

Lecture 6: The World Council of Churches and Orthodoxy

The Ecumenical Movement: Origins and Hopes

The search in the twentieth century to restore Christian unity has often been called “the ecumenical movement” with the adjective derived from the Greek word *oikoumene* which means “inhabited earth” and in earlier Hellenistic usage meant “the civilized world” or the Graeco-Roman empire” [Geoffrey Wainwright, “ecumenical movement”, in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason & Hugh Pyper (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 189-191]. The initiative was supported primarily within Western Protestantism, with a particular focus on 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 [See “ecumenical movement”, in F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (eds.), *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd. ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, pp. 528-529]. After many further meetings and much discussion, 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” (“World Council of Churches”, pp. 1765-1766).

Meanwhile, from 1921 to 1925 Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians held a series of meetings in Malines [now Mechelen], Belgium that became known as the Malines Conversations. The more Protestant parts of the Church of England were not happy with the outcome of this ecumenical dialogue which concluded that: “The Pope should be given primacy of honour; that the Body and Blood of Christ are indeed taken in the Eucharist; that the Sacrifice of the Eucharist is a true sacrifice, but after a mystical manner; that Episcopacy is by Divine law; [and] that Communion in both kinds is a matter of discipline not of dogma” (“Malines Conversations”, in Cross & Livingstone, p. 1025]. Controversy within the Anglican Church was so extensive that even publication of the Report could not be agreed;

and an impatient Lord Halifax, who had initiated the Conversations with Cardinal Mercier finally published the Report himself in 1928 [“Halifax”, in Cross & Livingstone, p. 730]. Despite the lack of agreement within the Anglican Church and the subsequent rejection of this approach to ecumenism by Pope Pius XI in his 1911 encyclical *Mortalium Animos* [On Religious Unity], the Malines Conversations, like the earlier meetings among Protestant churches in the 1920s, was an important step in increasing mutual respect among both individual Christians and denominationally focused Christian churches.

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

This initial attempt early in the twentieth century to draw Christians closer together received strong support in both 1902 and 1920 from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. In a Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical in 1902, Patriarch Joachim III wrote on his election to his fellow Patriarchs of Alexandria and Jerusalem as well as autocephalous sister churches in Cyprus, Russia, Greece, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro of his desire to bring “together the Orthodox peoples in the unity of faith and in mutual love and common purpose” as well as the importance of seeking “points of encounter and contact” with both “the Western [Roman Catholic] Church and the Church of the Protestants.” The 1920 Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate began bluntly: “Our own church holds that rapprochement [Greek, *Proseggisis*] between the various Christian Churches and fellowship [Greek, *Koinonia*] between them is not excluded by the doctrinal differences which exist between them. In our opinion such a rapprochement is highly desirable and necessary”. The closing plea of the 1920 Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was for other churches to reply with their “own judgment and opinion on this matter so that common agreement or resolution [can be] reached” in the spirit of Ephesians 4:15-16 in which we are all “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...” [Gennadios Limouris, *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports of the Ecumenical Movement 1902-1992*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994, pp. 1-14].

With such strong and early Orthodox support for the ecumenical movement, it is not surprising that by the early 1960s all of the Orthodox churches except the church in Albania had joined the WCC [Todor Sabev, *The Orthodox Churches in the World Council of Churches: Towards the Future*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996, p. 10]. 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.
- Baptists are asked to avoid rebaptism.

- 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.
- Reformed bodies desire explicit enthusiasm for the Reformation.
- Some Protestants would have preferred more symbolist and less realist accounts of the Eucharistic Presence and offering, and prefer to think of the pastor as representing Christ the Shepherd rather than as Priest. [“Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM), p. 153].

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.

By the 1990s there was considerable disillusion among numerous Orthodox churches about the “ethos” of the WCC, which Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of the Moscow Patriarchate has pointed out was being “dictated to a significant degree by the Protestant churches of the North, where a systematic liberalization of doctrine and morals has been in motion over the past decades, with the rejection of theological and ethical norms based on centuries-old Church tradition” [See “Orthodox Participation in the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches” at: www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles6/HilarionWCC.php , 10 March 2006].

With the 9th Assembly of the WCC held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in February 2006, relations between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox had improved to such an extent that Metropolitan Hilarion noted “now the Protestant majority cannot force any kind of decision upon the Orthodox minority”. Nevertheless, Metropolitan Hilarion still believes that the “liberalization of dogmatic and moral doctrine ... that has already been in motion for several decades ... has acquired ... an irreversible character”. In his view, “in defending traditional values the main ally of the Orthodox Church is the Roman Catholic Church. But the latter is hardly represented in the World Council of Churches” [*Ibid.*]. These issues remain prominent in the planning for the 10th Assembly to be held 30 October-8 November 2013 in Busan, Korea.

Orthodoxy and the World Council of Churches: Four Key Propositions

Views today about the extent to which the Orthodox Church and individual Orthodox Christians should engage with the World Council of Churches (WCC) vary from those who see any involvement as unjustifiable association with heretics to those who see the World Council of Churches as supportive of the Christian unity urged by Our Lord Jesus Christ 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” (John 17:20-21). In seeking to develop a balanced Orthodox understanding of the World Council of Churches, it is helpful to integrate four key propositions into an Orthodox perspective on the WCC.

First, as the lay theologian Todor Sabev (1928-2008) of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a former Deputy General of the WCC and former Professor of Church History at the Theological Academy of St Clement of Ochrid, Sofia, has pointed out: “The Orthodox churches consider themselves as depositories of the spiritual treasury of faith, life and Tradition of the undivided church. Their vocation is not just to be guardians or a sacred legacy but to expound and share it, making it more accessible and intelligible to all. Considering the present divided state of the church, the Orthodox are called to offer historically tested models and means that are likely to provide impulse and hope for healing broken communion” [Sabev, p. 8]. The essence of Professor Sabev’s argument is that precisely because the Orthodox faith is “a sacred legacy” each Orthodox person and jurisdiction has a responsibility to “expound and share” that “sacred legacy” with others.

Second, the patristic foundation of this evangelistic faith is found in St Basil the Great’s insistence that the Holy Spirit “is wholly in everyone and he is wholly everywhere” and that those who profess to be Christians “together make up the complete Body of Christ in the unity of the Spirit, and provide mutually for one another from their gifts the benefit that each one requires” [St Basil the Great, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 9,26; PG 322, 140D-141A, 108C; quoted by both Sabev, p. 98 and Dumitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980, p. 55]. As Father Staniloae stresses: “The [Holy] Spirit is wholly present in every member by *a different gift*, or by way of

mutually interdependent gifts which neither make all members the same nor allow them to work in isolation from one another, for no single member remains unconditioned by the others” [Staniloae, p. 55; emphasis added]. Thus ecumenism, with its roots in Holy Scripture, the liturgy and Tradition, is best viewed as “a joint effort of drawing nearer to Christ and carrying his cross together”; and one of the fruits of this effort to “draw nearer to Christ” is the World Council of Churches itself [Sabev, p. 98].

Third, as a guiding Biblical motif that justifies Orthodox participation in the WCC and dialogue with other Christians, it is appropriate to remember “the apostolic example” of the Council of Jerusalem which decided *not* to impose circumcision and the full Law of Moses on Gentiles because, as Professor Sabev insists, citing Acts 15:28, “in dealing with divisive issues” it remains true for us today as for the apostles that “the guiding principle” is that “of imposing or demanding nothing except absolutely necessary requirements for Christian faith” [p. 8]. It may well be that that if the WCC can exercise the light touch of *minimalism*—defined as the fewest and simplest elements to achieve the desired result—that would prove to be the path that best leads of the *maximalist* goal—defined as direct or radical action—of drawing Christians together.

In considering Orthodox attitudes to the WCC, all three of these propositions are important—(1) that we each have a responsibility to communicate the Orthodox faith to others; (2) that the Biblical, apostolic and patristic foundations of this faith reach out to all people everywhere; and (3) that what we seek to communicate to everyone is initially *only* what is absolutely necessary for Christian faith. However, there is a fourth proposition that many of those who are suspicious of the WCC enunciate: Orthodoxy must not compromise its beliefs, especially by too close association with “heretics and apostates” [See Archpriest Alexey Young, *The Rush to Embrace*, Richfields Springs, NY: Nikodemos Orthodox Publication Society, 1996; Archimandrite Justin Popović, *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*, Birmingham: Lazarica Press, 2000; cf. Sabev, p.19]. Intriguingly, the same objection 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 dangers of association

with such people need to be weighed against the fruits of such association, both in the ministry of Our Lord Jesus Christ and in the contemporary Orthodox approach to the WCC. 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’”. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to consider how Orthodox association with the WCC has balanced the good fruits of the first three propositions with the rotten fruit of the fourth.

Conclusion: Orthodoxy and the World Council of Churches—the Fruits

In *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports on the Ecumenical Movement 1902-1992* [Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994] Gennadios Limouris, formerly Coordinator of the Synodical Committee on Inter-Church Affairs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, then an Executive Secretary in the WCC Subunit on Faith and Order, and now Metropolitan Archbishop Gennadios (Limouris) of the Greek Orthodox Church in Italy and Malta, has drawn together 40 key documents with 10 reflections on the implications of Orthodox presence in the ecumenical movement. His aim is to understand “how Orthodoxy sees the unity of the churches for today” (p.xii). Several of these key historical documents have already been noted above. Of particular interest now are both the impact of Orthodoxy on the WCC and how the Orthodox have interpreted that impact.

The impact of Orthodoxy on the WCC has been set out by Dr Konrad Raiser, General Secretary of the WCC from 1993 to 2003 and an ordained minister of the Evangelical Church in Germany [Foreword” to Limouris, *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism*, p. ix-x]. Dr Raiser acknowledges that “many difficulties have regularly appeared and still emerge” but points to four major contributions that Orthodoxy has made to the ecumenical movement in general and the WCC in particular:

- 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*”;
- A stress upon the Trinitarian foundations of Christian faith and a “widening of the earlier Christocentric orientation of the ecumenical movement”;
- “The centrality of [the] eucharist in Orthodox life and thought has nurtured ‘the eucharistic vision’ within the ecumenical movement; and
- “Orthodox liturgical and spiritual experience [has] strengthened an ecologically conscious theology of creation” [“Foreword”, p. ix-x; emphasis in original].

For Dr Raiser, the determination of the Orthodox churches “to review again and again their participation in the ecumenical movement” challenges all Christians “to re-examine their own involvement”, with the result that “this mutual questioning” is a sign of the vitality “of the ecumenical endeavour” (pp. ix-x).

On the Orthodox side, Professor Sabev, writing in 1994, acknowledged that there had been “a gradual loss of ecumenical motivation, of interest in classical themes, consensus documents, ecumenical events and publications”. However, he insisted that “the ecumenical movement is alive and attractive in many places, particularly at the local level” and that “tension and crisis can become a road towards growth and transformation” [Sabev, pp. 19-20]. While supporting this positive view of ecumenism and the WCC, Grand Protopresbyter Dr George Tsetsis, formerly Permanent Representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the WCC, has insisted that “ecumenism should not be confused with doctrinal relativism” and that “the totality of the teachings of the early undivided church must be accepted by all” [Tsetsis, “The Meaning of the Orthodox Presence in the Ecumenical Movement” in Limouris, p. 275].

In Father Tsetsis’ view, just as the fathers of the early church “developed a theology of the whole creation, a theology of cosmic dimension” the same challenge confronts the WCC and all Christians today as we seek “the diakonia of the human being created in God’s image and likeness” [p. 276]. 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.