

The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement: a History

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The Meaning of the Orthodox Presence in the Ecumenical Movement,
Fr George Tssetsis, in Ed Limouris,
Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism, WCC Geneva, 1994 .*

The history of the ecumenical movement, and more particularly of the WCC, is very closely linked with the Orthodox Church. It should be remembered that the first concrete proposal "without precedent in Church history", to establish a "koinonia of churches", was made by an Orthodox church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which in its well-known 1920 Encyclical expressed the conviction that the coming together of the Churches and their fellowship and cooperation were not excluded by the doctrinal differences between them. As W.A. Visser't Hooft once pointed out, "the church of Constantinople was among the first in modern history to remind us 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. With its 1920 Encyclical, Constantinople rang the bell of our assembling. "

Seen therefore from an Orthodox perspective, the foundation of the World Council of Churches at the 1948 inaugural Assembly at Amsterdam could be considered in a way as the fulfilment of the proposal made by Constantinople 28 years earlier. The more so because most of the eleven models of cooperation projected by the above Encyclical eventually became the basis of the programmatic concerns of the WCC, at least in the first decade of its life and activity.

It is true that at the inaugural Assembly only three Eastern Orthodox churches -the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Church of Cyprus and the Church of Greece -and the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of USA, were represented. The rest of the Orthodox churches, which actively participated both in the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements between 1920 and 1938 {with the exception of the Russian Orthodox Church, living under precarious conditions during the post-Revolutionary period), did not attend the Assembly, as a result of the recommendations of the Moscow conference held just one month before which decided against the participation of the Orthodox.(...) The misunderstandings were cleared up and between 1961 and 1965 ail autocephalous and autonomous Eastern Orthodox churches became members of the WCC.

As the third Pan-Orthodox Preconciliar Conference (Chambésy, November 1986) pointed out: "The Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement today is not strange to the history of the Orthodox Church. It constitutes another attempt to express the Apostolic Faith in new historical situations and to respond to new existential demands." What is new however is the fact that this attempt is being made together with other churches and Christian bodies with whom there is no full unity. Of course it is here that difficulties arise. But it is precisely here that there are also many signs of real hope for growing fellowship, understanding and cooperation.(...)

Some Orthodox Encyclicals on Orthodox And Christian Unity

1848

Encyclical Of Patriarch Anthimos IV – Stressed the Catholicity of Universal Church of Christ.

1872

Encyclical Of Patriarch Anthimos VI – Condemnation of phyletism as cause of schism.

1895

Encyclical of Patriarch Anthimos III – “Reply of Orthodox Church to Roman Catholic Overtures on Reunion”.

1904

Encyclical of Patriarch Joachim III - Criticism of any rupture and dismemberment of the One, catholic Church.

1920

Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate – “Unto All the Churches of Christ, wheresoever they be.”

1947

Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate soliciting opinions of Orthodox on foundation of WCC.

1952

Encyclical of Patriarch Athenagoras – Advocation of pan-Orthodox involvement in WCC.

1965

Encyclical of Patriarch Athenagoras – “Lifting of Anathemas of 1054”.

1973

“Declaration of the Ecumenical Patriarchate” on 25th anniversary of WCC. Noted advances in inter-Churches relations, and challenged WCC to remain in service of Church unity.