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"Love one another earnestly from the heart"
(1 Peter 1:22)

The Orthodox in the Ecumenical Movement A Short History

by Fr. George Tsetsis*

In modern Church history, the first two decades of the twentieth century are considered as the dawn of a new and promising period in Church relations. The repeated initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for reconciliation and cooperation (1902, 1904, 1920), the call of the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh for a common Christian witness in the world (1910), the formation of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches (1914), as well as the Preparatory Conferences of the "Faith and Order" and "Life and Work" movements in process of formation (1920), marked a new beginning in Church relations and constituted praiseworthy attempts to abandon past practices and lay the foundations of the ecumenical movement. A movement understood as an effort of Churches and many committed Christians to overcome past quarrels, to find new denominators for the Churches' common witness and service to the world and thus to prepare the conditions which would facilitate the restoration of their unity.

It should be stressed, however, that although the term "Ecumenical Movement" was used for the first time in the 1920's in order to define this encouraging development in inter-church relations, the idea of ecumenism per se, is not a recent development in the life of the Church. On the contrary, it could be stated that ecumenism has been at the very centre of the Church's pastoral ministry since apostolic times.

It was frequently remarked that modern ecumenism emerged from within the Protestant world, as the outcome of its internal situation and in an endeavour to seek solutions to the existing problems confronting the Churches of the Reformation in their daily life and witness. This argument is valid to a great extent. Because, no doubt, the mobilisation at the beginning of this century of Protestant and Anglican ecumenical pioneers such as Charles Brent, William Temple, J.H. Oldham, Nathan Soderblom, Robert Gardiner and many others, was prompted by their consciousness that the Churches of the Reformation which, over the years, had taken different directions, (in spite of their belonging to the same historical roots and theological tradition), they presented an incoherent image of Protestantism. It was precisely because of this fragmentation that these ecumenical leaders attempted to reunite the multitude of Protestant denominations, at least on the basis of a common ecclesiological understanding.

It would be incorrect, however, to attribute the paternity of ecumenism to the Protestant and Anglican world alone. It is a fact that the history of the ecumenical movement, and more particularly of the WCC, is very closely linked with the Orthodox Church.

Moreover, it should be remembered that the first concrete proposal to establish a "Koinonia of Churches" was made by an Orthodox Church, namely the Ecumenical Patriarchate which, with its well known 1920 Encyclical advocated that the coming together of the Churches and their fellowship and cooperation were not excluded by the doctrinal differences existing between them. As W. A. Visser't Hooft once pointed out "the Church of Constantinople rung the bell of our assembling, for she was among the first in modern history to remind us with its 1920 Encyclical that world Christendom would be disobedient to the will of its Lord and Saviour if it did not seek to manifest in the world the unity of the people of God and of the Body of Christ".

Ecumenism both as a theological challenge and as an expression of Orthodox willingness for Christian unity was experienced in our Church during the 1st, 5th, 11th and 16th centuries. It re-emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century when the Ecumenical Patriarchate took its afore-mentioned initiative, in order to foster cooperation and promote unity. This initiative was favourably welcomed by many Protestant Churches and denominations which, confronted with their own chaotic separations, tried to unite and thus give a common witness to the world.

The WCC was founded in 1948 after the merging of "Faith and Order" and "Life and Work", the two major components of the early ecumenical movement, in the 1920's. The interest manifested immediately in this movement by almost all local Orthodox Churches (with the noticeable absence of the Orthodox Church of Russia, then under persecution) and the pioneering role played by Constantinople in the genesis of this movement and in the foundation of the WCC are well known. Certainly the positive presence and constructive witness in it of many Orthodox hierarchs and university professors during the first forty years of our century, was neither symptomatic nor a part of any particular "Church strategy". As Leo Zander once remarked, this presence expressed the conviction of the Orthodox Church that her participation in the ecumenical movement would have a determining importance for the future.

The Third Preconciliar Panorthodox Conference (1986) solemnly declared that the Orthodox Church, having full conscience of her responsibility for achieving Christian unity, is engaged today in theological dialogues with other Churches and Denominations, with the ultimate aim to restore Christian unity "in love and in the right belief". And referring more particularly to the Orthodox involvement in the WCC, this Preconciliar Conference expressed the profound conviction that the Orthodox Church holds a central place in any matter relating to the promotion of Christian unity, and consequently she is entrusted with the mission and duty to transmit in all its fullness, the truth which is contained in Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition and which gives to the Church her universal character. This was the praxis of the Orthodox Church throughout history. It remained the same when the contemporary ecumenical movement emerged at the beginning of our century and took shape in the 1920's and 1930's. The Orthodox Church maintained active involvement because she considered this movement to be a means of reconciliation par excellence, a privileged forum of encounter and cooperation, and a useful platform for mutual acquaintance and appreciation, in the way towards unity. It should be admitted, however, that the Orthodox presence in the WCC has often been problematic, both for the WCC and the Orthodox Churches themselves. On the one hand, the non-homogeneity of the Churches and denominations participating in the Council, the diverging theological and ecclesiological positions of the interlocutors, the problematics of the ecumenical movement, the methodology of the WCC and on the other, the specificity of Orthodox ecclesiology and theology, the Orthodox vision of the world, and some historical misgivings vis-a-vis Western Christendom are the main factors which make relations complicated and at times difficult indeed.

This very fact was clearly demonstrated many times and more recently during the world ecumenical Conferences of San Antonio (May 1989), at Seoul (March 1990) and particularly at the Seventh Assembly of the WCC in Canberra (February 1991). When Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox delegates, during the deliberations of this Assembly, perceived a growing departure from the biblically-based

Christian understanding of: a) the Trinitarian God, b) salvation, c) the "Good News" of the Gospel, d) human beings created in the image and likeness of God and e) the Church, they felt compelled to resume the pre-New Delhi practice, and of presenting a paper with some "Reflections", which in fact constituted a "separate document".

The Orthodox reaction in Canberra was prompted not only by the ambiguous presentation of the main theme on the Holy Spirit by Prof. Chung, a South Korean theologian, but also by the tendencies of some ecumenical partners, who appeared to favour the broadening of the WCC's aims in the direction of relations with other religions. Hence, consistent with the decades-old ecumenical policy of their Churches, the Orthodox delegates reiterated in the afore-mentioned document the unflagging Orthodox position that the main aim of the WCC should be the restoration of Christian unity, understood as full ecclesial unity in doctrinal teaching, sacramental life and polity. Furthermore, they pointed out that the tendency (as demonstrated by Prof. Chung's key-note address) to substitute a "private" spirit, the spirit of the world or other spirits, for the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son, constituted a distortion of the Christian faith.

This is why they urged the WCC not to allow itself to succumb to extremist tendencies, such as that of the Korean theologian.

Finally, with regard to the relationships of the WCC with other living faiths, the Orthodox in Canberra stressed that "the Orthodox having a long and living experience with members of other religions, respect the humanity of others and encourage, wherever possible and appropriate, peaceful relations and cooperation in areas of mutual concern.

But this cannot mean that Christian Churches, acting through WCC agencies, should be compromised in their central Christian commitments. The Orthodox hold that any syncretistic accommodation in WCC activities is inappropriate and contradicts the central affirmations and goals of the ecumenical endeavour (...). The dialogue with other religions ought not to compromise the identity of the WCC as a council of Christian Churches, as it serves to broaden the understanding of the member Churches regarding the variety of religious and non-religious stances in the world today and in promoting dialogue between Christians and members of other religions".

During the ongoing discussions, both within and outside the WCC, about the present state of the ecumenical movement and of the WCC, it was correctly stated that the vision of the Council is multifaceted, pursued within an increasingly pluralistic context. Indeed, the Council functions within a complex reality. Oppression, poverty, illiteracy, militarism, uprootedness, destruction of the environment, and many other factors that together make up the endless anguish of humankind today, is the milieu for its mission.

Hence the need felt by the Council and its member Churches to initiate programmes in various areas of human need. In this attempt to meet human need and alleviate suffering, however, the Council must not lose sight of its own nature or limitations. In the course of the debate on the future of the WCC it is frequently stated that unity should not be understood as unity of the Churches alone, but of the entire human community, for "the oikoumene is the whole inhabited earth, not just the Christian part of it".

Interestingly enough, a similar challenge had to be faced just a few years after the Amsterdam Assembly. W. A. Visser't Hooft reminds us that many people, unhappy over the "churchly" character which the ecumenical movement took after the formation of the WCC, began questioning whether the original meaning of oikoumene, in terms of "the whole inhabited world" should not become the true focus of the movement. They wanted it to be genuinely concerned "with the world rather than with the Church".

Later on, and along the same lines, it was further pointed out that the ecumenical movement ought to be concerned with unity and peace among people and not only with the unity of the Church, for the unity of the Church and the unity of humankind are inseparable.

The recent debate however, although reasserting the above overall concept, has gone much further by suggesting a reassessment of the validity of our present-day theological framework, based on the claim of a Christocentric universalism, because of the consideration that "the emergent plurality of contextual theologies obliges the ecumenical movement to open itself to a genuine dialogue of cultures, faiths and ideologies". Indeed, as Paul F. Knitter remarks, a growing number of Christian theologians today are seriously questioning the finality or definitive normativity of both Christ and Christianity; they are of the view that traditional Christology constitutes an obstacle to dialogue with other living faiths. Most of these theologians have come to this conclusion as a result of their practical experience of dialogue with other religions. Scholars such as Raymond Panikkar and Stanley Samartha, for example, consider that no one religion alone has "the monopoly of the fundamental religious fact, or that no religion, including Christianity, can claim finality".

Here lies, in my opinion, the fundamental difficulty that the two major partners of the WCC, namely Orthodox East and very large parts of the Protestant West (wherever this "East" and "West" are geographically located!) - are going to face in redefining the nature of the WCC and drawing the boundaries of the "oikoumene" within which the Council is called to serve.

As Nikos Nissiotis once pointed out, the ecumenical movement has to be understood as the dynamic process of mutual exchange by the Churches of their charismata, in the fulfillment of their common calling by God to be the channels of his grace for the whole world, in the name of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. The confession of our faith in the Triune God, contained in the constitutional basis of the WCC and our affirmation that "the visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharist fellowship" is sought "in order that the world may believe", express precisely this fundamental principle and provide the framework in which the Council should exist and operate.

Yet more than ever the very term ecumenical movement and its nature are mainly interpreted by many circles of the Protestant "West" in the perspective of our relations to the world or of our dialogue with other faiths and/or ideologies. This development demonstrates that the roots of our disunity are much deeper than our historical estrangement or our experience of isolation up until recent times. The difference is of a religious and doctrinal character.

Metropolitan John of Pergamon remarks that very often the oikoumene is assumed to be the sum of the different cultures and nations and peoples that make up the inhabited world, a synthesis of the variety of faiths and religions which exist and operate, paying little attention to another reality. Namely that "the oikoumene is also a matter of bringing together different Christians, different visions of the future", that "the catholicity of the Church is not simply a matter of bringing together existing cultures and nations in their present state of concerns", but a matter of uniting "historical identities and traditions, so that they may be transcended in the unity of the body of Christ".

It should be kept in mind that unity and catholicity are synonymous, pointing to the distinctive act of God in history and in the world, in order to unite humankind through the miracle of Pentecost, brought about by God's Spirit, the Paraclete. Certainly it is our belief that "the spirit blows where it chooses" (John 3, 8) and knows no limitations. It is also our belief, however, that the Holy Spirit "acts through what he establishes, the Church, as his own pivotal event in world history, marking by his act the new era which is breaking out into history and pointing to the final end and fulfillment of it at the end of the time". The Spirit was sent in order to guide us "into all the truth" (John 16, 13), to make manifest Christ's Lordship and to mark the beginning of the Church. This fundamental biblical affirmation is of paramount importance in any debate over the unity of Church and the unity of humankind.

Unity is to be understood as a conciliar life, not in any juridical sense, but in the sense of a real communion. Unity is a harmony in Christ among members within the Church and also among Churches. And it is precisely the achievement of this harmony which should be at the centre of any ecumenical debate. Churches which, in spite of their common roots and heritage, are unable so far to unite, cannot realistically cherish the ambition of bringing together all of humankind, belonging as it does to so many different cultures and beliefs. Orthodox witness to the world will be credible and effective only when divided Christendom achieves its unity and is seen as the unbroken Body of Christ.

Keeping in mind the present state of our divisions, it would not be inappropriate to say that, even if the space in which the WCC moves and acts is the oikoumene - the whole inhabited earth - the ecumenical movement, the major institutional expression of which is the World Council of Churches, is above all a movement seeking to manifest the fundamental unity and universality of the

Church of Christ, trying to bring divided Christendom into one faith and into one eucharistic fellowship, so that the world may believe.

In this perspective, the continued study carried by Faith and Order on the Churches' common understanding of the Apostolic Faith as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and most particularly the outcome of the Fifth World Conference of Faith and Order (Compostela, August 1993) on the crucial theme "Towards koinonia in faith, life and witness", undoubtedly constitute an important stage in the Churches' journey towards their unity and koinonia. A koinonia, which, God permitting, will one day enable them to confess again together the common Apostolic faith for the sake of the world.

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