

Can the Oriental Orthodox receive the Eastern Orthodox Councils?

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At the beginning of the 21st century it seems that the relationship between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox communities is as close as it has been for centuries. There certainly remain those within the Eastern Orthodox community who perhaps view the Oriental Orthodox community through a prism of lack of knowledge and misrepresentation, some of which is due to the lack of proper explanation by the Oriental Orthodox themselves. But increasingly it has become impossible for Eastern Orthodox to doubt that Oriental Orthodox have always confessed the perfect and complete humanity of Christ. In a growing number of congregations around the world there is a pastorally based reception to communion of lay members from other Orthodox communities. While formal agreements allowing communion between various Orthodox communities, and even proposals for reunion from senior Eastern and Oriental Orthodox hierarchs, suggest that an opportunity to explore the possibility of unity has now presented itself as both a challenge and encouragement.

Despite the positive outcome of the dialogues between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox communions over the last decades, it seems clear that an outstanding and significant issue remains the status of those councils not received by the Oriental Orthodox. These form such an important aspect of the life and witness of the Eastern Orthodox communion that they cannot easily be ignored. Recent agreements produced by the theological dialogue between the Eastern and Orthodox communities have appeared to skate over the need for a formal response from the Oriental Orthodox to these later councils.

Nevertheless, the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox have been able to produce a Joint Agreement which confesses a mutual confidence that the same Christology has always been held by all. That being so, it must be the case that the later councils of the Eastern Orthodox, and even the most controversial texts such as the Tome of Leo, are all able to be understood in an Orthodox manner. These joint statements have been accepted by the Holy Synods of almost all the Oriental Orthodox churches and therefore represent a formal and official view of the Eastern Orthodox.

This seems to be a moment in history that calls for generous efforts to resolve centuries old disputes. If it is necessary to go that extra mile in the name of truth and love, then such demands must be embraced.

I have been a member of the British Orthodox Church within the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate for over twenty years. Even before I became Orthodox I was engaged in the consideration of the controversy between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox communities, and it has continued to be one of the most important areas of my own research and study. To be able to write about the unhappy separation of those Orthodox Christians who believe and practice the same faith requires some detailed understanding of the controversial issues, and of the historical consequences of events taking place over 1500 years ago.

This paper is part of a wider project to consider and respectfully present proposals aimed at encouraging the reconciliation of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox communities. In this particular study it will be considered whether the Oriental Orthodox can receive the

Eastern Orthodox councils in some formal manner. I believe it is both possible and necessary, and that such a reception can take place without the Oriental Orthodox abandoning our own consistency of faith and continuity of history.

It will be necessary to consider the Tome of Leo, the councils of Chalcedon, the Second of Constantinople, the Third of Constantinople and the Second of Nicaea. If we must accept them for the sake of reconciliation then how are we to accept them without sacrificing our own integrity? This paper will describe one perspective in the following pages.

There are two aspects of each of these still controversial councils and texts. On the one hand there is the actual historical event itself, situated in a particular context and represented by a variety of particular narratives, whether positive or negative. On the other hand there is the present interpretation of the different doctrinal, canonical and disciplinary components of these councils. Is it necessary that all of these components and their historical representation be viewed in the same way?

Clearly any event or text can be and is often understood and described in a variety of manners. The Formula of Reunion of 433 AD brought about the union of St Cyril and the moderate Antiochians. A certain lexical compromise on both sides allowed the Orthodox Christology of St Cyril to be confirmed together with an appropriate breadth of language that allowed the Antiochians to be comfortable in expressing the same truths.

But when Ibas of Edessa wrote his letter to Maris the Persian he understood the Formula of Reunion in an entirely different manner. According to his interpretation of the correspondence between St Cyril and John of Antioch he wrote,

For Cyril has written Twelve Chapters, as also I think Your Piety knows, in which he says that there is one nature constituting the Divinity and Humanity of Our Lord Jesus Christ....But how impious such statements are Your Piety will have been quite persuaded...The Lord had willed the subduing of the heart of the Egyptian.

It is well worth considering the letter of Ibas to Maris the Persian, and noting that he viewed St Cyril's Twelve Chapters as error. More than that, he understood that the Reunion was on the basis of St Cyril rejecting his error and adopting a Christology which was consistent with the teaching of Theodore of Mopsuestia. This could hardly be further from the truth, not least because St Cyril was engaged in writing a work against the Christology of both Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus. But it does illustrate the fact that a single text can be understood in a variety of ways.

If we were able to have a conversation with Ibas it would not be enough for us to say that we agreed with him in accepting the Formula of Reunion of 433. We would have to ask him how he understood this text, and what Christology it was endorsing. In this case we would find that though we both seemed to accept the Formula, in fact what we were confessing were entirely contradictory and irresolvably different interpretations of what the Formula represented.

What is actually believed must take priority over the endorsement or criticism of various texts, such as the Formula of Reunion because apparent agreement can actually

mask an absolute disagreement. While apparent disagreement can in fact obscure a fundamental agreement.

Now if it has already been established over decades of dialogue that the Eastern Orthodox communion shares the same Faith as the Oriental Orthodox communion then it is not possible to insist that those fundamental, but controversial, texts and councils which are necessary to the Eastern Orthodox tradition actually and materially represent a false and even heretical Faith. The Eastern Orthodox cannot both profess the fullness of the Orthodox Faith and also profess error in these texts and councils.

Therefore it must be possible to accept these texts and councils in a manner which is consistent with the Orthodox Faith, and if it is possible to accept them in an Orthodox manner then it must also be possible for the Oriental Orthodox to receive them as Orthodox. This surely requires more than a simplistic assent to them without an appropriate process of reception, just as simply passing over them in silence has not proved satisfactory.

But what do we mean by accepting these texts and councils? In the first place we do not mean that we will be able to accept the current narrative which many of the Eastern Orthodox use to locate these texts and events in an historical context. We have a different view of what happened in many cases, and we believe that our variant narrative is as justified by historical evidence as any other. It is not possible for us to say, "Sorry, we have been wrong about everything all along", because we do not believe this to be the case. But neither do we wish to demand of the Eastern Orthodox that they abandon their own understanding of history as a necessary precondition for reconciliation.

What is surely required is a certain degree of self-reflection that allows all sides to understand how the various views of texts and councils came about. This self-reflection must also extend to an appreciation that different views on historical events is not a dogmatic matter.

There is some controversy at present, for example, within both Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy, about the consideration of the Emperor Constantine as a saint. It has been noted that he was not canonised until relatively late, and as part of a cultus that focused on the city of Constantinople. There is also the issue that he was baptised only shortly before his death, and had been complicit in the murder of family members. Is he a saint or not? Does it matter that he became a saint only centuries after his death? These are questions that often lead to heated arguments. But the example is raised because having different views about an historical person, even one whom many consider a saint, does not lead to a breach of communion, and is not considered as having a dogmatic character. Is the Emperor Constantine a saint or not? There are those who are committed to Orthodoxy who hold both opinions.

Those who believe that there is no scope at all in Orthodoxy for any difference of opinion on any matter are fortunately in a tiny minority. For most of Orthodoxy and for most of the time, there has been a understanding that there must be unity in dogmatic matters, while allowing a variety of opinions, within the boundary of the Faith, on other matters.

In regard to the controversial texts and councils that Eastern and Oriental Orthodox must come to terms with, there are various aspects that warrant different approaches. In terms of historical context there will perhaps remain, for a while, distinct narratives that colour the reception of the event itself. Modern scholars such as Richard Price, in his outstanding editions of the Acts of Chalcedon and of Constantinople II, have assisted in the process of developing a more neutral and objective history of these events. The understanding that these events were more complex than the brief paragraphs used to describe them in works of catechesis will help to produce an appreciation that in fact different views of the history usually represent the fact that there were different agendas that were actually being played out at these events, and that there is no one monolithic history.

If it is required that Oriental Orthodox accept unchallenged the popular Eastern Orthodox historical narrative then reconciliation will continue to be stalled at an official level. But there is no reason why this should be so. When St Cyril and John of Antioch were reconciled with each other it was not on the basis of John of Antioch confessing that he was wrong to hold another separate council in Ephesus in 431. It was not on the basis of confessing that everything he remembered of the events was in error. It was on the basis of accepting the dogmatic substance of St Cyril's council. It was entirely reasonable for John of Antioch to continue to believe that St Cyril had acted improperly at Ephesus, and for him also to accept the deposition of Nestorius and the use of the term Theotokos in relation to the Virgin Mary.

To accept these texts and councils does not require the acceptance of a particular history. But these councils also produced disciplinary statements. These are also problematic for the Oriental Orthodox since they name some of our own Fathers such as St Dioscorus and St Severus. But it would seem to many, including Eastern Orthodox, that these disciplinary resolutions are also not a matter of dogma. At the council of Ephesus, John of Antioch was deposed by St Cyril and the bishops with him, yet St Cyril was reconciled with him and did not act towards him as a bishop who had been deposed, even though an ecumenical council had disciplined him in such a manner.

Likewise, Theodore of Mopsuestia died in the peace of the Church, and even St Cyril did not demand that his name be removed from the diptychs of the Antiochian Church for the sake of unity, even though he considered him a heretic. Nevertheless at Constantinople II he was condemned and the approach taken by the Fathers of the previous generation was modified. There are those Eastern Orthodox who will insist that any action taken by the Fathers may not be challenged, but this was clearly not the view of the Fathers themselves, who used different approaches in different circumstances.

St Dioscorus was clearly not condemned for heresy in his lifetime but was deposed on a procedural point. He was anathematised centuries after his martyrdom when those who so condemned him could have had no real knowledge of his teachings, which can be seen to be entirely Orthodox by the documentary evidence available to us. Likewise, St Severus was engaged in dialogue with the Imperial Church late into his life, and during the 6th century it had been recognised on several occasions during such official conferences that there was no Christological difference between those who accepted Chalcedon and those

who rejected it. St Severus was willing to accept the Henotikon as far as it went, which makes the accusations against him of being both a Nestorian and a Eutychian especially objectionable.

What we require of the Eastern Orthodox is a willingness to consider again whether the condemnations of St Dioscorus and St Severus are properly attached to their persons, even if the errors purported to have been held by them are certainly liable to condemnation. There will be a need for the Oriental Orthodox to consider again the persons of Leo of Rome and the Emperor Justinian. The case of the Emperor Constantine surely shows that agreement in the canonisation of various figures is not necessary for agreement in faith, especially not if there is an agreement in the rejection of those errors some believe these figures held, and agreement in the acceptance of those truths which others would wish to insist they held.

These are not dogmatic matters, they are liable to revision because they depend on the attribution of error and truth to a particular person, and not on any acceptance of error or rejection of truth. To a great extent this has already been understood. When I read the writings of Maximos the Confessor, for instance, I find myself agreeing with his positive statements of truth and with his negative criticism of error. But I know that he is entirely wrong to attribute error to St Severus and that he has mistaken and misrepresented what St Severus taught. At the time in which Maximos wrote, the works of St Severus had been entirely proscribed and destroyed within the Empire. They are preserved to us thanks to the copies made into Syriac even while he was alive. To disagree with Maximos on a matter of truth and error would have a dogmatic significance, but to disagree with him when he attributes error to St Severus is a different matter altogether and is to do with opinion not doctrine.

The very fact that the Alexandrian Churches, Greek and Coptic, allow intercommunion of laity, and that the Syrian Churches, Greek and Syriac, experience even closer ties of mutual fellowship, indicates that the issue of the status of those controversial persons is not considered to be a doctrinal issue. If the veneration of St Dioscorus absolutely meant that the Oriental Orthodox accepted the heresy of Eutyches there could be no such intercommunion. Likewise if the veneration of Leo of Rome absolutely meant that the Eastern Orthodox accepted the heresy of Nestorius there could be no such intercommunion. Metropolitan Hilarion, one of the most senior hierarchs of the Moscow Patriarchate, also believes that issues such as these are secondary to the profession of the same doctrinal substance.

What does this mean? If the historical perspective is not dogmatic, and if the disciplinary actions are not absolute, then to properly consider the status of these texts and councils within the Oriental Orthodox communion means to reflect on the Definitions and official Statements of each council, and those canons which these councils produced.

Such a reflection may even comprehend even the most controversial texts such as the Tome of Leo and the Definition of Chalcedon. We are not asking ourselves do we agree with everything that has happened in history around these texts, but we are asking whether the

manner in which the Eastern Orthodox understand the words of these texts is a manner in which we can agree.

If we were to consider the Sentence and the Capitula of the Second Council of Constantinople we would discover that there is little in which there could be any disagreement at all. If we were to consider the Definition of Chalcedon there are aspects which it is well known would cause some concern. What is required of us is not to imagine ourselves into the minds of those who accepted this text in the 5th century, nor even to imagine ourselves into the minds of our own Fathers who had reasons enough to reject it then. But to discover how the Eastern Orthodox today, with whom we are challenged to rediscover our fundamental unity, actually understand this text and all the others.

Once again it must be insisted that since we confess that the Eastern Orthodox have the same Christological Faith as ourselves then even the Definition of Chalcedon must be able to be understood in an Orthodox manner. And if it is understood in an Orthodox manner then we can receive that interpretation as Orthodox ourselves.

What should we do? I believe that a document must be compiled which contains all of these authoritative texts which cannot be ignored if reconciliation is to take place. These texts must be glossed or explained with various notes so that it is clear how we are willing to receive each passage, and which errors and false readings we wish to exclude. This would not be a very lengthy document, the output of the various Eastern Orthodox councils is not excessive and deals with particular issues. This document, however it was produced, and I am researching just such a volume myself, with an introductory essay and doctrinal and historical notes, could be received in due course by each of the Synods of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. This comprehensive text would be accepted as Orthodox, and as consistent with the Orthodox Faith as professed in the first three Ecumenical Councils of universal acceptance.

Would this count as accepting these texts and councils as Ecumenical? The latter councils after Chalcedon might perhaps be considered ecumenical under such a process, to the extent of receiving the doctrinal statements and canons. It would remain problematic to use the term ecumenical of Chalcedon, even under a narrow consideration of the texts as understood by the Eastern Orthodox at present. There might be greater consistency in allowing that the acceptance of a comprehensive document as being Orthodox allows for the reception of all the doctrinal substance of these councils, including Chalcedon, when properly understood.

It would then be possible to say to our partners in dialogue that we do accept all the ecumenical councils, even if we do not count them all as properly Ecumenical.

This will not satisfy all Eastern Orthodox. Some do wish to see the complete submission of all Oriental Orthodox to the historical narrative commonly presented among those who accept Chalcedon. Some will continue to demand the condemnation and rejection of St Dioscorus and St Severus as the cost of an asymmetrical reconciliation. But these are not the majority. There are also those Oriental Orthodox who believe that our own historical views of Chalcedonians are immutable, but this is to fail to properly research our own engagement in efforts for reconciliation in the 5th to 7th centuries.

What is clear is that we cannot hope to achieve reconciliation without properly coming to terms with the central place which these texts and councils hold in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. If there is a need to go that extra mile then we must take it, while preserving our own integrity. We will discover that even the most controversial texts can be understood in a variety of ways, and that in fact we already share agreement in those things which these texts strive to explain.

There is continuing hope for reconciliation. But we will not move forward without honestly considering how to understand these things in an Orthodox manner. I hope to return to this theme in much greater detail in further and more substantial papers.