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ORTHODOX VIEW OF ECUMENISM
(SOCIOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES)*

INTRODUCTION

It is illusory to expect someone else, apart from us, to sociologically explore, analyze and present Orthodoxy and Orthodox Church. Others may show an interest, pay intellectual attention and give some benevolent help; yet, the core of this task inevitably remains as an assignment for secular and religious sociologists from the Orthodox region.

Dragoljub B. Đorđević (1993)

The guilt for “sociological insufficiency regarding Orthodoxy,” that is, “an impermissible neglect of the religious science about Orthodoxy,” D. B. Đorđević, Serbian sociologist of religion, who has dealt with the issue more than others, equally distributes among three parties, namely, Serbian socialist power-holders, sociological profession on the whole and, especially, sociology of religion and the Serbian Orthodox Church. After elaborating of a host of reasons explaining the underdevelopment of the sociological study of Orthodoxy, the same author states precise and concrete obligations of the future sociology of Orthodoxy and the Orthodox Church, or of the sociology of Orthodoxy; namely, “its *main task* would comprise the study of the spiritual and economic and social development in the Orthodox cultural space, that is, the study of *Orthodox spirituality as a factor of development or stagnation of the Orthodox civilization*” (Ђорђевић, 1993:201).

What are doctrinal and practical possibilities of Orthodoxy in the current spiritual situation of the world society? Can Orthodoxy offer its responses to the challenges of the times and preserve or even expand the spheres of its influence? Can Orthodox believers respond to the challenges of our times with ready-made clichés or is it necessary for them to get to know the current developments in the developed world for the sake of preparing their own timely and valid answers?

A special place is left for the defining the position of Orthodoxy in the context of the present religions’ ecumenical coming together and facing each other. Has

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Orthodoxy developed a common conception regarding the ecumenical movement whose formation is regarded by many as the most significant religious twentieth century event in the Western world? Is this based on cooperation and tolerance on the spiritual level with all religions, both traditional and major ones as well as with numerous offshoots of Protestantism as the third branch of Christianity?

The paper follows the genesis of the emergence of the ecumenical movement in the world at large as well as the inner-Orthodox theological criticism of ecumenism and the involvement of the Orthodox in its activities. The paper ends with an overview of the sociological consequences of the Orthodox (non)ecumenism.¹

ECUMENISM AND “ORTHODOX ECUMENISM”

The Orthodox authors, as a rule, place the beginnings of ecumenism² in the year of 1902 (when Patriarch Joachim III asked from all the autocephalous Orthodox churches to give their opinion about the relationship with other Christian communities) while the Protestant ones relate it to the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. The very term “ecumenical” is more precisely defined as inter-Christian cooperation and a dialogue for achieving the full unity of the Church at the 1937 Oxford Conference of “the Faith and Order”. A concrete expression of the ecumenical movement as well as an instrument of churches for cherishing the ways towards Christian unity is the World Council of Churches (WCC) with about 330 member churches and its seat in Geneva. The founding assembly of the WCC took place in Amsterdam in 1948 with 351 delegates from 146 churches including 51 Orthodox. So far six more assemblies have been held namely, in Evanston (USA) in 1954, in New Delhi (India) in 1961, in Uppsala (Sweden) in 1968, in Nairobi (Kenya) in 1975, in Vancouver (Canada) in 1982 and Canberra (Australia) in 1991.

The first ecumenical move made by the Orthodox was made in January 1920 when the Patriarchate of Constantinople sent its Epistle to all the Christian churches and, among other things, proposed the introduction of the Gregorian calendar. Patriarch *Meletios II Metaxakis*, officially the first Patriarch of Constantinople who started with ecumenical activities summoned, in 1923, a synod in Constantinople

¹ A more detailed version of the text will be published in Serbian in Niš journal “*Crkvene studije*”, No. 2, 2005.

² *Ecumenism* (Greek *oikoumene* from *ikos* meaning home, house; today “universe” or “the entire inhabited world,” the whole system of the world, space as harmony, accord and order) represents a movement for bringing together all the Christian churches; it emerged in the 20th century. The secular bases of ecumenism are comprised in the general human tendency to come together and unite by solving accrued social problems while its religious base lies in the understanding of the pointlessness of debates between individual churches and the need for common engagement in the

at which respective resolutions were issued in agreement with the suggestions made in the 1920 Epistle and the introduction of the new calendar was announced without the consensus of all the local Orthodox churches. In 1952 the Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagora issued *Encyclicals* in which he called upon all the heads of the local Orthodox churches to join him; some of them did it while in 1955 the Ecumenical Patriarchate sent its permanent members to the WCC seat in Geneva. In 1959 the Central Committee of the WCC had a meeting at Rhodes with the representatives of all the Orthodox churches.

In the process of coming closer of Orthodoxy and the ecumenical movement *three phases* can be singled out.

The first phase of their mutual cooperation covers the period from 1961 to 1979. This is the time when the Orthodox conferences at Rhodes were held in 1961, 1963 and 1964 when a dialogue with Vatican on equal footing was accepted. In the same period several letters were exchanged, several meetings were held and several visits exchanged between Vatican and Constantinople.

On September 20, 1963 Pope Paul VI sent a letter to Patriarch Athenagora acknowledging him as a brother by episcopate.³ Next year, Patriarch Athenagora met with the Pope of Rome in Jerusalem while on December 7 1965 both sides eliminated damnation and exclusion introduced in 1054. In July 1967 Pope Paul VI paid a visit to Athenagora while, three months later, the Patriarch visited Vatican. The ecumenical activity grew especially intensive when Pan-Orthodox commissions for the dialogue with Protestants and Roman Catholics (Mixed International Commission for Theological Dialogue) as well as with representatives of Islam, Judaism and other faiths were founded. The successor of Patriarch Athenagora to the throne of the Church of Constantinople was Patriarch Dimitri in 1972 before whose emissary, Metropolitan Melliton, Pope Paul VI knelt down on December 14, 1975 and kissed his feet as a sign of humility and askance for forgiveness.

The second phase was marked by the foundation of two theological commissions (in 1975) which included both Roman Catholics and Orthodox. In 1977, the common synod was held, too. The theological commissions were supposed to study, interpret and find a common ground regarding the issues of the Holy Sacraments, the position of the Roman bishop in the church and the dogma about the Virgin Mary and *Filioque* (the belief in the Holy Ghost).

The third phase was marked by the common address by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Dimitri on November 30, 1979, in which it was stressed that the dialogue of love between the two Churches had opened up a way to the theological dialogue.

In Fanar, on November 2, 1991, the new Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew Archondonis, former Chalcedonian Metropolitan and the closest search for unity and renewal (of the Body of Christ), (Тодоровић, 2003а: 388).

associate of Patriarch Dimitri was enthroned. In the years to come, *Ecumenical Patriarch*, “the first among equals,” invested, more than all other Orthodox leaders, the greatest effort into improving the relationships between the Orthodox Church and other Churches and into enhancing its role, especially in Europe. At his own initiative, he visited the Churches and ecumenical organizations in West Europe. He especially ensured good relations with the Roman Catholic Church, the affirmation of the “sister church theology” while, at the end of his journey, he also met with Pope John Paul II in Rome in June 1995.

INNER-ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF ECUMENISM

Stating that “the history of the churches and dogmas is indeed a subject of the theological sciences,” Slobodan Jovanović compared the sociological standing with the theological one a long time ago, in 1938. Yet, adhering to the suggestions of the sociologists of religion of the middle and older generations that “the sociological insight into a religious fact” (D. B. Đorđević) asks for some kind of bent for a deeper understanding of theology (P. Berger), we are here partially discussing the dogmatic reasons of the Orthodox lack of trust in the ecumenical movement.

The Orthodox Church, in its dialogues with other churches, emphasizes the fact that it is “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church that has managed to preserve unblemished the faith handed over to it by the Apostles, through its ecclesiastical fathers, so that every ecumenical work is impossible without returning to the ancient original sources and roots of the Church” (Тодоровић, 2003а: 388).

The traditionalist current among the local churches interprets the participation in the ecumenical activities of the Christian reconciliation as betrayal of the original principles of Orthodoxy. Numerous activities of Constantinople, Moscow and other centers of Orthodox ecumenism are regarded as open violations of the canonical principles and decrees, namely, “the kiss of peace” with non-Orthodox clergy accompanied with the slogan “Let’s kiss each other...”, common prayers of canonically clad clergy, blessing of the believing nation by the non-Orthodox and their sermons during the divine liturgy in the Orthodox churches, the Holy Secret communication with the so-called non-Chalcedonian (Monophysite) churches, acknowledgement of other Christian churches as “sister” ones, most of all, of the Roman Catholic Church, enabling parishes and communities to express, at the local level, the extent of the existing communication, the rejection of “the theology of return” and the advocating for the “baptismal theology” in addition to the minimalizing of the dogmatic issues and their reduction to local theological non-obligations for other Christian churches, etc.⁴

³ Patriarch published the latter under the title “Two Sister Churches.” This is the first time after the

The reconciliation among the Christians should be preceded by the establishment of complete agreement on the doctrinal issues. “The religious Esperanto” (S. Bulgakov), based upon a minimum of the common dogmatic truths of Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants, cannot be an adequate substitution for the real unity, unity in the religious issues. In that sense, diverse arguments of the non-established canonical “commonism” of Orthodox and other Christian communities are stated.

Though they have many characteristics in common such as the belief in God as the Holy Trinity, in Jesus Christ as the God incarnated, acknowledgment of the Eucharist as the true Body and Blood of the Savior, adoration of the Mother of God and the holy ones, the prayer for the diseased, the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics are divided by the issues that still wait for their solution. The Roman Catholics describe Orthodox mysticism as obscure and indefinite and reject the Orthodox absolution of divorce and the Palamic differentiation between the essence of God and energies. A list of the doctrinal objections on the part of the Orthodox is equally long; it comprises *Filioque* and the resolutions of the First Vatican Council regarding infallibility and universal jurisdiction of the Pope, the doctrine of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary and purgatory along with the remark that the secular views have turned the Latin Church into a church of non-authentic Christianity. Especially pregnant is the ecumenical dialogue between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics regarding objections to Rome concerning proselytic and unionist pretensions.⁵

The dialogue with the up-to-Chalcedonian theologians is burdened with different teachings about the personality of Christ while the dispute with the Eastern Church started concerning the name *Theotokos*. The dogmatic agreement with the Old Catholics cannot be achieved due to the previous proclamation of the full communication between the Old Catholics and the Anglicans in 1931 while the theological coming closer with the Anglican community, despite mutual affection, was made difficult by too elaborate and too indefinite formulations of the Anglican Church including, more precisely, the ordaining of women into priesthood in several Anglican provinces.

The introduction of the Gregorian calendar by the Patriarch’s Epistle in 1920 caused considerable ruptures in the Greek Orthodox Church. As an expression of the disagreement with such politics of the official Church, *an old calendar movement* came into being as well as three groups of the Old Calendar Churches, namely, 1) Old Calendarists around Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili, 2) “Matthewians” or radical zealots around Archbishop Andrew, and 3) a more modest though more numerous group of Archbishop Chrystostom II.. While the first group acknowledges the worship of the New Calendar Churches (though, as a schism (breach) that the two Churches acknowledged each other.

sign of protest because of ecumenism and innovations they restrain from communicating with them which is an ecclesiastical attitude similar to that upheld by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia with which, accordingly, it communicates), the second and the third ones utterly deny the existence of the worship of the Holy Ghost in any other Orthodox Churches except from their own ones, and, are not, therefore, in communication with any of the canonical Orthodox churches; neither do they have any mutual contact. The clergy of the Orthodox Christianity that supported the resistance to ecumenism, though they had never separated themselves from the official church, mainly condemned sharply “hyper-orthodoxiness” of extreme zealots.⁶

Against all the increasing ecumenical activities of Constantinople and some other local Orthodox churches *an international traditionalist front* was even created which, at present, comprises *the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, the Old Calendar Church of Metropolitan Cyprian, the Romanian Old Calendar Church and the Bulgarian Old Calendar Church around Bishop Photius* which are in liturgical communication and have a unique ecclesiastical attitude. In addition, though not in any official canonical relationship, a great number of anti-ecumenists from all the local Orthodox Churches, especially *Patriarch of Jerusalem Diodor*, are in touch with them. Yet, all these Churches (unlike the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia that informally communicates with the Serbian Orthodox Church) do not have any liturgical communication with any other canonical local Orthodox Church which further complicates their canonical status.

The most adamant in their confirming the Holy Fathers’ truth about salvation as well as in preserving the Orthodox teaching clean from any desecration by the mundane spirit of this world have turned out to be *the monks from the Holy Mountain*. Because of the attacks upon their autonomy as well as obstructions during the Fifth Special Synod of bishops and antiprosops of the Holy Mountain in 1994, thirteen Holy Mountain monasteries quitted their participation in the activities of the Holy Municipality in Karyaes (Chilandarion, St. Dionysius, Xiropotamos, Zographu, Docheiarion, Caracalla, Philotheos, Simopetra, St. Paul, Gregorios, St. Panteleimon and Constamonite) unlike six other ones (Laura, Iviron, Coutloumousi, Pantocrator, Staurovitsa, and Xenophon). The monastery of Esphigmenon had already cut off communication with the Ecumenical Patriarchate upon the canonical bases.

⁴ More about it in: Јеромонах Сава (Јањић) (1995).

⁵ On missionarying, conversion and proselytism, partly from the ecumenical aspect, see in: Todorović (2004); Тодоровић и Ђорђевић, 2004).

SOCIOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ORTHODOX (NON)ECUMENISM

The sociologists of religion did determine, no matter how modestly, early in the last decade of the twentieth century, the guidelines of Orthodoxy for its future contacts with other Christian confessions. Up to now, considerable efforts have been made in establishing all-Christian unity; yet, it seems that the most modest ones are those of the Orthodox. The ecumenical persistence to reduce the differences among the Christian churches has failed to gain the needed trust of the Orthodox dogmatists. Moreover, “those who speak about peculiarities of the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox understanding of the ecumenical movement are right” (Ђорђевић, 1991:15). The theological argumentation that has been most recently used to “justify” the non-ecumenical behavior and activities of the Orthodox Church has not undergone any significant change a decade later; yet, some circumstances that in a very specific way color the sociological study of the religious complex in the context of the contemporary world have changed. Most of all, the secularizing, globalizing and transition processes are at work.

The Orthodox Churches must, in the modern age, try to find, as it were, their own answers to two basic questions. One thing is to deal with inner issues of the church, its approach to the solving of the dilemma imposed by the times; another is the attitude of the church towards its environment, toward secular facts and developments. Can it happen, in accordance with the Orthodox traditionalism, conservatism and distrust of the present times in general, that the Orthodoxy undergoes transformation, that is, is it possible that its specific updating and cherishing of the dialogue, most of all within the ecumenical movement, take place?

The Orthodox Church believes that it is “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church”; that is why “it may seem that this exclusive statement prevents any serious ‘ecumenical dialogue’ with Orthodoxy and each fruitful work upon establishing re-union” (Веп, 2001:292). Fruitful meetings between the Orthodox believers and other Christians in the last few decades oppose such a conclusion though it is clear that within Orthodoxy there are two currents, one stricter and the other moderate. The standing of the former is exclusive: a non-Orthodox cannot be a member of the Church. That is why not so rarely do some Orthodox authorities regard as “heresy” every attempt to communicate with the non-Orthodox. The other, more numerous and readier for contacts, believe that, in addition to the fullness of the truth of the Orthodox Church, there are other Christian communities that, to a greater or smaller degree, possess authentic values of the Orthodoxy. The participation in the most important organ of the ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches, imposes itself, thus, as one of the steps towards achieving the final goal.

This participation of the Orthodox has been considerably alleviated by two official documents issued by the bodies of the World Council of Churches. One is the foundation document in which it is stated that “the World Council of Churches is a community of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. The other document is the Toronto Statement adopted at the Central Board of the WCC in 1950 stating that the membership in the WCC does not mean acceptance of some “detailed and precise definitions of the nature of the Church.” It also states that the membership in the WCC does not mean that every church has to accept other members as a *church* in the true and complete sense of the word. In this way, the Orthodox believers are not to deny the peculiarity of their faith; neither should they essentially change their attitude toward the representatives of different branches of the world Christianity. Instead, they are all the time reminded that the Council is, primarily, a meeting place among the churches in their search for *the Christian re-union established on the doctrinal agreement*” (Bep, 201:308). Therefore, these are serious theological disputes unlike the Protestant ones that put too much stress on dealing with social and economic issues.⁷

Father John Meyendorff (1998:193), in judging his epoch, estimated that the future of the Orthodox Church depends on the “way in which it will be able to pose itself before the youth and carry its testimony in tomorrow’s society.” It has become clear that the insistence, sustained for centuries, of the Orthodox theologians upon the return of all the Christians to the unique faith of the Holy Fathers cannot, at present, rest only upon faded pictures from the past; neither can it be practiced only by simple servicing of the individualistic spiritual needs of the faithful. The equal participation in the enterprises undertaken by the ecumenical “machine” requires vitality of the religious institutions as well as experienced individuals ready to face the opinion of the Protestant majority. Of decisive influence in this can be the Orthodox Diaspora in the West which is completely able to recognize the needs of the contemporary West world and to introduce a new organizing spirit into the missionary work. The contemporary connoisseurs of the Orthodox teaching agree in their estimate that the “Orthodoxy is the need of the Christian West, its industrious and demanding strictness, its view of the modern world, in order to overcome historical sins of the East and become fully conscious of its message and its service” (Kleman, 2001:119).

⁶ The Old Calendar Movement in Serbia exists since 1996 under the name of the Church of True Christians. They object to the Serbian Orthodox Church that in many elements it has deviated from the strict Orthodox dogmas and they are harsh critics of ecumenism. The unofficial head of

Today, in the era of the global Christian community, the ecumenical role of Orthodoxy is favorable for at least two reasons. Namely, the participation of the Orthodox can prevent both syncretistic tendencies and the prevalence of Protestants and Roman Catholics in the creation of the future policy of the ecumenical movement. At the same time, by letting itself be permeated with the Western thought, Orthodoxy can gradually discard the backwardness of its medieval isolationism.

Concerning the historic mission and responsibility for co-existence, the ecumenical behavior and activities should remain, for all the Orthodox churches, an imperative of the civilization coexistence in multiconfessional societies. It is upon religious authorities, most of all in local communities, to persist in the teaching that the knowledge of others does not mean a betrayal of one's own faith.

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