

The Ecumenical Movement and The Theological Thinking in the Life of Orthodox Churches “Style and Ethos of being as Orthodox in the ecumenical movement”

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Abstract

This study presents firstly an elaborated vision of the author on the way how the Orthodox theology accepted to approach themes of large interest raised by western philosophy and theology in XIXth- XXth centuries. The second part is concentrated on the ecclesiological challenges related with the acceptance of discussing these issues by the orthodox theology. The last part presents the author's vision on the future of the involvement of Orthodox theology in the ecumenical movement and the role that education could play in it.

Key words: ecumenical movement, ecclesiology, orthodox witness today

1. What Sort of Subject is Modern Christian Theology?

Between the Middle Ages and the end of the twentieth century there were many major events and transformations of life and thought, often originating in Europe, which had global consequences. Chief among these have been the Renaissance and Reformation, the colonization of the Americas, the South and not only, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, the rise of nationalism, the Industrial Revolution, the development of the natural sciences, technologies, medical science, and the human sciences, and at last new wars and the terrorism. There has also been the combined impact of bureaucracies, constitutional democracy, new means of warfare and of communication, mass education and public health programs, and new movements in the arts and in philosophy and religion¹.

¹ Cf. David. F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians. An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd Edition, University of Cambridge with Rachel Muers, University of Exeter, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 3-5.

Theologians have been members of ecumenical societies, churches, and academic institutions through this innovative, traumatic period, and their theology has inevitably been influenced by it. That is how, in a minimal sense, their theology is modern: by taking account of such developments, even if sometimes in order to dismiss, criticize, resist, or try to reverse them. Some may wish to repeat a past theology, but this is not possible. The context has changed, and what is actually communicated and understood today can be very far from the original meaning. Yet Christian theology always requires some continuity with the past, so the question is: How can there be appropriate continuity without simple repetition? What is the significance of modernity for the content and method of theology? What is the importance of Christianity for a proper appreciation and response to modernity? And might it be that a religion with the discontinuity of the crucifixion at its heart enables a creative way of coping with the novelty and disruption of modernity? Such questions, which are broadly in the area of interpretation or hermeneutics, are inextricable from others about the nature of Christianity and of theology.²

It insists that Christian identity is primary and that all other reality needs to be construed in relation to it, but also that Christianity itself needs continually to be rethought and theology must engage seriously with the modern world in its quest for understanding. Karl Barth par example is a leading representative of this approach, though this typecasting by no means exhausts his theology – and the same is true of attempts to pigeonhole most of the other theologians. Daniel Hardy's essays describe this theology in its development and content, and trace its remarkable fruitfulness in the work of other leading theologians. Further examples of this type are Bonhoeffer (though some would dispute this, especially as regards his latest letters and papers), de Lubac, Balthasar, Thomas Torrance, MacKinnon, Ramsey, Roland Williams, most post liberals, Jüngel, Jenson, Gunton, those called conservative post moderns in much ecumenical, Eastern Orthodox, Evangelical, and Pentecostal theology.

In its classic modern representative, Paul Tillich, it takes the form of the basic questions raised in contemporary life and thought being correlated with answers developed through interpretation of key Christian symbols. In a period of fragmentation and pluralism the method of correlation is especially attractive as a way of keeping going a range of open dialogues. It is a component in most theologies and is particularly important in Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, some of those the-

² The typology that follows draws on the work of Hans W. Frei, in: *Types of Christian Theology*, For a brief account and discussion of Frei's typology, see David Ford, "On Being Theologically Hospitable to Jesus Christ: Hans Frei's Achievement," in: *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 46/October 1995, 532–46.

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ologies labelled “*particularizing*”, and many of those in North America who could be called revisionist. James Buckley also defines revisionists as those “*devoted to shaping Christian practices and teachings in dialogue with modern philosophies, cultures, and social practices.*”

2. The nineteenth century: creativity and crisis

In the recovery and criticism of the past a theologian frequently gives a special place to particular periods or contributions. It is often more true to say that a theologian seems gripped in this way, and is immersed in texts and debates which have an authority that permeates his or her theology. The Holy Bible is most widely treated in this way, and the patristic period is likewise usually privileged. The other two main reference points before the modern period are medieval theology and the Reformation. Periods, traditions, and theologies inter-animate each other in subtle ways, and it is often crude to draw clear lines of influence. Yet it remains important to understand with whom a theologian finds dialogue most worthwhile.

One period, however, stands out as the most helpful in understanding what it means for theology since 1918 to be specifically modern: the nineteenth century (which I will consider as extending to 1918). That was the century in which the issues of modernity were tackled comprehensively for the first time, and most of the main Christian responses to them explored. So it is not surprising that the main dialogue partners for twentieth-century theologians (especially those in the West or educated in the West) outside their own period tend to be either nineteenth-century figures or movements of thought which were shaped then. Even though most theologies are, of course, deeply indebted to other periods as well, in their understanding of them the philosophical and historical habits of nineteenth-century thought are usually very influential. Karl Barth, for example, who wanted to break with much of what he saw as characteristic of nineteenth-century theology, was steeped in it and has to be understood in relationship to it. The cost of ignoring the nineteenth century is often paid in energetically repeating the exploration of options which were developed and thoroughly discussed then, and most twentieth-century theologians know this.

It is therefore worth surveying the nineteenth century for its importance. There were three thrusts in nineteenth-century thought which especially need to be appreciated in relation to twentieth-century theologians. The first was the re-thinking of knowledge and rationality, and the accompanying need to re-conceive theology. This will be treated below through Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. The second was the development of a new historical consciousness joined with the application of critical historical methods to religion. This will be traced through

Hegel and Strauss. The third was the challenge of alternative explanations of religion, as seen in Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Durkheim, and others. In the middle comes the awkward figure of Kierkegaard, and at the end the summing up of many of the issues in Troeltsch.

This is sometimes developed by focusing on personal freedom and inter-subjectivity, as in existentialism's concern for encounter and decision. With others, such as Moltmann and the liberation theologians, the practicality takes a social and political form and is more affected by post-Kantian ideas of history and society.

It is worth reflecting on why Kant's stress on the ethical, practical, and inter-subjective in relation to religion which continued to be attractive. Partly it is because Kant shared common roots with many theologians in a Lutheran faith constituted by a dynamic interactive relationship between the believer and God. For those who came later, it also represented an appealing response to the most dangerous threats which modernity posed, not only to theology but also to the whole realm of value, ethics, and to the personhood. These were the challenges of naturalistic and other "reductionist" explanations of religion, morality, and humanity which by the end of the century had been built up to massive proportions by such personalities as Strauss (critical history), Feuerbach (philosophy), Marx (politics and economics), Durkheim and Weber (sociology), Frazer (comparative religion), William James (psychology), Darwin (evolutionary biology), and Nietzsche (philosophy). These have decisively shaped the "common sense" of many twentieth-century educated Western people about religion, and in the face of them the claim of Kant that the realm of freedom and practicality could not be reduced to any "objective" explanation offered theologians something which was both widely appealing beyond Christianity and a medium through which to express Christianity.

3. The Ecumenical Movement a Space of 'togetherness'

Within this situation on theologies appeared the ecumenical movement, without any doubt has been today considered as a privileged place and space of "togetherness" of Christian Churches, and confessional families, but not only this. This was marked since its beginning with an ecclesial understanding, a common action, and of worshipping and style of life and which was developed throughout all of its history. Thus, togetherness and fellowship became the essential part of life of the ecumenical movement, bringing people from various Church "traditions" together in reflection, prayer, and in one communion of fellowship in the love of Christ.

In all these years of ecumenical life ecclesiology remained and still remains the crucial issue for Christian theology in ecumenical perspective. Because of

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the growing number of inter-church theological dialogues, a consequence of the ecumenical movement, this special topic in systematic theology becomes more and more the focus of interest in modern theological research. At the same time, it is evident that in ecclesiology the vast spectrum of theological study assumes a concrete shape and a specialized expression. As a response to the challenges for intensifying inter-church relations, or for making theology more explicitly relevant and concrete in the modern world, ecclesiology today becomes the meeting point for church-centred ecumenism and church centred theology.

Therefore, it is not astonishing that such a rich theological production has been manifest in this area of theology during the past decades. One cannot avoid appreciating the intense ecclesiological research based on sound Biblical premises and historical-patristic studies. For that reason ecclesiology has not only contributed to a better understanding between separated and divided Christian confessions, but also towards a more complete self-understanding on the part of each confession; indeed, it has given a new impetus to the renewal of Christian theology itself.

The new question now is how to evaluate this extremely rich production of studies, statements, documents and declarations and use them in an appropriate, comprehensive and synthetic way, not so much for producing additional statements of confessional ecclesiological positions - this only risks repeating positions which are well-known already - but rather in the service of *renewal* both in ecumenism and in theological work. It seems that our tasks at this moment are to use this wealth of ecclesiological literature and attempt a new type of ecclesiological approach, with the intention of promoting an ecclesiology of *convergence* and mutual enrichment between our one-sided ecclesiological positions. It is precisely this kind of ecclesiological approach which lies behind, or better, is at the basis of such pre-consensus documents like "*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*" (BEM) of Faith and Order.

4. The ecclesiological approaches

There is clear and sufficient evidence that all ecclesiological approaches can be distinguished between two main streams of thought. Without risking a dangerous generalization - because there are multiple variations within each one of them - one can detect in all ecclesiologies in contemporary systematic theology on the one hand a "*pro-catholicizing*" tendency and, on the other, a "*pro-congregational*" tendency. There are many attempts at mutual appreciation and at a gratifying exchange between these tendencies, but we are still in the process of constructing a genuine, all embracing ecclesiology which incorporate both elements.

When one regards ecumenical life, ecclesiology in ecumenical perspective, we become fully aware that after more than half a century of work there still prevails a strong dualism in contemporary ecclesiological thinking. There is a certain “*distance*” resulting from the opposition between two different ecclesiologies. The first is an ecclesiology conceived on the basis of incorporating all in Christ and sharing in the secure experience of an inseparable, single communion as common members of one “*sacramental*” body. The second is an ecclesiology deriving itself from re-gathering the people of God by *his* word, and sharing in the prophetic actualization of the evangelical message in the world.

In other words, the one tendency emphasizes the element of belongingness to the body of Christ through sacramental events as the *sine qua non* of the Church’s existence. This is accompanied by a mystical experience of an inner, spiritual communion with all the Saints of the Church as immaculate and holy. The other tendency underlines belongingness to the body of Christ as a result of a Christ-centred appeal and vocation within the gathered community, which “*hears*” or acknowledges the absolute supremacy of the word of God addressed to, and exercised in, the world in a prophetic way. Experience within the mystical body of Christ on the one hand, and kerygmatic-prophetic adherence and consistent devotion and action on the other, are the fundamental elements - amongst many others resulting from them - which distinguish these two tendencies in ecclesiology.

Certainly this schematic and perhaps, in some respects, too easy and arbitrary, separation does not do justice to the reality of church life in either case. This is because, in ecclesial *praxis*, i.e. in the actual *praxis* of the churches and their devotional, liturgical and evangelical-missionary action, there is an inevitable interpenetration of the two tendencies as described above. But I would still like to maintain that there is clear evidence which make this distinction clearly manifest, especially in ecclesiology as well as in the positions taken over current issues of the life of the church in relation to its own renewal and to the renewal of the world,. Of course we can defend the ideas that the “mystical body” tendency includes the kerygmatic-prophetic tendency, and vice-versa, but in reality our ecclesiological thinking and the corresponding presence and action of our church in the world betrays our commitment to one view over the other and this one-sidedness is at the basis of all later disagreements over specific ecclesiological issues.

There is, on the Eastern Orthodox-catholicizing side, a permanent reference to a kind of ecclesial “*ontology*”, i.e. a special ontological affirmation by faith and *praxis* - expressed especially in the liturgy - of the being of the church in itself, beyond the adherence, the loyalty or disloyalty, and the holiness or sinfulness of its human members. This affirmation is due to the direct and imperturbable connection between the head, Christ, and the body, the members as maintained by the

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operation of the Holy Spirit cleansing the church and preserving it *as holy* (though composed of sinful members). Without denying that a similar trend exists in the life of the churches of the other type and that perhaps a kind of church ontology can be found in some of the leading reform era also, the truth is that there is no similar insistence on the permanent, transcending element in the existence of the church itself. This is clearly seen in the different appreciation each side has for the value of church tradition, for the *priestly* nature of ministry, and for the permanent validity of church structures in their continuity throughout history.

It is because of this ecclesiological “*ontology*”, for instance, that Orthodox theology “*never treats the earthy aspect of the church in isolation but thinks always of the church in Christ and the Holy Spirit... and starts with the special relationship which exists between the church and God*”. It is because of this reference that the priorities given in ecclesiology are expressed by subjects like the body of Christ, or the bride of Christ, the insistence on the Trinitarian basis for the communion of the Church, the interpretation of the Church as a continuous Pentecost, or as the celestial Jerusalem established in history, reflecting in it the permanent divino-human intercourse as the image of the incarnate word.

We may speak here of a verticalism of ontological affirmation and mystical experience in the liturgy and the sacraments, with an attendant strong pneumatological-charismatic, Eucharistic-sacramental, and eschatological elements. But historical facticity and reality are equally important for a holistic ecclesiology which advances to be based, as it should be, on authentic Christological premises. The question remains, however, how far this kind of ecclesiology could include such historical elements without losing its own “*ontological*” and sacramental self-affirmation. Certainly this attitude or, better, this necessary extension would be expected from the evangelical-congregational tendency and from the notion of the people of God in order that both tendencies might converge into one common, more complete ecclesiology capable of contributing to the study of the relationship between the unity of the church and the renewal of the world.

Worship was and still is also considered the “*sacred and holy*” heart of every Christian Church and community, because Christian liberty and virtue arise out of the fertile soil of the Church’s memory “*anamnesis*” of the central salvific events in the life, death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fulfilment of God’s Kingdom.

Nevertheless, a pervasive influence of secularism in Western culture has constricted the Christian imagination and invention of new things and forms. The experience of the eschatological “*future*” is being lost and the morally formative and spiritually trans-formative power of the liturgy is diminishing. On the other hand the Orthodox tradition holds that the remembrance or anamnesis of the Kingdom

in the Eucharist remains the substantial soil from which grows all that belongs singularly to Christian ethics and style of life in Christ. Were the liturgy of the Eucharist merely one source of authority among others for Christian ethics, this impoverishment of the experience of worship would not pose a problem quite as severe nor would this crisis of Christian ethics and life in Christ be so acute.

But the liturgy is not just one among a variety of authorities and sources for Christian ethics: it is its ontological condition. It is the principal of a dialogical encounter where God and human beings meet and the ecclesial body, the community or the “*synaxis*”, teaching repentance and forgiveness, confession and proclamation, prophesy and doxology. This cloth is woven on the extensive frame of an eschatological vision. As the vision of the Kingdom of God recedes from the consciousness of Christians the cloth unravels, the threads pull apart, and some Christians hang on to one thread or another; some identify the Church primarily in its teaching function, others in its prophetic or proclamatory mode, others as a moral community dedicated in service to the poor or powerless.

This loss of eschatological vision has the added effect blurring the boundaries of Church and world. Christians themselves have become often unsure about what makes their ethics distinctive. This distinctiveness affects the whole life of the ecumenical movement and the inner life of the World Council of Churches’ participation in the search for church unity in particular. Since the Enlightenment advanced, processes of secularization within the Church of Christ itself have opened the doors for the entrance of secular ethics, whether Kantian, Hegelian or Marxist. The deterioration of Christian worship and disciplines of prayers has deprived the Churches of necessary tools of discernment and creativity to build ethics from within the ecclesial body itself. Ordinary Christians very often adopt secular moralities without knowing the difference between these moralities and the Christian style of life, ethos and ethics.

The Christian world is divided in “*schism*”, and there is little unity or little agreement among those who “*believe in Jesus’ name*”, who confess Christ Jesus as God and Saviour, who put their trust in him and proclaim, by word and deed, their ultimate allegiance to Him as their Lord. There are, in fact, numerous Christian bodies which claim the name of the Church for themselves - and they are out of communion/*koinonia* with one another, sometimes even in open and bitter antagonism. Today, the unity of faith has fallen apart in many cases. The unity of love has cooled down. The body of Christians has been utterly disrupted. Only the hope of unity has not yet been fully lost, and perhaps this is the only token of unity still left in the divided Christendom.

The Orthodox participating in the ecumenical movement have always struggled by making an appeal and addressing an invitation to their ecumenical partners

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that: Christians have to begin to know the “truth” (*aletheia*) of the Good News, to believe and to love the Ecclesia, the Church of Christ, to embrace it even under difficult circumstances and in painful moments of its history, to suffer, witness and confess it, to defend it even if martyrdom be the cost. Thus is the Christian way of worshipping, by communication directly and with open hearts to face the Lord and his Church. The analogical communion/koinonia is the real participation in the Kingdom of God, not yet fulfilled, but already present among us.

We need to find ways for worship services in which the liturgical convergence can become clear to everyone; people need to be aware that it is the liturgy of the Church they use, not a Methodist service or a Roman mass nor an Eucharistic liturgy of the Orthodox. As such awareness grows, will this not lead to the question: “*If we have the same worship service, why are we divided?*” Another factor is the rapid growth in an individualistic, consumer-oriented approach to the Church and the resulting audience-style worship. The convergence in worship does not have uniformity as its goal. Nor is it meant to signal a massive retreat to the 3rd or 4th century. What the ecumenical movement says about unity and diversity applies equally to worship.

At its 1978 meeting in Bangalore, the Faith and Order Commission affirmed the interconnection of *the concept of ‘organic unity’, with the proposed concept ‘unity in reconciled diversity’*.³

Today, in the ecumenical field the choice is not between style and ethos or institution and task, but rather between different aspects of the one task - to be in one communion of Faith and Conciliar Fellowship. In the many critical situations we have faced in the ecumenical movement, the question has constantly been: to what extent must we give priority to the task of maintaining the fellowship between the Churches and to keep alive the main issue as a priority which is the unity of the Church; and to what extent is the other responsibility bearing a clear witness against the injustice of the world?

For its life in unity, the Church requires regular gatherings, consultations, common decisions and the testing of these decisions by a process of reception.

³ Cf. G. Gassmann (ed.), *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993*, in: *Faith and Order Paper No. 159*, WCC Publications, Geneva 1993, p. 78 : “*Many say that true unity requires the gathering of all in each place into one Eucharistic community; there would be no room for a continuing life of the confessional traditions. Others say that unity according to Christ's will does not necessarily require the disappearance but rather the transformation of confessional identities to such degree that unity in full sacramental fellowship, common witness and service, together with some common structural institutional expression becomes possible. While the first view is rather connected with the concept of ‘organic unity’, those proposing the concept ‘unity in reconciled diversity’ hold the second. The two concepts are not seen as alternatives. They may be two different ways of reaching to the ecumenical necessities and possibilities of different situations and of different church traditions*”.

The earliest example of such representative gathering may be found in the gathering (*synaxis*) of the Apostles in the Book of Acts (Cf. Acts 15). The Church was freed by the possibility of a serious split. The issue at stake was of far reaching consequences and could easily have divided the Church for centuries. The response to the danger was quite spontaneous. The leaders had to meet and consider the issue in an assembly. Of course, this first assembly was of a rather unique nature.

Subsequently, “*Conciliarity*” found expression in various forms: local synods, in regular regional synods of bishops, in assemblies and councils, of the Christian Roman Empire, etc. Perhaps among these various forms a basic distinction needs to be drawn between regular gatherings required for governing the Church and gatherings called for special reasons⁴.

The question then arose quite naturally: can the different practices of conciliar life not converge and become one? Years ago, some voices in the ecumenical movement raised years ago the question: Can the ecumenical movement not be understood as the anticipation of a future common practice of conciliar life, as the place where each church purifies its own approach and prepares itself for that future Conciliar event which, one day, may bring together the representatives of all churches and which will proclaim the Gospel in new appropriate ways?

What then is Conciliar fellowship? The answer can be very simple. It is communion-koinonia among the Churches which are sufficiently closely knit to be capable of celebrating such “*a genuinely universal council*”. No council can be held without this communion in its full sense.

⁴ *Councils, be they ecumenical or local, do sometimes not serve the unity of the Church. As history shows, they can also be a source of division as any instrument towards unity can be misused and become divisive. There are two extremes which should be avoided. Councils can disregard the participation of the Church. They can try to impose their guidance on the Church. They will then provoke resistance and possible rifts which cannot easily be healed. They can also be overcautious and refrain from offering guidance at all. Such an attitude will equally create confusion and division. Councils serve their purpose if the guidance results from the participatory process, and if at the same time the Council is firm and determined enough to initiate such a participatory process.*

The practice of Conciliar life continued in the separate traditions until today. Each Church developed its own mode of representative gatherings. The Eastern Orthodox Churches, due to their peculiar historical tradition, experience the Conciliarity of the synodical system in an institutional form and action. They rely on the unaltered and also uninterpreted teaching of the Ancient Councils. The Western Churches created new forms of Conciliar assemblies: the papal councils which developed out of the Roman Episcopal Synod under the influence of the increasing dominance of the idea of Primacy; the reform and union councils of the late Middle Ages; the synods as ecclesial representative on the basis of the Reformation understanding of Scripture and Community. In the twentieth century almost all Churches have experienced a revival of conciliar life. Under the pressure of the many new and unexpected challenges of a changed world, they have acutely felt the need for consultation and guidance.

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The Nairobi statement in 1975 underlines that all local churches need to form one fellowship across local, national, ethnic and linguistic boundaries. They share in the same faith and need to recognize each other as churches belonging to Christ. The term “*Conciliar Fellowship*” presupposes not a static, but a dynamic understanding of unity.

The Church is a living human-divine institution or “*organism*” which requires constant attention and care from all its members in order to remain faithful in faith and in Eucharistic communion. The goal of Conciliar fellowship still lies in the future.

Concluding these reflections, a question comes up again. Is there still an ethos and style within the life of World Council of Churches, or are we still in search of such a form of existing together? After a century of the ecumenical movement’s existence, and more than fifty years of presence of World Council of Churches, it could be said that the ethos which has emerged from the Churches’ participation in the fellowship of togetherness is an ethos in ambiguity, which needs to be clarified by the Churches themselves. This unclearness presupposes that the Churches have to re-appropriate their tasks and goals towards the communion-koinonia in an Eucharistic fellowship of the same Body and Blood of Christ, where they at the same time still remain divided.

5. The Orthodox tradition as ecclesial witness “*martyria*” in the diakonia of the world’s renewal

The inner connection and interdependence between sacramental vision and witness in the world as a contribution to its renewal through a continuous *martyria*-martyrdom seems to be one of the main characteristics of church life in the East throughout its long history. Due to the insistence of the Orthodox on the devotion of the total human person to Christ as the unique archetype of the renewed humanity on the way to its *theosis*, the life of a faithful Christian, as a member of the Church sharing in its sacramental vision, has to be an imitation of Christ’s prototype: a continuous witness (*martyria*) through the suffering, service and diakonia within the world to the glory of God.

The intense sacramental-liturgical life of the Orthodox can give the impression of an introverted praying community, closed to the outside world. In reality, however, praying, sharing in the Eucharist, and enjoying the ecclesial sacramental vision significant for the Orthodox, has in their long history been a *prefiguration* of their full conformity to Christ’s diaconal witness to the world, and at the same time a *martyria* through martyrdom to Him.

a) Philanthropy justice as a witnessing diakonia

Because of the historical circumstances in Eastern European countries, it has always been necessary for the church life to render witness and service to the

world through a manifold martyrdom. Neither worldly wisdom nor social work has ever enjoyed, in the East, primacy over this simple, direct, and effective martyrdom. Faith has survived in the East because of this continuous dynamic witness: martyrdom as a living example of the existence in Christ. That is why martyrs, hermits, staretzes, monks and totally devoted lay persons were always the backbone of the ecclesial community witnessing through martyrdom. St Basil's phrase: "Thus Christ has taught, the apostles have proclaimed, the Fathers have maintained, the martyrs have confirmed" summarizes the patristic thought on the value of martyrdom as the confirmation of Christian ecclesial faith in and for the world.

It is within this tradition of witness that the whole evangelical missionary work of the Eastern Church has always been conceived and practiced. While there were no organized "missions" in the modern sense of the term, Orthodoxy has never ceased to be a missionary ecclesial community. Patristic theology was fundamentally kerygmatic, evangelical in so far as it had underlined that faith is not primarily and only an individual possession but is ecclesial, and a faith for others who have not yet joined the Christian community. St John Chrysostom writes that if one keeps his faith to himself then life is unjust to those who do not have it, and to himself also; his faith he makes passive and inactive. *"Mission flows out of the essence of God who is love, and therefore witnessing to the Christian faith for and to others is the first expression of being rooted in God's love. No personal problems should make us neglect to save one who is in danger of drowning in the waves of the sea: precisely the same thing makes our witness become at every moment urgent"*.

Christ himself as the archetype *"has not remained in Jerusalem but went out to find and save people"*. Therefore, *"you also do all possible things to make those who are ignorant and deserted from faith return to it"*.

b) Ecclesial sharing in the world's renewal

It is in this way that one has to think of the relationship between church witness as diaconal service and the ongoing renewal of the world. In other words, we should not think that churches are going to create renewal processes in the world. Renewal in the world is a permanent event. What is new in the world becomes self-evident in the renewing power that all things in nature possess once they come into positive and creative contact with the human intellect. Science does not need to create theories about renewal of all things, nor do sociologists. All things appear to have a permanent existence in space and time, but in reality their reason for being is to be found in a process of change, renewal and development. We can consider this process to be the primary reality in history; it is not a blind process, but one which can be scientifically explained, and to a certain extent mastered, without referring to metaphysical or supernatural causalities.

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The Church as a witnessing service to the world has to recognize this “autonomous” event as happening also within the grace of God - of course, with the restrictions imposed by the historical predicament of human sinfulness. We should not posit an opposition of sacred and profane renewal, but an irreparable co-belongingness within the one creation which is in permanent process of renewal. The Church as sacramental reality and vision is in the midst of this renewing process of all things, and must always be the primary reality of a world which is changing and renewing itself. It does this by sharing in this renewal through the people of its day who move and structure it. Therefore the Church’s life and theology is also subject to renewal for itself, and its renewal is the only possibility of establishing a point of contact with the renewal of the world.

The first question, or problem, therefore is the one concerning the church’s renewal in light of the renewal of all things. We cannot easily distinguish between church renewal, reformation, and transformation, because we cannot easily reconcile the challenge to share in this world’s process of renewal with the desire to preserve and keep the past inheritance in unbroken continuity with the future. It is the problem of how to link the special renewing intervention of God in Christ, and through the Spirit, with the ongoing renewing process happening in the world by and within the same grace of the Trinitarian God. The renewal problem for the Church, especially for the Eastern Churches today on the basis of their age-old tradition of diaconal, renewing service, is central for their authentic identity in a world which is also continually changing and renewing itself.

The biblical message that everything becomes renewed in Christ and is called upon to share in this newness as the purpose of human life is not an abstract contemplative and visionary notion. The sacramental vision of renewal is the primary central reality of world history from the Christian point of view. The apocalyptic phrase “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5) summarizing the Gospel message denotes the divine sovereign act of God acting in Christ by the operation of the Holy Spirit at the centre of history. The scriptures have as their last chapter the vision of “*the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city ... the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit ... and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations*” (Rev 22:1-2).

In this image we can trace symbolically the grace of God flowing from his throne through the tree of life with “*its twelve fruits*”, i.e. the apostolic church and its message (*kerygma*) and sacramental life which is in “*the middle of the street*”, at the centre of the world, “for the healing” of the world. The movement starts from God through the Church as the centre of the world and in inseparable unity with it so that it might offer its diaconal witness for the improvement, correction and perfection of what is already happening in the nations.

We are not, therefore, introducing renewal to the world but sharing God's grace in it and healing the nations. If we lose sight of this vision of renewal both in church and world as one inseparable event out of God's grace, then we risk all kinds of extremist one-sided positions, either isolating the church from the ongoing process of renewal of all things or identifying it with this renewal process thus entirely losing the "healing" aspect of renewal as a distinctive witnessing church contribution in the renewal of the world.

Christian faith, based on the Holy Bible, is at the origin of the most dynamic modern concept of history laying emphasis on its continuous process of renewal and historical development towards the future. There should be no discrepancy between keeping the past of the church life and doctrine unchanged and the need to share in the renewal of the world by and through the renewal of the church. Progress is the targets of renewal in the service of humanity, but progress means continuity with the past and continuity therefore means the right use of the past event in Christ and the wisdom to interpret it anew through the renewal of the Church in contact with the renewal of all things.

The secular world thus becomes an appeal to the church reminding it of being at the origin of the whole renewal process beginning with itself, otherwise it risks not to be a witnessing church. But while renewing itself the Church does not respond to the temptation to easily identify itself with the world's renewal, because it fulfils this ongoing renewal in the world by the specific intervention of the continuous Pentecostal event that it represents, i.e. uniting everybody and all things by this process of renewal caused by the operation of the Spirit. The wholeness of this renewing act of the world by the Spirit implies the new specific event of re-gathering all people into God's oneness, which implies the defeat of all kinds of race and sex discrimination, the improvement of human conditions, the protection of human dignity and the-abolition of injustice and poverty.

The unity of the Church in this way has to be understood as the focus of renewal of the whole world in a new perspective, i.e. as one human family struggling to recapture its high destiny in God. The unity of the church therefore does not fulfill a self-purpose but it is a renewing process of church life as a sacramental community and as a living diaconal witness in the midst of a self-renewing world, aspiring also to its unity by overcoming all obstacles caused by human sin and failure and which have broken its unity. Thus unity, witness and renewal in church and world constitute the means of the whole of history to fulfil its purpose in God. That is what is grasped from the perspective of the sacramental vision of the church.

The tradition of the Orthodox should always be maintained because of its insistence on church continuity, sacramental distinctiveness, special witnessing,

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service to the world, i.e. the special renewing church contribution to the world's renewal but at the same time the solidarity of the church with the ongoing renewal of the world in which the Church is sharing in all human efforts in developing human values and world's unity. The example of the church patristic tradition in this respect, initiating and sharing out of the sacramental life of the Church in all of the genuine efforts for improving the human race in personal, family, social and cultural life, is very instructive for the Orthodox Church life at the present moment.

At the same time this central purpose of witness should become the cause today for an honest self-criticism of the Orthodox as they are finding it hard to reinterpret the patristic thought and action in contemporary areas and by witnessing acts of renewal for the sake of the unity of all. Liturgy is instructive of a continuously renewed dynamic style of life in the world, but when it absorbs the total sacramental vision then diaconal renewing witness in the world risks failing. Orthodoxy today is tempted to fall into an introverted ecclesial life. There, where hostile church authorities prevent the Church from being a witnessing community in the world, the renewal issue is hindered by the survival problem, but unfortunately there where full freedom for this is allowed, a sclerotic conservatism negates the practicing of the renewal process as a witnessing diaconal witness (*martyria*) in the secular realm. The dynamic process of uniting all things into the oneness of God by "*diakonia*" and witness can then be negated by an illusory self-sufficiency in God and a confidence in "our" unchanged church structures and scholastic dogmatism.

6. Looking at the future and moving forward

We easily realize that the ecumenical movement finds itself at a stage of under evaluation from the Churches and the ecumenical partners. This is due to the fact that the Churches give more importance to their search for unity in the bilateral dialogues rather than in the multilateral encounters because are convinced that any attempt for any further communion in fellowship would be realized through the bilateral theological dialogues.

After half a century of multilateral dialogues Churches have realized that the only way which leads to church unity is to achieve it through bilateral encounters and theological dialogues. The multilateral dialogues have been used as instruments and tools towards church unity.

The ecumenical movement have, for years, warned the WCC to undertake the ecumenical education as a lever to broader the ecumenical learning growth. Undertaking education would enable the member churches, including their educational institutions, such as theological faculties, Schools of Theology and semi-

nars, to think seriously about how ecumenical theology could be part of the whole ecumenical life of the respective Churches.

This appeal has been heard with much difficulty due to the varied and complex ecumenical landscape over the world. There is a unique and harmonious picture which could be protected. The diversity of North and South, East and West as well as the ecclesiological diversity are the main obstacles of these challenges for years urged as an ecumenical key issue for the growing of the Churches towards the search of Church unity.

What makes these strikes particularly the WCC is that a delay of an ecumenical growing is worldwide presented between North and South, due to the historical, social, cultural even ethnic, socio-political reasons, facts and events. Thus it seems that sometimes various main lines Churches tried to monopolize over the ecumenical scene and under the ecumenical development of the local Churches. The picture “*we and you and the others*” has been plastered on headlines for decades around Europe and the other continents while the ecumenical partners tried to work with the idea and perception of how to bring the Churches closer to each other in spite of the non deeper issues which were the same of the main reasons of their divisions and separations.

The differentiation of educational systems in the Churches was also one of the reasons which brought the ecumenical education to a variety of models and forms. It is also a fact that in many educational institutions ecumenical theology never was a specific matter in the basic educational system. In addition, only in a very few of these theological training schools was ecumenical theology presented as a concrete part of the educational system.

On the other hand, in the Northern hemisphere scene have been established since decades specialized institutions promoted ecumenical education as a matter *per se*. This last gave the opportunity to many on the young generation to undertake studies on the ecumenical theology and history.

One of these specific institutions is of course the WCC Ecumenical Institute of Bossey with its long and very interesting history on the ecumenical learning and education. Thousands of students from over all the world Churches and Confessions had the great privilege to study and to enrich their ecumenical knowledge recognized and appreciated. Even this ecumenical “*think tank*” of ecumenical institutions, the ecumenical education find its place and role. A significant phase placed them at the whole ecclesial life of the Churches on their growth to the ecumenical “*ideology*”.

Today even more before, ecumenical education is starting to be developed in various Orthodox Churches, but very limited. Looking at the situation after 90’ in Europe in particular, the respective Orthodox Churches had priority their adoption

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o the new so-called democratic political systems appeared after the collapse of the socialist regimes. They respectively tried to find once more their ecclesial identity in confrontation of various political systems and forms. A new public opinion had established and formed where sometimes exercised criticism to the Churches and their leadership that the Church didn't respond accordingly to the peoples needs and lives during the old regimes. This phenomenon brought the Churches in a very difficult situation and to close to themselves, sometimes to give the impression that a spirit of anti-ecumenical is blowing round the ecclesial life of the Church.

Meanwhile, various circles on the other hand, in the Northern hemisphere since decades specialized institutions have been established to promote ecumenical education as a matter *per se*. This gave at last the opportunity to many of the young generation to undertake studies on ecumenical theology and history.

Various circles of the so-called new intelligentsia were founded and began to play a significant role in the society and the authority of the Churches. These groups also started to criticize the official church authorities for their role in past political situations, even made accusations and committed brutal inhuman actions. The Churches, on the other hand, were obliged either to respond or to keep silent or at least to be again enclosed to themselves in order to avoid a social dialogue and confrontation. In addition this situation had a great influence on the hierarchy of various Churches and pushed the Churches to not participate anymore in the ecumenical encounters and to limit their priorities.

Thus we are living in a new situation where the voice of the Orthodox Churches has to be heard - done with the Special Commission - and the WCC is experiencing a new era with the consensus process already accepted as the new method of decision-making in regard to enrich the fellowship and the togetherness within the entire ecumenical movement.