

Ecumenical Impact on Orthodox Witness and Mission: A Convert's Reflections

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Twenty-seven years ago (last week, in fact), I stood outside the doors of the St. Seraphim Church, Dallas, Texas, awaiting reception into Holy Orthodoxy. I was asked whether I confessed the Orthodox Church as the Bride of Christ wherein was true salvation which was in the Ark with Noah at the Flood. I confessed it with all my heart. I believed it then. I believe it now.

Orthodoxy was for me the Pearl of Great Price. Archbishop Dmitri of Dallas had counseled me upon my entry into the Church that, as grave as the situation was in my Anglican life, there remained but one reason to convert to the Orthodox faith: namely, that I believed it to be true. He, himself a convert from the Baptists while yet in his teens in the early 1940s, was the perfect one to give that advice.

Thus, I come before this august gathering of prelates and priests, of theologians and spiritual fathers, as an American, a convert to Orthodoxy, a “village priest,” quite humbled by this privilege, to speak on a subject of concern to us all. I bring the perspective of one who has sought refuge in Orthodoxy from the doctrinal and moral morass afflicting many of our partners in the ecumenical movement.

In my seminary training, in an Episcopal seminary in the 1970s, I was alarmed by trends away from apostolic faith and witness then present in my denomination. Equivocation on the Incarnation, the Resurrection and the Miracles was readily accepted. Doctrine was nuanced away. Ordination of women to the priesthood was on the horizon. Advocacy for abortion, for which some Episcopal clergy were already providing “ministry services” — (transporting young women to abortion clinics) — and acceptance of homosexuality raised few eyebrows amongst faculty or most students.

Indeed, situational ethics were normative. Inclusive language was about to make its debut with little fanfare. God, who had been our Father, now would also be our Mother. That the Episcopal Church would consecrate to its episcopate an openly homosexual priest, three decades later in 2003, or that Episcopal bishops are now authorizing rites for same-sex “holy unions” does not surprise me in the least. The die had been cast years ago.

In a post-modern age, in which Americans fancy themselves to be living, truth is ultimately defined as what one wishes it to be for oneself. There are no absolutes. The ancient boundaries of faith and moral practice no longer apply. There are no meta-narratives. If Modern Man thought himself capable of discerning the Truth through reason, the Post-modern believes that individuals may come through experience to relative “truths,” culturally determined, all equally valid. The Orthodox understanding that Truth is a person who is the definitive revelation of God to Man in the Person of Jesus Christ, that the Church is the ground and pillar of that Truth, that the faith we confess in word and in deed has established the Universe, runs counter to the basic tenets of the dominant, Post-modern religious culture of the majority of our ecumenical partners in America.

Orthodoxy in the context of North American ecumenism is somewhat unlike Orthodoxy in the Mother Lands and its historic relationship to the world-wide ecumenical movement. Lacking establishment by civil law and/or history, nationality and language, Orthodoxy is but a recent arrival in the consciousness of most Americans whether Christian or not. With the exception of Alaska and the original Russian Mission, the preoccupation of the majority of Orthodox Christians in the Americas has been one primarily of economic and/or religio-political survival. All too often, Orthodox Christians in America have preoccupied themselves with conforming to Western behavior and ethics. In fact, to paraphrase Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, they have wanted not only to be Americanized, “but homogenized and pasteurized.” [1]

In this cultural desire for upward mobility, homogenization and pasteurization, participation in organized ecumenical endeavors such as the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the World Council (WCC) has provided a measure of social acceptance to the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Indeed, both an Orthodox priest and an Orthodox laywoman have served as the National Council’s president in America. Thus, I would argue, participation in ecumenical ventures has provided the Orthodox in America with acceptance and visibility, and, indeed, at times political influence, which otherwise might not be enjoyed. Yet this social acceptance and political influence has had a price both in terms of mission and of Orthodox self-understanding in America and elsewhere.

In 1995, I was privileged to speak on the subject of Evangelism at a conference held at Holy Cross Seminary in Brookline, MA. It was jointly sponsored by the Orthodox Christian Mission Center, St. Augustine, FL and the WCC. I emphasized that evangelism involved a process of bringing individuals into the life of the Church and confessing the Orthodox Faith. Imagine my surprise to find that those who took audible exception to my presentation were two Orthodox bishops, both attending under WCC auspices. One queried why it was not enough merely to become “Christians”, but not necessarily Orthodox Christians. Another protested similarly, vehemently denying that multiple Christs were now being preached in America, as I had contended. Interestingly enough, he was not from America but Geneva, so I seriously doubted he was an expert on American religious life.

It was obvious to most, if not all, of those attending that Orthodoxy seemed only a

denomination to these bishops, a confessional community, part of an “invisible church”, but not *Una Sancta*. It was truly astonishing and eye-opening. Such, can be, I fear the result of “working together ecumenically.” The practical result is to reduce any concept of mission to that of pastoral ministry to one’s own people in one’s own lands, a sad identification of Orthodoxy as tribal faith rather than faith universal. Why then engage in mission at all?

If this be true for Orthodoxy in America, the impact on evangelism, on mission and witness, is indeed constricting. While St. Innocent could rejoice at the prospects of Orthodoxy penetrating North America by means of missionary endeavor to draw Americans into Orthodoxy [2], such seems precluded by “working together ecumenically”, if the reaction of those cited above is typical.

As a point of information, conversions to Orthodoxy in America are increasingly common, not because of marriage but by choice. The theological drift and moral relativism of the mainline confessions in the United States are a good part of the reason why. Fully 60% of the clergy in the Antiochian Christian Archdiocese and at least 30-40% of the priests in the Orthodox Church in America (Russian Metropolia) are converts, as are a majority of the OCA’s bishops. At both St. Vladimir’s and St. Tikhon’s Seminaries, the majority of students studying for the priesthood are converts. Many new missions and parishes consist of virtually all converts, as well.

In fact, Orthodoxy in America experiences conversions at virtually twice the rate of the evangelical denominations while the mainline ecumenical Protestants tend to post annual declines in membership. “How ironic that the very elements of Protestantism, the Liberal elements that have had the most to do with ecumenism, are the very elements that have become the most secularized and which represent less and less people as their numbers dwindle, plagued by the drumbeat of Protestant doubt,” wrote convert Frank Schaeffer in his book, *Dancing Alone*. [3]

In America though, as in Europe, objections to ecumenism are at times met with arguments *ad hominem*. While those who object to ecumenism in the Mother Churches might be dismissed as “nationalists” and “xenophobes”, likewise in America, those who question current ecumenical involvement are easily brushed aside with opprobria such as “traditionalists” or “converts”, who lack the sophistication and the sobriety to make judgments or comments re: involvement in current ecumenical bureaucracies and the like. The epithets might be different, but the message and the method are the same; and the arguments are ignored.

Perhaps, we merely embarrass or annoy them. But many of us oppose current ecumenical involvement because we have seen it from the other side. We have been members of many of the very denominations with which we partner. We know ecumenism firsthand and we reject it. Suffice it to say that many of us have converted to Orthodoxy in spite of Orthodoxy’s ecumenical partnerships rather than because of them.

It has been said that there is more true ecumenism taking place in America, ecumenism of a

type which all Orthodox, I would think, might applaud outside of rather than inside the institutionalized ecumenical organizations and bureaucracies. [4] In fact, those with whom we seem to have the most in common in terms of faith and morals in the United States are those of the faith communities NOT associated with the NCC or WCC, such as conservative Protestants and some Roman Catholic groups. So let me touch on a few of the theological and moral issues which ought to be of greatest concern as we examine the question before us, issues which eviscerate the liberal Protestant, and at times, even Roman Catholic communities in America, many of whom are our partners in ecumenical undertakings. They are all interlinked and they herald the advent, I suspect, of a New Religion.

Theological Issues Advent of a New Religion?

Language and Re-Imagining

The case of inclusive language and the syncretism found at the WCC's General Assembly, Canberra 1991, are but part of a new theology growing out of the abandonment of traditional theology. This demonstrates what history has shown all along, that the Protestants are the inheritors of but a recent tradition, steeped in the tenets of and made possible by Western-European rationalism and humanism. For the Protestant, man, (or rather now I suppose, humankind), is the measure. Objective reality has been jettisoned in favor of a culturally determined one. That the ecumenical movement has definitely played a major part in attempts to redefine and to re-imagine Christian doctrine is now beyond dispute. Two examples can be readily examined affecting life in America. One is inclusive language, and the other, the re-imagining of God.

Inclusive Language

In "the mid-1980s, the National Council of Churches began publishing its multi-volume Inclusive Language Lectionary...which omitted male pronouns for God and retranslated Jesus's traditional title, the Son of Man, as the Human One." [5] Despite Orthodox dissent, the influence of the inclusivist movement has continued to be felt and promoted in ecumenical circles.

Coupled with an ecumenical convergence about worship the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church all agree that inclusive language is to be employed, though they treat it differently. Some merely seek to remove (most) masculine nouns and pronouns, but others go further — much further.

The UCC, in fact, has been constrained to caution its clergy: "The recognition of our baptism by the ecumenical church is important to us, and the *Book of Worship* encourages the use of

language recognized in most Christian churches: ‘I baptize you in the name of the *Father*, the *Son* and the *Holy Spirit*.’ Feminine images for God may surround these words to enrich understandings and offer balance.” (Emphases added.) [6] (One should note that the use of Trinitarian formulae is “encouraged,” but not required!)

However, one of the feminine images for God permitted “to enrich understandings and offer balance” is the following prayer: “We give you thanks, O Holy One, mother and father of all the faithful.. [7]

Likewise, the *United Methodist Book of Worship* provides this prayer [#466:] “God our Mother and Father, we come to you as children,” [8]

One thus finds an ecumenical trend towards a radically different doctrine of God, a Christology other than that of the Church:

“Gracious God,... you have brought us forth from the womb of your being and breathed into us the breath of life...” [9]

“Our Father-Mother, who is in the heavens, may your name be made holy, may your dominion come, may your will be done..” [10] And many, many more.

Re-Imagining: God is Good, Isn’t She?

UCC theologian, Willis Elliott, worries that this is the advent of a new religion. By means of certain worship forms, a new religion is coming. This is where the path of ecumenical convergence is leading. [11] Perhaps a concern for more historic forms of worship has emerged in part because of Orthodox participation. Yet this convergence must be seen hand in hand with a new theology, not unlike the position of pre-exilic Jews who followed old ritual forms of Yahweh worship at the same time pagan idols were erected in the Temple.

This ecumenical convergence about worship cannot be described otherwise as but an ecumenical divergence from Orthodox Christology. The ancient landmarks, that Jesus is Christ, that Jesus is Lord, that He is the Son of God, and that the first Person of the Holy Trinity is the Father, both His and ours, are being removed by our “partners” in ecumenical endeavors. Whatever de-mythologizing might have been contended with at the beginning of the ecumenical movement, what is now occurring can only be described as re-mythologizing: re-imagining.

An obvious case in point was the Re-Imagining Conference held in Minneapolis in November 1993. It celebrated the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. “Wisdom/Sophia” was addressed as an alternative to and in distinction from the triune God, not merely a divine attribute, while a milk and honey ritual was offered as an ersatz eucharist. Worship of “Sophia” as goddess was definitely encouraged. [12]

Subsequently one of the conference organizers was discharged by her Presbyterian denomination only to be hired by the WCC as deputy director in Geneva. [13] Another co-convenor of the conference, lesbian Methodist bishop, Jeanne Audrey Powers, was active for years in Faith and Order Work for the WCC. [14] Indeed, one might ask, “Whose faith and whose order?”

In the decade since the Re-Imagining Conference, advocacy for “Sophia” worship and rituals continues amongst certain of our ecumenical partners. Only this past June/July, during the Presbyterian General Assembly, in Richmond, VA, a meeting was held of “Voices of Sophia”, a continuation of the re-imagining movement, still invoking “Sophia” as a goddess. Whatever the Ecumenical Decade meant to Orthodox women, over a decade later, some of our ecumenical partners have yet to distance themselves from Sophia-worship. As one speaker said: “God is good. Isn’t She?” [15]

Is this not that of which our Saviour warned, that many would come in His Name and say, ‘Here is Christ, and there is Christ’?

Moral Issues

Abortion

Ecumenical dealing with the two most contentious moral issues in American society, abortion and homosexuality, indicates the failure to reach convergence, much less agreement, on the morals once delivered to the saints. For example, membership in both the NCC and WCC can be interpreted as endorsing a pro-abortion agenda, based upon statements and actions of the councils and its representatives.

Orthodox presence in the NCC has thwarted an attempt to proclaim a pro-abortion position officially, but its “witness” has not been sufficient to preclude then General Secretary Dr. Joan Brown Campbell’s having gone on record for the NCC in support of a national health care reform proposal which included abortion coverage as an integral part, in 1993. Yet, both Roman Catholic Bishops and conservative Protestants, who are not NCC members, specifically denounced the abortion coverage provisions. [16]

Internationally, the World Council, for its part, in the mid-90s lobbied for the admission of feminist and pro-choice groups to attend the Beijing Conference on Women. [17] Likewise, concluding the Decade of Solidarity with Women, at Harare, 1998, the WCC issued a statement endorsing the concept of Reproductive Rights, a catch-phrase for abortion added after consensus was supposedly reached, much to the chagrin of Orthodox participants. [18]

Homosexuality

The other moral issue threatening the very fabric of society is, of course, the approbation sought by many secular forces to regard homosexuality as but an alternative life-style and homosexual marriage as a “holy union.”

As with abortion, Orthodox presence has stalled acceptance into the NCC of a largely homosexual denomination, along with objections from some of the predominantly African-American Baptist council members. According to then General Secretary Campbell, the differing opinions on this issue, ranging from those of the Black churches and the Orthodox to that of the United Church of Christ, (which ordains openly gay and lesbian pastors), are all based in who the constituent bodies are. [19]

That is, Orthodox positions on homosexuality are viewed not as based on revealed truth but as opinions rooted in the cultures of the various member bodies. Thus, the Orthodox, like the Black Baptists, have their pigeon-hole, their historically determined niche. “Keep in it, conform to the stereotypes, and we will tolerate you.” We Orthodox, after all, are seen as giving the movement its “integrity,” to quote Ms. Campbell. [20] Yet, our “witness” seems to be nothing more than a patch on the quilt of multiculturalism rather than being the fabric of the apostolic faith. The most the Orthodox Churches have been able to do in the area of abortion or homosexuality is to preclude the adoption of positions officially favoring either. The behavior of our ecumenical partners otherwise exhibits even more dramatically the failure of our witness. Evidence of such can be noted in the following quote in 1996 by Dr. Konrad Raiser, then General Secretary of the WCC:

“...the unity of the Christian Churches is facing serious new problems in the bosom of the World Council of Churches because of differences on matters of Christian ethics, such as contraceptives, sex education, and homosexuality,” and he offered the further explanation that “many of the Council’s 330 member-Churches unquestioningly accept homosexuality and have special ceremonies for all those homosexual couples who wish to seal their relationships with marriage.” [21]

Conclusion: Truth and Falsehood

The interrelatedness of inclusive language and feminist theology, abortion and homosexuality, cannot be dismissed by anyone serious enough to be alarmed about ecumenism’s role in current theological debate. In fact, the writings of feminist theologians would precisely tie all of these together and see them as parts of a whole. [22] The ecumenical convergence, to borrow a phrase, is one now so radically different from that of those early days of the World Council in Amsterdam. And it is a convergence that we lend credence to and “give integrity” to by our membership in and association with the institutionalized ecumenical movement.

Fr. Justin Popovich would offer us a critique of ecumenism, thus: “The contemporary dialogue of love, which takes the form of naked sentimentality, is in reality a denial of the salutary

sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth (2 Th. 2:13), that is to say the unique salutary love of the truth. (2 Th. 2:10) The essence of love is truth; love lives and thrives as truth. Truth is the heart of each Godly virtue and therefore of love as well.” [23]

His viewpoint is paralleled succinctly in the writings of German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer in another context: “There can be no creedal confession without saying, ‘In the light of Christ, this is true and that is false!’”

Even as we meet, an article has gone to press on the subject “Orthodox Christians and Public Life,” for inclusion in the fall edition of *Again Magazine*. The author, Fr. Patrick Reardon, a priest of the Antiochian Christian Archdiocese strongly advocates a serious realignment of Orthodox Christians in America in matters ecumenical.

He argues that the time has come to break off ecumenical relations with those liberal bodies such as are represented in the National Council of Churches if Orthodoxy is to have any major impact on American culture and society

“Some of these mainline Protestant churches should properly be considered part of the problem, not the solution...(I)t is in Orthodoxy’s best interest to break off, cleanly and expeditiously, our inherited ties to the mainline Protestant churches in respect to social and political matters. Those alliances pertain to a decrepit, self-serving, superannuated ecumenism that has long outlived its favor with either God or man.” [24]

So, let me repeat what I said at the beginning: Accepting the Orthodox faith, I confessed that this Church was the Bride of Christ in which was true salvation. I believed it then. I believe it now. I also believe that our ecumenical associations can, do, and will continue to have a cloying effect on the import of that confession, both in witness and mission.

Is it not high time to say, in the Light of Christ, what is true and what is false? Is not some form of disassociation the best way to say it? Is it not, as Fr. Justin would warn us, the twelfth hour? [25]

To the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Endnotes

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4. George, Robert P. "What Can We Reasonably Hope For?" *First Things*, January 2000.
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6. *The Book of Worship*. The United Church of Christ. "Baptism", as quoted online: <http://www.ucc.org/worship/tuch/baptism.pdf>
7. Ibid.
8. *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. The United Methodist Church. #466.
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14. "Methodist Official Comes Out." *The Christian Century*. July 19-26, 1995.
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17. [At another time, Dr. Campbell discussed her role as spokesman for the NCC: "I try to root our statements in our theology and to make it clear we are speaking for the churches, not a secular organization." *The Christian Century*, Nov. 8, 1995. p. 1052 .]

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19. "Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly." World Council of Churches.
20. "An Interview with Joan Brown Campbell." *The Christian Century*. Nov. 8, 1995. p. 1052.
21. Campbell, Dr. Joan Brown. Address. Banquet. All-America Council of the Orthodox Church in America. Chicago. July, 1995.
22. Raiser, Konrad. "Unconventional Morality" *Katholike*, No. 2802, January 16, 1996. p. 4 [in Greek].
23. Viz, for example:
 - a. Pagels, EImages of God in Early Christianity;" Womanspirit Rising; Carol P. Christ laine H. "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting and Judith Plaskow, Ed. Harper & Row, 1979. pp. 107-119.
 - b. Raming, Ida. "Male discourse about God in the liturgy and its effects on women" *Lumen Vitae, Revue Internationale de Catcchse et de Pastorale* 55 (1999) pp. 47 - 57.
 - c. Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *Sensuous Spirituality: Out from Fundamentalism* New York: Crossroad. [Dr Mollenkott helped prepare the NCC's Inclusive Language Lectionary and participated in the Re- Imagining Conference in 1993.]
24. Popovich, Archimandrite Justin. *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ*. Institute of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Inc. Belmont, MA. 1994. pp. 170 ff.
25. Reardon, Fr Patrick Henry. "Orthodox Christians and Public Life." *Again Magazine*. Conciliar Press. Fall 2004. (At press.)
26. Popovich, op cit.

A longer, much earlier version of this article was published by *The Christian Activist* in 1996 with the title "The Price of Ecumenism: How Ecumenism Has Hurt the Orthodox Church." The present article reflects a number of events which have transpired amongst our ecumenical partners since then.

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