

# *An Eastern View of Ecumenism*

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Several of the oriental Orthodox churches, especially those of India and Ethiopia, are founder-members of the World Council of Churches. All five of them, i.e., the Egyptian, the Syrian, the Armenian, the Indian and the Ethiopian Orthodox churches, are now members of the W.C.C. The Indian Orthodox Church has taken an active part in the ecumenical movement since 1930. In general, the Oriental Orthodox had already accumulated a great deal of ecumenical experience by the time Pope John XXIII opened the doors and windows of the Roman Catholic Church to let in the ecumenical wind.

The time has now come for the Oriental Orthodox to assess the ecumenical experience and to draw up a fresh priority list of ecumenical concerns. It was done before, in 1965, at the Addis Ababa Conference of the Heads of Oriental Orthodox Churches. Have the priorities changed since then?

It was clear in 1965 that the first priority for the Oriental Orthodox was to restore communion with the Byzantine Orthodox churches. The four unofficial conversations, i.e., Aarhus (1964), Bristol (1967), Geneva (1970) and Addis Ababa (1971), have now confirmed the basic insight of Addis Ababa. The differences are hardly theological. There are problems like the acceptance of certain councils, anathemas against saints and fathers of the other side, and the rank of patriarchs; but none of these really constitutes a substantial difference in faith. This relation remains the first ecumenical priority for the Oriental Orthodox. Whether it is also similarly a first priority for the Byzantine Orthodox can be clearly seen only after the next Byzantine Orthodox synod.

The second priority at Addis Ababa was relations with the Roman Catholic Church, and the third, relations with the Protestant churches. This pattern remains basically unaltered. What has become clearer is that the first of these two relations cannot be conducted and developed through medium of the World Council of Churches. The W.C.C. has been useful in the past in developing the relations between the Oriental Orthodox and the Byzantine Orthodox. But that stage is now over. Whatever relations are developed will now have to be worked out bilaterally between the two families of churches at an official level. For this, the W.C.C. can be of only limited use.

This leads to the conclusion that membership in the W.C.C. for the Oriental Orthodox churches is mainly for the purpose of maintaining relations with the Protestant churches. There is a great deal of discussion in Orthodox circles about whether membership is actually necessary for maintaining these relations. The W.C.C., as a body that coordinated the work of the Protestant churches, will remain an important element in the ecumenical movement, and the

Orthodox churches, both Oriental and Byzantine, will have to continue in formal membership in the W.C.C., so that the council can continue to be regarded as something more than merely a pan-Protestant organization. At least that is the present position of most Oriental and Byzantine Orthodox who are ecumenically minded and experienced. To withdraw from membership in the W.C.C will be a direct affront to the Protestant churches, and there does not seem to be sufficient reason for such an affront at this time.

What really emerges as new from the last 25 years or more of ecumenical experience and participation is the possibility of a closer relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the two families of Orthodox churches. This possibility is such a surprisingly new development in our century's ecumenical movement that ecumenists are beginning to talk about a new structure to give more body to this new phenomenon and develop it as a high priority.

The Orthodox churches are now sufficiently clear that no dramatic new developments are to be expected in Orthodox-Protestant relations. The possibilities have been explored. The ecclesiological difference is too great to be easily overcome by verbal formulae. The best we can hope for is a continuation of cooperation and conversation, especially in the field of service to the world, and the issues that confront humanity as a whole.

But, among the three families of Roman Catholic, Byzantine Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox, there has recently emerged such common ground, ecclesiological, that some form or structure has to be devised to make this common ground visible as a platform for further work.

For the Oriental Orthodox, until recently, relations with Roman Catholics was only a second priority. But the initiative of an unofficial body, like Pro Oriente in Vienna, has made possible enormous advances in Orthodox-Roman Catholic relations. What began with the participation of the Orthodox observers at Vatican II has now developed into a large network of bilateral and multilateral conversations between Roman Catholics and Orthodox.

On the Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic level, we have now had three major unofficial conversations, all organized under the aegis of Pro Oriente. The leadership given by Cardinal Franz Koenig of Vienna has been surprisingly productive. Many points on which there seemed to be misunderstandings have now been cleared. It has made the following achievements:

1. Three very rich reports were published in *Wort und Wahrheit*, a Viennese publication.
2. Joint statements of heads of churches were issued, indicating a wide area of agreement: His Holiness Pope Paul has issued such statements with both His Holiness Pope Shenouda of the Coptic Church and His Holiness Patriarch Ignatius Yaqub of the Syrian Church, as also with the Armenian Catholicos, His Holiness Vazgen I.
3. Plans are now afoot for a thorough discussion of the most difficult points, like papal jurisdiction and the rationale for the existence of Catholic churches of the Oriental Rites ("uniate" churches).

Since similar progress has been registered also in the relation between Byzantine Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, is it not opportune for us now to propose an ecumenical coordinating structure for the three families of churches?

Such a structure would strengthen the ecumenical movement and give new hope to millions of Christians in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches who are now rather frustrated about the lack of ecumenical progress.

It would be a modest structure, something less than one-tenth the size of the present World Council of Churches. The pattern of representation in such a council would follow three principles:

Delegations will be from national Episcopal bodies of the three churches (Roman Catholics, Byzantine and Oriental).

Delegations will be, within limits, proportional to the number of believers in each jurisdiction.

Delegations will be led by bishops, but may contain other clergy, as well as laity.

Thus, for example, from a country like the United States, there will be representatives of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, who will be the largest number of American delegates. The Byzantine Orthodox Bishops' Conference in the United States could also choose a certain number of delegates in proportion to the number of Orthodox in the United States. The Oriental Orthodox (especially Armenian, Coptic and Syrian) bishops could also get together and elect delegates to the central body.

Such a central body could then meet and elect necessary executive officers and staff to carry on the work. The Vatican, as the central authority of the Roman Catholic Church, can be given special power to nominate or approve certain officers, and even be given special representation in addition to the delegates of the Italian Bishops' Conference. Observer status can be given to other ecumenical bodies, like the W.C.C., and to confessional bodies, like the Lutheran World Federation or the World Methodist Council.

The general secretary of the body, as chief executive, will have to be a bishop of one of the three churches, assisted by associates from the other two churches, who will also be bishops--titular or diocesan. The staff will be from the three churches, and will live in community, following the traditions of their own churches, and, at the same time, developing patterns of ecumenical worship.

The main orientation of the new structure would be to develop ways of renewing and uniting the three churches, which means:

daily common prayer for unity – the spiritual dimension of continuous prayer, fasting and meditation will be given paramount importance;

organizing study and common reflection on the problems that need to be resolved on the way to unity, helping the churches to take action where necessary;

generating programs for cooperation of the three churches in helping humanity solve the problems that confront it today, including the creation of new life styles in the Spirit; and

a trouble-shooting committee that resolves problems that cause internal dissension within or among the three churches.

My suggestion would be that this proposal should first be considered unofficially by a group of interested people from the three churches, and a more complete plan be prepared for submission to the churches. If it is God's will, the Spirit may thus get us out of the present ecumenical stalemate.