

WILL THE ECUMENICAL SHIP SINK?

by **Bishop Hilarion (Alfeyev)**

Excerpts from an interview posted on the official website of the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. Bishop Hilarion (Vienna) had headed the Russian Orthodox Delegation to the World Council of Churches Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 2006.

Doesn't membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC) obligate acceptance of its fundamental principles which contradict Orthodox ecclesiology?

Bishop Hilarion: Membership in the WCC does not require from any Church the recognition of all the other member churches of the WCC as churches in the literal sense of the word. This is stated in the foundational documents of the Council. If we call one Protestant community or another a "church," which in our point of view has lost all the main traits of church-ness, then it is only because this community calls itself a church. Among the members of the WCC there are more than a few such groups, which in our view long ago lost the fundamental properties of church-ness or which never possessed them in the first place. We are speaking here of such properties as apostolic succession of the hierarchy, the mysteries, faith in the reality of the Eucharist, etc.

At the same time, the WCC is not simply a council of some charitable agencies or organizations with some church ties. This is a council of Christian communities which consider themselves churches and respect each other's ecclesiological self-recognition. The respect Protestants hold for Orthodox ecclesiological principles is expressed in particular by the fact that the WCC does not accept church groups which, from the point of view of Orthodox, are schismatic (for example, the "Kiev Patriarchate"). The Orthodox Churches form a unified, almost autonomous group within the WCC, for whom 25% of the places in any leading organ of the Council are reserved. These 25% form a sort of "Orthodox lobby" which counteracts the non-orthodox majority. Included in the group of Orthodox member Churches in the WCC are the pre-Chalcedonian churches, which, though they are not in Eucharistic unity with the Eastern Orthodox Churches, share their theological, ecclesiological and moral positions.

Also, there are certain theological criteria in the WCC which are required for acceptance as Council member. A church group seeking membership in the WCC must

confess faith in the Triune God-the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, confess Christ as God and Saviour, share the theological tenets of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Organizations that do not meet these criteria cannot become members of the WCC. Despite all the differing positions, viewpoints, ecclesiological tenets, moral principles between Orthodox and Protestants, faith in the Holy Trinity and Jesus Christ as God and Saviour remain as the platform which unites the member churches of the WCC.

What is the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to the "branch theory?"

Bishop Hilarion: The attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church towards the "branch theory" is defined in no uncertain terms in the same document "Basic Principles of the Attitude Towards the Non-Orthodox," as follows: "The Orthodox Church cannot accept the thesis that despite historical divisions, the essential, profound unity of Christians allegedly remained inviolate and that the Church must be perceived as coinciding with the entire "Christian world," that Christian unity exists above denominational barriers and that the fragmentation of the churches is simply a result of the imperfect level of human relations. This concept states that the Church remains one, but that this unity is insufficiently apparent externally. In this model of unity, the task of Christians is not seen as re-establishing lost unity, but expressing unity which exists and cannot be taken away. This model repeats the teaching borne of the Reformation of the "unseen church." Just as unacceptable is the concept, connected with the above idea, of the so-called "branch theory," which supports the normalcy and even providential nature of the existence of Christianity as separate "branches." It would be difficult to add to this definition.

Why has the General Assembly in Porto Alegre gone practically unnoticed by Orthodox society?

Bishop Hilarion: I wouldn't say that it went unnoticed. Some Orthodox and church-focused media outlets commented. One internet site posted a photo-gallery entitled "Hot sun, warm sea, the embrace of ecumenical friends." There was no warm sea at Porto Alegre, of course: the city is two hundred kilometres from the sea. But the sun was indeed hot. There were long

hours of meetings over the course of ten days, and tense discussions, and the exhausting flights of the delegates from Europe and Latin America and back. If anyone thinks that this is all entertainment and leisure, he is deeply mistaken. This is work - difficult work, draining and thankless. It is thankless because within the "ecumenical concordance" you are considered either a retrograde or a conservative, and they quarrel with you and criticize you, while "at home," you are accused of betraying Orthodoxy for the mere fact of participating in such an event.

The photo-gallery on that site was aimed at demonstrating a deliberately anti-Orthodox and frivolous spirit of the event. For instance, the camera photographed a normal discussion: people sitting on a chair and talking. The caption, however, reads: "Orthodox delegates during an ecumenical prayer." Or a photograph depicting Brazilian dancing (during breaks in the meetings, in fact, local dance groups did perform). The caption reads: "Fire worship becomes a mandatory rite of ecumenism."

It goes without saying that when the Russian Orthodox Church's participation in inter-Christian dialogue is portrayed by the press in this manner, there is a concrete aim in mind: to spur mistrust for the hierarchy, to coax schismatic feelings. Such propaganda, as a rule, comes from the various schismatic structures: for example, the Old Calendar Greeks, or the "alternative Orthodox structures" at home. In the past, such propaganda caused no small trouble in the relationship between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, and I am truly happy that at the present time we have the opportunity to discuss this problem face to face, in open and good-willed dialogue.

Why does the ROC/MP continue to participate in the WCC?

Bishop Hilarion: The Moscow Patriarchate continues to participate in the WCC for a whole series of reasons. Some of them I mentioned in my previous explanation. In deciding the question of whether to remain in the WCC or withdraw, the Moscow Patriarchate is guided by the following tenets of the "Basic Principles of the Attitude Towards the Non-Orthodox," namely: "In the matter of membership in various Christian organizations, the following criteria are to be met: the Russian Orthodox Church cannot participate in international (regional/national) Christian organizations in which a) the by-laws, rules or traditions require a rejection of the teaching or traditions of the Orthodox Church; b) the Orthodox Church does

not have the opportunity to bring testament that it is the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; c) the method of decision-making does not take into account the ecclesiological self-recognition of the Orthodox Church; d) the rules and procedures assume the force of "majority opinion." The level and forms of participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in international Christian organizations must consider the internal dynamics, the agenda, priorities and character of these organizations as a whole. The scope and measure of the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in international Christian organizations is determined by the Hierarchy based on notions of benefit to the Church."

At the present time, the WCC does not fall under any of the four categories listed as criteria which make the participation of our Church in an international Christian organization impossible. We recognize the fact that in the period between the Harare and Porto Alegre Assemblies, the WCC did everything possible to address the wishes and demands of the Orthodox Churches with full responsibility. In this situation, withdrawal from the WCC would have been unfounded.

This does not mean that the Russian Orthodox Church will always remain members of the WCC. This organization is evolving: today it suits us more, tomorrow it may suit us less. In that case, membership will once again be an acute problem, as it was in the mid-1990's.

I would like to share one observation I made over my ten years of participation in the WCC and other inter-Christian dialogues. Today, the Christian world is more clearly divided into two groups. On one hand is the group of Churches which insist on the need to follow Church Tradition: this group includes, mainly, the Orthodox Churches, the pre-Chalcedonian Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. On the other end of the spectrum are those Protestant communities in which following Tradition was never the norm, in which there is a rapid liberalization of doctrine, of moral principles and church practice. The latter group includes in particular, the majority of Protestant communities of the North. The chasm between the "churches of Tradition" and the churches of a "liberal bent" is now so significant, and it is widening so quickly, that it is difficult for me to foresee how this "inter-Christian collegiality" can be preserved in the near future.

The fact that our church already broke dialogue with the Episcopal Church of the USA and the Church of Sweden attests to the fact that the inter-Christian community, if you will, is "bursting at the seams." It is difficult to doubt that other Northern Protestant Churches

will follow the lead of the American Episcopalians and Swedish Lutherans, and that soon the bonds will tear on a regular basis. In this case, one fine day, "the union of Protestants and Orthodox," as the WCC is today, will simply not bear the weight of accumulated differences, and the "ecumenical ship" will sink.

There are now two obvious essentially-differing versions of Christianity—the traditional and the liberal. The abyss that now exists divides not so much the Orthodox and Catholics, or the Catholics and Protestants, as the "traditionalists" and "liberals" (with all the conventions of such labels). Of course, there are defenders of traditional values in the Protestant camp (especially in the Southern churches, that is, Africa, Asia, Latin America). But a liberal attitude prevails among the Protestants.

In this situation, I suppose that a consolidation is needed in the efforts of those churches which consider themselves "Churches of Tradition," that is, the Orthodox, Catholics and pre-Chalcedonians. I am not talking about the serious dogmatic and ecclesiological differences which exist between these Churches and which can be considered within the framework of bilateral dialogue. I am talking about the need to reach an agreement between these Churches on some strategic alliance, pact, union for defending traditional Christianity as such—defense from all modern challenges, whether militant liberalism, militant atheism or militant Islam. I would like to underline that a strategic alliance is my own idea, not the official position of the Moscow Patriarchate.

We do not need union with the Catholics, we do not need "intercommunion," we do not need compromise for a doubtful "rapprochement." What we do need, in my opinion, is a strategic alliance, for the challenge is made to traditional Christianity as such. This is especially noticeable in Europe, where de-Christianization and liberalization are occurring as persistently as the gradual and unswerving Islamization. The liberal, weakened "Christianity" of the Protestant communities cannot resist the onslaught of Islam; only staunch, traditional Christianity can stand against it, ready to defend its moral positions. In this battle, the Orthodox and Catholics could, even in the face of all the differences accumulated over the centuries, form a united front.

The strategic alliance I propose must first of all defend traditional moral values such as the family, childbirth, spousal fidelity. These values are subjected to systematic mockery and derision in Europe by liberals and democrats of all types. Instead of spousal fidelity, "free love" is promoted, same-sex partnerships are equated with the union of marriage, childbirth is

opposed by "planned families." Unfortunately, we have serious differences in these matters with most Protestants, not to speak of [differences of] fundamental theological and ecclesiological character.

I will use as example a conversation with a Lutheran bishop, held within the framework of a theological dialogue with one of the Northern Lutheran churches. We tried to prepare a joint document in the defense of traditional values. We began to talk about abortion. I asked: "Can we put in the joint document that abortion is a sin?" The Lutheran bishop responded: "Well, of course, we don't promote abortion, we prefer contraception." Question: "But abortion is in the opinion of your church, a sin, or is it not?" Reply: "Well, you see, there are various circumstances, for example, the life of a mother or child could be in danger." "Well, if there is no threat to either the mother or the child, then is abortion a sin, or not?" And the Lutheran bishop could not concede that abortion is a sin.

What is there to talk about then? Abortion is not a sin, same-sex marriage is fine, contraception-wonderful. There it is, liberal Christianity in all its glory. Besides Orthodox Christians, only the Catholics preserve the traditional view of family values in Europe, and in regard, as in many others, they are our strategic partners.

In your opinion, what forms of ecumenism are acceptable, and which are utterly unacceptable in church life?

Bishop Hilarion: Intercommunion is unacceptable, the performance of "ecumenical services" together with churches with which we do not have Eucharistic communion is unacceptable, the "branch theory" is unacceptable, unacceptable are any compromises in theological, ecclesiological or moral matters. Unacceptable is theological syncretism, when the foundations of the Christian doctrine are diluted, when the fundamental postulates of the Orthodox faith are questioned.

Allowable, and necessary, are those forms of inter-Christian dialogue which give the Orthodox Church the possibility of freely witnessing the truth in the face of the non-orthodox world. One shouldn't forget what the "Basic Principles" states: "Witness cannot be a monologue, since it assumes the existence of listeners and therefore of communication. Dialogue implies two sides, a mutual openness to communication, a willingness to understand, not only an "open mouth," but also a "heart enlarged" (II Cor. 6:11).