EU	European Union
GA	General Assembly
IAO	Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

## *Literature*

- Bria Ion – Petros Vassiliadis, *Orthodox Christian Martyr*, Tertios Publications, Katerini, 1989.
- Yioultis Vassileios, *Sociology of Religion*, Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki, 2002.
- Krikonis Christos, *Teachings of the Church Fathers, Volume B*, University Studio Press Publications, Thessaloniki, 2004.
- Lieros Giorgos, *An Actually Existing New World*, The Colleagues' Publications, Athens, 2012
- Mantzaridis Giorgos, *Christian Ethics, Volume A*, P. Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki 2004.
- Nikolopoulos Takis – Kapogiannis Dimitris, *Introduction to the Social and Solidarity Economy*, The Colleagues' Publications, Athens, 2012
- Economou Christos, *New Testament and Culture*, P. Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki, 2003.
- Tönnies Ferdinand, *Community and Society*, transl. M. Markaki, Ger. Avgoustidis Publications, Athens
- Tawney Richard, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, transl. D. Kurtovic, Kalvos Publications, Athens 1979.
- Tsobanoglou George et al., *The Rise of the Social Economy*, Papazisis Publishers, Athens 2008.
- IAO's website: <http://www.eiao.org/>