

# The Missiological Tradition and Heritage of the School of Theology

at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens\*

Prof. Eirini Christinaki

## Abstract

It has often been claimed that the Orthodox do not have a missionary or a missiological tradition. In part this may have seemed true because of historical circumstances, in particular the abrupt interruption of Russian missions in their heyday by the October Revolution (1917) and the vulnerability and weakness of the Greek state, along with most other Balkan states, which were focused on their struggles of national liberation from the Ottoman empire. Nevertheless, these historical misfortunes do not mean that there has not been mission or missiological reflection on the part of the Orthodox. The Faculty of Theology of Athens University has had a vital role in raising missiological awareness and conducting research in the field of Missiology. The late Prof. Leonidas Filippidis was the first to include missiological classes in his main Study of Religion course. He was a key figure contributing to the foundation of a university seat. The actual founder of Missiology as an academic discipline at the University was the late Prof. Elias Voulgarakis, who through his extensive research linked modern Missiology to the ancient patristic tradition. Additionally, the Archbishop of Albania, Anastasios Yannoulatos, a figure of international renown, was not only Professor of the History of Religions but an active missionary, who gave mission, in praxis and in theory, a worldwide appeal. When the Department of Social Theology and the Study of Religion was founded in 1983 under the name 'Pastoral Department' as a separate department of the Faculty of Theology, these two professors, along with the equally eminent Professor of the Philosophy of Religions, the late Nikos Nissiotis, inaugurated within the Department a particular division of the Study of Religion entitled the Philosophy of Religion and Missiology, giving a new momentum to Missiological Studies. This presentation will discuss the fluctuations of history while reflecting also on the present and the future contribution of the Faculty of Theology.

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f one considers the question of which came first historically — mission or the Church — and considers the causality dynamics existing between the two, there are different possible answers. One fact, however, is unambiguously true: mission and the Church are interconnected, interwoven, and each is inconceivable without the other.<sup>1</sup> Pentecost is regarded in the Orthodox Church as the day of its foundation (*γενέθλιος ημέρα*), yet the Church as the Body of Christ is and always has been pre-eternally present, just as the second person of the Holy Trinity was pre-eternal, while being known to us in historic times, when He became flesh. When one speaks of mission, one speaks chiefly of the mission of God<sup>2</sup> for the redemption of his creation, usually referred to as '*divine economia*'. Mission is known to us through the prophets of the Old Testament<sup>3</sup> and there are modern theologians who see in mission the continuation of this prophetic calling.<sup>4</sup> Mission is also known to us in the preaching of the apostles, and in the gradual expansion of the Church in ancient and Byzantine times.

However, mission theory and terminology developed gradually in early modernity, after the great discoveries that extended the boundaries of the 'known world'. The need to tame the new, unknown territories and govern the indigenous peoples of newly discovered lands, an often turbulent history, created a new extrovert approach in the metropolises of western Europe, combining a civilising mission with exploitation and domination, and a renewed urge to preach the gospel and church the unchurched. In the confused and often contradictory ways in which history inevitably proceeds, this great undertaking resulted in a new understand-

<sup>1</sup> Αθανάσιος Παπαθανασίου, *Η Εκκλησία γίνεται όταν ανοίγεται: Η Ιεραποστολή ως Ελπίδα και ως Εφιάλτης* [Athanasios Papathanasiou, *The Church becomes when it opens up: Mission as Hope and Nightmare*] (Athens: Εν Πλω [En Plo], 2009), 27-42.

<sup>2</sup> Missio Dei. Cf. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Meryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1991] 2011). Elias Voulgarakis, 'Orthodox Mission,' in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, edited by K. Müller, T. Syndermeier, S. B. Bevans, and R. H. Bliese (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 334. Original publication in German (1987). Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, 'Mission and Dialogue: An Assessment of the Interaction of Orthodox Theology and Practice with the Reformation': *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 47 (4) (2023): 560 [548-572], <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393221138358>.

<sup>3</sup> The prophetic calling was one of repentance, redemption and salvation, a task that sometimes exceeded the limits of the prophets themselves, as in the case of Jona. Cf. Εύη Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, 'Ο Ιωνάς και η Αποκλειστικότητα της Σωτηρίας', *Ανθίβολα* 1 (1917): 213-241 [Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, 'Jonah and the Exclusivity of Salvation', *Anthivola* 1(1917)].

<sup>4</sup> Georges Khodr, 'Christian Mission and Witness in the Middle East', Washington D. C. , 7 February 1994, (retrieved from [http://georgeskhodr.org/en/articles\\_year\\_detail.html?year=1994&type\\_id=15&articleID=1269](http://georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=1994&type_id=15&articleID=1269), accessed 24/7/2016.)

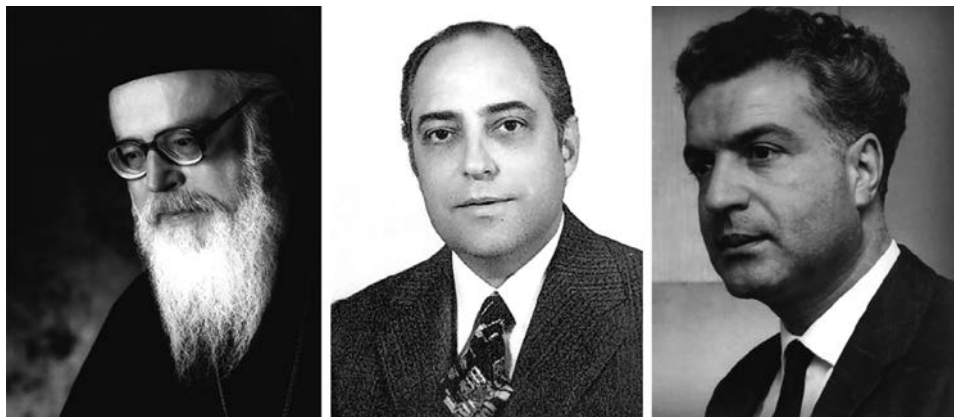
ing of mission. It now became primarily an overseas expedition from centre to periphery, of a well organised and structured character. Despite the commitment and enthusiasm for this undertaking in the West, Eastern Europe, and particularly the predominantly Orthodox southeast, took no part in it. Indeed, with the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, the 1000-year reign of the New Rome came to an end, and the Orthodox were enslaved to the Ottoman rule.<sup>5</sup> Their yoke included what is now Greece, as well as the whole Balkan region. As the *Romioi* (Greeks and other Orthodox peoples) became no more than a *millet* (a religious community) in the Ottoman Empire, the position of the Russians was elevated, especially after the reign of Ivan the Terrible (1530-1584) and the expulsion of the Tatars from Kazan. The need to unify spiritually with the new territories in the mid-Volga region and further east led gradually to a missionary as well as a colonial undertaking, further promoted by Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. Elsewhere, towards the north, ascetics and monks formed little monastic communities which gathered the local population around them, and this mild kind of missionary penetration reached as far as the polar circle. Towards the east more organised expeditions were conducted which reached into east Asia and even crossed the Bering Sea to the Americas (Alaska). Russians were subject to the same spirit of the times as their western counterparts in their more organised missionary endeavours.<sup>6</sup> Orthodox mission reached its prime in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, when important missionary figures were recognised as saints by the Orthodox church. However this flowering was abruptly brought to an end by the October Revolution in 1917.

Western colonialism similarly reached its peak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but following the aftermath of the Great War (1914-1918), a wave of anticolonial movements led to the dismantling of colonial rule in various regions such as Africa, India, and beyond. This shift also prompted a profound reassessment of missionary strategies. According to missiologists and church historians, a pivotal event took place in Edinburgh in 1910.<sup>7</sup> A global conference on mission was convened, laying the groundwork for subsequent gatherings in the following decades, albeit in different formats and with evolving procedures. These efforts were later taken up by the World Council of Churches (WCC), with a centennial commemoration held in

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols., (In the Strand., London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776- 88 (1<sup>st</sup> edition), 1845 Revised edition and numerous reprints.

<sup>6</sup> Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, 'Mission and Dialogue: An Assessment of the Interaction of Orthodox Theology and Practice with the Reformation', *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, Studies in the History of Christian Missions (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).



From left to right: Archbishop of Albania, Anastasios Yannoulatos, Late Prof. Elias Voulgarakis, and late Prof. Nikos Nissiotis.

2010.<sup>8</sup> While Orthodox participation in these early conferences was not particularly strong there were nonetheless significant contacts established.

At a time when the Church in Russia faced severe restrictions under an atheist regime and the Churches in the Balkan states encountered similar challenges, Greece was primarily focused on its national cause: the consolidation of the Greek state after the long war of independence from the Ottoman empire. Initially, the Greek state comprised only a small portion of its present-day territory, and subsequent national struggles, including the Balkan wars (1912-13), led to the further incorporation of the northern part of Greece. World War I ensued, followed by a Greek expedition into Asia Minor aimed at liberating the Greek population from centuries of Turkish rule. Sadly it resulted in the defeat of the Greek expeditionary army and the destruction of Smyrna in 1922, leading to a mass migration of the Greek population from Asia Minor to Greece, the so-called Asia Minor Disaster. Amid these tumultuous times, there was little space for addressing broader international concerns. Then came World War II, followed by a civil war, and it was only in the 1950s that a period began where Greek society could direct attention to issues beyond national preservation.

Now mission became an issue of reflection and concern, with the Theological Faculty of Athens playing a leading role. Initially, it was unsurprising that that Prof. Leonidas Filippidis (1898 - 1973), known for his international outlook in the History of Religions, was the first to include missiological classes in his courses. Not only did he broaden the scope of the Study of Religion within Greek Academia, but he also gained recognition as a significant figure. In his capacity as Rector of the

<sup>8</sup> David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2009).

NKUA, he became a founding member of the cultural foundation of the National Bank of Greece, which was dedicated to supporting the Humanities, the Fine Arts and Sciences.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, he inspired a large number of people to think in missional terms and reflect on the nature of mission. Among these were: Metropolitan Dionysios (Psarianos) of Kozani, the late Professor Evangelos Theodorou and a circle of people linked with SYNDESMOS and the Inter-Orthodox Centre *Porevthentes* (Go Ye), particularly Anastasios Yannoulatos and Elias Voulgarakis. Before we come to this generation, we should also mention that the Archbishop of Athens Chrysostomos Papadopoulos (1868-1938), also professor of Church History, had much earlier shown a similarly keen interest in mission in his writings.<sup>10</sup> One cannot overlook the ties the two influential personalities had with the second Patriarchal Thone of Alexandria, underscoring the enduring significance of mission within the ancient Patriarchate.<sup>11</sup>

Filippidis proposed that his outstanding student and later assistant, Elias Voulgarakis, should succeed him as professor of the History of Religions.<sup>12</sup> However, Voulgarakis declined the invitation, as he preferred to establish a chair of Missiology. Achieving this goal required great effort and many years of exertion, uncertainty and endurance, but ultimately he was successful. Voulgarakis is widely recognised by all his biographers as the founder of the discipline of Missiology in

<sup>9</sup> National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation, History, URL: <https://www.miet.gr/en/foundation/history>, accessed 13.4.24. For further information, see Λεωνίδας Φιλίππιδης, *Αυτοβιογραφικόν Σημείωμα (1898-1963) και Πνευματική Προσφορά (1913-1963)* [Leonidas Filippidis, *Autobiographical Note (1898–1963) and Intellectual Contribution (1913–1963)*] (Athens, Τύποις Γ.Δ. Κυπραίτου [publ. G.D. Kypraiou], 1963). In English, Vasilios N. Makrides, 'Leonidas Filippidis and the Beginnings of the History of Religions as an Academic Discipline in Greece', in *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, edited by Horst Junginger (Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2008), where there are further references in Greek literature. In Makridis' analysis it is apparent that all scholars are affected by the spirit of times in which they live, but they are not necessarily defined by them.

<sup>10</sup> Χρυσόστομος, αρχιεπίσκοπος Αθηνών [Παπαδόπουλος], 'Περί της Ανάγκης Ιδρύσεως Ορθοδόξου Ανατολικής Ιεραποστολής' [Chrysostomos, Archbishop of Athens [Papadopoulos], *On the Need to Establish an Orthodox Eastern Mission*]: *Νέα Σιών* [Nea Sion] 4 (Απρ. 1906): 423-428.

<sup>11</sup> Chrysostomos was from Alexandria. He also wrote an important text: Χρυσόστομος Παπαδόπουλος, *Ιστορία της Εκκλησίας Αλεξανδρείας (62-1934)* [Chrysostomos Papadopoulos, *History of the Church of Alexandria (62-1934)*] (Alexandria: Πατριαρχικόν Τυπογραφείον [Patriarchal Printing House], 1935, 2nd edition, Athens 1985). Filippidis worked there for a while, and maintained close ties, as recorded in his autobiography.

<sup>12</sup> Δημήτριος Β. Γόνης, 'Ηλίας Βουλγαράκης: Ο Θεμελιωτής της Ιεραποστολικής στην Ελλάδα' [Dimitrios V. Gonis, 'Elias Voulgarakis: The Founder of Missiology in Greece': *Επετηρίδα Θεολογικής Σχολής Αθηνών* ΛΣΤ' (2001) [*Scholarly Yearbook of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Athens* 36]: 70-120.

Greece.<sup>13</sup> Having spent many years studying in France and Germany, and particularly under the German Prof. Philipp Ohm in Münster, then a centre for Missiological studies, Voulgarakis was very familiar with western Missiological thinking. His research was very thorough, as demonstrated with his doctoral thesis, entitled 'Avoiding the Exercise of Mission in the First Three Centuries' for which he studied and took notes on the entirety of ecclesiastical literature in Greek and Latin. This was a beginning of a new project, which was presented to the School of Theology when he became full professor: the 'Semantic Thesaurus of Greek Literature, 1-15<sup>th</sup> century'. I have personal experience of the significance and impact of this monumental work, which I would dearly wish to make more widely accessible by creating a digital version, via a research programme.

In summary, through his extensive and rigorous research, Prof. Voulgarakis laid the groundwork for Missiology, linking modern and ecumenical thinking with our patristic tradition, our Church History and an Orthodox approach and self-awareness. This proved to be a catalyst for fostering missionary consciousness and the quality of mission worldwide. He also saw to the cultivation of successors, as evidenced by the number of his students who completed PhDs in Missiology. This was documented in a volume dedicated to him by his students.<sup>14</sup>

Another figure of international renown was Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos) of Albania, who succeeded Filippidis as professor of the History of Religions. He had studied in Marburg, Germany, then a major centre for Religious Studies, going on to do extensive research in Africa. His academic writing is characterised by clarity, breadth, and solidity. But his interest was not limited to academic achievements. He has always been a universal figure, active in international and ecumenical affairs, but also a pastor and spiritual father. He was the Director of *Apistoliki Diaconia*, the pastoral and diaconical organisation of the Church of Greece. He became Bishop of Irinoupolis in East Africa, with the aim of improving the quality of mission and strengthening the Church in East Africa in the spirit of peace and reconciliation. After this experience, the Ecumenical Patriarch appointed him Patriarchal Exarch in Albania (1991) and subsequently Archbishop of Tirana, Durrës and Primate of Albania from June 24, 1992, a position he still occupies today.

<sup>13</sup> Gonis, previous note. Αθανάσιος Παπαθανασίου, 'Μαθητεύσατε' [Athanasios Papathanasiou, 'Make Disciples'] in *Αγάπη και Μαρτυρία: Αναζητήσεις Λόγου και Ήθους στο Έργο του Ηλία Βουλγαράκη. Αφιέρωμα από τους Μαθητές του* [Love and Witness: The Pursuit of Logos and Ethos in the Work of Ilias Voulgarakis. A Tribute from his Students], edited by Εύη Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα [Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina] (Athens: Ακρίτας [Akritas], 2001), 19–32. Εύη Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, λ. 'Ηλίας Βουλγαράκης (23.8.1927-9.11.1999)', *MOXE* [Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, entry 'Elias Voulgarakis', in the *Great Orthodox Christian Encyclopedia*] 4 (2011), 272-275.

<sup>14</sup> *Αγάπη και Μαρτυρία*, see previous note.

This description only scratches the surface of a multifaceted individual who has made significant contributions and garnered widespread attention and recognition.<sup>15</sup> Archbishop Anastasios continues to actively lead the Autocephalous Church in Albania, leaving an indelible mark on the history of theology and history more generally .

A third personality, equally preeminent, the professor of the Philosophy of Religions, the late Nikos Nissiotis, was active in ecumenical and international circles. Sharing a strong bond of friendship with Elias Voulgarakis, he too exhibited an interest in mission.<sup>16</sup> While detailed information about his life and work can be found in other publications,<sup>17</sup> it is important to highlight the synergistic relationship between these three individuals, which was complementary and exceptionally creative. This was a period of excellence in the Theological Faculty. In 1983, when the Department of Social Theology and the Study of Religion was founded as a 'Pastoral Department' these three Professors pioneered the division of Study of Religion, Philosophy of Religion and Missiology within the department, which in turn injected new energy into Missiological Studies. Their approach encompassed openness to the world, a grasp of global dimensions, holistic thinking, adherence to gospel principles, advocacy for peace and justice, active participation in ecumenical dialogue, and profound philosophical and theological inquiry. Their spirit of collaboration, personal excellence and teamwork yielded enviable results.

<sup>15</sup> St. Papalexandropoulos, 'At the Service of the Church', in *'Go Ye': Gratitude Volume in Honor of Archbishop of Albania Anastasios (Yannoulatos)* (Athens: Harmos Publications, 1997), 9-21. Nikolaos Tsirevelos, 'Christian Witness, Communication and Education: The Example of the Archbishop of Tirana, Durres and all Albania Anastasios (Yannoulatos)': *Theology and Culture* 1(1) (2020): 9-32. Εύη Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα, λ. 'Αναστάσιος', *MOXE* [Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina, entry 'Anastasios', in the *Great Orthodox Christian Encyclopedia*] 2 (2011), 407-410. This is only a sample of the many works on Anastasios Yannoulatos, addressing the whole of his life and work or aspects of it, such as: Lynette Hope, *Resurrection: The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania 1991-2003* (Tirana: Ngjallia Publishers, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Nikos Nissiotis, 'Die ekklesiologische Grundlage der Mission' [The ecclesiological foundation of Mission], in *idem, Die Theologie der Ostkirche im Ökumenischen Dialog: Kirche und Welt in Orthodoxer Sicht* (The Theology of the Eastern Church in Ecumenical Dialogue: Church and World in Orthodox Perspective) (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1968), 186-216.

<sup>17</sup> 'Βιογραφία καθηγητού Νίκου Νησιώτη [Biography of Prof. Nikos Nissiotis] (21.5.1924-18.8.1986)', in *Νικόλαος Νησιώτης: Θρησκεία, Φιλοσοφία και Αθλητισμός σε Διάλογο* [Nikolaos Nisiotis: Religion, Philosophy and Sport in Dialogue], ed. Marina Nisioti, bilingual ed. (Athens, 1994), 4-10. Marios Bengos, 'Προσωπογράφηση Νίκου Νησιώτη (1924-1986)', [Επίμετρο] σε *Νίκος Νησιώτης, Από την Υπαρξη στη Συνύπαρξη: Κοινωνία, Τεχνολογία, Θρησκεία* [Portrait of Nikos Nissiotis (1924-1986), [Appendix] to Nikos Nissiotis, From Existence to Coexistence: Society, Technology, Religion] (Athens: Maistros, 2004), 243-50.

Nissiotis was renowned for his kindness and generosity. He encouraged open access to academic knowledge, and many students from other Schools, researchers and people interested in his teaching attended his lectures. I myself was one of them when I was still in my late teens. I vividly recall the impact he made as well as his personal aura within the Faculty. He was taken by God early, in a car accident in 1986, and his loss was deeply felt in Athens. Later, during my studies in the Faculty I had the privilege of being taught by Anastasios and Voulgarakis. They were both charismatic speakers, brilliant in their approach to a wide range variety of subjects, also outside theology, with a multifaceted view of the subjects.

Anastasios remains active, after dedicating himself to his archiepiscopal duties and the mission of the Church of Albania for more than thirty years. Voulgarakis retired in August 1994 and passed away too soon on September 11th 1999. For some years Missiology was offered as an academic discipline by Prof. Patronos of NT (Department of Theology) and Dr. Papathanasiou and Vallianatos (Department of Social Theology) and Prof. Nikolaidis of the Sociology of Religion. However there was a significant gap for many years, until Dr Evi Voulgaraki took a permanent lecturing position as Laboratory Teaching Staff (ΕΔΙΠ). Soon the old tradition began to revive. Undergraduate and Graduate studies were offered in a variety of relevant topics. A unique graduate course was founded as part of the postgraduate Study of Religion MA course, namely the thematic Unity 'Philosophy of Religion and Missiology'. New synergies have been achieved with the Philosophy of Religion Associate Professor Haralambos Ventis, and the programme has as of this year been graced with the presence of Dr. Kerasenia Papalexiou (Laboratory Teaching Staff, Ancient Philosophy) and his Eminence Kyrillos (Katerelos) Metropolitan of Krini (Historical Dogmatics). New students have added their own research to the corpus of missiological literature. A scholarly non-profit association 'Remembering the Vanguard, Opening new Paths' (Μνήμη και Πρωτοπορία) was founded by students and friends of Missiological Studies around our Faculty, to support and promote missiological research, conferences and publications. A series of lectures / open classes with the title 'Athenian Dodecalogues' was offered for the academic year 2021-22, with the collaboration of the association 'Remembering the Vanguard, Opening new Paths' and the Post-graduate course in 'Philosophy of Religion and Missiology'. 'Athenian Dodecalogues' has exercised a greater impact in broader society. Recently, on 11-12 October 2022, an International Conference on Africa was held here in this room for the first time. It was entitled 'African Soundscapes: Theological, Anthropological and Legal Approaches. The African Project in Missiology and Canon Law', jointly organised by the Association 'Remembering the Vanguard, Opening new Paths' and the Laboratory of Canon Law, of the Department of Social Theology and the Study of Religion. As I was personally a host



and co-organiser in my capacity as Director of the Laboratory of Canon Law, I shall refrain from giving a detailed account of the impact of the conference and the positive feedback received from different organisations, institutions, colleagues, and prominent churchmen. However I can assure you that there will be follow-up initiatives to consolidate its impact, including videos with subtitles, the publication of a volume, and further activities in the future.

Today we are at another international conference, with esteemed speakers from around the globe. There are searching discussions of missiological matters relevant to modern society and the Church of today. The occasion is also festive, as we celebrate the launch of the first issue of a new, peer-reviewed international theological journal, *Salt: Crossroads of Religion and Culture*. This journal, a private initiative of Dr. Voulgaraki, hosted by Maistros Publications, has gathered an eminent group of international scholars to serve as members of the editorial and advisory board, contribute as authors and, I believe, act as peer-reviewers. These distinguished experts recognise the need for increased openness to the world and a broader focus on missiological and dialogical issues. Recognising the significance of this venture, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens has provided support for the printing costs of the inaugural edition. Particular thanks go to the Dean of the Faculty Prof. Christos Karagiannis, the Rector Nikolaos Voulgaris and the Special Account for Research Funds (ELKE).

Dear speakers and attendees of this International Conference 'Salt of the Earth', dear colleagues at the Faculty of Theology, NKUA, I shall finish with a declaration and an appeal. The capacity of Missiological Studies to offer an international recognition to the School of Theology has been proven, both in the past and in the present. The tradition is rich. The appeal is for continued support for Missiological Studies in the immediate future so that we can build on this tradition and bring the vitality and openness of Missiology to our Theological Curriculum. Thank you! ■

Keywords:

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Eirini P. Christinaki-Glarou is a lawyer and theologian, a full professor at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, specialising in 'Canon Law', and Legal Advisor to the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece. Since 1993 she has practised as an advocate and legal advisor to institutions and compa-

nies. She has been a member of the Board of Directors and General Secretary of the Vienna-based International Society for the Law of Eastern Churches for several years (2007-2017). Her research work is very extensive, in the fields of Theology and Law, with numerous books and articles to her name.