

ASPECTS OF THE VISION FOR ECUMENISM IN ENGLAND.
**An Orthodox view presented to Churches Together in England national gathering at
27 Tavistock Square, London on 7.12.2009 by Fr George Hackney
on behalf of the Antiochian Deanery in England.**

1. The Orthodox Church is a comparative newcomer to the English Christian scene in comparison with the Church of Rome and the new denominations which emerged from the Protestant Reformation. Our Orthodox communities arrived here from the 19th century to the present as immigrant communities with an ethnic base, or rather with a variety of ethnic bases.

2. Towards the end of the 20th century an increasing number of Orthodox missions and parishes began to transform themselves from ethnic chaplaincies to local churches with a missionary agenda. This change, which is continuing and has been given formal blessing by all the Orthodox Patriarchates at the Pre-Conciliar Meeting at Chambesy in June of this year, will inevitably transform the way the Orthodox Church in England relates to other Christian organisations.

3. Although the Orthodox Church in our time is a new arrival on the English Christian scene it brings with it 2,000 years of unbroken history and collective experience of being the Church of Christ in the world. That experience has included zealous missionary activity, wealth and worldly power with State support at some times and places...and State hostility, persecution, massacres and suppression at other times and places - even within living memory. In our congregations you can stand beside people who have suffered bitterly for their faith under Soviet repression and lived to tell the tale.

4. One aspect of life in the Orthodox Church in England today is the steady and continuous stream of native English people coming to Christ as Saviour and Lord within the Orthodox Church and finding themselves at home with us.

5. Nevertheless The Orthodox Church in England at present remains a small minority with perhaps 300,000 active members. Our presence is located only in the major cities and towns. Orthodox Christian people may travel 50 or 60 or miles or more every Sunday to take part in the corporate worship of their Community of Faith.

6. Let me now speak about the Orthodox attitude to Ecumenism.

There is a spectrum of opinion and commitment within the Orthodox world in relation to the idea and practice of Ecumenism.

There are Orthodox who will have nothing to do with the Ecumenical Movement in any form. They regard it, frankly, with hostility. They believe that the Orthodox Church in Communion with Constantinople is in itself the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church founded by Christ and that outside the Orthodox Communion all Christians are either heretics or schismatics, or both. They hold the conviction that involvement in bodies like the World Council of Churches or Churches Together in England necessarily involves a surrender of the Fulness of the Christian Faith and a watering down of Christian Dogma and Moral standards. These Orthodox are a long way off from Cardinal Hume's 1987 Swanwick call for a move from co-operation to commitment. It is among the influential monks Mt Athos that these views are strongly held and encouraged.

There are other Orthodox who do commit to engagement with the Ecumenical Movement and have been deeply involved in contact and co-operation with other Christians in this country since the arrival of exiles driven from Russia by the 1918 Revolution. The debate within Orthodoxy is ongoing and open-ended.

contd next page....

7. David Spriggs 2007 report for CTE, "Moving Together" raises the question whether in our present situation a move from multilateral to bilateral conversations might be fruitful. [See Pathways Section 5].

This might provide an entry point for Orthodox in this country who would find in the Church of Rome the natural partner for themselves in any bilateral conversations. The present Archbishop Aidan Nichols or Westminster himself drew attention to this in an article (date) in which he pointed out that in his view the Orthodox Church exhibits 4 marks which make it the primary partner for Rome in the ecumenical endeavour.

The Orthodox Church, he says, is a Dogmatic Church, a Liturgical Church, a Contemplative Church, and a Monastic Church. There is a great deal more to be said about these marks and it cannot be said in two minutes !

But I think most Orthodox would accept that description and find it mirrored in the history and organism of the Church of Rome.

In January 1964 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople met for the first time, in Jerusalem. In a common declaration issued by them on 7 December 1965, the mutual excommunications of 1054 AD were lifted. Since then bilateral dialogue at an International level has been ongoing with the stated goal of restoring full Communion between the Orthodox and Catholic communities.

Progress has been made. At Balamand in 1993 the Orthodox and Catholic delegates for the first time in modern history recognised each other as "Sister Churches." This was a giant step - and a step too far for some Roman Catholics and some Orthodox.

8. Many Orthodox share the vision of reunion with the Bishop of Rome. Orthodox are already agreed that it is right and in accord with sound doctrine that the Bishop of Rome should hold a Primacy within the Episcopate of the Universal Church. We regard the present Primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople as a sort of "locum tenens" Primacy which must and will be surrendered to Rome when reunion takes place.

9. What are the obstacles to Orthodox - Catholic Ecumenism ? As you all know they are certain particular Roman doctrines which have been promulgated during the schism and since the the First Vatican Council and the Roman method of using 'Uniatism' as an ecumenical instrument. It was agreed at Balamand in 1993 that although the present Uniate Rites would not be suppressed there would be no future use by Rome of the Uniate method of bringing Orthodox into Roman Communion.

9a. Two comments can be made at this point.

(1) The Roman Pontiff's declaration of October this year offering to set up a Personal Ordinariate for corporate Anglican groups to transfer from the Communion of Canterbury to the Communion of Rome looks suspiciously like Uniatism revived.

(2) The Orthodox themselves have set up in the USA a network of "Western Rite" parishes that look remarkably similar to Uniatism. People who live in glass houses should not, perhaps, throw stones !

10. What would be the advantages of a Reunion of Rome and Constantinople ?

There would be many but I would like today to draw attention to just one point. Cardinal Kasper has somewhere suggested, and David Spriggs draws attention to it in his report, that after a century and more of ecumenical contact the question we need to ask is not 'What gifts does my church have to give?', but 'What gifts could my church receive?'

contd page 3...

One great gift that we Orthodox should be ready to receive from the Church of Rome is the gift of a firm and thorough recognition of the Universality and Catholicity of the Church, not merely in lip service - but in practice. One of the clear marks of the Roman Church is its internationalism.

One of the faults, defects and sins of Orthodoxy is its Nationalism. We are crippled and hindered by our Nationalism and the Jurisdictional division of Orthodoxy in England into ethnic jurisdictions. There are historical reasons for the Nationalism of homeland Orthodox Churches - but the fact remains that according to Orthodox Doctrine it is an heretical thing to organise a Christian Community on the basis of ethnicity. The Church of England suffers from the same fault... i.e. the concept of a "National Church." There is no such thing in sound Orthodox Doctrine as a 'National Church.'.. There is only the ' Local Church."

11. What then of the vision of the Orthodox for ecumenical engagement with the Protestant Communities ? We remain suspicious of them. We do not know much about them. There seem to be so many of them. Diarmid McCulloch in his recent TV broadcast, based on his new book, of the History of Christianity, tells us there are more than 30,000 Protestant denominations and that the number is increasing. Where do we begin ? I think we begin with those who are affiliated to CTE - but alarm bells rang a couple of weeks ago when through the offices of CTE (or was it CTBI ?) we received notification that a member group of CTE, namely the Quakers, had decided to offer not just civil partnerships but actual marriages to same sex persons...and to begin to lobby the Government to authorise legal same sex marriages on exactly the same terms and level as heterosexual marriages.

On the other hand Orthodox would be very positive if Churches Together in England were to promote an English version of the American "Manhattan Declaration" of 20th November 2009, signed by leading members of the Catholic, Evangelical and Orthodox communities in the United States in response to the increasing secularisation of the Common Life of the peoples of the USA.

12. Finally, David Spriggs notes in his Paper that it is much easier to do things together than to talk about God together. Doing things together – a night shelter, a drop-in centre, a lunch club – create bonds of friendship and trust, and friendship and trust are the essential to building relationships and ecumenism is crafted from relationships. Sharing together in social service can be done NOW without waiting for doctrinal agreement and ecclesial communion.

There are many Orthodox parishes in England where, despite our different approaches to Dogma and Worship, we work alongside our Protestant friends in caring for the hungry the homeless and the disadvantaged.

Fr George.
Antiochian Orthodox Church.