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## Stumbling-blocks to Ecumenism\*

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On 20 May 1997 the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church decided to withdraw from the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Conference of European Churches. This event demands our attention. It is an expression of the unease and discontentment among Orthodox member churches which is to be found not only in Georgia.

The Orthodox relationship with the ecumenical movement has always been ambivalent and has entered a critical phase in the 1990s. Much that has taken place in the WCC in recent years has upset the Orthodox churches. Church services with oriental and aboriginal elements, such as those during the Seventh General Assembly of the WCC in Canberra in 1991, provoked outright indignation among Orthodox participants, who viewed them as syncretist. The sometimes very aggressive missionary activity of western churches, church groups and sects in Russia and other Eastern European countries is increasingly proving to be a great strain on ecumenism, because the Orthodox churches see such activity as invasion of their territory and condemn it as 'proselytism'. Voices critical of and opposed to ecumenism are also winning the upper hand in the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose nationalism is determined by religion. In 1991 the Belgrade journal *Pravoslavlje* levelled harsh criticism at the WCC and advised its own church to 'leave this accursed arrangement while there is still time'. In Moscow in 1994 the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church debated whether or not to leave the WCC. Although the final vote was clearly in favour of remaining within it, inside sources reported that practical considerations of an economic nature has greatly influenced the voting. At the Bishops' Council of 18–23 February 1997 the issue was back on the agenda. Like other '-isms', such as capitalism and communism, ecumenism has become a derogatory word in Russia. So-called ecumenical services, ordination of women, the reevaluation of moral norms regarding interrelations between the sexes and the idea of the reevangelisation of Eastern Europe have apparently become intolerable to Orthodoxy.

On the other hand, severe criticism has been levelled against Orthodox churches from the western side, especially against the Serbian Church. These criticisms are no less harsh than the antiecumenical voices within the Orthodox churches. Here are just a few examples from 1994: 'We can no longer sympathise' with the close links

\*This paper was first presented at the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, 23–29 June 1997, as a part of a series of hearings on the subject 'Stumbling-blocks to Ecumenism' organised by the Dutch foundation *Communicantes*, the *Instituut voor Oosters Christendom* in Nijmegen, *Glaube in der Zweiten Welt* and *Keston Institute*.

between nation and religion in Serbia (Protestant Church of Germany); the Serbian Orthodox Church should be excluded from the WCC because of its position during the war in former Yugoslavia (Protestant Church of Austria); 'Who is Cain in this fraternal war?' (Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen der Schweiz).

Coming almost 2000 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and a church history which has cast a great deal of shadow as well as light, these are very harsh words. They are very harsh words almost 100 years after the formation of the ecumenical movement. They are very harsh words coming just before a Christian conference which is presenting itself to the world with the theme of reconciliation.

On the opening evening of our series of hearings 'Stumbling-blocks to Ecumenism' I would like to make some observations from my own perspective. I am a Reformed theologian from Switzerland, director of the institute Glaube in der Zweiten Welt in Zollikon near Zurich, and professor of Eastern European church history at the theological faculty of Zurich University. For years I have been intensively and actively involved with Orthodoxy, but am neither Orthodox nor crypto-Orthodox.

### **The Necessity of International Openness: A Brief Synopsis of the Origin of the Ecumenical Movement**

The Edinburgh World Mission Conference of 1910 is usually seen as the birth of the modern ecumenical movement. Its origins go deeper, however. They are to be found in Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, which provided a particular set of suitable conditions: revivalist movements; a strong missionary impulse; experience of opposition between the state church and the free churches in England; confessional plurality in the United States, where there was never a state church but always strict separation between church and state; competition between different confessions in the mission field. There were other circumstances too: international openness; the experience of political, economic, cultural and ecclesiastical diversity in the British Empire, the USA and worldwide; and a particular sensitivity towards the manifold workings of the Holy Spirit in broad historical, geographical and cultural contexts. Ecumenism has been able to appear and evolve wherever this diversity has been present and thriving, but has had difficulties in finding a firm foothold and being accepted wherever uniform, closed or monolithic state, cultural or church structures have existed.

Experiences of pluralism thus advance the ecumenical concept, but monolithic structures hinder it. In this respect nothing has changed since a century ago.

### **Constructive and Critical Contributions by the Orthodox Churches to the Ecumenical Councils of the Interwar Period**

Anglican Protestantism did not remain on its own, however. A remarkable Orthodox initiative from the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1920, just 10 years after the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh, was a plea 'to all Christian churches, wherever they may be'. This called for the churches to form a 'League of Churches' (*koinonia ton ekklesion*) along the lines of the League of Nations (*koinonia ton ethnon*). Of course the First World War and all its seismic shocks lay between the two events. One of these shocks had been the complete collapse of the Russian and Ottoman Empires; in the latter the patriarch of Constantinople had occupied a powerful position as *ethnarchos*, or leader of (Orthodox Christian) nationalities. The Patriarchate of Constantinople had to reorientate itself in the power vacuum which resulted from the First World War, and this concealed another stumbling-block: in

times of political weakness or lack of orientation, openness towards ecumenism can clearly be very considerable, while in times of political strength it is substantially weaker. The very same Patriarchate of Constantinople had expressed itself in very negative terms about the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches in various encyclicals before the First World War.

Orthodox delegates from all Orthodox countries other than the Soviet Union contributed actively and intensively to the ecumenical associations 'Faith and Order' and 'Life and Work' which were founded in 1920. However, in final resolutions they often cast special votes or abstained so that these resolutions were frequently not unanimous but *nemine contradicente* (without opposition). Orthodox delegations always expressed reservations and criticism if ecclesiological issues were discussed, such as the meaning of tradition and of confessions of faith, and questions regarding the 'true' church or apostolic succession, or when issues such as joint communion services, intercommunion, eucharistic hospitality or mutual recognition of church offices were on the agenda. Orthodox churches also clearly stated their rejection of proselytism – all too understandable in view of their history. Orthodox voting made clear what was unacceptable to the Orthodox. I believe that these signals, tentative in form but clearly expressed in content, were insufficiently heeded in a period of ecumenical euphoria; and the Second World War prevented deeper discussion. It is thus unsurprising that little has been achieved in the last 50 years. Stumbling-blocks in the form of unrealistic expectations should have been more clearly perceived and taken more seriously.

### **Positive Developments in a Small, Confessionally Mixed Country**

In my homeland, Switzerland, ecumenism amongst the various churches has generally functioned well, if not always and everywhere, even if observers have judged it to be at a standstill. Much has now become so commonplace that it is no longer remarked upon. There was little contact between Reformed and Catholics until the Second World War. Two closed systems existed which communicated only when absolutely necessary. In confessionally mixed areas boundaries were strictly observed. Catholics brought Catholic bread at a Catholic bakery and Reformed bought Reformed bread at a Reformed bakery. A change set in during and immediately after the Second World War. The decades between 1945 and 1965 brought a decisive, irreversible transformation, determined by external factors such as the increased mobility of the population, flexibility in employment, technological and industrial progress, and a substantial increase in marriages between people of different confessions. The impulse mostly came from below, from the grass roots, and was heavily influenced by 'nontheological factors'. In many spheres ecumenism was achieved in practice and came to be taken for granted. Current signs of standstill or reversal cannot obscure this fact.

Ecumenism functions wherever equally strong partners from different confessions have to get along together and where pressure to act is exerted by ordinary parishioners. Often church structures then give in; they thus react rather than taking action. Ecumenism, however, should be more than 'reaction', should be more than something which simply 'functions' or 'does not function'.

### **Political, Ideological and Nontheological Factors as Stumbling-blocks**

Ecumenism must have Jesus Christ as its foundation and model. The founding fathers of ecumenism were always quite clear about this; but to some extent history took a quite different course. Unrelated elements penetrated ecumenical work and

then became stumbling-blocks which in a period of crisis, as today, ecumenism has proved too weak to overcome.

Two decisive developments in the 50-year history of the WCC have turned out to be stumbling-blocks in the current area of tension between Orthodoxy and ecumenism, and are together responsible for the bad feeling of the present time: the Russian and other Orthodox Churches of the former Eastern bloc joined the WCC at the Third General Assembly in New Delhi in 1961 in peculiar political and ideological circumstances; and at the Fifth General Assembly in Nairobi in 1975 discussion of the antichurch Soviet religious policy was stifled. There were too many political and ideological implications in these developments, as many colleagues pointed out at the time, preparing appropriate countermeasures. Major concessions were made to the extensive political interests of the Soviet government and to forces working closely with it in the ecumenical movement itself – specifically, to the so-called ‘peace policy’ of the Soviet Union – and insufficient attention was paid to the fact that the Soviet Union wished to use the ecumenical movement for its own purposes and was in fact doing so extensively. Detailed and discriminating analysis will probably reveal that both sides gained by playing the diplomatic game: the churches in Eastern Europe too were able to benefit from the so-called ‘quiet diplomacy’ of the WCC. For the Russian Orthodox Church entry into the WCC strengthened its position in the struggle against large-scale administrative repression, even if it meant it had to compromise with Soviet interests. It is still difficult to understand why violations of religious freedom which were demonstrably taking place in a great many countries and political blocs were measured by such different standards. However, strongly politically and ideologically motivated ecumenical work of this kind was unable to develop strong roots, especially in Orthodox countries. Clergy and laity in Eastern Europe must have had the impression that the ecumenical movement was a state institution, and now, more than five years since the Soviet Union ceased to exist, there is a strong feeling even among the bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church in favour of withdrawing from the WCC; and as we know, the Georgian Orthodox Church has already taken this step a month before the Graz Assembly even though it used to receive large amounts of aid as a result of so-called ‘quiet diplomacy’. Political and ideological motivations and implications provide poor conditions for ecumenical work; in the aforementioned areas they have proved to be stumblingblocks, and only now are we being confronted with their effects.

Economic dependency also produces poor conditions. Stumbling-blocks exist wherever the motivation for ecumenical contact lies in development policies, with the donor attempting to exert influence in connection with the aid provided, and with the recipient showing a perhaps excessive fear of such attempts: we’ll take your money but we don’t want any other kind of contact.

### **Ecumenical Realism in Contacts with Orthodoxy**

#### *Nontheological Factors Affecting Understanding Between Western Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy*

In February 1997 the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and the institute *Glaube in der Zweiten Welt* held a conference concerned with these issues in which Protestants and Orthodox took part. We did not discuss the traditional theological differences between the two confessions, but the basic cultural differences between

Orthodoxy and Protestantism 'rooted in general differences between the cultural worlds in which the two confessions developed and in which they live today'. These differences have arisen in the course of the very different historical development of the churches in East and West and involve different speech and thought patterns and different understandings of the nature of man and of the church, of tradition, of the 'sacred' and of authority. In discussion it turned out that the differences were often differences of degree rather than differences of principle – that is, not 'one thing or the other' but 'more like one thing than the other'. However, in the concluding paper four nontheological points were identified which are real stumbling-blocks to ecumenical dialogue:

- (i) Eastern cultures, including eastern Orthodoxy, feel overwhelmed by the political and economic dominance of the West and thus react defensively in an attempt to protect their own culture and churches against the West.
- (ii) Contacts between western Protestantism and eastern Orthodoxy which have developed through material aid involve additional difficulties (as outlined above).
- (iii) The images that the media present of the West in the East and of the East in the West often make realistic mutual recognition and understanding more difficult: that is, despite open borders and today's opportunities for travel we still know too little about each other.
- (iv) Ecumenical reflection has completely ignored one extremely important factor: the differences in mentality between nations shaped by Orthodoxy and those shaped by western Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism).

### *Theological Factors*

The reemergence of conservative, fundamentalist, nationalist and exclusivist attitudes makes ecumenical dialogue in general more difficult, and the dialogue between Protestantism and Orthodoxy in particular. These attitudes can be found in all quarters. They stem from general insecurity as a result of pluralism, globalisation and uncritical belief in progress, and a corresponding fear of loss of identity. New identities are sought; and they are found, for example, in scripture-based, fundamentalist Word of God theology or in an exclusivist Orthodox understanding of the Church; and when these come up against each other, especially in combination with nationalist and chauvinist ideas, there is not reconciliation, but war. Today the churches (and not just the churches) are particularly prone to nationalism, and in this respect we can modify the words of Karl Marx: a ghost is haunting Europe – the ghost of nationalism.

However, even where extreme positions are not adopted and there are no clashes it has recently become clear that theological differences – such as in the ecclesiology of the main Christian confessions, for example – are so fundamental that they cannot be brought alongside one another. It is not only historical differences which divide the churches, but fundamentally different dispositions. Attempts at unity according to the lowest common denominator and the widely-used 'consensus and convergence logic' are increasingly proving to be stumbling-blocks because they give rise to unrealistic expectations. Disappointment is then concealed by means of romantic transfiguration or polite church diplomacy. Together with Michael Weinrich, whose 1995 book

*Ökumene am Ende?* deals with ecclesiological problems in detail, I would like to plead for 'ecumenical realism', which takes as its starting point the diversity and richness of the work of the Holy Spirit, taking others seriously in their diversity and difference and thus maintaining fellowship with them.

(Translated from the German by Geraldine Fagan)