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# RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

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## **Editorial**

For the western Christian world the agenda in the second half of the twentieth century has been more or less shaped by the concept of ecumenism, defined by the World Council of Churches in 1951 as 'the whole task of the whole church to bring the Gospel to the whole world'. In this issue of *RSS* we try to find out what ecumenism means to those involved and what problems arise today in postcommunist times when the churches try to put the concept into practice.

Several of our authors make the point that the twentieth-century ecumenical encounter between the western (Protestant) and eastern (Orthodox) churches never included that thoroughgoing discussion of doctrinal differences which would have been essential for achieving real mutual understanding. Instead the agenda was from the very beginning largely determined by nontheological factors. Communist governments had their own political and ideological programme for their church representatives. There was also economic disparity: Gerd Stricker notes that from their very entry into the WCC the Orthodox churches were dependent on the generosity of western Protestants, and therefore tended to adopt an attitude of bonhomie while concealing their deep reservations about the nature of their hosts' Christianity. Nothing substantial happened within the WCC to alter the centuries-old Orthodox view of the West as (in Flavius Solomon's words) 'a territory where any heresy was possible'. For their part, argues Stricker, western Protestants always suspected that the Orthodox did not accept them as full Christians.

Anne Herbst quotes a Serbian Orthodox bishop who berates the ecumenical movement because it includes communities which have introduced female bishops and pastors as well as 'member churches which have given their blessing to such unnatural things as marriages between persons of the same sex'. This kind of criticism, in the tone of one who has only just discovered a dreadful truth, can be heard in many quarters coming from East to West. It is symptomatic of the absence of doctrinal discussion over the last half-century; but it should not in itself be seen as precluding such discussion in the future. We may recall that the Church of England is still a single world-wide ecumenical community even after the heated debates of the latest Lambeth Conference.

However, special factors in the postcommunist period have meant that the doctrinal gulf has, if anything, widened. Many individuals who were formerly zealots for the official ideology in communist times are now seeking new certainties in the church. Church life tends to become ideologised by people who were brought up under communism with the idea that they were surrounded by enemies and needed always to be vigilant and unmask them. Vladimir Fedorov identifies the neophyte complex – 'the desire to display one's exceptional loyalty to the church, the search for one's own identity, and the seduction of nationalism and messianism'. Writing of Russia, Fedorov says that 'One of the most pressing tasks for Christianity in our country (including Orthodoxy) is therefore to combat fundamentalism'. He sees a

general movement in Eastern Europe away from ecumenism and towards 'confessionalism'.

In this context the specific issue causing the most bitter East–West church controversy has been missionary activity, seen by its opponents as 'proselytising'. When protectionist churches are invaded by foreign Christian organisations bent on converting their members antagonisms naturally arise. Yet this state of affairs is by no means a consequence of 'ecumenism', as many in the East allege. As Anton Houtepen points out, 'The difficulties surrounding proselytism in Eastern Europe do not stem from the ecumenical movement, but from groups and churches who want to remain aloof from this movement'; and Fedorov comments that 'if other churches are seen as sister churches, recognising the validity of each other's sacraments and allowing mutual communion without accusation of heresy', then the issue of proselytising will simply not arise.

It begins to become clear at this point that the word 'ecumenism' is being interpreted differently in East and West. Most of today's problems arguably arise from the fact that these differing understandings have never properly been analysed. As Houtepen observes, 'The greatest stumbling-block to ecumenism is ... the concept of ecumenism itself.'

The western understanding is that ecumenism involves the world's churches working together. It is essential, says Houtepen, to realise that God's truth is discovered not by coercion, but by listening to each other: '... the contributions of all churches are necessary for joint witness.' When asked what Christian ecumenism will look like when it is finally achieved, Fr Michel van Parys replies that it will be 'a eucharistic communion which will be the expression of the love which will have been rediscovered among the churches. Unity in diversity with the aim of mission – witnessing to the joy of salvation.'

A common eastern suspicion, however, is that ecumenism means annexation. As Stricker puts it, the Orthodox tend to perceive ecumenism as an effort to make them Protestant. And indeed, during the ecumenical era, reticence about dogmatic differences on the part of the Orthodox frequently evoked a response from the Protestants implying that there were no real differences at all. Stricker puts the situation into sharp focus when he asks whether Protestant churches would in fact be prepared to give up something important – such as the ordination of women – in order to come closer to the Orthodox. Yuli Shreider notes that 'Attempts by one side to initiate dialogue are often seen by the other as expansionist, as an imposition of their own view of the situation', and that 'ecumenical initiatives which are insufficiently thought through deepen the divisions amongst churches and confessions.'

These different understandings must, in turn, be placed in a wider context: the eastern churches' fear that they are being forced to compromise with secularism. The Orthodox churches in postcommunist Eastern Europe tend to regard themselves as uniquely equipped as conduits to the truth. Fr van Parys notes that in maintaining their contacts with foreign churches the churches in communist countries 'had to make concessions to party and state pressure ... The legacy of doublespeak is that "ecumenism" has actually come to mean "compromise".' Herbst quotes a Serbian Orthodox bishop to the effect that ecumenists today want to forge Christian unity, but 'not on the basis of truth and in truth, but through compromise, lies and hypocrisy.'

What is involved here is suspicion of any movement that involves cooperation with 'people of goodwill' who have undisclosed credentials. Fedorov emphasises the 'antihumanism of antiecumenism', which he sees as a product of current fundamentalism. 'This is the context in which we should discuss the fear aroused in many

Orthodox by concepts such as “common human values”, “global ethics” and so on. Fundamentalists tend to view all these as antichristian, as ideas of masonic origin.’ Herbst quotes a petition widely supported by Orthodox clergy and priests in Serbia. The petitioners maintain that the ecumenical movement ‘is no longer concerned with the exclusive unity of Christians’ but includes ‘all non-Christian and pagan religions and sects, even Satanists, among its numbers’, a situation which is leading to ‘the coronation of the Antichrist and a global superreligion’.

Fedorov argues that a long and fruitful tradition of Orthodox humanism – belief in the absolute value of the individual – is today widely obscured by the prevalent fundamentalism. ‘Very many Orthodox have yet to learn how to see the likeness of God – which is preserved in everyone, even a sinner – in people who belong to another school, tradition, church or religion.’

There is some disagreement amongst our contributors about the importance of the differences between eastern and western Christianity. Erich Bryner concludes that ‘even when extreme positions are not adopted and there are no clashes it has recently become clear that theological differences – such as the ecclesiology of the main Christian confessions, for example – are so fundamental that they cannot be brought alongside one another’; and Stricker believes that differences in mentality have been ignored or dismissed as of secondary importance for too long. Fedorov, however, argues that while ‘Canonical, ritual, ascetic and other features shaped by different national and cultural environments and the historical and political conditions of church life in different areas’ are often perceived in popular consciousness to be a major obstacle to ecumenism they are not in fact so. Basilius Groen believes that Orthodoxy is a variegated phenomenon, containing different types of mentality, some exclusivist, some mystical, some practical and objective and concerned with arriving at realistic solutions. ‘It is impossible to say that one or another of these tendencies is typically Orthodox and that the others are not.’

However hard it may be to overcome such differences, however, Stricker is surely right when he argues that the goal of ecumenism should no longer be described in terms of ‘church unity’. He proposes a new ecumenical model, a new agenda for the WCC: ‘reconciled diversity’. It is a concept that has been dismissed as too timid, as reflecting too weak a faith. Yet, Stricker argues, in these times of deep distrust it has the advantage of being a realistic first step, and one that is obviously essential before further progress can be made.

For it may well be that fuller ecumenical cooperation in common witness will be a process which will take many decades and which will need to be catalysed by increasing religious pluralism. Quite simply, the members of eastern and western churches will need to become much more familiar with each other as fellow-believers. Gary Bouma makes some useful distinctions here among types of religious body.

‘Denominations’ are relatively equally valid, mutually accept each other’s validity, and tend to operate in a market economy of religious preferences in a given society. The term originated in the United States where many religious organisations which were state churches in the homelands of migrants became one church among others. ‘Denominations’ are different from ‘sects’ primarily in that they accept each other as valid expressions of Christianity, whereas sects tend to see themselves as the only true expression. ‘Denominations’ are different from ‘churches’ in that they represent only their membership and not larger social realities.

According to this definition, while the Anglican Church in England is a state church, the Anglican Church in Europe – the subject of Bouma’s article – is a ‘denomination’; and so is, for example, the Russian Orthodox Church in Western Europe and the USA. Bryner takes the example of Switzerland to show that ‘Ecumenism functions wherever equally strong partners from different confessions have to get along together and where pressure to act is exerted by ordinary parishioners.’ His survey of the history of the ecumenical movement leads him to the conclusion that ‘Experiences of pluralism ... advance the ecumenical concept, but monolithic structures hinder it. In this respect nothing has changed since a century ago.’

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Several of the articles in this issue of *RSS* were first presented last June at the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz. While the official proceedings were going on the thousands of non-delegate visitors had the opportunity to arrange their own events. Keston joined some other organisations involved in East–West Christian contact in arranging a series of hearings on the theme ‘Stumbling-blocks to Ecumenism’. My own contribution looked at the problem of proselytising in Russia, which has been well covered in *RSS* and in other Keston publications.

German versions of some of the articles have appeared in the magazine *Glaube in der Zweiten Welt* published by the institute of the same name (Bergstrasse 6, Postfach 9, CH-8702, Zollikon, Switzerland), as follows:

Bryner, ‘Stumbling-blocks to ecumenism’: no. 3, 1998, pp. 11–13

Stricker, ‘Fear of proselytism ...’: no. 3, 1998, pp. 25–31

Fedorov, ‘Barriers to ecumenism ...’: no. 5, 1998, pp. 25–30

August 1998

PHILIP WALTERS

## **Notes on Contributors**

**Gary D. Bouma** is professor of sociology in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Monash University, Victoria, Australia. He is the author of numerous books and articles in the sociology of religion, including *Religion: Meaning, Transcendence and Community* (Longman, 1992). He is an Anglican priest and has served as chaplain in the diocese of Gibraltar in Europe on several occasions over the past few years.

**Erich Bryner** is a minister in the Reformed Church, director of the institute Glaube in der Zweiten Welt near Zurich, and professor of Eastern European church history at the Theological Faculty of Zurich University. He is involved in many ecumenical activities in Switzerland and has published works on the Russian clergy in the eighteenth century and on the Orthodox churches.

**Vladimir Fedorov** is a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church and a professor at the St Petersburg Theological Academy. He has recently been working at the Ecumenical Institute attached to the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Münster.

**Basilus J. Groen** lived in Thessalonica for three years as a student and has maintained many contacts in the Balkans. He is a lecturer at the Instituut voor Oosters Christendom in Nijmegen. In 1977 he was visiting professor of ecumenics and the Eastern Churches at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Münster.

**Anne Herbst** was born in Berlin. She worked in publishing, broadcasting and human rights organisations in Germany as a specialist on communist countries before joining the institute Glaube in der Zweiten Welt 11 years ago as researcher and writer on the churches and nationality and on the churches and conflict in the Balkans and the Caucasus.

**Anton Houtepen** is director of the Interuniversity Institute for Missiology and Ecumenical Research in Utrecht.

**Veniamin Novik**, a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church, graduated as an engineer before becoming a student at St Petersburg Theological Academy and later a monk and dean with responsibility for the students. After his recent expulsion from the staff of the Academy he continues to teach in theological schools and is studying the Christian roots of democracy and human rights.

**Michel van Parys** was abbot of the monastery of Chevetogne in Belgium for 26 years until his retirement in 1997. He has maintained close contact with the churches

of Eastern Europe and has worked for mutual understanding amongst the denominations.

**Dimitry Pospelovsky** recently retired from his post as professor of history at the University of Western Ontario. A Russian-Ukrainian by birth, he spent several months in Russia each year from 1990 lecturing on Russian and Soviet church history at various theological schools and secular higher educational establishments.

**Yuli Shreider** was born in Dnepropetrovsk in 1927. He has a doctorate in mathematics and has worked in computer science and information technology. He became a Roman Catholic in 1970 and a lay Dominican in 1977. He is president of the Centre for Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology of Religion, and since 1991 he has been a member of the board of the Russian Bible Society. In 1998 he published a textbook on ethics.

**Flavius Solomon** works at the Institute of History in Iași, Romania, and is a member of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

**Gerd Stricker** is the head of research at the institute Glaube in der Zweiten Welt near Zurich and has lectured and published prolifically on many aspects of church life in communist and postcommunist countries and on the history of denominations in those areas. One of his special interests is the history of Protestantism in Russia. He is a Lutheran.