

Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches

A Movement towards Church unity

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Introduction

The Church of the Eastern Roman Empire of ancient times came to be split into two camps in consequence of the Council of Chalcedon of 451 A.D. The struggle between them for exclusive recognition as *the one Church* resulted in their separation from 536 A.D. Thus it came about that two ecclesiastical bodies out of communion with each other took shape in the East, one accepting and the other rejecting the Council of Chalcedon. None of the many efforts to bring them back to unity was successful and both have continued in history ever since. They are referred to in recent times as the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches respectively.

Each of them came in due course to have its affiliation widened to include churches outside the geographical areas of their existence in the past. The Eastern Orthodox tradition, for instance, absorbed into itself the people of Russia and Eastern Europe. The Oriental Orthodox body consisted from the beginning of practically the entire Church of Egypt and a great part of the Church of Syria and the Orient. The Church of Armenia did, by a decision renouncing Chalcedon early in the 6th century, expressed its agreement in doctrine with the Oriental Orthodox group and so did the Church of Ethiopia as well. A similar development took place, though much later, in the section of the Indian Church.

All these bodies are now members of the World Council of Churches. Their representatives participating in the various ecumenical programmes have been brought to meet each other from about the second decade of the present century. Affinity in ecclesiastical ethos and an awareness of oneness in faith led them to seek closer relations and to explore ways and means of a restoration of the unity of their churches. Accordingly from 1964 a series of four unofficial consultations at the level of theologians, with the knowledge and approval of the Churches, concerned have been held. The World Council of Churches particularly its Faith and Order Secretariat, extended its unstinting assistance and co-operation in bringing about the consultations.

In this paper a brief summary of what has been done so far through them is given. We have only made a beginning and have to go farther ahead to achieve the goal of unity.

The Four Consultations

From August 1964 to January 1971 four unofficial consultations have been held. Participants in them were on the whole theological experts from the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches. Since their separation was the result of their acceptance or non-acceptance of the Chalcedonian Council, they are referred to sometimes as "Chalcedonian" and non-Chalcedonian" Churches in the concerned documents. This terminology is employed in this paper also when felt necessary.

The meetings were held in Aarhus, Denmark, in August, 1964; in Bristol, England, in July, 1967; in Geneva, Switzerland, in August, 1970; and in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in January 1971. In all, fifty-seven persons attended them, twenty-nine from the Chalcedonian tradition and twenty-eight from the non-Chalcedonian. The Chalcedonian participants were drawn from the Ecumenical patriarchate in Constantinople; U. S. A., and Geneva; the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate; the Church of Greece; the Rumanian Orthodox Church; the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; the Orthodox Church of Alexandria; and the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. The non-Chalcedonians came from the Coptic Orthodox Church; the Syrian Orthodox Church; the Armenian Orthodox Church; the Indian Orthodox Church; and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This shows that almost all the constituent Church bodies of both traditions were represented in the consultations.

The subjects discussed were also representative and relevant to the goal aimed to achieve. Christological doctrine held by each tradition was treated at length and depth. Issues like the meaning of the Cyrilline phrase "One Incarnate Nature of God the Word" as it is understood in both traditions, the question of the two natures, two wills and two energies, the doctrine of the person of Christ in the various Church traditions on both sides, and received attention. The place of Councils in the ancient Church and their inter-relatedness or otherwise; the question of the condemnations pronounced by those Councils and the ways to solve the problem which it raises for unity; a survey of efforts in ancient times to bring the two sides back to unity; and ecclesiological issues with reference to relations of the two sides, were also given sufficient prominence in the discussion.

Areas of clear Agreement.

The result of the endeavour is indeed remarkable. The basic issue that separated the two traditions was indeed the doctrine

concerning Jesus Christ. On this point the agreement reached by the participants was most rewarding. The Aarhus consultation of August 1964 spoke of this in a guarded way. As its *Agreed Statement* said:

"Our inherited misunderstandings have begun to clear up. We recognise in each other the one Orthodox faith of the Church. Fifteen centuries of alienation have not led us astray from the faith of our Fathers".

The statement then continued:

"On the essence of the Christological dogma we found ourselves in full agreement. Through the different terminologies used by each side, we saw the same truth expressed"

Both sides, it was shown, rejected a doctrine of two Sons on the One hand, and the teaching that confused the natures of which the One Christ is composed.

The Bristol consultation of 1967 spoke more clearly. After stating the positions of each side briefly, its *Agreed Statement* affirmed:

"But both sides speak of a union without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. The four adverbs belong to our common tradition"

The fact may be recalled here that these adverbs are central to the Chalcedonian *Definitio*. However at Chalcedon it was Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria, whom the Council deposed, who applied these adverbs to the union of the natures of which the One Christ is composed. Bristol went on to say:

"Both affirm the dynamic permanence of the Godhead and the Manhood, with all their natural properties and faculties in the One Christ".

The members of the Consultation acknowledged the fact that the Eastern Orthodox tradition speaks of Christ as existing in two natures, and that the Oriental Orthodox tradition, while rejecting it, affirmed that Christ is 'one incarnate nature of God the Word'. It is clarified that the difference in terminology here does not lead either side to fall into the heresy suspected of it by the other.

"Those who speak in terms of 'two' do not thereby divide or separate. Those who speak in terms of 'one' do not thereby commingle or confuse. The 'without division, without separation' of those who say 'two' and the 'without change, without confusion' of those who say 'one' need to be specially underlined, in order that we may understand each other".

While expressing so positively their essential agreement in the Christological doctrine, the members of the consultation did not leave out the question of the Lord's will and energy. The Churches of the Chalcedonian tradition affirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 680-81 that there were two natural wills and two natural energies in Christ, existing united indivisibly, inconvertibly, inseparably, unconfusedly. In agreement with the emphasis on the "two natures" of Chalcedon a doctrinal development that is necessary and legitimate can be seen here. But the non-Chalcedonian side, which disagreed with Chalcedonians on the very issue of "two natures", has all along conserved a doctrinal continuity with its insistence on the 'One incarnate nature of God the Word'. Its emphasis on this point is based on the union of the wills and energies of the natures, of which the One Christ is composed. Acknowledging this terminological difference, the *Agreed Statement* of Bristol makes it clear,

"All of us agree that the human will is neither absorbed nor suppressed by the divine will in the incarnate Logos, nor are they contrary one to the other".

The affirmation of a "dynamic permanence of the Godhead and the Manhood, with all their natural properties and faculties" by the non-Chalcedonian side is a clear indication of the fact that they do not ignore the conational and volitional faculties of the humanity in Christ. The position endorsed by both sides is, as the Bristol meeting made clear: "The uncreated and created natures, with the fulness of their natural properties and faculties, were united without confusion, or separation, and continue to operate in the One Christ, our Saviour".

These ideas were reaffirmed in Geneva in August 1970.

"On the essence of the Christological dogma", "our two traditions, despite fifteen centuries of separation, still find ourselves in full and deep agreement with the universal tradition of the one undivided Church."

The meeting went on to say that both traditions affirm the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ, that for both

"He who is consubstantial to the Father according to Godhead became consubstantial also with us according to humanity in the Incarnation, that He who is before all ages begotten from the Father, was in these last days for us and for our salvation born of the blessed Virgin Mary".

As regards the human will and energy of Christ also, Geneva restated the position of both sides. These are neither absorbed nor suppressed by His divine will and energy, nor are the former opposed to the latter. They are together united in perfect concord

without division or confusion. "He who wills and acts", the consultation affirmed, "is always the One hypostasis of the Logos incarnate."

Geneva affirmed further the agreement between the two sides "in the common Tradition of the One Church in all important matters", namely "liturgy and spirituality, doctrine and canonical practice". They have the same "understanding of the Holy Trinity, of the Incarnation, of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit". They are also agreed in holding to the same view regarding "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 shall come in all his glory"

Finally the Consultation made it clear that

"Our natural agreement is not merely verbal or conceptual; it is a deep agreement that impels us to beg our Churches to consummate our union by bringing together again the two lines of tradition which have been separated from each other for historical reasons for such a long time".

In conclusion the consultation expressed the hope that

"our Lord will grant us full unity so that we can celebrate together that unity in the common Eucharist".

The Next Step

The doctrinal agreement reached by the theologians was an unofficial action. Though their work had the blessing of the Churches concerned, what they have accomplished has no official character. The *Agreed Statements* of all the four consultations were in fact submitted "to the authorities and people of our Churches with great humility and deep respect", in order that the Churches may act officially to act on them. To this end two official actions by the Churches are expected to be carried out. In the first place, the Churches should receive the findings of their theologians, and secondly, authorize an official commission to study the issues and make recommendations to the Churches. As to the second of these actions, the Bristol consultation proposed to the Churches to appoint official representatives in order to constitute a Joint Theological Commission to be in charge of the follow-up work.

The Bristol proposal was in fact twofold.

1. The Joint Theological Commission to be appointed should take up the drawing up of an agreed declaration as a formula expressing together "our common faith in the One Lord Jesus Christ whom we all acknowledge to be perfect God and perfect Man". This formula, the consultation made it clear "will not

have the **status of a creed**". After being drawn up, the formula is to be **"submitted to the Churches for formal and authoritative approval, or for suggestions for modifications"** which the commission will **consider "before a final text is approved by the Churches"**

The Geneva meeting, while reaffirming the suggestion for the appointment of the Joint Theological Commission by the Churches, clarified further the nature of the agreed formula. This should be "an explanatory statement of reconciliation, which will not have the status of a confession of faith or a dogmatic definition, but can be the basis on which our Churches can take the steps necessary for our being united in a common Eucharist". The basic content of this statement should be "the common Christological agreement". This, it should be made clear, "is not an innovation on either side, but an explanation of what has been held on both sides for centuries, as attested by the liturgical and patristic documents". As to content, the statement could make use of the theology of Cyril of Alexandria, the expressions used in the Formulary of Reunion of 433 between Cyril and John of Antioch, the terminology employed in the four later councils and in the liturgical and patristic texts. "Such terminology should not be used in an ambiguous way to cover up real disagreement, but should help to make manifest the agreement that really exists".

2. The Theological Commission should examine the canonical, liturgical and Jurisdictional problems involved in the actual realization of unity. The work of the Joint Theological Commission here is threefold. Firstly, to suggest ways and means of dealing with the question of "anathemas and liturgical deprecations by some churches of theologians regarded by others as doctors and saints of the Church". The first step is to drop the anathemas pronounced by one side against teachers recognized as saints by the other. The matter is indeed delicate. All the same when once the Churches are led formally to express their agreement in faith this is an indispensable step to be adopted for the restoration of their unity. The issue refers, for instance, to the cancelling of the anathemas pronounced against Dioscorus, Timothy Aelurus, Philoxenos, Severus and others by the Chalcedonian side, and those against Leo of Rome, Theodoret, Ibas, and so on by the non-Chalcedonian side. The Geneva Consultation observed on this point that

"It may not be necessary formally to lift these anathemas, nor for these teachers to be recognised as Saints by the condemning side".

The meeting added that

"the restoration of Communion obviously implies, among other things, that formal anathemas and condemnation of revered teachers of the other side should

be discontinued, as in the case of Leo, Severus, and others".

The Addis Ababa meeting suggested the dropping of the anathemas in a quiet way by the Churches, following the formal expression of agreement in faith and decision in favour of unity of the Churches.

Regarding the lifting of the anathemas many participants in the Addis Ababa meeting expressed the view that "It is much simpler gradually to drop these anathemas in a quiet way as some churches have already begun to do". They further made the point that each autocephalous Church "should choose the way most suited to its situation. The fact that these anathemas have been lifted can then be formally announced at the time of union".

In this context the Addis Ababa meeting raised the question as to who has the authority to lift the anathemas. It was answered that the anathemas were pronounced in the first place by the Church "for pastoral or other reasons of that time". The Church has also "the power to lift them for the same pastoral or other reasons of our time. This is part of the stewardship or Oikonomia of the Church".

Another equally important question was also raised there. "Does the lifting of an anathema imposed by one ecumenical council call in question the infallibility of the Church?" The meeting answered the question, "We are agreed that the lifting of the anathemas is fully within the authority of the Church and does not compromise her infallibility in essential matters of the faith". For the lifting of the anathemas pronounced by an ecumenical council is there need for another ecumenical council? On this point there was general agreement that a council is but one of the principal elements expressing the authority of the Church, and that the Church has always the authority to clarify the decisions of a Council, in accordance with its true intention". No conciliar decision can be viewed in isolation from the total tradition of the Church, and a council should be seen as a stage on "the way to a fuller articulation of the truth".

This point is to be taken up for further study by the Joint Theological Commission of the Churches.

Secondly, there is the question of the acceptance by the non-Chalcedonian side of the Council of Chalcedon and the three later Councils recognized as ecumenical by the Chalcedonian side. This indeed is a major issue. The Aarhus consultation had already made the point in its *Agreed Statement* that the Council of Chalcedon was to be understood "as reaffirming the decisions of Ephesus (431), and best understood in the light of the later Council of Constantinople (553)". It was also agreed there that all councils

had to be seen "as stages in an integral development and no council or document should be studied in isolation" The Bristol meeting proposed that "the acceptance and non-acceptance of some councils" should be taken up for study by the Joint Theological Commission. The Geneva meeting went further and stated the position of each side separately, as no agreement was reached on the issue. Theologians of the Eastern Orthodox Church stated the teaching of their Church that "the seven ecumenical councils which they acknowledge have an inner coherence and continuity to make them a single indivisible whole, to be viewed in its entirety of dogmatic definition". Theologians of the Oriental Orthodox Church expressed their view that "the authentic Christological tradition has so far been held by them on the basis of the three ecumenical councils, supplemented by the liturgical and patristic tradition of the Church". The agreement in faith, in other words, reached by the two sides was not the result of an acceptance of the Council of Chalcedon and the three later Councils by the non-Chalcedonian side. Therefore it cannot be admitted that for the maintenance of the faith in its purity and integrity the adoption of all the seven Councils was necessary. The Geneva meeting however expressed the hope that "further study will lead to the solution of this problem by the decision of our Churches".

It is hoped that the Joint Theological Commission, when it is appointed by the Churches, will address itself to this study.

Thirdly, there is the question of the "jurisdictional assurances and agreement" which needs settlement before the restoration of communion between the two sides. The issue implied here may be stated in this way. One of the consequences of the split in the Church was the setting up of parallel jurisdictions in the same cities. From about the middle of the 6th century, for instance, there were two lines of patriarchs in Alexandria and Antioch, and dual Metropolitans and bishops in many cities, who did not recognize each other. The restoration of unity will require a unification of these two lines.

On this point the Geneva meeting expressed the view that "jurisdiction is not to be regarded only as an administrative matter". It also "touches the question of ecclesiology in some aspects". The fact that in the early century there was one bishop in one city with one college of presbyters united in one Eucharist, was a manifestation of the Church in that area. The practice of having more than one bishop and more than one Eucharist in the same city has come about in more recent times on account of pragmatic considerations.

When the two families of our Churches meet officially it is necessary that a solution be found for the problem of parallel jurisdictions. The Joint Theological Commission should study the issues involved here and suggest ways and means of solving them.

Conclusion

Before bringing this resume to a close there are two suggestions made by the Geneva and Addis Ababa Consultations to be noted. The former points out that the "universal Tradition does not demand uniformity in all details of doctrinal formulation, forms of worship and canonical practice". However the limits beyond which this variability should not go must be worked out.

The Addis Ababa meeting made the proposal that there is need for "the rewriting of the Church history text books, theological manuals and catechetical materials". These have been composed on both sides by interpreting the sources on a partisan basis. "Common study of the sources with fresh objectivity" in an ecumenic spirit "can produce texts for use in both our families"

The Addis Ababa Consultation concluded with the observation that "the work done at an informal level can soon be taken up officially by the Churches, so that the work of the Spirit in bringing us together can now find full ecclesiastical response. In that hope we submit this fourth report to the Churches".