

Summary of Lecture 6: The World Council of Churches and Orthodoxy

The Ecumenical Movement: Origins and Hopes

- The Greek word *oikoumene* means “inhabited earth” and in earlier Hellenistic usage meant “the civilized world” or the Graeco-Roman empire”.
- The Edinburgh Conference of 1910, the University Christian Conference on Life and Work in 1925, and the World Conference on Faith and Order at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927 were all important.
- The World Council of Churches (WCC) was formed in Amsterdam in 1948 by 147 member churches as the “fellowship of Churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour”.
- The Malines Conversations (1921-1925) drew some Roman Catholics and Anglicans closer together.

Orthodoxy and the World Council of Churches: The Roots of a Relationship

- Encyclicals from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1902 and 1920 supported contacts among Orthodox churches and non-Orthodox churches.
- By the early 1960s all of the Orthodox churches except the church in Albania had joined the WCC.
- Today the World Council of Churches (WCC) describes itself as “a worldwide fellowship of 349 churches seeking unity, a common witness and Christian service” [see their website: www.oikoumene.org]. It should be noted that the focus of the unity being sought is not so much institutional unity in a single united Christian Church, but rather helping “to bring Christians together in common prayer, shared spirituality and theological reflection”.
- This focus upon mutual respect among Christians has had some institutional impact, such as the nullification in 1965 by Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of the anathemas that had been in force since 1054 between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.
- At the level of doctrine there have been some important steps toward agreement, especially the joint statement on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* approved by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC at Lima, Peru in 1982. This document has become “the most widely distributed and studied ecumenical document [providing] a basis for many ‘mutual recognition’ agreements among churches” [For the full text go to: www.oikoumene.org and search for “Lima text” .] Despite an impressive convergence in doctrine, major differences in theological outlook remain, as quoted in detail in *Dictionary of the Christian Church*:
 - **Orthodox theologians believe that one Church already exists and is not something to be realized by the agreement of heterogeneous bodies on the theology of the sacraments.**
 - Non-episcopal bodies have been pained by the suggestion that they should consider the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons as a norm they would do well to recover.
 - Roman Catholics find the language about sacraments ambiguous and inadequate and ask for further study of the nature of the apostolic tradition and the issue of decisive authority in the Church.

- This 40-page document of less than 18,000 words published 30 years ago remains a key statement of both what the WCC has achieved doctrinally and what remains disputed.
- For a balanced assessment of the relationship between the Protestant churches of the North and Orthodoxy, see Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev)'s comments at: www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles6/HilarionWCC.php , 10 March 2006].

Orthodoxy and the World Council of Churches: Four Key Propositions

- **(1) We each have a responsibility to communicate the Orthodox faith to others;**
- **(2) The Biblical, apostolic and patristic foundations of this faith reach out to all people everywhere;**
- **(3) What we seek to communicate to everyone is initially *only* what is absolutely necessary for Christian faith.**
- **(4) However, Orthodoxy must not compromise its beliefs, especially by too close association with “heretics and apostates”.**

In seeking to balance these four propositions we should keep in mind the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ in **John 17:20-21** that those “who believe in Me ... may all be one; even as You Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me”. Intriguingly, the objection to associating with “heretics and apostates” was made against Our Lord Jesus Christ when he associated with the wrong kind of people, including tax collectors and prostitutes (**Matt 9:11**). The response of the Christ as set out in the Gospel of St **Matthew 9:12-13** still applies: “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners’”.

Conclusion: The Orthodox Contribution to the WCC

- (1) A stress upon **the Trinitarian foundations of Christian faith** and a “widening of the earlier Christocentric orientation of the ecumenical movement”;
- (2) A sensitivity to **ecclesiology**—defined as the study of church structures and traditions—especially in the context that “the ecumenical problem is not the *unity of the Church*, which is a gift of God, but the *disunity of Christendom and humankind*”;
- (3) “The centrality of [the] eucharist in Orthodox life and thought has nurtured ‘**the eucharistic vision**’ within the ecumenical movement; and
- (4) “Orthodox liturgical and spiritual experience [has] strengthened **an ecologically conscious theology of creation**” BUT NOTE THAT:
- **“ecumenism should not be confused with doctrinal relativism” and “the totality of the teachings of the early undivided church must be accepted by all”**
- We seek “the diakonia of the human being created in God’s image and likeness”. In other words, precisely because we have each been created in God’s image and likeness we all share a desire to develop a theology and a lifestyle that affirms the cosmic dimension of the Trinitarian God who creates both humanity and nature in such fullness. That **awareness of both God’s omnipotence and immanence both in the universe and in each of our lives is rightly shared among all Christians and churches, despite our different interpretations of the precise meaning that should be attached to this search for God’s image and likeness.**