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Stumbling-blocks between Orthodoxy and Protestant Ecumenism*

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At a major event such as the Ecumenical Assembly in Graz there is a danger of using its theme, 'reconciliation', in an inflationary manner. Reconciliation is so important for human coexistence that it is a basic precondition for ecumenism. A vital factor in a properly understood reconciliation is acknowledgment of one's own failings and guilt, for which one then asks forgiveness of the other person. Reconciliation cannot possibly consist in laying the guilt for creating disharmony on the other person. However, the examination and recognition of one's own failings presumes deep reflection: 'Who am I? What is my position and task in life?' In our context this means: 'What does it mean to be Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, and what do I and those of other denominations bring into the common discussion that is of value?' This leads to the question: 'How are we – as Orthodox, Catholics or Protestants – guilty of reinforcing our divisions?' If I am to be truly reconciled with another person then I must also know him. I must ask him what he thinks, how he feels, how he acts and why he does certain things. I should not ignore his otherness, but try to understand him just as he is. Only deep reflection on one's own position and that of the other person allows a true coming-together and sound discussion, because each person can then put forward his or her argument from a considered position, and can thus move towards reconciliation. A particular stumbling-block to ecumenism as a whole, and therefore not something peculiar to East–West relations, is often considered by the clergy in particular to be the fact that frequently laypeople have lost their confessional identity and are therefore more open to ecumenical fellowship. On the other hand, laypeople often criticise theologians and the clergy for meeting representatives of other denominations over the heads of their parishioners and holding talks on consensus which are hopelessly beyond the horizons of ordinary laypeople who have not had a theological education.

Theological Dialogue

Theologians of the various confessions have been exploring the possibilities and bases for rapprochement since the late nineteenth century. This process is invariably

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linked with deep reflection on one's own position in order that there might be a firm foundation from which to address the other side. Significant results have been achieved in this respect, as witnessed by numerous documents showing consensus. As good examples the dialogues involving the Protestant Church of Germany (from 1979), the Union of Protestant Churches of the GDR (from 1974) and the Russian Orthodox Church and other Orthodox Churches are often quoted. Unfortunately no discussions have taken place since 1991; only in 1998 did consultations begin again.

There is a further momentous stumbling-block in this context: the huge quantity of reports, consensus papers and resolutions resulting from interconfessional dialogue, especially in the Protestant–Orthodox field, have usually remained quite unknown to the churches at local level. Even the so-called Lima Paper on baptism, eucharist and ministry, produced by the WCC in the late 1970s, and on which so many hopes were placed, has seldom found its way into the parishes. However, we have recently seen an encouragingly successful outcome from one set of 'summit-level' discussions of this kind: the common declaration of the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church on the doctrine of justification. This may remove a huge stumbling-block between these two churches.

Institutionalised Ecumenism

Alongside these specialised theological discussions there has been an institutionalised ecumenism since the Second World War – the World Council of Churches. It was without doubt the aim of the founders to foster understanding and fellowship amongst all Christians on a broader basis than theologians had managed to do in their detached theoretical field, and to make a breakthrough in respect of the desire 'that all may be one'. The aim was to overcome the scandal of fragmented Christianity in one fell swoop. Organised ecumenism has a completely different emphasis from that of theologians: at the forefront stands not so much ecumenism on the basis of one's own definition of one's position as the clarification of the position of the other party, by means of which a realistic and sound dialogue is to be achieved. The ecumenical movement has set itself the aim of bringing together as many Christian churches as possible almost at any price. The more member churches the WCC has, the greater its success. To put it crudely: quantity seems more important than quality.

The Roman Catholic Church ignored this plan from the outset and is not a member of the WCC to this day. As a result Protestant churches dominate the ecumenical movement; there are more than 100 of them. The Orthodox churches in the WCC, of which there are some 15, are very much in a minority position alongside them, and increasingly so as more and more Protestant groups join – which is a cause for frequent Orthodox complaints. From time to time the Orthodox churches even dispute whether some of the newly accepted Protestant communities are Christian churches at all. Most Orthodox churches – that is, those which were subject to communist rule – joined the WCC only in the 1960s. Both their refusal to join the WCC at the end of the 1940s and their entry in the 1960s was determined to a certain degree by the political considerations of their Kremlin masters. In order to conceal the new wave of repression of religion in the Soviet Union Khrushchev was anxious to send representatives of all Orthodox and Protestant denominations in the communist states to the WCC and CEC in order to exert influence, in Soviet interests, at all levels of the ecumenical movement. This has been demonstrated, for example, in the manipulation of the peace movement, specifically the 'Prague Christian Peace Conference', by Soviet organs of power. The question of how the

World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches were infiltrated by these organs still awaits academic study.

Basic work on theological and spiritual questions was also carried out in the WCC and CEC, but the problems at the forefront of these institutions' activities were those which the churches found themselves set by the times, solutions to which were often achieved in lengthy committee sessions, sometimes along a Moscow line, and often according to the perspectives of the Third World or liberation theology. At any rate, this must have been the impression of someone following the activities of the Geneva committees from his or her parish. Certain sections of the WCC, such as Faith and Order, conducted theological work which must not be underestimated, but this was overshadowed by other (Third World related) activities.

The Dependence of the Orthodox Churches

However one views these activities – whether as over-influenced by political criteria or as good policy – one thing has certainly happened: representatives of very different churches have had practical dealings with one another. This should have led to relaxed, issue-related cooperation, and then on to mutual respect and appreciation of the Geneva committees. However, this has clearly not taken place. When we hear today that the Georgian Orthodox Church, as well as the Union of Baptists of the former Soviet Union, have left the Geneva committees and broken off all further ecumenical contact, and that the Serbian and Russian Orthodox are close to taking the same steps, then something must have gone wrong.

The sincere attempt to find common ground made by the two main groups who embarked upon Geneva ecumenism – Protestants and Orthodox – might not have happened at all, because both set out from diametrically opposed positions: the Protestants had money and political influence, while the Orthodox were dependent upon western money and western political influence because these afforded churches oppressed by the communist system at least a certain degree of security and alleviation of their position. However, such strong political and financial dependence is a poor basis for true ecumenism and soul-searching reconciliation. As a result of this dependence the Orthodox churches from the communist bloc did not wish to offend western patronage; they needed western support, and for many eastern church representatives an ecumenical visit to the West had considerable appeal.

Nevertheless, the Orthodox have criticised the Geneva ecumenical committees for concentrating too much on the horizontal (social) dimension of human existence and thereby neglecting the vertical dimension; for pushing God himself, prayer and worship into the background. Over time the representatives of the Orthodox Church succeeded in including more of this vertical dimension in the work of the WCC, to give Geneva ecumenism a certain spiritual dimension.

Nevertheless, it was always a very decisive criterion of Orthodox activity in ecumenism not to annoy the western Protestants with too much Orthodox criticism. The clear rejection of western churches evident today within many Orthodox churches was not articulated until a few years ago. Rather, the representatives of the Orthodox Church signalled a high degree of agreement to western Protestants, so that for the most part this gave the impression that the eastern bishops thought the concept of ecumenism as professed in Geneva was the right path, and that the Protestants could count on the complete support of their 'Orthodox brothers'. The frequently brotherly, jovial tone of the Orthodox led the Protestants to believe that the Orthodox viewed them as equals.

Thus the cooperation between Protestants and Orthodox within the framework of Geneva ecumenism soon became based, almost inevitably, on shaky foundations: the representatives of the Orthodox Church signalled their considerable agreement with western Protestants, and this created the illusion that the Orthodox regarded them as equal brothers in Christ. This peculiar situation resulted in both sides beginning to seek and emphasise common ground while playing down or even ignoring the existing and readily apparent fundamental differences between Orthodoxy and Protestantism.

Ecumenism cannot function when one side is heavily dependent upon the other side and therefore sweeps fundamental differences, even direct contradictions, under the carpet, and when the other side willingly, even gladly, accepts the deception that the two are already quite close to each other and that ecumenism works wonderfully.

Protestant Inferiority Complexes?

Today relations between the Protestant churches and Orthodoxy are certainly very complex. The Orthodox accusation of heresy naturally affects Protestants deeply. This stigma of heresy is borne by every Protestant ecumenical functionary who imagines himself on the same level as an Orthodox bishop. Many professionals in Geneva ecumenism who have excelled more because of diplomatic skill than Protestant self-confidence have stood out not because of Protestant steadfastness but because of their obsequious manner towards Orthodox bishops. On the other hand, in Orthodox eyes a common spiritual basis between the true church and Protestant heretics is as a matter of principle difficult to find. The word 'heretic' was of course never used in front of the Protestant patrons from the West – but the stance being taken by many Orthodox churches today suggests that it was probably constantly in the minds of many of their representatives.

Many Protestants look towards Orthodoxy with a certain longing. They are moved when they listen to the Russian choirs in the liturgy, they marvel at the display of splendour of the bishops and priests, and the rich atmosphere of the churches filled with incense. The deep sincerity of the nuns and monks is impressive, as is the self-assured, albeit frequently domineering and despotic, and unfortunately also presumptuous and arrogant, behaviour of many bishops. It was embarrassing to see how subserviently the Protestant office-holders approached Orthodox bishops – or else, in an attempt to cover up their inferiority complex, how they took too firm and exaggerated a stand on the platform of equal 'brothers-in-office', while most likely aware, however, that the Orthodox bishop occupies a quite different, utterly sacral place in the teaching and life of his church; whereas the Protestant office-holder, although also a bishop, is ultimately nothing more than a priest with higher administrative tasks.

The Problem of Mentality

The differences between Orthodoxy and the Protestant churches concern basic principles. In addition there are complicating issues arising out of differing mentalities: the religiosity and religious life of eastern Christians differ from those of the West to the same extent that the nature and mentality of a Russian differs from those of a German, or those of a Greek from those of a Frenchman. However, it is these issues of mentality which are usually ignored as stumbling-blocks to ecumenism. Differences of mentality are often seen as part of nationalism, which can also lead to enmity in the religious sphere, as we are forced to recognise in much that is happening today. Problems of mentality and national characteristics make

ecumenism particularly difficult – to a great extent they are unconscious impulses and reactions to the unfamiliar. However, true ecumenism becomes completely impossible when we try to blot out differences and contradictions, which has happened within ecumenism almost since its birth over 50 years ago. The antiwestern upheavals in the East and the war in the former Yugoslavia show in shocking clarity that the suppression of emotions never solves problems of mentality. Recognition that the problem of mentality exists does not in itself, of course, solve the problem. However, if the problem of mentality is acknowledged head-on and included in ecumenical discussion as a possible area of conflict, and if ecumenical programmes are drawn up on this basis, then these will doubtless be more realistic than those which have been pursued so far, which have often ignored the problem altogether.

Postcommunist Nationalism

Communism has collapsed. The West rubs its eyes, shocked at the developments which are suddenly taking place in the Orthodox world. Apart from disagreements between one another (Moscow–Constantinople) which have never been conducted so openly before, an antiwestern attitude is breaking through into the Orthodox national churches (in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus', Bulgaria, to a certain degree Romania, and above all in Serbia), which more than anyone else shocks those professional Protestant ecumenists who thought they had 'brotherly', equal relations with the Orthodox churches.

What has happened? Throughout the former eastern bloc the collapse of communism has led to economic collapse and the complete disappearance of the spiritual and moral guidelines which showed the way to citizens of communist states over many decades. The material and spiritual need which every individual feels today makes it easy for radical nationalist politicians to blame all misery on the West. The more extreme the criticism of the West, the greater the following such politicians have, for example the communist Shargunov and the right-wing nationalist Zhirinovskiy. The church is unable to escape this extreme shift to the right: in the ideology of nationalists the Russian Orthodox Church has a central place, as in that of the national-fascists, and is accordingly monopolised and manipulated by them. On the other hand, priests often lack the necessary general education, but also the calibre and, not least, a basic theological education, so that they do not recognise the danger from the influential circles supporting 'red-brown' (communist-fascist) policies and are thus not in a position to lead the parishes entrusted to them in a different direction. On the contrary, priests often walk behind extreme nationalists, and place the tsarist double eagle of Russian nationalism in the centre of the church and the cross of Christ in the background. There are similar tendencies in Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania; more drastically in Serbia.

The West was also shocked by what was taking place in the former Yugoslavia. For a long time mediation was attempted, then the problems were played down; in the church sphere quick solutions were sought to restore peace, above all with the Serbian Church. Eventually it became clear that a spade had to be called a spade, which the Protestant Church of Germany and the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches finally did when they drew up specific points of criticism addressed to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Antiwestern Positions

A spectator could have been surprised by these frequently shocking events, however,

only if he had closed his eyes to the reality beforehand. Everything which is taking place on former Soviet territory and in former Yugoslavia is understandable, especially the antiwestern attitude, which has also become a dominant factor in the churches (including even Catholic and Protestant churches) in these areas. In particular, the whole ecumenical movement is rejected; 'ecumenism' is a derogatory term. The nationalists rank 'ecumenism' among hated concepts such as communism, Bolshevism, socialism and, above all, Judaism (as part of the new Russian anti-semitism). In the Soviet bloc people were isolated from the western world for decades. They had no opportunity of finding out anything objective about other churches in the Soviet Union, still less in other countries, and almost nothing about the ecumenical movement. For people in the Soviet Union ecumenism appeared to be a particular strategy of the communists, like the Prague-based Christian Peace Conference; it seemed to Christians in the socialist states that their state leaders wanted to damage the churches through ecumenism.

Sad as the antiwestern reproaches directed at our churches by Orthodox bishops make us feel, they are understandable against the background of the aforementioned decades of isolation, decades in which the way to theological education was blocked, and of course also in view of the considerable differences in dogma in the teachings of the Orthodox and Protestant churches. Despite the harsh climate this does not have to mean the end for reconciliation and ecumenism. However, it does mean the end for ecumenical illusions, which have long been pursued in Geneva. In the light of this new realism those involved in ecumenism, especially the ecumenical institutions in Geneva, must rethink and change the priorities of their work.

Moving Away from Illusions

Ecumenism needs to be rooted more deeply in reality, and compelled to struggle harder for truthfulness and move away more decisively from unrealistic dreams – which is not to say that it must move away from visions which show the way forward, but only that these visions must be based on realistic evaluations and analyses. Differences have been ignored in ecumenical committees over the past 50 years in order to point to outward successes (that is, a large number of member churches). A great feeling of togetherness with bland grass-roots songs, involvement in projects as far away as possible (the Third World), euphoric embraces and violet scarves – this is how the ecumenical movement has appeared for long periods. Now that we are faced with great ecumenical problems this strategy of self-delusion will no longer hold up.

Ecumenism has a future only on the basis of true reconciliation, which is more difficult than waving violet scarves with a transfigured look and ardently singing banal songs with lightweight lyrics, such as 'love is like grass and riverbank'. The Catholic bishop of Basel, Dr Kurt Koch, has all too correctly described the process of reconciliation and ecumenism as 'hard work'. This hard work involves understanding, accepting and respecting the otherness of fellow Christians of different denominations, and then, having reached this level, searching for the way to one another. Up to now we have mostly shied away from it.

Continued Illusions in East and West

Despite all the disappointment, despite the 'ecumenical shock' of recent months, church leaders in East and West are still creating or succumbing to illusions. When

Patriarch Aleksii speaks of 100 million Russian Orthodox Christians then he should add that probably 95 per cent of them are only nominally such, that of these, 50 per cent at most attend church once a year and that scarcely more than two per cent carry out the minimal faith duties of an Orthodox Christian (regular attendance at the liturgy, confession, communion, fasts); the other 98 per cent avoid these basic duties. We in the West operate in the same way, with impressive membership figures for our churches, 80–90 per cent of which are just on paper. Today Patriarch Aleksii still publicly declares that the Moscow Patriarchate is imbued with ecumenical conviction and that only a handful of Russian bishops think otherwise, while his minister for foreign affairs, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk, states that 60 per cent of all bishops at the Bishops' Council in February 1997 wanted to leave the ecumenical movement and that it was only through a 'trick' (appeals for pan-Orthodox solidarity) that they were dissuaded. Speaking with a forked tongue is also characteristic of the West. Many of the Protestant clergy who behave in as Orthodox a manner as possible in circles of Orthodox dignitaries and try to prove to Orthodox brothers-in-office how near Protestant spirituality is to that of Orthodoxy adapt their church life in their parishes at home to the conditions of secular daily life in a way that would make an Orthodox priest shake his head in disbelief. On the Orthodox side they probably know very well about empty Protestant churches; they certainly recognise the hectic activism of many Protestant ecumenists; they criticise the Protestant tendency increasingly to understand the church as a community centre in which the name of God or Christ or his holy word should be mentioned as little as possible; they are annoyed by tactless questioning about the ordination of women in an inquisitorial manner by Protestant activists and visitors; to the Orthodox the question of blessing homosexual couples currently being discussed in Protestant churches is simply horrific; they see so-called 'feminist' language as a deviation from God's holy word. In Orthodox eyes the Protestant Church is an institution which is abandoning its principles in order to survive as a people's church.

Would it not help dialogue greatly if our church leaders did not always feel bound to present themselves as being as close as possible to believers of other confessions? The need obviously felt by our ecumenists to please everyone leads to deeply felt ecumenical irritations. No one is convinced by that sort of ecumenism any more.

'Reconciled Difference'

But ecumenism and reconciliation must not fail, even if there are differences like these, even contradictions. Because reconciliation means sincerely coming to know and understand one another, accepting and respecting differences and working to overcome them when the time is ripe. It is counterproductive – and the current crisis is a good example of this – to use ecumenism as a pretext to drag the Orthodox with gentle force into the Protestant camp. At any rate, that is how the Orthodox see it. They think that western church functionaries ('professional ecumenists') want to undermine the splendour and dignity of Orthodox churches with western intellectualism and 'drag them down' to a lower spiritual level. The Orthodox feel – with some justification – that Geneva ecumenism of the Protestant mould is a large-scale attempt to force upon them a spirituality and Protestant concepts which they do not want at all.

For 50 years the WCC and CEC have cultivated a close network of churches which – although Geneva continually denied this – was understood by Orthodoxy as an attempt to create a united church. Orthodoxy wants to free itself from these shackles

and snares now that the era in which the churches in socialism were economically and politically dependent on the West is over. This is understandable. This is where the true essence of the apparent crisis in ecumenism lies. The crisis consists, on the one hand, in the fact that the Orthodox no longer need to hide their critical attitude towards the West, and on the other, in the fact that the western brand of ecumenism suddenly finds itself forced to work from now on on a new, firmer and broader base. This does not mean condemning Geneva ecumenism wholesale and dissolving the current structures, but it must mean setting the tasks of the ecumenical organisations and structures so that they fit true ecumenical requirements, as signalled by events in the Orthodox world.

One stumbling-block of a quite special nature must not be overlooked when we are considering this whole issue. That is the question:

What do the Orthodox Churches Actually Expect from Ecumenism?

Today it appears as if the majority of the Orthodox grass roots, the clergy and above all the bishops are against 'ecumenism'. What is definitely needed is a wide-reaching educational campaign to make clear what the aims of ecumenism actually are and also what they are not. This is a contentious issue even in the West. The next question would be what those in the Orthodox churches who have said they are in favour of ecumenism – almost all Orthodox church leaders including, for example, Patriarchs Vartholomaios and Aleksii – really want from ecumenism. This question has never been clearly answered by Orthodox ecumenists; or rather, the Protestant side has never dared to pose it seriously. The question is, however, whether the Orthodox churches would be prepared to discuss basic principles of Orthodox spirituality with the Protestants – who, we should recall, they view as heretics – and perhaps even give up one or another principle which is important to them, or if their 'vision' of ecumenism is to lead the misguided heretics back into the one true church. The same question could of course be asked of the Protestant side: would the Protestant churches be prepared to give up something important in order to come closer to the Orthodox? The size of the problem becomes clear if we bring it into focus by asking a question which is on the face of it absurd: would the Protestant churches be prepared to give up the ordination of women? If the Protestant side would rule out a question like this from the outset then the Orthodox side is sure to get the impression that the ultimate aim of ecumenism is to make the Orthodox 'Protestant'. And that is no basis for ecumenism.

An Ecumenical Council With New Tasks

Today ecumenism is embarking on a new phase, the necessity of which has become clear to many only after the actual or threatened withdrawal by Orthodox churches. The ecumenical committees in Geneva now need to develop ideas which correspond more closely to the reality of church life in different confessions and which respect the otherness of the different denominations in a principled and sincere way. The 'church unity' which was the aim of organised ecumenism in the medium term is certainly not the model suited to the current situation. A model which rests on a foundation of reconciliation, that is, on profound mutual knowledge, respect and forgiveness, would be the ecumenical model of 'reconciled diversity'. Up until now, however, this kind of model has seemed to many ecumenists to be insufficiently far-reaching, too timid, reflecting too weak a faith. But true 'reconciled diversity' would

be the first ecumenical step, whereas 'church unity', which used to be sought as an immediate objective, can actually be only a second or even third step. The ecumenical model of 'reconciled diversity' would lead to less status-seeking, less intense effort for 'unity', and above all fewer Orthodox fears of contact with western churches.

If they were convinced of the sincerity of the ecumenical endeavour, the Orthodox churches would not suspect the danger of an ambush by Protestant intellectuals in every ecumenical approach, offer of assistance or theological discussion. If they did not have to fear a constant attack on Orthodox identity from ecumenism they would proceed in a far more cool-headed manner on western church committees.

If as Protestants we are offended at being viewed as heretics and frequently treated with arrogance and presumption by the Orthodox we will make progress only if we include this offence in our discussions with the eastern churches rather than ignoring it. Honesty towards one another, self-critical, realistic analysis of the situation, visions rooted in reality as well as the rejection of illusions – these form the basis for a 'reconciled diversity' of churches which does not force any church to make outward concessions to another. The model of 'reconciled diversity' would once again make possible open, free dialogue between East and West, as well as a coming together which would be expressed perhaps less in spectacular successes and more in the unseen world of intellectual and spiritual engagement.

(Translated from the German by Geraldine Fagan)