Orthodoxy & Ecumenism

The involvement of the Orthodox Church in the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies has become a matter of bitter debate among Orthodox Christians. The discussion can often take a harsh, polemical quality. Sometimes it is unclear what “ecumenism” even is.

The purpose of this web page is to post some of the texts which provide the foundation for Orthodox involvement in the ecumenical movement, as well as essays which introduce into the discussion the perspectives of Orthodox who are actually involved in it.

The essays come from a variety of sources. Their authors cannot readily be categorized as “liberal” or “conservative”, “traditionalist” or “modernist” (as useful as these terms may or may not be). But there are three perceptions which emerge from all of them without exception:

**Ecumenism is not a heresy** — or at least the “ecumenism” that is derided as “heresy” in some people’s estimation, and the “ecumenism” that is actually practiced by the Orthodox who participate in ecumenical organizations are two different things. If one looks at the anathemas which some have written about ecumenism, it is clear that what is being anathematized is the so-called “Branch Theory”, something which is not held by Orthodox “ecumenists”.

**Orthodox involvement in ecumenism is a missionary responsibility.** As in any missionary situation, a person’s actual conversion to Orthodoxy is left up to God, but the responsibility lies with Orthodox to be present and witness to their apostolic faith, to teach, and also to learn from the encounter.

**Orthodox involvement in today’s ecumenical institutions merits serious examination.** Orthodox Christians need to remain critical of problematic tendencies within institutionalized ecumenism. They also need to reflect seriously among themselves about the nature and purpose of their involvement with it.

It is hoped that the texts and essays on this site can help to balance the discussion on ecumenism and the Orthodox Church’s participation.

— Peter Bouteneff

**Basic Texts**

**Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of 1920.** “Above all, love should be rekindled and strengthened among the churches, so that they should no more consider one another as strangers and foreigners, but as relatives, and as being a part of the household of Christ and ‘fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise of God in Christ’. (Eph. 3:6)”

**Report of the III Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference of 1986.** “It is essential to create within the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and other inter-Christian organizations, the necessary conditions which will enable the Orthodox Churches to act on an equal footing with the other members of the above-mentioned organizations.”

**Report of the inter-Orthodox consultation of Orthodox WCC member churches in 1991.** “It is our belief that the Orthodox have much to contribute in the ecumenical movement. It is therefore highly desirable that they develop more and more a witnessing, missionary mentality.”
“The World Council of Churches is not and must never become a Super-Church” — so declared a the “Toronto Statement” received by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in 1950. Here are the highlights plus the full text of that declaration.

A summary history of Orthodox involvement in the ecumenical movement by Protobresbyter Georges Tsetsis, representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch to the World Council of Churches. “Unity is to be understood as a conciliar life, not in any juridical sense, but in the sense of a real communion. Unity is a harmony in Christ among members within the Church and also among Churches. And it is precisely the achievement of this harmony which should be at the center of any ecumenical debate.”

Orthodox complaints are a ‘family disagreement’, says Catholicos Aram I: "For many years the Orthodox churches in the World Council of Churches felt themselves a bit isolated, on the margin of the World Council of Churches’ life and work. They issued separate Orthodox statements on important occasions … I believe that this is the time that we bring the Orthodox churches out of that psychological, political or theological situation, and make them an integral part of the one fellowship of the World Council of Churches." Catholicos Aram announced that a “mixed theological meeting” of representatives of Orthodox and other WCC member churches would be held near Geneva on 22 June.

Statement on the Relationship of the Orthodox Church to the World Council of Churches issued by the Orthodox Theological Society in America at its annual meeting held at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline Massachusetts on June 4-5, 1998. The Society urged continuity in the Orthodox participation in the WCC, at the same time calling for changes in the WCC.

Essays

Essays on Orthodoxy and Ecumenism by Fr. John Meyendorff. Fr. John (+1992), one of this century’s greatest Orthodox theologians and historians, was an active participant in the ecumenical movement. In the seven editorials we reproduce here, he writes with clarity, sobriety and conviction about the problems, opportunities and responsibilities of ecumenism for Orthodox Christians.

The Church, the Seminary and the Ecumenical Movement by Fr. Thomas Hopko, former Dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, wrote this brief but penetrating essay for friends and supporters of the Seminary in order to clarify the nature and purpose of participation in the ecumenical movement.

Orthodox Ecumenism: A Contradiction in Terms? by Peter Bouteneff. The author is Executive Secretary of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and author of "Daily Readings in Orthodox Spirituality" (Templegate, Springfield, IL). There is also a link to responses published in the October In Communion and Peter Bouteneff’s reply to those letters.

An essay by Peter Bouteneff — “The Orthodox Churches, the WCC, and the Upcoming WCC Assembly”.

Excerpts from an article by Metropolitan Isaiah printed in the Denver Diocesan Newsletter of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. The author cautions against misunderstanding the terminology of “the pan-heresy of ecumenism” and against carelessly calling people “heretics” on the basis of this definition. He addresses the issue of resurgent Donatism in church life today.
Report of a meeting between the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Churches’ respective Departments for External Church Relations. It highlights the distinction between constructive criticism of the ecumenical movement, and criticism whose purpose is to undermine the structures of canonical Orthodox churches. It reflects the desire to re-examine ways in which Orthodox can participate in ecumenism today.

Interview with Fr. Vassily Kobahidze, press secretary of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Fr. Vassily discusses the tensions and the breakaway groups which prompted the withdrawal of his church from the World Council of Churches.

Interview with Archpriest Vladislav Tsypin, professor at the Moscow Theological Academy and a leading specialist on canon law in the Russian Orthodox Church. Deconstructing the “ecumenism as heresy” position, Fr. Vladislav discusses the political motives which lie behind many anti-ecumenical arguments.

“Towards a New Ecumenism” by Christos Yannaras. There are many ways to react to the encounter with Christians of traditions other than one’s own. Some will be satisfied with dialogue; others will want more, writes Christos Yannaras, a well-known theologian who is Professor of Philosophy at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece. He has written many books, among them "Freedom of Morality" and "Person and Eros".

“The reaction against ecumenism [in Russia] at the moment of freedom was as inevitable as the economic stratification of the population after the liberalization of prices, writes Vladimir Zelinsky in his essay on “Rebuilding Russian Orthodoxy: the Ecumenical Issue“.

The WCC’s World Assembly in Harare: a report by Peter Bouteneff

“Orthodox Contributions to Ecumenical Ecclesiology” [PDF] — an essay by Nicholas A. Jesson.

For numerous documents critical of Orthodox participation in ecumenical organizations, see the “Ecumenism Awareness Page” maintained by Patrick Barnes. This site includes the text of two Orthodox encyclicals: The Encyclical of 1848 (a reply to the Epistle of Pope Pius IX, “to the Easterns”) and The Encyclical of 1895 (a reply to the Papal Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Reunion).

Will the Ecumenical Ship Sink? — re Orthodox participation in the World Council of Churches; an interview with Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev of the Moscow Patriarchate published in April 2006.

updated April 23, 2006