

Barriers to Ecumenism: an Orthodox View from Russia*

VLADIMIR FEDOROV

What is Ecumenism?

In this paper I am referring to ecumenism in its broadest sense – the effort to achieve Christian unity, understanding between Christians and the fulfilment of Christ's teaching 'that all may be one'. In this sense 'ecumenical activity' can refer to the personal contribution of every Christian who has helped to create and strengthen this unity, to the activity of various ecumenical organisations and church initiatives which help to develop ecumenical awareness among believers, and of course to official interconfessional or interchurch contacts and programmes.

In some quarters, unity is rejected both in theory and in practice. An analysis of antiecumenism and the nature of the obstacles which obstruct the path to ecumenism presupposes a description of all aspects of the problem (psychological, church-political, socio-historical, cultural, national and so on) at all levels. The description I am giving here is based on the experience of the Russian Orthodox Church in recent decades, but I suggest that many causes and mechanisms are characteristic of Orthodox churches of other countries as well, and will also be comprehensible to our sisters and brothers in other Christian traditions.

The Use of the Term 'Ecumenism'

Firstly, it should be pointed out that the word 'ecumenism' has always jarred on Russian ears. It is regarded as a Latinism, one of a series of 'isms' such as 'materialism', 'Marxism', 'bureaucratism' and so on. It is no coincidence that many Russian Catholics do not like the word 'Catholicism'. 'We don't say "Orthodoxism"! they declare. Very few people realise that the word '*oikoumene*' is of Greek origin, and is used to describe the Ecumenical Assemblies of the church; it is therefore perfectly acceptable to an Orthodox person. People do not understand the word, however, and in colloquial speech it is unfortunately often mispronounced as 'ecommunism' or 'economism'. The second variant is interesting and not accidental. The concept of '*oikonomia*' is as important to Orthodox consciousness as its opposite, '*akriveia*', and ecumenism naturally accompanies it.

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Opponents of ecumenism often assume that it is a rejection of their own tradition and their own church teachings, the pursuit of a kind of compromise, watered-down faith: Christian living Esperanto-style. Not long ago I came across a video cassette of a film called 'Ecumenism: "New Age" Religion'. Some Orthodox have another view, especially in the context of relations with the Roman Catholic Church: for them 'ecumenism' simply means subordination to Rome after the example of the Uniates. One current 'defend Orthodoxy' book accuses several priests of being apologists for ecumenism and of claiming that ecumenism does not attract believers to other confessions.¹ As proof of the opposite, the book quotes a newspaper interview with Mgr John Bukovsky, apostolic nuncio to Russia: "our ultimate aim is full unity in faith and love." "Will this entail a single church structure?" "Certainly!" "Which?" "That of the followers of St Peter." "Of the pope?" "Yes." "Do you think the Moscow Patriarchate will readily agree to that?" "I'm not a prophet".² There are a good many more unfortunate statements in this book which do not succeed in shedding light on the gospel basis of ecumenism as the pursuit of unity and mutual understanding.³ Opponents of ecumenism often complain that its advocates do not explain exactly what ecumenism is.⁴

It is possible not to use the word 'ecumenism' at all and instead use concepts such as 'openness to dialogue', 'trust', 'tolerance', 'the search for unity and mutual understanding' and so on. Just because they do not appear in the Gospels does not mean that they are alien to Orthodoxy: there is no expression in the Gospels for 'of one substance', for example – a concept which appears in the Nicene Creed. There is no sense in restricting the term 'ecumenism' to participation in one of the ecumenical organisations, although of course the ecumenical aim, sufficient openness, inevitably leads to membership of one of the ecumenical organisations. For the Russian Orthodox Church the start of active ecumenical activity can be said to have been 1961 – the year it joined the WCC – but like Fr Georges Florovsky we can count all contacts with non-Orthodox Christians as part of the history of Russian Orthodox ecumenism.

The Concepts 'Ecumenism' and 'Heresy'

In order to discover what the term 'ecumenism' means in public consciousness, it is useful to listen to antiecumenical speeches and to denunciations of ecumenically-minded Orthodox. A common accusation made by 'antiecumenists' is that any non-Orthodox confession (Catholicism, Lutheranism and so on) qualifies as heresy; according to ancient church regulations prayer with heretics is forbidden. The word 'heresy' is central to the antiecumenical polemic. Theological educational establishments today regard it as very important to maintain competent teaching of church history, dogmatic theology, comparative theology, canon law and other subjects: a teaching programme which is in keeping with church consciousness and the practice of church life. We must ensure that those Christians and churches whose baptismal sacrament we, the Orthodox of the Moscow Patriarchate, recognise, cannot be called heretics.

Of course, the meaning of many words changes over time. At one time 'heresy' did not have such a harsh overtone of condemnation as it did during the time of the Councils of the Church or as it does today. The word 'sect' can also be considered inoffensive, although many Protestant denominations prefer not to be termed as such. However, no Christian community called 'heretical' or a 'sect' can be counted as a sister-church within Orthodoxy.

The History of Ecumenical Aspirations in the Russian Orthodox Church and the Dynamics of the Attitude of Russian Orthodox towards Ecumenism

The traditional view is that ecumenism in the Russian Orthodox Church began when it entered the WCC in 1961. As I have already noted, however, all contacts with non-Orthodox, and indeed, dialogue in any form, can be called ecumenical. The interaction between priests of foreign parishes of the Russian church and non-Orthodox in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can thus also be termed ecumenical activity.⁵ Naturally there is no point in looking for signs of ecumenism after 1917, except in the prisons and labour camps, where suffering united all. Immediately after the Second World War, when the Russian Orthodox Church was just about able to breathe again, there was no talk of ecumenism. Within the USSR interdenominational interaction was discouraged right up to the time of *perestroika*.⁶ At the height of the Cold War international contacts of any kind were forbidden. The decision taken by the Orthodox hierarchy gathered together in Moscow in 1948 to ignore the WCC was neither coincidental nor determined exclusively by the internal convictions of the participants.

In 1961 the political situation changed fundamentally both within and outside the USSR. Internally the church was experiencing a period of heavy persecution; meanwhile outside there were crises which the USSR was able to overcome only by demonstrating its 'human face'. The Soviet government and ideologists felt it necessary to allow the Russian Orthodox Church to enter the international arena. Nothing suited these aims better than the ecumenical structures. But the church too needed the attention of the world community: the interests of the church and state thus coincided. Moreover, the internal interests of the church also required interaction with the wider Christian world. For several decades the church had had no outreach into society at large, there had been no cooperation between church and state and Christian spirituality had been rooted out of public consciousness. Many priests realised that in this critical state it was imperative that the church did not abandon the rest of the world but opened itself up to it, witnessing to Christian love. The churchman who understood this better than anyone else was Metropolitan Nikodim. He was able to play the leading role in a new church policy of dialogue and open interaction with non-Orthodox and even with the secular world. At the same time, however, it is clear that the ideological leaders of the state were interested in seeing the Russian Orthodox Church appear in the international arena, and today this fact allows the 'new ideologists' to denounce supporters of the ecumenical line as KGB collaborators; the term '*nikodimovshchina*' has made its appearance.⁷ Certainly the interests of church and state coincided in those years. The unique demands of the time explain why Orthodoxy was forced to be untypically open. Orthodoxy found itself in the pre-Constantine era once again.

The Changed Situation: From Ecumenism to Confessionalism

As soon as the church was freed from ideological control in the early post-*perestroika* years another form of control appeared (from below, or from the side) exercised by 'Orthodox zealots'. People who had never studied theology or church history, drunk on freedom of speech and without any responsibility, began to pass judgment on hierarchs and theologians according to standards which they hastily cobbled together on the basis of literal (i.e. fundamentalist) readings of the church canons. However, these people had no feelings for the church, no sense of responsi-

bility for Christian unity and no Christian love. Moreover, this neophyte complex – the desire to display one’s exceptional loyalty to the church, the search for one’s own identity, and the seduction of nationalism and messianism – led to extreme confessionalism, which was taken up by people in the church, chiefly by those who had only just joined it and who were searching for a specifically ‘Orthodox’ path.

The explosion of religious freedom meant that the number of parishes increased several times over and the number of monasteries grew twentyfold. Religious schools also multiplied, but were unable to train enough people. Young – and not so young – who took holy orders were not always sufficiently prepared, and fundamentalism goes hand in hand with obscurantism. Inadequate education goes along with a closed mind, while a lack of culture results in obscurantism for the whole of society. The illiterate teacher is not a source of enlightenment, but a factor in mass stupefaction.

Causes of the Weak Ecumenical Potential in the Russian Orthodox Church Today

Almost a decade ago the ecumenical atmosphere changed greatly. One reason why it did was that the ecumenical potential was not high to start with. Only a restricted circle of priests and laymen had taken part in official ecumenical meetings and dialogues. Believers in large cities such as Moscow and Leningrad had met hierarchs of other churches for Orthodox worship and heard their words of greeting. However, many of the older generation had already died by that time and a large number of people started coming to church who had never been to services before. Ecumenical life was described in detail in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, but ordinary people did not read it. The seminary and academy in Leningrad were always more ecumenical, but the majority of their students went home to Ukraine after finishing their studies. In St Petersburg today there is still a more open atmosphere than anywhere else, but many young zealots have also appeared there too. The Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate currently organises the ecumenical activity of the Russian Orthodox Church, and only a restricted circle of believers is involved. This does not mean that there are no laymen or priests prepared to support ecumenical initiatives, however. On the one hand there is the general problem that bureaucracy and unnecessary centralisation always hinder opportunities for personal meetings and contacts. On the other hand, guidelines are important for the Orthodox in the ecumenical sphere. If centralisation hampers the process, then seminaries might draw the guidelines. Several are spiritually and professional prepared for interdenominational creativity. This whole issue is a lively one: the bishops’ council has decided that many issues, for example ecumenical prayers, are to be resolved at the level of the diocesan bishop.

Doctrinal and Other Differences in Church Life as Obstacles on the Path to Ecumenism

For many, differences in systems of doctrine and worship, in church structure and discipline and in traditions of piety are arguments against ecumenical openness and interaction. Such assumptions again reveal an ignorance of church history, which tells of how an undivided church flourished, expanded and grew strong within multifarious traditions. Today few are able to say what ‘unity in faith’ means. It is still the Orthodox view that only when unity in faith has been proclaimed will it be possible to allow non-Orthodox to participate in the sacrament of communion with Orthodox.

I am not advocating the opposite principle, although it is alive today; I just want to note that the concept 'unity in faith' is misunderstood by many. Even within a single church there is no complete doctrinal unity. There is a minimum of dogma which those who consider themselves to be Orthodox Christians (and not heretics) must accept; but this is not just assembled automatically: it is made known through Holy Scripture and traditional church teaching, which has been taught in different ways in different theological schools. We may recall, for example, the fundamental differences between the schools of Alexandria and Antioch, and remember that they played an important role, stimulating theological creativity and the discovery of a new theological language.

Canonical, ritual, ascetic and other features shaped by different national and cultural environments and the historical and political conditions of church life in different areas pose even less of an obstacle to Christian unity. However, in the popular consciousness it is factors of this second type – that is, ritual or aesthetic – which play the essential role. Who has not heard Orthodox Christians in Russia saying: 'Catholics don't revere icons, they bow down to statues', or explaining how the Catholic portrayal of the Crucifixion differs fundamentally from that of the Orthodox? In such instances what are normally being compared are images from different historical periods. In order to convince an Orthodox believer that the Saviour's cross did not have nor needs to have eight branches requires much patience and tact, but above all knowledge. More often than not examples of non-Orthodox church culture are seen as symbols of the enemy camp. This is just one small example of the ideologisation of faith and church life. All these problems can easily be solved by dialogue and a readiness to listen and empathise. To achieve peace and neighbourliness, Christian love is necessary. Even the peoples of nations recently at war with one another can find the opportunity to forge friendly interdenominational partnerships. The Christian part of the contact programme between the twin towns of Hamburg and St Petersburg is just one example.

Ideologisation of Faith and Church Life

This is one of the most critical problems in modern Russia. People who have lived their whole lives under a totalitarian ideology and who were brought up with the conviction that they were surrounded by enemies and needed constantly to be vigilant and unmask them are lost without any ideological support in the new conditions. Many have chosen Orthodoxy because 'opposites attract', not out of personal conviction but as a new ideological system. The temptation is understandable, since from outside may see Orthodoxy as a harsh system of rules and regulations, a doctrinal system which believes itself to be the only true one, a system which binds together people who not only do not share a complete set of values but differ in all kinds of ways in their outward appearance. This kind of understanding of Orthodoxy has meant that those who maintain the spirit of Bolshevism have easily been able to find support in Orthodox circles. In a microclimate of 'party control' like this it is impossible to imagine openness towards non-Orthodoxy or ecumenism: these will immediately be interpreted as making a deal with the CIA, Zionism, masonry and other enemies. It is no accident that the main antiecumenical stronghold is the newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, the most influential mass-circulation communist mouthpiece. In the regular supplement *Rus' Pravoslavnyaya* ecumenists, supporters of the new calendar and others like them are constantly condemned. It was here that the term '*nikodimovshchina*' was coined.

False Orthodox Stereotypes and Incorrect Ideas about the West

Incorrect ideas have a long history on both sides. Divisions were the result of hostility and suspicion, which were fuelled by false stereotypes. Unfortunately, all this happened in the earliest history of the Russian church. On the one hand, Rus' did not take an active part in the disputes between Constantinople and Rome and there had always been strong trade links between Kiev and Novgorod and Western and Central Europe. On the other hand, twenty years after the schism and the ensuing series of mutual excommunications a Slavic text denouncing the Latin church appeared in Kiev, largely repeating denunciations by the patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerularius (1048–58), but containing new material as well.⁸ Feodosi Pechersky (*ca.* 1036–91) repeated the essence of the same denunciations when he denied the Latin faith.⁹ No theological dialogue today could be conducted on the basis of assertions such as 'they eat with dogs from the same bowl', but unfortunately this is more or less the level of comment in much of our church literature.

The current tensions between Orthodoxy and western non-Orthodox confessions are explained not only by the events of the Reformation and the issue of Uniatism but by even earlier events with their roots in the socio-political culture at the time when Christianity first came to Rus'. This culture was natural and organic for past eras, but certainly did not correspond to the Christian ideal. We Christians do not have the moral right to construct our policies and ideology on the basis of an image of a political, national or denominational enemy.

The Concept of the 'Decaying West' among Orthodox in Russia

In Russia it has become commonplace to regard the West with condescension.¹⁰ As it outstrips the East in social and economic development the West is belittled and the supremacy of eastern spirituality is stressed by way of compensation. This happens at all levels of society. The Slavophiles who had a European education realised the significance of Western Europe and its place in the history of culture and spirituality and called it 'the land of holy miracles' (Khomyakov), but nowadays even dissidents who at the time of Soviet totalitarianism won the right to belong to world culture together with the West and who for many years were at the receiving end of the attention, concern, protection and love of Western Christians can today be heard speaking derisively of the West. 'We are a people. There they just go to restaurants or watch the television',¹¹ says Tat'yana Goricheva, the author of a dozen books on Orthodoxy which have been published in the West. There is no point in talking about the views of pseudo-patriots and nationalists if even the erstwhile democratically-minded intelligentsia can indulge in un-Orthodox attitudes like these. They do nothing to further the cause of peace or mutual understanding, the authority of the Orthodox Church or ecumenism.

Misconceptions and False Stereotypes of Orthodoxy

The non-Orthodox conception of Orthodoxy involves a number of firmly-planted stereotypes, as does the conception the Orthodox themselves have of Orthodoxy. Some of these stereotypes are completely false; others appear true at first glance. We should not let ourselves be misled by the latter any more than by the former. A path which at first seems to be going in the direction we want but which in fact turns off to one side is no better than a completely wrong one.

Orthodoxy, Non-Orthodoxy and Russian Culture

One false stereotype which is not obviously wrong at first sight is that 'Orthodoxy is the basis of Russian culture, Russian civilisation and the Russian mentality'. This assertion is often heard nowadays; is not only not particularly accurate, but actually dangerous.¹² One can agree fully with the statement that 'Christianity is the basis of Russian culture and civilisation', but Orthodoxy and Christianity must not be seen as opposites. Orthodoxy is not a religion. Rus' was baptised into an undivided church. The eastern tradition has its own character in the legacy of the Holy Fathers of the East but this does not contradict Christianity or even the legacy of the Holy Fathers of the West in the same period. The values which are the essence of Christianity and of baptised Rus' come from the Gospel and are therefore Orthodox. It is naturally of central significance to Russian culture that Christianity in Byzantium had its own character and tradition; and Russian Orthodoxy – that is, Christianity in Rus' – also developed its own character which left its mark on the whole culture. But all this, of course, needs careful unpacking.

Orthodoxy: Unchanged and Unchangeable?

The idea that Orthodoxy is a strictly formalised religion with a hierarchical bureaucracy and an obligation to perform ascetic deeds of superhuman strength is a common false stereotype. We need to be aware that ideas like this are held not only by non-Orthodox but by many Orthodox as well.

One widespread and quite deeply-rooted idea is that Orthodoxy is the church where everything has been preserved since Apostolic times and nothing will tolerate change. This approach is nonhistorical. Orthodoxy has no problem with being seen as conservative. 'Conserving Orthodoxy' is a sacred task. It is another matter to be a 'guardian of Orthodoxy', a kind of theological policeman or a member of a 'Committee for Spiritual Security' (thankfully there is no such thing yet, but the idea is sometimes discussed). When talking about ecumenism it is important to remember that 'defensive' theology is nothing new. An attempt in 1860 to start up a discussion on the theme of 'Orthodoxy and the modern world' in the church press was dealt with by voluntary 'spiritual police'.¹³

Fear of 'Renovation' and the Myth of 'Neorenovationism'

The idea that Orthodoxy will not accept changes is certainly alive. Few people know that the liturgy we use today took some time to develop, that the Slavic text of the Holy Scriptures has constantly been edited, that it is quite feasible that a Pan-Orthodox Council might adopt new canon laws, and so on. False stereotypes have created the need to find enemies and to fight to keep Orthodoxy pure; 'Orthodox zealots' have assumed responsibility for this purity and have located its destroyers. They are dubbed the 'Neorenovationists'. There is no room here for a detailed description of the phenomenon of 'Renovationism' in the 1920s and 1930s in Soviet Russia, although in order to explain the issues at stake today we should note the extraordinary complexity of this phenomenon. The tragedy for the church lay not in the reforms themselves but in the associated schism, and in the fact that supporters of reform and reorganisation turned out to be puppets in the hands of the ideological and political police. The people did not accept

Renovationism, and the schism was averted because its opponents were loyal in word and deed to those in power, and the Renovators thus became superfluous to the state.

Today the labels ‘Renovator’ and ‘Neorenovator’ are applied to a few priests who are very active in the missionary sphere and who are extremely popular and loved among young people and the intelligentsia. Practically all these priests are said to be open to non-Orthodoxy and are even alleged to adhere to Protestantism (and sometimes Catholicism as well). Of course, allegations like these are the natural expression of a certain fundamentalist complex in which many characteristics come together (literal interpretation of Scripture, obscurantism, rejection of secular culture, nationalism bordering on messianism, sectarian psychology and so on), including antiecumenism. How can we talk about Christian unity when within our own Orthodox Church one of the new idols of Christian consciousness in Russian and European society, Tat’yana Goricheva, can call our ascetic missionary priests ‘playboys’ in the mass media – priests who are simply fulfilling their pastoral service by feeding the Orthodox flock with the blessing of the church leadership – and blame the hierarchs for not disciplining them?

The passivity and noninvolvement of our hierarchs is staggering. I know Chistyakov and the others – it’s hard even to call them priests, your tongue won’t say the word. They’re just playboys really. Completely superficial people who even the Catholics don’t take seriously. They’re just after money – that’s all. And no one listens to them in the West because there they want to see a truly Orthodox person, a sincere believer in Orthodoxy and not some kind of ecumenist who doesn’t know his own people and who doesn’t understand what is foreign either.¹⁴

Comment is superfluous – sadly, the text speaks for itself. However, the theme ‘western masochism’ deserves special attention. The more crude and offensive the Orthodox are when they speak of the West, the more Orthodox they seem in the West, and therefore desirable targets for interaction, aid, publications and so on. It is very Christian to help the enemy, but not at all Christian to help to kindle hatred; but this is what happens, in part, when fundamentalist structures are supported by the West.

Rejection of the Second Vatican Council

A typical development in recent years has been an increasingly negative evaluation in Orthodox circles of the Second Vatican Council. In the 1970s its materials were diligently studied in the theological academies, but today not only laymen but clergy and sometimes hierarchs too can be heard expressing the view that the Second Vatican Council reforms went too far and gave birth to a crisis in church life; that just a quick glance at those materials will horrify us, showing us just what kind of blind alley Catholicism has gone down.

It is curious that this position appears to be ‘ecumenical’ in that it unites two particular groups of Orthodox and Catholics – supporters of Lefèbvre on the one hand and our Orthodox fundamentalists on the other. ‘Fundamentalists of the world unite!’ Obviously this is one and the same disease that can grow in any soil – Catholic or Orthodox. These people do not like reforms on principle. They do not like openness or ecumenism; they do not like the documents *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate* produced by the Second Vatican Council.

Elements of Sectarian Psychology in Orthodox Consciousness and in the Consciousness of Christians and Other Traditions

The newspaper *Pravoslavny Sankt–Peterburg* plays a significant role in forming the views of Orthodox believers in St Petersburg, although no member of its editorial team has any theological education. In an ironical tone it quotes *Lumen gentium*: ‘The Catholic Church is actively and continually striving towards the unity of all mankind and human values in all their diversity under Christ as head, in the unity of his spirit.’¹⁵ The editorial team cannot bear to hear talk of common human values. This rejection of a whole range of humanistic concepts is another typical feature of fundamentalism. But what come in for the most criticism, however, are faith and hope in the salvation of those whose views are not approved of by the fundamentalists. The following words from *Lumen gentium* cause particular irritation:

All people are called to the catholic unity of the people of God, which preordains and strengthens universal peace. Faithful Catholics, other Christian believers and ultimately all people without distinction who are called to salvation by the grace of God are all in their different ways partakers of this unity or are destined for it.¹⁶

This kind of view is termed ‘a new Catholic dogma which is modernising Christianity’. It is interesting that as an example of Orthodox attitudes to the call to unity the newspaper quotes the words of A. S. Khomyakov, the famous Russian lay religious thinker, in response to the plan for unity with Rome proposed by Russian Jesuit Prince I. S. Gagarin:

Even if the hierarchs are tempted, many millions of souls will remain steadfast in the truth, millions of hands will raise the banner of the church and form ranks of laymen. In all the immense eastern world at least two or three bishops will remain true to God; they will bless these lower ranks and form the whole episcopate, and the church will not squander any of its strength or unity but remain the Catholic Church as before in apostolic times.¹⁷

This is a dangerous position to take up. The truth of any given view is not determined by the number of voices proclaiming it. We know from church history that the Orthodox were often in a minority amongst a majority of heretics. But the principle of disregarding the majority view is also dangerous. When a small fanatical group of believers supposes that the truth has been revealed to them alone and everyone else is mistaken, they are usually termed a sect. Sectarian psychology plays a decisive role in antiecumenism. This is the psychology that brought about the Old Believer schism and the schism with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad.

The Karlovtsy Schism: a Consequence of Fundamentalism and a Factor in Antiecumenism Today

This question demands thorough and properly-argued discussion. The position of the Old Believers and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad is a dead end for Orthodoxy: this is proved by the fact that like the Protestants the Old Believers divided into many strains, and the successors of the Karlovtsy Synod have split up into several jurisdictions and do not display any desire to unite. The main danger, however, lies in their obscurantism, which is linked with absolute anti-

ecumenism. The arrogance of the sectarian psychology has unfortunately not yet been overcome.

Proselytism

It may seem strange, but it is at this juncture that the dangers of proselytism can and should be discussed. However we define proselytism, it is impossible to eliminate it completely. Indeed, we have to recognise that a church sure of its truth is not afraid of proselytism and supposes that sooner or later the representatives of other churches will see the light. Only if other churches are seen as sister churches, recognising the validity of each other's sacraments and allowing mutual communion without accusation of heresy, can we hope that the idea of proselytising will not arise amongst any of them. In circumstances of hostility, however, accusations that other denominations or churches are heretical prompt missionary-minded members of a church to witness to their faith in the hope that they will be heard and so 'convert' believers of other churches to the true church. This problem can be overcome either by freeing oneself from sectarian psychology or by following the legal route, as used to be the case in Russia when conversion to another confession was a criminal offence. It is to be hoped that there will not be a return to the old practice of a state church; indeed, our own hierarchs continually emphasise this.¹⁷

It seems that the view that proselytism is the main obstacle to the development of ecumenical activity is to be expected of a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church. The view is constantly heard during meetings between Orthodox and Catholics. It is usually directed at the many Protestant denominations (although many Orthodox unfortunately do not differentiate between the Lutheran and the evangelical free church strains in contemporary Protestantism). With regard to the Roman Catholic Church, we should differentiate between the official position of this church and the 'irrational zeal' of individual priests and laypeople. Of course, it is possible to find Catholics who simply dream of uniting Orthodoxy with Rome in the form of Uniatism, but in my view this is not the position of the church leadership.

There is much evidence of respect for Orthodoxy among Catholics in Russia and of efforts to achieve mutual understanding. One cannot call an invitation to an Orthodox priest to teach Orthodox theology in a Catholic seminary an act of proselytism. It is hard to imagine an equivalent situation in an Orthodox seminary today, although it was normal in St Petersburg in the 1970s.

While Orthodox priests who call Catholics heretics undoubtedly yearn for Orthodox proselytism, they cannot realise their wishes for many reasons. Moreover, it is necessary to set priorities. Proselytism is of course seen as a danger, but pseudo-religions, atheism, secularism and the simple lack of spiritual awareness in society are seen as even more dangerous. A general understanding of these threats to the church will necessarily shape our view of the disputes over canonical territory, episcopal titles, legislative restrictions on religion and many other issues. The most important task today is to work together to curb growing hostility and ill-will, manifesting themselves in international and interdenominational conflicts as hatred and blind fanaticism (fanaticism is in fact always blind).

New Religious Movements as a Factor in Antiecumenism and a Simultaneous Challenge to the Churches to be Ecumenical

New Religious Movements are a very serious matter. There is no point in trying to

produce precise definitions of sects, cults and movements. It is enough to agree that pseudoreligious groups and antichristian and pseudochristian communities exist. Public opinion about them has led some totally ecumenically-minded Orthodox theologians to declare that it is ecumenism that created this situation, that it is a side-effect of openness and tolerance.

It is easy to refute this kind of accusation, and I will not spend time on this now. I would just like to note that it is precisely the situation that has arisen with the New Religious Movements which obliges us today to operate ecumenically and to adopt a course of interdenominational cooperation. We are 'doomed' to work together in this situation. Only if they speak with one voice can churches which society recognises as indisputably Christian – Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran and others – hope to be heard as they assert that such and such groups and movements are unchristian or pseudo-christian.

Interconfessional cooperation of this kind is as yet at an insignificant level, but for a long time now it has been taking place within the framework of 'Dialog – Nevskaya Perspektiva', the Christian interdisciplinary centre for the study of New Religious Movements in St Petersburg.

The Interdenominational Activity of the 'Free Churches' and Evangelical Missionaries

Unfortunately, interdenominational cooperation in Russia today is usually undertaken by free churches and denominations which do not enjoy much authority in the eyes of Orthodox and Catholics. There are several Protestant denominations which invite Orthodox to work with them in the political and missionary spheres as well as in radio broadcasting, and individual Orthodox, even clergy, participate in joint projects, but this is rarely approved of by most Orthodox. Missionary initiatives such as 'March for Jesus', addresses by preachers to mass crowds and other actions of a charismatic nature provoke criticism from Orthodox. We should remember that even such projects as 'Mission Volga', which began with the support of the Moscow Patriarchate, met with extraordinarily fierce opposition from Orthodox people in a number of towns, by which time the Moscow Patriarchate had already backed out of the programme. Of course, all this requires detailed analysis, but I feel it important to point out that the reputation which ecumenism gains is defined largely by activities of this kind, as public knowledge of ecumenism is minimal. This situation is naturally different from that involving the New Religious Movements, but Orthodox believers tend to take the same attitude, especially as it is easy to confuse a typical 'free church' of evangelists or Baptists from the USA (each of which has to adopt a particular name for registration purposes in Russia: Church on the Neva, Victory Church and so on) with the Church of Christ – a typical New Religious Movement.

Antiecumenism and Antisemitism

The connection between antiecumenism and antisemitism is simple: both emanate from the so-called 'Cold War syndrome'. The conviction that all the powers of evil in the world (there is even the term 'world conspiracy') have for a long time been aiming to destroy Russia and Orthodoxy means that all contacts with the West are seen as successes on the part of the CIA and Zionism, and all ecumenical activity as the work of the Masons, who are carrying out the orders of the leaders of this 'world conspiracy'. The level of this logic is that of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,

which still commands respect in some Orthodox circles in Russia.¹⁹

Those who are called 'neorenovationists' are quite regularly accused of being either baptised Jews or under Jewish influence. These accusations are of course to be found primarily in the nationalist/patriotic gutter press. The same newspapers equate ecumenism with Satanism and claim that ecumenism is the greatest heresy of the twentieth century.²⁰

Fundamentalism versus Creative Freedom in Orthodoxy and their Relation to Ecumenism

I have already noted that many antiecumenical tendencies are symptoms of one disease – fundamentalism. Antiecumenists in different churches therefore form their own '*oikoumene*', their own unity.

At first glance it seems to be the fundamentalists who are actively preaching and preserving traditional piety, but on closer examination it is evident that without creativity and personal choice such piety is superficial and does not affect the individual. It is not surprising that many fundamentalist tendencies are interwoven with nationalist and church-political slogans. It is usually fundamentalism which stops people outside the church from approaching church teaching with interest and confidence, from listening to fundamentally different ideas and moulding their own tolerant attitude towards unfamiliar values. Christianity itself is open by nature. It does not force its convictions on people but calls upon 'those who have eyes to see'.

One of the most pressing tasks for Christianity in our country (including Orthodoxy) is therefore to combat fundamentalism. This is in keeping with the interests of the whole of society, as a victory over fundamentalism would help to strengthen social unity and harmony and overcome mistrust, hostility, nationalism, pseudopatriotism and obscurantism.

We also need to emphasise the antihumanism of antiecumenism. It is no coincidence that one of the basic theses of the 'new Orthodox' is that 'humanism is Satanism'. It was in Russia during the period of religious renaissance at the start of the twentieth century that there was discussion of the Orthodox understanding of humanism. In Orthodox spiritual literature today we can also find spiritual exhortations which are essentially Orthodox humanism. In the words of a contemporary pastor and ascetic who is much loved by the Orthodox, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh:

We must believe in the human person with the same faith that we believe in God, just as absolutely, resolutely, passionately. We must learn to discern in the human person the image of God, a holy object which we are called upon to bring back to life and glory just as the icon-restorer is called upon to restore to glory the damaged, trampled, bullet-marked icon he is given. The process begins with us, but must be applied to others too – both to other Christians, whom we judge so readily, and to those closest and dearest to us; and also to those who think differently from us.²¹

Jacques Maritain believes that humanism is essentially about making a human being more humane and revealing his innate stature. Humanism, he suggests, enables an individual to become involved with everything which is capable of enriching him, whether in nature or in history: 'above all it requires a person to develop the possibilities and creative potential within him, to develop his intellectual activity and to work to change the forces of the physical world into instruments of his own freedom.'²²

This is the context in which we should discuss the fear aroused in many Orthodox by concepts such as 'common human values', 'global ethics' and so on. Fundamentalists tend to view all these as antichristian, as ideas of masonic origin. A person open to ecumenism, however, is open to dialogue with humanism, and everyone who loves his neighbour. Unfortunately, one must use these concepts very cautiously among Orthodox today, as they have been taught for the most part by clergy who are fundamentalist.

Orthodox Spirituality and Ecumenism

If an Orthodox person aligns himself with the fundamentalists, then he will not acknowledge any kind of spirituality in western Christianity, either Protestant or Catholic. Here again one can speak of false stereotypes, such as the view that mysticism in the West and East are fundamentally different;²³ we may recall the aesthetically and ethically inadequate pronouncements of some of our *startsy* who knew little of the West.²⁴ However, there are other champions of the Russian Orthodox faith who have had the courage to say only positive things about western spirituality.²⁵

Orthodox spirituality places primary emphasis on the personal spiritual effort (*podvig*) of the believer, the aspiration towards those values which are revealed by sacred traditions on the way towards an understanding of the Good News. This spirituality involves humility, an unwillingness to condemn others, and other qualities essential to being a Christian. In the sectarian psychology of so many Orthodox who believe in the superiority of their own tradition it is difficult to recognise these treasures of Orthodox spirituality which ought to be part of their own. Very many Orthodox have yet to learn how to see the likeness of God – which is preserved in everyone, even a sinner – in people who belong to another school, tradition, church or religion. To refuse to recognise as Christ's disciples Christians of a different tradition who are leading a good moral life (from a Christian point of view) is to pass a judgment which is not ours to pass. A letter from a group of Orthodox monks and priests to His Holiness Patriarch Aleksii II denouncing two Orthodox priests has the savour of Soviet spirituality about it. It is worth close analysis: it calls several Orthodox clerics 'Catholicisers' and 'Catholophiles'.²⁶

The nature of an individual's spirit is of fundamental importance – is it one of love and peace, or of joy and gratitude to God, or of evil and hatred? Some people resolve or prevent conflicts and wars; others cause them and provoke them. These are two forms of spirituality. Evangelical efforts demand a genuine gospel spirituality, which can be found both in East and West. Of course, one can read scornful words about St Francis in Orthodox authors, but nevertheless the saints do not divide but unite. The task of the church today is not only to preach about this but also to choose from those proposed for canonisation the ones who are not going to cause controversy; those who unite, not divide; those who are not going to scandalise anyone. The planned canonisation of Tsar Nicholas II, who was brutally murdered by the Bolsheviks together with his family and companions, is a cause of dispute among Orthodox believers in Russia.

The Changing Socio-Political Situation in Russia as a Hindrance to Ecumenism

The church does not live in a vacuum and thus it naturally reacts to social and political changes. We note that the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church

stresses the fact that it does not identify with any political party. It is also to be hoped that the hierarchs do not identify with those political movements which are preparing to glorify the tsar as a political martyr, or with those who are advocating the restoration of the monarchy and making the Orthodox Church the state church again. That would be a completely antiecumenical path to follow.

Monarchism is the antithesis of democracy. Russia is used to totalitarianism and unfortunately the setbacks in the process of introducing democracy to the new Russia have meant that there has been no ecumenically-oriented revival of church life. An active involvement of the church in political life, not as a mouthpiece for authority or a source of moral pronouncements, but as a vehicle for cultivating a sense of responsibility and openness to world problems, and an active personal involvement by believers, is still in the future; but it is rooted in the experience of the church.

Conclusion

It remains to be said in conclusion that in reviewing various factors I have not attempted to give an exhaustive description of all the obstacles to ecumenism, but only to indicate the direction a far more detailed analysis should take. Let me now make a few final comments.

As an Orthodox believer I have to recognise that although the Orthodox Church has never prevented people from reading the Holy Scriptures church members today have far too little access to them. But the Scriptures are undoubtedly something which brings people together. When we Orthodox maintain that the daily reading of Holy Scripture is just Protestant piety then we are not so much antiecumenical as heretical.

Our Orthodox spirituality calls upon us to learn from our own experience, the experience of the church as a whole, and the experience of other traditions, from the mistakes and achievements of others besides the Fathers of the Church.

It is fundamentally important that we should be aware that the church expects us to respond today in an essentially new situation which has no precedent in history. We are obliged to give a church response to the world on contemporary problems on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. This will not be a mechanical repetition of words that have been said before – it may need to be said a new language. But it must be the teaching of the Good News. This is why it is so important for us today to recognise the task of Orthodox creativity – cooperation with God. We run a great risk today if we undervalue the role of the intelligentsia and ignore their questions and doubts, even if they are not members of the church.

Meanwhile those members of the intelligentsia who identify themselves as belonging to the church should remember that an effort to achieve unification in the church does not lead to unity. Unity lies in diversity – an ancient church principle.

What is needed today, therefore, is not accusations and denunciations, but open discussion within the church – and, moreover, a discussion that comes down from the level of theological commissions to the level of the parish. It will be possible to have such a discussion only if we manage to preserve the centres of our theological education – seminaries – as places which are open to interdisciplinary and interdenominational links, initiatives and dialogues, open to the world, missionary interaction with it and ecumenism.

Notes and References

- ¹ The book makes reference to Fr Aleksandr Borisov, *Poblevshkiye niviy* (Moscow, 1994), pp. 183, 184, 189.
- ² *Argumenty i fakty*, no. 39, 1996. Quoted in *Sovremennoye obnovenchestvo – protestantizm ‘vostochnogo obryada’* (Odigitriya, Moscow, 1996), p. 235.
- ³ Fr V. Vigilyansky, one of the authors of the anthology *Sovremennoye obnovenchestvo ...*, criticises the authors and compilers of issue no. 50 of the journal *Logos* (p. 269).
- ⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- ⁵ See Archimandrite Kiprian (Kern), ‘Dorevolyutsionnoye russkoye dukhovenstvo zagranitse (“ekumenizm” do nachala ekumenicheskogo dvizheniya)’, in *Khristianskoye vossoyedineniye* (Paris, 1935).
- ⁶ With the exception of politically important peacemaking initiatives, where it was both possible and necessary to demonstrate unanimity.
- ⁷ The suffix ‘-shchina’ means ‘affair’ or ‘business’, usually with pejorative or problematic overtones. See the articles by K. Dushenov in *Sovetskaya Rossiya* in April and May 1997.
- ⁸ Metropolitan Georgi of Kiev, ‘Styazaniye s latinoi’, in *Zlatostrui (Drevnyaya Rus’ X–XIII vekov)* (Moscow, 1990), pp. 140–45.
- ⁹ ‘Slovo o vere khristianskoi i o latinskoi’, in *Zlatostrui ...*, pp. 160–62.
- ¹⁰ Paradoxical as it may seem, Japan (in the Far East) is already part of the West as far as Russia is concerned, and China will probably soon follow.
- ¹¹ This was the title of an interview with Goricheva in the newspaper *Pul’s goroda*, 16 May 1997, p. 14.
- ¹² *op. cit.*
- ¹³ I refer to the crude polemic between Askochensky and Archimandrite Feodor Bukharev.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Goricheva, *Pul’s goroda*, 16 May 1997, p. 14.
- ¹⁵ *Pravoslavny Sankt–Peterburg*, no. 5, p. 6.
- ¹⁶ *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁷ *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁸ For example, see one of the most recent statements by Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, chairman of the Department of External Church Relations: ‘The era when Orthodoxy was the official state religion in the Russian Empire was far from being a “golden” one for our church. Accusations that the Russian Orthodox Church now wishes to gain state religion status are thus absurd. That would mean that it was trying to deprive itself of freedom.’ *Nizhegorodskiy novosti*, 30 April 1997.
- ¹⁹ We need only recall the efforts of the late Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg.
- ²⁰ See, for example, the newspaper *Nashe otechestvo*, which is on sale at every street corner.
- ²¹ Mitropolit Antoni Surozhsky, *O vstreche (Satis)*, St Petersburg, 1994), pp. 103–4.
- ²² Zhak Mariten (Jacques Maritain), *Integral’ny gumanizm: filosof v mire* (Vysshaya shkola, Moscow, 1994), p. 53.
- ²³ Fr Ignati (Bryanchaninov) has a lot to say about this.
- ²⁴ St Feofan Zatvornik: ‘The papists have done harm to all the sacraments and many redemptive activities. The papacy is like an infected or festering lung.’ We should compare these words with what Vyacheslav Ivanov said about the two lungs of Europe – East and West. Pope John Paul II fully agreed with Ivanov’s idea and has often repeated it.
- ²⁵ Prominent among them is St Tikhon Zadonsky who particularly advised Orthodox to read the book *True Christianity (Ob istinnoy khristianstve)* by the Lutheran pastor Arndt.
- ²⁶ See *Sovremennoye obnovenchestvo ...*

(Translated from the Russian by Geraldine Fagan)