

## **Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement and the role of theological education: A few questions in the form of Introductory Thoughts**

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### **Abstract**

This paper contains an elaborated input presented at the conference entitled The Ecumenical Movement in Theological Education and in the Life of Orthodox Churches (Sibiu, Romania, November 2010). The author address, in an interrogative form, issues like the role of theological education”in ecumenical formation, the relation between ecclesiological challenges of Orthodox tradition and their ecumenical implications; the role of Orthodox theologians in witnessing the values of their tradition

**Key issues:** ecumenism, ecumenical-theological education, orthodox witness

Today, in the midst of rapid socio-political changes, financial crises, a growing religious pluralism all over the world, challenges addressed to spiritual values, and various ideological debates which mark our age, Orthodox Churches strive to share the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ with each person and with each people in the specific circumstances of their life.

Theological and ecclesiological principles remain identical for all Orthodox churches in their witness to the world; their major sources of reference and inspiration are the same; their liturgical and sacramental experience – with its immediate and direct pastoral and spiritual implications – keeps its fundamental character for Christian life and witness throughout the local churches. Yet, a diversity can be observed from one context to the other in the realm of pastoral attitudes and missionary commitment, as each local church, facing specific historical circumstances, and living within a distinct cultural context, attempts to respond to concrete situations and challenges, to consider a variety of issues and solve a multitude of human problems.

To some extent, this was one of the old dilemmas both theology and church life had to face: how to express the eternal in terms of the temporal, and how to communicate the universal in terms of the local.

However, the most recent theological and ecclesiological dilemma for the Orthodox churches was their commitment to the search for Christian unity, as part of their witness to the world and a possibility for giving to the world a “common witness” with other Christian churches. In other words, this is the dilemma of Orthodox participation in the contemporary ecumenical movement, considered by some as a natural extension of the Orthodox witness to the world, while by others as a church-dividing issue, since any form of relationship between divided Christians is considered with suspicion and, even, qualified by some as a “heresy”.

Theological education should – by definition – include these dilemmas in its vision and mission, and elaborate curricula and methodologies allowing a systematic and objective effort to provide Orthodox Churches on the one hand with a younger generation of graduates – indeed, the next generation of clergy and church leaders – and, on the other hand, with a rich harvest of theological research.

The introductory thoughts offered here will have the character of a “discussion starter”. Two methodological principles will guide the presentation:

First, formulated by somebody who does not have teaching experience in an academic setting, these preliminary thoughts will avoid a style and a tone that might suggest a temptation “to teach the teachers”. Rather, the experience, as a senior staff of the World Council of Churches, will constitute the starting point, and questions will be raised on areas where as Orthodox, both staff and participants in ecumenical encounters, feel the need for the continuous support of theological education. Some Orthodox participants in the ecumenical movement might also describe these questions as “the most frequently felt needs”!

Theological institutions represented in this consultation may be ready to respond positively and extensively to such questions. This is precisely the intention of the presentation: to lead to an exchange of information and a dialogue, so that deliberations and learnings are built on existing experiences.

Second, reference to Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement will not be limited to a sterile assessment of ongoing programmatic activities of the World Council of Churches. The issue of Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement goes far beyond the programmatic activities of any ecumenical institution. It would be more appropriate to go deeper, to the very heart of ecumenical challenges (e.g. on theological and ecclesiological principles, and on strategic institutional concerns).

### 1. The nature of Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement<sup>1</sup>

In spite of objective difficulties and contextual changes and challenges affecting Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement, there is an unequivocal expression of Orthodox commitment to Christian unity and of Orthodox participation in both bi-lateral theological dialogues and ecumenical organizations (e.g. WCC, CEC, MECC, AACC, CCA, NCCC/USA, etc.).

This affirmation is grounded on Orthodox conciliar authority. In fact, the statement of the Third Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference (1986) on „*The Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement*“ summarizes Orthodox ecclesiology, missiology, and church life as follows:

*„The Orthodox Church, in her profound conviction and ecclesiastical consciousness of being the bearer of and witness to the faith and tradition of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, firmly believes that she occupies a central place in matters relating to the promotion of Christian unity within the contemporary world. The Orthodox Church, which unceasingly prays for the union of all, has taken part in the ecumenical movement since its inception and has contributed to its formation and further development. In fact, the Orthodox Church, due to the ecumenical spirit by which she is distinguished, has, through the history, fought for the restoration of Christian unity. Therefore, the Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement does not run counter to the nature and history of the Orthodox Church. It constitutes the consistent expression of the apostolic faith within new historical conditions, in order to respond to new existential demands.“<sup>2</sup>*

Throughout the years, representatives of Orthodox member churches participating in ecumenical gatherings or governing bodies of ecumenical organizations have consistently affirmed this explicit expression of Orthodox commitment to the ecumenical movement. This has also been the consistent response to questions -- and sometimes harsh criticism -- from rather conservative and anti-ecumenical circles from within the Orthodox Church.<sup>3</sup>

The ecclesiological sincerity, clarity and consistency of the Orthodox were appreciated and qualified by a well known theologian of the ecumenical movement “*perhaps as the most important Orthodox contribution to the WCC.*” Indeed, Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser, former general secretary of the WCC and professor of ecumen-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the excellent report of an inter-orthodox consultation held in New Valamo, Finland, in 1997. In: Gennadios Limouris, *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism, Statements, Messages and Reports on the Ecumenical Movement (1902-1992)*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1994, pp. 66-69.

<sup>2</sup> In: Gennadios Limouris, op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the attempts to respond to internal criticism are gathered and made available in: <http://www.incommunion.org/2004/10/24/orthodoxy-ecumenism/>

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ical theology, affirms that: “Few other member churches of the Council have been as explicit about the fundamental theological reasons for their participation”.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, this same vision was rearticulated and reaffirmed by the Ecumenical Patriarch, in the Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical on the occasion of Sunday of Orthodoxy (2009):

**“Orthodoxy must be in constant dialogue with the world. The Orthodox Church does not fear dialogue because truth is not afraid of dialogue. On the contrary, if Orthodoxy is enclosed within itself and not in dialogue with those outside, it will both fail in its mission and no longer be the “catholic” and “ecumenical” Church. Instead, it will become an introverted and self-contained group, a “ghetto” on the margins of history. This is why the great Fathers of the Church never feared dialogue with the spiritual culture of their age – indeed even with the pagan idolaters and philosophers of their world – thereby influencing and transforming the civilization of their time and offering us a truly ecumenical Church.**

*Today, Orthodoxy is called to continue this dialogue with the outside world in order to provide a witness and the life-giving breath of its faith. However, this dialogue cannot reach the outside world unless it first passes through all those that bear the Christian name. Thus, we must first converse as Christians among ourselves in order to resolve our differences, in order that our witness to the outside world may be credible. Our endeavors for the union of all Christians is the will and command of our Lord, who before His Passion prayed to His Father “that all [namely, His disciples] may be one, so that the world may believe that You sent me.” (John 17.21) It is not possible for the Lord to agonize over the unity of His disciples and for us to remain indifferent about the unity of all Christians. This would constitute criminal betrayal and transgression of His divine commandment”<sup>5</sup>.*

The intention here is not to depict only a positive picture. It is true that there are many voices within Orthodoxy that are critical with regard to Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement. However, even the “*Thessaloniki report*”<sup>6</sup>, while exercising a severe critique of certain aspects of the life and work of the World Council of Churches, it clearly reminded the fact that there is a unanimous

<sup>4</sup> *The importance of the Orthodox contribution to the WCC*, Public lecture by Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser at an international symposium on “Orthodox theology and the future of ecumenical dialogue: perspectives and problems”, Thessaloniki, Greece, 1-3 June 2003, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/member-churches/special-commission-on-participation-of-orthodox-churches/orthodox-contribution-to-the-wcc.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Patriarchal and Synodical Encyclical on Sunday of Orthodoxy (2009), published in many web-sites, as for example: [http://www.thyateira.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=663&Itemid=1](http://www.thyateira.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=663&Itemid=1)

<sup>6</sup> The Thessaloniki report is available at <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/morges-06-e.html>.

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expression of the necessity for continuing Orthodox participation in various forms of inter-Christian activities.

There is no doubt that there are Orthodox theologians who are cautious vis-à-vis the ecumenical movement. In various occasions, however, Orthodox theologians have clearly stated that:

*“the unity of the church is not for us an option but an imperative, in fact a divine command” and affirmed that “progress was made toward Christian unity especially since the early years of this century, both in the context of the WCC and in other fora”.<sup>7</sup>*

Some of the questions that could be asked in this area might be the following:

- How does theological education strengthen the stated option of Orthodox Churches to actively participate in the ecumenical movement and thus give an account of their faith and their understanding of the *Una Sancta*?
- How could theological research and formation convince and mobilize Orthodox churches that seem to gradually decrease their interest and participation in the ecumenical movement?
- How could Orthodox churches be assisted in their efforts to face internal pressures from conservative/fundamentalist groups?
- Even if they have hesitations or questions about the ecumenical movement, how could Orthodox churches manifest their solidarity vis-à-vis sister churches for whom participation in inter-Christian relationships constitutes an imperative as they live and witness side by side with other Christian sisters and brothers?

## **2. The ecclesiological challenge**

Another constant affirmation by the Orthodox in their participation in the contemporary ecumenical movement, particularly after the foundation of the WCC, was the crucial importance of ecclesiology. From the very beginning, the Orthodox wanted to clarify – as much as possible – the ecclesiological presuppositions of Orthodox participation in ecumenical initiatives.

Metropolitan John of Pergamon offers an excellent historical and theological overview:

*“(…) a decisive factor contributing to the continuing full participation of the Orthodox in the WCC was, in my view, the support given to the Ecumenical Movement by the eminent and deeply respected in conservative Orthodox circles Russian theologian, the late Fr G. Florovsky, whose role was decisive, particularly at the*

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<sup>7</sup> cf. Two reports, respectively from Iasi and Boston, in: Fr Thomas FitzGerald and Peter Bouteneff (Ed.), *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope...*, pp. 130-135 and 147-150.

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*Evanston Assembly. Florovsky was the first one, as far as I am aware, to raise the question of the Orthodox participation in the Ecumenical Movement at a theological level. Up to that time the Orthodox limited themselves to the assertion that only the Orthodox Church is the Una Sancta, avoiding to raise the question of what the other participants in the Ecumenical Movement ecclesiologically were (...). Florovsky took the matter further, and the step he made must be taken into account even today. First, he insisted that the true catholicity of the Church requires the co-existence of both, Eastern and Western Christianity. Speaking of the "catholic ethos" of the ancient undivided Church, he made the point that this was due to the creative exchange between Greek and Latin Christianity, an exchange which ceased to exist after the great schism of the 11th century. His slogan "ecumenism in time" did not aim at an assertion of traditionalism, but expressed the conviction that the division between West and East has affected seriously the catholicity of the Church."*<sup>8</sup>

It is true that, in the discussion leading to the Toronto Declaration (1950), Orthodox theologians played an active role. While the declaration constituted, somehow, an "ecclesiological chart" for the WCC and an "ecclesiological guarantee" for Orthodox participation in the WCC, we do not seem to have moved much beyond the point of stating an open question for which an acceptable answer or solution has not yet been found. Many Orthodox theologians have written since, but the question still remains quite open, as stipulates a recent article by Fr Emmanuel Clapsis.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that we face here a serious theological and ecclesiological challenge as there is no a converging and commonly agreed position on Orthodox relationships with other Christian churches. The only official statement responding to this challenge is the following formulation of the Third Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference:

*"The Orthodox Church as the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is fully conscious of its responsibility with respect to the unity of the Christian world. She recognizes the real existence of all Christian Churches and confessions. At the same time, she is convinced that all her relations with these Churches and confessions must be based upon the clarification, as quickly and objectively as possibly, of ecclesiological questions and particularly, of the common teaching with respect to the Sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession. The bilateral theological dialogues currently being conducted by the Orthodox Church are the authoritative expression of this consciousness of Orthodoxy. In conducting dialogue with other*

<sup>8</sup> Metropolitan John of Pergamon, *The Self-understanding of the Orthodox and their Participation in the Ecumenical Movement*, in: [http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/ecumenical/john\\_selfunderstanding\\_ecumenical.htm](http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/ecumenical/john_selfunderstanding_ecumenical.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Clapsis, *The Boundaries of the Church – An Orthodox debate*, in: <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8541>

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*Christians, the Orthodox Church is, of course, not unaware of the difficulties attached to such an undertaking; she realizes that they are not to be avoided on the road to the common Tradition of the Early, Undivided Church, and hopes that the Holy Spirit, Which builds the entire Body of the Church, will provide for the deficiencies.*"<sup>10</sup>

Within the ecumenical movement and particularly the WCC, the Orthodox struggled with their ecclesiological rigor and, on their persistent request, the Special Commission on Orthodox participation in the WCC, established after the Harare assembly (1998), has given attention to critical questions which have arisen regarding the theological -- and in particular ecclesiological -- basis of Orthodox participation in the life of the WCC. The commission has tried to address, once again, the basic principles which are implied in Orthodox participation in the WCC. Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser, who at that time was the trustee of this process as general secretary of the WCC, recognizes that:

*"The Orthodox churches should at least be credited for the fact that they have continued to insist that it is of central importance for the World Council of Churches to struggle with this question."*<sup>11</sup>

The Report of the Special Commission, drafted with substantial contribution of its Orthodox members, paid particular attention to ecclesiology and described participation in the WCC as follows:

*"Joining a World Council of Churches entails accepting the challenge to give an account to each other of what it means to be church; to articulate what is meant by 'the visible unity of the church'; and how the member churches understand the nature of the life and witness they share together now through their membership in the WCC. This is the question of how the church relates to the churches."* (para. 13)

In sharpening this challenge, the Special Commission invited the two main groupings in the membership of the WCC to pose to one another the following questions:

*"To the Orthodox: 'Is there space for other churches in Orthodox ecclesiology? How would this space and its limits be described?' To the churches within the tradition of the Reformation: 'How does your church understand, maintain and express your belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church?'"* (para. 16)

This is the most burning issue for Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement. Without defining this "space", Orthodox churches will continue their

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<sup>10</sup> The Decisions of the Third Pre-Council Pan-Orthodox Conference, in *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* 5 (1987) 57.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit.

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endless internal debates and Orthodox theologians will continue defending oscillating – sometimes very inconsistent – positions.

Here the questions we might consider are the following:

- Can Orthodox theological institutions and professors deepen together the crucial matter of the “boarders of the church”, an issue that both individual theologians and the pre-conciliar process<sup>12</sup> have tackled without, however, reaching any final convergence?
- What would be the Orthodox assessment after a few years of implementation of the main findings of the Special Commission (is an evaluation needed)?

### 3. The agenda “of the world“

The vision and activities of the WCC are marked by the intrinsic relationship between the unity of the church and the unity of the humankind, particularly humanity’s struggles for justice, peace, development, renewal and the effort to build relationships with all people of good will. Orthodox churches, despite some fundamental critical remarks and warnings they have issued at certain occasions, joined the efforts of other churches and committed themselves to offer their own witness in these areas.

Practically every issue on the agenda of the WCC was picked up by Orthodox theologians, looked at from an Orthodox perspective, and the results were shared with the wider circle of member churches in the WCC. To give only one example, in the period between the Nairobi and Vancouver assemblies, twelve consultations with Orthodox theologians were organized by or in cooperation with the WCC Orthodox Task Force and by several sub-units, on a variety of theological, missiological and social issues which were part of the WCC agenda during that period. Rev. Dr Georges Tssetsis, the Moderator of the Orthodox Task Force in that period, edited a volume documenting the reports of these consultations. In his foreword, he states the following:

*„These gatherings made it possible for an impressive number of Orthodox bishops, priests, theologians, sociologists and educationalists to meet together in prayer and meditation and to try to respond to the challenges and questions posed to the Orthodox Church by developments in the world and the ecumenical movement. While the findings of these meetings do not represent the official position of the Orthodox churches, they nevertheless point to new expressions of the Orthodox tradition within*

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<sup>12</sup> There was an attempt, at the Fourth Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Commission (1968), in the framework of the study of “*Economy and Akribeia in the Orthodox Church*”, to recognize the de facto existence of Christian churches and communities outside the canonical boarders of the Orthodox church. The document however did not figure on the agenda of the next pre-conciliar phase.

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*an ecumenical context and indicate new trends and developments within Orthodox theological thought.*<sup>13</sup>

This practice continued consistently throughout the years. Orthodox reflections on matters ranging from pneumatology to the theology of creation, and from missiology to the role of women in the Church, were articulated and widely shared.

The volume “*Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism*”, compiled by Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima is only a simple “mirror” of these longstanding efforts, since it gives a taste of the rich harvest through the final reports of the consultations. The rich bibliography of Orthodox consultations, research and reflection – to limit myself only in the area of the WCC, which I am familiar with – constitutes one of the most important sources of inspiration for both Orthodox theologians and partners in the ecumenical movement.

Our questions for the present case might be the following:

- How do we make available to Christian sisters and brothers the most precious resources of our patristic, liturgical and spiritual tradition, having the tremendous potential to respond to burning questions of our world?
- How do we make sure that Orthodox churches and their theologians actively participate in key debates/processes (e.g. not only on ecclesiology, mission, spirituality and common prayer, but also on peace and justice, overcoming violence, human rights, economic globalization, etc.) and that their voice is heard and seriously taken into consideration?

#### **4. “Agendas” of local Orthodox churches**

The conciliar movement of the Eastern Orthodox church had sharpened the idea and practice of a “common agenda”. New pastoral needs and missiological challenges had as a consequence a shift to rather “individual” agendas. To give only a few examples, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has gradually strengthened its presence and leading role in the area of environmental issues and inter-religious relations. The Patriarchate of Antioch developed a theology of religions and strong relationships with Islam. The Russian Orthodox Church produced significant working documents in the area of inter-church relations and social issues. The Church of Greece inaugurated a highly sophisticated and qualified research center for biotechnology.

This might be another way of responding to urgent questions raised by our world and dealing with vital issues on the world agenda. Probably, it is precisely for this reason that most of these initiatives of local Orthodox churches were rec-

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<sup>13</sup> Georges Tssetsis (ed.), *Orthodox Thought. Reports of Orthodox Consultations organized by the World Council of Churches 1975-1982*, Geneva 1983, 1.

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ognized as reflecting broader Orthodox and ecumenical concerns. Therefore, they are very often becoming occasions both for an Orthodox witness to the world and for building and maintaining ecumenical relations.

Going back to the definition of the Third Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference that Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement constitutes the consistent expression of the apostolic faith within new historical conditions, in order to respond to new existential demands, one could find a possible description of these “new historical demands” in the Message of the Heads of Eastern Orthodox Churches, issued at the end of their meeting in the Phanar:

*“In human social life, the accumulation of privileges of the (technological and scientific) progress and power proceeding from it to only a section of humanity exacerbates the misfortune of other people and creates an impetus for agitation or even war. The co-existence of this progress with justice, love and peace is the only safe and sure road, so that this progress will not be transformed from blessing into a curse in the millennium to come.*

*Tremendous are also the problems which come out of this progress for man’s survival as a free person created in the image and likeness of God. The progress of genetics, although capable of making enormous contributions to combating many diseases, is also capable of transforming the human being from a free person into an object directed and controlled by those in power.*

*Similar are the dangers for the survival of the natural environment. The careless and self-indulgent use of material creation by man, with the help of scientific and technological progress, has already started to cause irreparable destruction to the natural environment (...).*

*In view of such tremendous possibilities, as well as dangers, for contemporary humanity, the Orthodox church hails every progress towards reconciliation and unity”.*<sup>14</sup>

There is no need for further elaboration of this point. We may simply want to take note that in all the examples mentioned, it is widely recognized that Orthodox churches and theologians play a pioneering role, becoming a source of inspiration and encouragement to many.

The questions in this area might also be simple and straightforward:

- How do we strengthen our Churches in their effort to address new and urgent issues, providing them the necessary theological resources?
- Do we systematically include in our teaching the pastoral and missiological concerns of our churches?

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<sup>14</sup> Message of the Primates of the Most Holy Orthodox Churches, Phanar, 1992, in : Gennadios Limouris, op. cit., p. 198.

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## **5. The harvest of the ecumenical movement**

After a century of history, the contemporary ecumenical movement can put on the records a number of “success” stories, as well as a number of serious difficulties. This brief introductory paper will not enter neither into all the details of the progress made by the bi-lateral theological dialogues nor of the difficulties faced by the ecumenical organizations. In both cases the harvest is rich and the legacy quite heavy. The fact that “reception” is quoted in many occasions as a major problem is partly due to the rich harvest and the important break-through events in the last decades.

The questions in this area would certainly be numerous. Only to two of them are raised here, with the hope that the scope will be expanded to include other similar questions:

- For over thirty years Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches have been engaged in theological dialogue. Through this dialogue churches have come to see that they share the same faith. In many situations, churches have grown closer through cooperation in all aspects of ecclesial life. What is the role of an Orthodox theologian today in contributing to the full unity and communion between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches?

- How do Orthodox churches participate actively and responsibly in the efforts to deal with the present institutional difficulties of the ecumenical organizations (e.g. vision, structures, programmes, resources, etc.)? How do we assess new ecumenical initiatives (e.g. the Global Christian Forum)? What is the attitude/assessment of Orthodox churches with regard to new – less “ecclesial” and more “cooperative” or “activist” -- ecumenical instruments (e.g. EAA, ACT, etc.)?

## **6. Conclusion**

The most appropriate word of conclusion would be an expression of gratitude to all Orthodox theological institutions and Orthodox theologians who largely contributed to a meaningful and fruitful Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement.

The number of Orthodox member churches and individual Orthodox theologians that are unanimously recognized as pioneers and leading forces within the broader ecumenical movement is by far larger than any of us can presume. It will be of outmost importance to continue this trend. The role of theological institutions will be – as always – decisive.