

Theological Education in the Oriental Orthodox Tradition and the Ecumenical Movement

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Abstract

This study presents briefly the actual situation of the Oriental Orthodox Churches being afterwards focused on presenting the traditional education system of Malankara Orthodox Church which was adopted from the Indian tradition and on the theological and traditional values that this Church share with all Orthodox in the world.

Key words: *ecumenism, Oriental Orthodox Churches, traditional indian education*

Introduction

One of the interesting features of the Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement, more particularly in the World Council of Churches, is that the Orthodox Churches in general used to take a common stand regarding all major issues and challenges facing the 20th century ecumenical movement for the visible unity of the Churches. In other words there emerged very often an Orthodox consensus on theological and ethical issues. This common ground was shared by both these families of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches. It would be a surprise to an outside observer given the great diversity of cultures, countries, languages and jurisdictions represented by the various local Orthodox Churches. This shared world view and common theological-ethical stand could be attributed to the common Orthodox sources of theology, spirituality, and liturgy that shaped a certain perspective and ethos. It is particularly obvious in the area of theological education and its relation to the ecumenical movement. This conviction grew in me during my years of collaboration with theologians and Church leaders from various Orthodox Churches in the Central Committee and the various programmes of the WCC like the Faith and Order Commission and Bossey Ecumenical Institute. It seems, therefore, that there is no need of a sharp distinction between the Eastern and Oriental families in this particular regard. There is, however, a need to

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highlight the contextual differences and the different emphases in different local Churches. This paper thus assumes the fundamental unity of Orthodox vision in theological education and makes a modest attempt to bring out the special concerns from the perspective of the Oriental Churches.

Two Families of Churches

A word about the two families of Churches and their dialogue may be of help.

In the WCC the Orthodox Churches are grouped into two families – the Eastern and Oriental. It was in the 20th century ecumenical context that the expressions ‘Eastern’ and ‘Oriental’ were routinely used to distinguish these two families. “Eastern” refers to the family of Churches in the Byzantine liturgical tradition. These are the Orthodox Churches which accept the seven Ecumenical Councils as of fundamental doctrinal and canonical importance. They share the same basic liturgical texts and practices. Sometimes these Churches are referred to by the other family of Oriental Orthodox Churches as the Chalcedonian Orthodox since the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the fourth Ecumenical Council for the Eastern Orthodox, was the point of separation between the Eastern and the Oriental Orthodox.

The other family, namely the Oriental Orthodox, consists of the Armenian, the Coptic, the Ethiopian, the Indian (Malankara) and the Syrian Churches. Very recently, in the aftermath of the political division between Ethiopia and Eritrea, a separate Church called the Eritrean Orthodox Church, formerly part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was constituted.

The main conflict between the two families was in the area of Christology—about how the divine and the human natures are united in the person of Jesus Christ. However, strong political, cultural and social factors also played a major part to aggravate the doctrinal dispute. The differences resulted in the breach of communion between these two Eastern families which, in spite of separation, maintain to this day a remarkable unity in theological approach, liturgical-spiritual ethos and general church discipline

The Christological differences between these two families were resolved in a series of unofficial and official dialogues between the two families since 1967. Both families now acknowledge each other as holding the same apostolic faith in spite of the Christological misunderstandings in the distant past. What is interesting to us is that these two families though separated for about 1500 years since Chalcedon maintained the same ecclesiology. In spite of the Christological disputes around the Chalcedonian definition the Oriental Orthodox have accepted the disciplinary canons of Chalcedon that pertained to ecclesiological issues.

As the result of the unofficial dialogue, a consensus emerged. Both sides could affirm together “the common Tradition of the one Church in all important

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matters – liturgy and spirituality, doctrine and canonical practice, in our understanding of the Holy Trinity, of the Incarnation, of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, on the nature of the Church as the communion of saints with its ministry and sacraments, and on the life of the world to come when our Lord and Saviour shall come in all his glory” (Geneva, 1970).

The official dialogue confirmed this: “We have inherited from our fathers in Christ the one apostolic faith and tradition, though as churches we have been separated from each other for centuries. As two families of Orthodox Churches long out of communion with each other, we now pray and trust in God to restore that communion on the basis of the apostolic faith of the undivided Church of the first centuries which we confess in our common creed”(Egypt, 1989)

Tradition and Theological Education: Some Major Features

Some of the traditional features of theological education in the Oriental Orthodox Churches need to be mentioned here. (Examples are taken from the Indian Church because of my personal knowledge of it)

1. Teacher-Disciple relationship: The personal spiritual bond between the teacher and the student is of crucial importance. Since traditionally higher theological education was imparted only to the candidates for priestly ministry, this relationship was considered essential for nurturing the inner spiritual personality of the future priest. The teacher is fully committed to his student while the student retains a life-long veneration for his teacher as the special source of the light of the knowledge of Christ, the true Teacher.

Let me illustrate this from the traditional system of *Gurukula* teaching in the Indian Church.

In the Sanskrit language *guru* means teacher, and *kula* is family. Gurukula thus means ‘the family of the teacher’. In the classical Indian tradition of general education, young boys, mostly in their teens, were sent to live in the family of the teacher, often a scholar-householder of distinguished learning and discipline. The students live in the large household for several years adopting the teacher and his wife as their parents, and learn the fundamental texts of grammar, sacred literature and mathematics. Advanced and specialized courses like medicine, astronomy, architecture, performing arts and other special skills were also taught in the gurukula style.

The Orthodox Church in India had adopted the *gurukula* system, and candidates for priestly ministry (often elected by parishes) were sent to the house of a well known teacher of Scripture, theology, liturgy and canons. He was called a *Malpan* (Indian version of the Syriac *Malphono* meaning teacher). He was the

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Christian counterpart of the traditional Hindu *guru*, and could be a distinguished householder-priest, of known academic and moral credentials, or a learned bishop whose diocesan house was considered to be a monastery (Dayro).

A solid spiritual bond is established between the *guru* and the *sisya* (disciple) over the years of training. This traditional theological formation was practiced until the mid 20th century though the Seminary system came to be adopted by the Church in the early 19th century. “Learning from the face of the teacher”, as it is said in India, imparted a profound spiritual character to any learning.

2. Monastic Setting: Training of priests in a monastic context is a general characteristic of the Oriental tradition of theological education and priestly ministry. Even if they are going to be married priests later, the period of ministerial training is underlined by ascetic-monastic discipline. This is evident even in the modern “Seminary” system in the Oriental Churches. The Seminaries are considered to be semi-monasteries. The teachers are mostly resident on campus. The coenobitic life is expressed in the regular common worship, sharing of food, studies and house hold chores.

3. Academic and Pastoral: The question of academic theology confined to a university setting does not arise in Oriental Churches. In fact, the western academic distinctions, for instance, between dogmatic theology and pastoral theology or between biblical theology and systematic theology or between theology and spirituality are really alien to the traditional theological education of the Oriental Churches, though in modern times imitation of the western system has influenced the teaching of theology in their seminaries and institutions of pastoral training. For the Orient, theology is one, and can be understood only holistically. The integrity of the discipline of theology cuts across all insulated specializations. In India, for example, the Orthodox Seminaries have adopted a university curriculum of theology (in affiliation to Serampore University) keeping up with the contemporary intellectual and theological questions, though students are constantly reminded of the integral character of theology and its essentially pastoral-spiritual nature.

4. Liturgical backbone: In the Oriental Orthodox tradition liturgical worship forms the backbone of theological education. There is no theology without liturgy. In fact all theology arises from the matrix of liturgical celebration and experience according to Orthodox understanding. Although the well known maxim *Lex orandi est lex credendi et agendi* (The rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action) is attributed to a western hierarch, namely Pope Celestine I (5th cent.), this is literally true in the Oriental Orthodox understanding of theology. In Indian Orthodox theological faculties, despite the heavy academic programme, no compromise is made in the common liturgical life of the students and teachers.

5. Patristic Sources: The great emphasis placed on patristic tradition is a common trait of Oriental Orthodox theological education. Since patristic writings

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are authentic interpretations of the Holy Scripture and the Church's life, the writings and hagiography of the 'Fathers of the Church' constitute the rule by which to measure all theological reflection. The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) is a turning point in the history of the Oriental Churches, and therefore Greek and Latin Fathers who lived after the 5th century are not generally taught to the Oriental students though advanced students are familiar with the writing of such eminent figures as St. Maximus the confessor and St. John of Damascus. After dealing with such common fathers as St. Athanasius, the Cappadocians, St. Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria the Oriental Churches rather continue with the most eminent of local theologians and fathers in their own particular tradition. The theological-canonical authority of the Fathers as a guiding beacon is fundamental in Oriental Orthodox theological education.

In India, during the Portuguese colonial period Jesuit missionaries introduced the Seminary system in the present state of Kerala. It was meant to train the Indians in the Roman ecclesiastical tradition. The Indian Christians of St. Thomas vehemently resisted such uniatist attempts though a large number of people finally succumbed to Portuguese-Roman power.

In the early 19th century (1815) the Orthodox Church started a Seminary (College) at Kottayam with the gracious support of the Queen of the Kingdom of Travancore (in Kerala) and the assistance of British missionaries and colonial authorities. This is probably the first Orthodox Theological School in the whole of Asia.

This Seminary combined the traditional Indian Gurukula system and residential college system in English universities like Oxford and Cambridge. This is still followed in the present day Orthodox Theological Seminary at Kottayam, in the Indian state of Kerala, where priestly formation and academic theological education are carried out as one single activity.

Major Challenges

Challenge of Interpreting the Tradition:

Oriental Orthodox theological education and ministerial formation are facing significant challenges in the 21st century. Interpreting the Tradition of the Church to our world which is in the grip of modernity is a major challenge. The Oriental Churches with the exception of their western Diaspora have been living with a different world view, largely unaffected by the powerful social and scientific revolutions in Europe and America. So there is a certain defensiveness in their self understanding and some degree of stiff conservatism in their interpretation of faith. However, their more prominent theologians and leaders constantly teach

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that tradition is not rigid conservatism or dead weight of the past. Rooted in the Trinitarian worship and profoundly aware of the apophatic dimension of theology, the Oriental Churches understand Tradition as the continuous living stream of experience of the mystery of faith. Academic and intellectual articulation of the “articles of faith” is not the core of theology here. It is doxology in its depth and breadth. The maxim ‘theology is doxology’ captures the ethos of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the matter of theology and theological education.

Challenge of Ecumenical Encounter:

Since all the Oriental Orthodox Churches are members of the World Council of Churches (The Ethiopian and Indian Orthodox Churches are founding members since 1948), their theological schools and seminaries have been familiar with the major ecumenical questions. For example, theologians from these churches have closely worked at various levels with colleagues from the Reformation and Roman Catholic traditions in the study process of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)* of the Faith and Order Commission as well as in the *Justice, Peace and Creation* project. Oriental theologians have been challenged to relate their sense of Tradition to issues that did not arise in earlier periods of human history. Communicating and dialoging with cultural zones outside the traditional Orthodox patristic and liturgical domain produced significant ecumenical results. The Bossey Ecumenical Institute and various programmes of the WCC certainly helped create solid ecumenical encounters between the Orthodox theological thinking and the contemporary issues. The Ecumenical Theological Education programme of the WCC has opened fresh areas of exchange and dialogue between the Oriental theological-spiritual heritage and various other traditions. For the Oriental Orthodox, theological dialogue is easier when the partners concerned are respectful of the integrity of Tradition and its attitude to the question of God and the Church, the Body of Christ. The Western historical-critical method of analyzing the Scriptures is approached with a certain degree of suspicion in the Oriental Churches though in their Seminaries this is also taught as part of biblical studies.

The pastoral and spiritual dimensions of theological education are deeply underlined by the Oriental Orthodox, and they are rather hesitant to make theological education solely a matter of academic exercise at the university level-devoid of a ‘people’s touch’.

Challenge of Women’s Ministries:

The ecumenical exposure of theological schools probably awakened the Oriental Church’s awareness of various women’s ministries. This led to such changes as the restoration of women’s diaconate and the active participation of women in theological education and various levels of Church life.

Oriental Orthodox women increasingly take leadership roles in ecumenical programmes and produce theological literature. The Oriental Orthodox Churches, however, take a firm position against women's priestly ordination. They uncompromisingly hold the view that priestly and episcopal ordination of women is incompatible with the Tradition of the Church. This, however, does not mean women are discouraged from other forms of ministry. More and more women take courses of Orthodox theology and exercise teaching ministry in the Church. They are also being delegated to ecumenical events as Church representatives.

Challenge of Theological Education by Extension:

In addition to the traditional Sunday School and catechism classes, some of the Oriental Churches have launched theological study courses for the benefit of laymen and women. For example, *Divya Bodhanam* (Divine Teaching), the well-known programme of theological education by extension started by the Orthodox Theological Seminary at Kottayam, India in 1984 has attracted much attention. In the last 25 years some 2000 lay women and men (majority are still women) have taken this course in 3 cycles. Led by the professors at the Seminary this has produced some 30 text books for a full theological curriculum, and has inspired many a serious Christian to study theology and engage themselves in the various ministries of the Church challenge of contemporary ecological and social movements.

Theological education in the Oriental Churches is becoming more and more sensitive to the social and intellectual currents prevalent in our world. Theological schools naturally turn to the biblical-patristic resources for possible responses. One of the very first Orthodox responses to the ecological crisis was provided by the Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios of Delhi in his book *The Human Presence: An Orthodox Understanding of Nature* (1978) in the wake of the famous WCC conference on *Faith, Science and Future* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1978.

Issues of justice, peace and human rights increasingly became part of discussion and research in the Seminaries. While positively responding to issues of gender discrimination, the Oriental Churches are solidly united in their strong opposition to matters such as "gay rights" and "same sex marriage" as part of human rights question. These Churches consider homosexuality as sin against the will of God for humanity on the basis of biblical-patristic understanding of human nature. In theological education too this uncompromising position is adopted in such issues though a renewed study of theological anthropology from an Orthodox perspective is encouraged.

Challenge of Religious Pluralism

Compared to the Western Churches the Oriental Churches have a far longer experience of living with people of other faiths. While pluralism is a rather new

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word coined in the West, the experience of wide plurality in culture and religion has always been part of churches in countries like India. Over the centuries these Churches developed a certain *modus vivendi* with their neighbours of other faiths. While radical fundamentalist movements in Islam and Hinduism begin to change the traditional inter religious scenario of amity and conviviality, the mainstream still sticks to the principles of tolerance, hospitality and good neighbourliness. Orthodox theological education in India, for example, offers solid courses on Hinduism and Islam, and encourages students to make advanced studies and doctoral level research in the faith and philosophy of such major religions. The Seminaries also take initiatives for in depth inter religious encounter and exchange.

Challenge of New Technologies and Secularization:

Globalization of contemporary Western cultural paradigm with all its economic, technological and moral implications has affected the Oriental Churches in various ways. The Western Diaspora of these Churches increasingly feel the pressure of being in between two worlds. Secularization has deeply threatened the traditional foundations of faith. New biotechnologies capable of manipulating life have raised unprecedented ethical questions for theologians. Theological schools are open to discussion on such issues though they would hold fast to the sanctity of life and God's sovereignty as guiding principles for human freedom and creativity.

Challenge of Mission:

The Oriental Churches are in general averse to the Western idea of "mission" since they themselves have been victims of "mission" from Roman Catholic and various Protestant mission bodies. All the Oriental Churches have been sadly divided by Roman Catholic Uniatist missions. However, Oriental theological education takes the missionary task of the Church as fundamental, without making it a conquering, converting, colonial mission as conceived by in the west. The Oriental Churches teach that the announcing of the good news of Jesus Christ the Saviour can take many forms and ways rather than one. In Oriental Orthodox theological education the task of discerning and discovering alternate ways of the mission of love, peace and salvation of our world is of primary importance.

Suggestions

1. The two families of the Orthodox Churches need to seriously follow-up the findings of their official Joint Commission for Dialogue and move towards realizing Eucharistic communion. (It should be mentioned with great appreciation that the Romanian Orthodox Church has shown great openness to the positive results of the Dialogue and its pastoral implications.) This is an essential first step for

the global ecumenical involvement of the Orthodox Churches. Their ecumenical credibility depends on harvesting the fruits of this well-conducted intra-Orthodox dialogue that once raised great hopes in the ecumenical world.

2. Some Oriental Orthodox Seminaries and Faculties have incorporated in their curriculum courses on ecumenism. Making mutually available the key writings of the prominent theologians from these churches as well as from the Eastern Orthodox family in each one's language can be of great help in broadening our ecumenical perspective. At the moment even within the Oriental family this is not happening at the desired level. (The Orthodox Seminary in India is currently preparing collaboration with the St. Vladimir Seminary, New York for reproducing the Indian edition of select theological books. Recently the five volumes of *Philokalia* were translated into Malayalam, the language of Kerala, from Russian by the laudable efforts of an Indian Orthodox layman Dr. Cherian Eapen. This has created significant waves of spiritual awareness and opening to Orthodox spirituality in different church traditions).

3. A project to exchange professors and students even for a short period of 3 months would be useful for cross cultural experience and new ways of hermeneutical approach. This would stimulate new thinking in our provincial faculties and Seminaries and open up fresh avenues of ecumenical collaboration.

4. A common project needs to be conceived to study "Orthodox Theological Anthropology" in the 21st Century" with the collaboration of selected theologians from all Orthodox Churches and a few resource persons from Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The project should not be confined to gender issues or some controversial questions only, but should broadly embrace the nature and meaning of life in all its dimensions.

Conclusion

Holding on to the age-old traditions of faith and culture on the one hand and facing the fast lane of the contemporary world on the other, the Oriental Orthodox theological education has an enormous task on hand. There is always the risk of sliding to the one or the other, that is, being ensconced in a blind traditionalism or disappearing without trace in the flux of modernity. The ecumenical theological task of the Oriental Churches is to rediscover and reread the ancient scriptural-patristic resources providing insights into God's creation in the context of a plurality of Churches and religions while maintaining a deeply compassionate sensitivity to the suffering world of the poor and the marginalised. Carrying out this task will be more rewarding though not always easier if it is done on a broad basis together with fellow Christians from other Church traditions and all others concerned in a truly ecumenical setting.

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Notes

1. See Kondothra M. George, "Theological Education in Oriental Orthodox Tradition" in *Theological Education in World Christianity*, ed. Dietrich Werner *et al*, Regnum Books International, 2010, Oxford, pp.623-628. Substantial portions of my contribution to this recent book are included here.

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