



**THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN  
THE EASTERN ORTHODOX  
AND ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES**

**edited by Christine Chaillot**

*Volos Academy Publications*

**THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN  
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ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES**

Edited by  
Christine Chaillot

Foreword by  
His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

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Cover design by Eric Jabouille, based on a photograph by Olya Gluschenko.  
View in a Coptic monastery in Egypt with the following symbolism: “The wooden gate bears a cross. It is closed but capable of being opened for dialogue and for climbing the steps towards unity, with knowledge, work, humility and love”.

The personal style of the authors in their articles was respected by the editing team.

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# Which Orthodoxy, Whose Heresy?

## An Eastern Orthodox Comment on the Breach between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches

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*Nikolaos Asproulis and Pantelis Kalaitzidis*

The last 1500 years and more have witnessed the unpleasant effects of a schism in the midst of Orthodoxy, a result of a controversial Christological debate which took place at the Council of Chalcedon (451),<sup>1</sup> concerning the way divine and human natures are united in Christ. Since that Council and its endeavour to express and further clarify the Orthodox faith in relation to Christological dogma, an unpredictable division manifested between those who claimed to faithfully follow the Council (Eastern Orthodox along with their Western brethren) by adopting its *Horos* and labelling Chalcedon as the Fourth Ecumenical Council, and those who rejected it and never recognized it as an Ecumenical Council (non-Chalcedonian or Oriental Orthodox).<sup>2</sup> For the later it was considered a profound Christological deviation from Orthodoxy as it had been formulated in the first Three Ecumenical Councils (325, 381, 431), as well as from Cyril of Alexandria, their primary theological person of reference. Several attempts aiming at the reconciliation of the two Church families had already been put forth in the policy of the Byzantine Emperors of that time in the East (Zeno, Justinian, etc) especially during the sixth and seventh centuries right up until the Middle East was occupied by the Arabs.<sup>3</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century some important agreements were achieved at the theological level in the context of both unofficial (1964-1971) and official (1985-1993) dialogues<sup>4</sup> between the two communities, but the schism has not been yet healed. In what follows an attempt will be made to critically reflect on the various conditions that prevent the Eastern Orthodox from full (Eucharistic) communion with the Oriental Orthodox, while considering some possible ways of overcoming what still divides these two Christian families. The real issue at stake here is not the issue between Orthodoxy and heresy, but primarily the one related to the extent that communion is compatible with otherness (between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox) and *vice versa*.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, John Meyendorff, "Chalcedonians and Monophysites after Chalcedon," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* [GOTR] 10 (1964): 16-30, and V. C. Samuel, *The Council of Chalcedon Re-examined* (Xlibris Corporation, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For a general overview of the diverse families in Orthodoxy see *The Orthodox Christian World*, ed. Augustine Casiday (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, V. C. Samuel, "A Brief History of Efforts to Re-unite the Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian Sides," GOTR 16 (1971): 44-62.

<sup>4</sup> For the texts see, *Towards Unity: The Theological Dialogue Between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, ed. Christine Chaillot (Geneva, 1998).

## 1. Is Eastern Orthodoxy Ready for Self-Criticism?

The ecclesial division of 451<sup>5</sup> is a reality which still challenges the very character and nature of the Church as the Body of Christ split in various parts. Throughout the centuries, the inherent ecumenical dimension of the Church has been obscured by various cultural, political and historical reasons, rendering the vision of unity a difficult task. Divisions thereby turned out to be the source of estrangement between Churches and Christian people.

In this respect and due to the distance of time since the occurrence of the breach under discussion, one is obliged to ask from an Eastern Orthodox perspective the following critical questions: How could anyone explain the Eastern Orthodox reluctance or, even, animosity, towards the ecumenical idea, and in our context the unity with Oriental Orthodox? Why are some Eastern Orthodox with a rich universalistic tradition facing today a strong and tenacious fundamentalist resistance towards the profound affinity of faith with the Oriental Orthodox? What are the historical, social and other reasons for the strengthening of anti-ecumenical movements and feelings that prevent the Eastern Orthodox from a restoration of faith with their Oriental Orthodox brethren? Despite all the various efforts for theological dialogue mentioned above and despite the agreements reached on a series of "Proposals",<sup>6</sup> great reactions were expressed, for instance by some monasteries in Mount-Athos with great influence on conservative people.<sup>7</sup>

On the contrary, these "Proposals" were not followed by serious and effective impact on the life of the respective Churches as many Patriarchates and Churches did not react at all. Today there is no real progress towards the next step, i.e. the restoration of the full ecclesial and Eucharistic communion. Let us try then to present in brief a critical examination of several factors that prevent Eastern Orthodoxy from proceeding to this final step.

### *1a. Persistent Ambiguity of the Eastern Orthodox Participation in the Ecumenical Movement*<sup>8</sup>

It is evident that despite the institutional participation of nearly all canonical

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<sup>5</sup> For a historical overview of this division, see Vlassios Phidas, *Church History*, vol. 1 (Athens, 1994), 620 ff. (in Greek). See also, Thomas FitzGerald, "Restoring the Unity in Faith: The Orthodox-Oriental Dialogue," in *Restoring the Unity in Faith: The Orthodox-Oriental Dialogue*, eds. Thomas FitzGerald and Emmanuel Gratsias (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 5-38.

<sup>6</sup> For the relevant texts see the appendix.

<sup>7</sup> For the various reactions expressed against the dialogue between the two families, see for instance: *Dioscorus and Severus. The Anti-Chalcedonian Heretics. A Critique of two Doctoral theses* (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of Gregoriou, 2003); *Comments on the Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Anti-Chalcedonians* (Mount Athos: Holy Community of Mount Athos, 1996); *Are the Anti-Chalcedonian Orthodox?* (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of Gregoriou, 1995), (in Greek).

<sup>8</sup> The first part of this article (1a-1d) with the necessary adjustments draws mainly on Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Theological, Historical, and Cultural Reasons for Anti-Ecumenical Movements in Eastern Orthodoxy," in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Recourses for theological education*, eds. P. Kalaitzidis et al. (Volos, Greece: Volos Academy Publications in cooperation with WCC Publications and Regnum Books International, 2014), 134-152.

autocephalous Eastern Orthodox Churches in the Ecumenical Movement and some of their fruitful and constructive contribution to many crucial issues, as well as the leading role of distinguished Eastern Orthodox theologians in promoting ecumenical understanding and theological reflection towards Christian unity, it seems that from the Eastern Orthodox side, and especially in the monastic milieu (for instance Mount Athos and related monasteries outside Greece), the low clergy (with several exceptions though in relation to University Professors and Hierarchs)<sup>9</sup> and the grassroots, there has always been a long-standing suspicion towards, if not an open rejection of, the Ecumenical Movement. The present extreme reactions of a conservative part of the Eastern Orthodox faithful (with an anti-modern, anti-ecumenical, anti-Western agenda and beyond), against any reformation or change in the Church life, led many local Eastern Orthodox Churches, Hierarchs and lay theologians to the adoption of an ambiguous stance towards the Ecumenical Movement: with some rare exceptions, the general rule was that, while they were fully participating in the ecumenical meetings and discussions, the official ecumenical representatives of the Eastern Orthodox Churches systematically avoided speaking after these meetings to a wider audience within their Churches at home, and informing or educating them about ecumenical matters. The official Orthodox representatives employed for decades a dual language: one ecumenical *ad extra*, and one conservative and defensive (but not principally anti-ecumenical) *ad intra*. As a result of this ambiguity, despite the initial positive attitude of Eastern Orthodoxy towards Ecumenical Movement and inter-Christian dialogue, the Eastern Orthodox people remained alienated from, and finally became even suspicious of, the search for Christian unity and the efforts towards ecumenical understanding, even in such cases as the relations with the Oriental Orthodox where no proper doctrinal disagreement exists.

This reality implies a serious re-consideration of and reflection on a range of reasons and factors as the following ones: the understanding of the Ecumenical Movement as well as any sort of bilateral dialogue (as is the case also with the Oriental Orthodox) mainly or exclusively as the *return* to Eastern Orthodoxy as the only possibility of reconciliation; the exclusivist ecclesiological models and the non-recognition of the “ecclesiological status” of the other Christian Churches and Confessions; historical reasons as Western aggressiveness (at least since the Crusades) and the consequent traumatic historical experience of Orthodox peoples, which decisively contributed to the formation of Orthodox anti-Westernism and also introversion, fundamentalism and anti-ecumenism and the successive losses of Eastern Orthodox universalism and catholicity.

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<sup>9</sup> See previous note.

1b. *The Understanding of Ecumenical Movement as a Return to Orthodoxy and the Exclusivist Orthodox Ecclesiological Models*<sup>10</sup>

If the Ecumenical Movement in general and any bilateral inter-Christian dialogue in particular is “a great move of conversion and repentance” (Jürgen Moltmann), is it not the time for the Eastern Orthodox to recognize their own mistakes, failures and weaknesses for which they need to ask forgiveness in the light of an “ecumenism of repentance”?<sup>11</sup> Is it not the time to finally clarify the issues the Eastern Orthodox should reconsider in the light of the common tradition of the undivided Church, without immediate suspicion?

In any case, according to the prevailing idea among many clerics, monastics, and lay Orthodox today, this return should not only include the acceptance by Orientals (as well as by other Christian traditions and Churches) of the Eastern Orthodox position and terminology in key dogmatic issues such as Christology, but should also take into account the liturgical rite, canonical matters and even local customs and practices, in other words a general uniformity in all aspects of Eastern Orthodox ecclesial life and experience.

For years now, there has not been any serious discussion, especially among the Orthodox officials, regarding the nature and the origins of the differences separating us from Christians of other traditions. For example, this refers to an effort of distinguishing and discerning the differences we have with the Oriental Orthodox: which are touching the very core of the ecclesial faith and which are just a reflection or an expression of the cultural, social or political context of each place and time. In other words, one could re-formulate the issue under discussion in terms of the relation between dogmas and the so-called *theologoumena*,<sup>12</sup> that is between theological and non-theological factors, a distinction which would ascribe a great account of freedom to the official theological discussions.

For many of the Eastern Orthodox, every different practice in the life of the other Church families, every diverging wording in the latter's dogmatic tradition immediately acquires the status of doctrinal distortion, a position which must be overcome if we want to have a true ecumenical spirit, towards the union and communion in the same Eucharistic chalice. It is a fact that for many Eastern Orthodox it is difficult to see unity in diversity and to accept otherness as constituting of unity, or to think of reaching Church unity through the

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<sup>10</sup> For the different ecclesiological models in contemporary Eastern Orthodox theology see Cyril Hovorun, “Borders of Salvation: Reading Fathers with Russian Theologians,” in *Für Uns und für unser Heil: Soteriologie in Ost und West*, eds. Theresia Hainthaler et al. (Innsbruck: Verlagsanstalt Tyrolia, 2014), 313-322.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the appeal made by His Beatitude John X, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, during the 24<sup>th</sup> conference of Orthodox spirituality in Bose on the theme “Martyrdom and Communion,” September, 7-10, 2016: “In ecumenism, we are in need of an ‘ecumenism of repentance’ (*metanoia*) (...) and (...) of an ‘ecumenism of blood’, through the new Christian martyrs of today (the Coptic and Ethiopian martyrs in Libya, Eastern Orthodox in Syria, etc),” available at <http://antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/john-x-patriarch-of-antioch-and-all-the-east-blood-of-martyrs-seed-of-communion-monastery-of-bose-september-2016/1489/> (last accessed 20 September, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. V. V. Bolotov “Thesen über das ‘Filioque’ von einem russischen Theologen,” *Internationale theologische Zeitschrift* 6 (1898): 681-712.

legitimate Church's diversities and particularities, despite any positive approach to otherness articulated nowadays by some leading Eastern Orthodox theologians.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, legitimate theological pluralism and unity in diversity may be treated with suspicion when it comes to Christians of other traditions. Many Eastern Orthodox completely ignore the other parts of Christianity, showing a tendency towards their own uniformity and homogeneity, without the acceptance of otherness.

However, in order to understand and explain the above defensive attitude chiefly characterized by an ecclesiological exclusivism and theological uniformity, one has to be aware of the successive losses of Orthodox universalism which determined, to a great extent, the theological background of the Eastern Orthodox anti-ecumenical movements and shaped their physiognomy and agenda.

*1c. The Successive Losses of Eastern Orthodox Universalism and Catholicity. A Comprehensive and Inclusive Study of Patristic Sources*

In the Final Document of the Third Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference of Chambésy, Geneva (1986),<sup>14</sup> the Eastern Orthodox Church expresses its “profound conviction and ecclesiastical consciousness of being the bearer of and the witness to the faith and tradition of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”. This understanding of the Catholicity of the Church, chiefly and primarily experienced in the Eucharist, and formulated within the theology of the local Church and through a robust Eucharistic ecclesiology, is not without consequences for the historical course of the Church, especially since it was linked, in many regards, to the universalistic vision of a Christian empire, i.e. the Roman/Byzantine empire which was claiming to incarnate and to realize the Kingdom of God on earth, and in which the Emperor was supposed to be “in place of Christ”.

However, to the extent that this catholic and universalistic vision was related to the Byzantine theocracy, to the Roman/Byzantine world (*oikoumene*) and the imperial power, it was (and still is) suffering from a series of multiple—mainly historical and political—losses related, in their turn, to the retreat, diminution, and finally demise of the Roman/Byzantine empire, losses which seriously affected the sense of the catholic and universalistic consciousness of Eastern Orthodoxy. The Byzantine Empire's Fall in 1453 appears to have opened an incurable wound in the ecclesiological constitution and the way in which the Eastern Orthodox materialize the relationship between local and universal Church, between the particular and the catholic. In fact, it is difficult to decide if *this* vision of catholicity arises from the fundamental Eucharistic experience and its ensuing ecclesiological principles (being at the heart of the experience of the Eastern Orthodox Church) or from the imperial unity and the

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<sup>13</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T & T Clark, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Available at *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports on the Ecumenical Movement, 1902-1922*, ed. by Gennadios Limouris (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 112.

reality of the Roman/Byzantine *oikoumene*. Even worse, for many Eastern Orthodox these two visions of catholicity and universality are just nothing else but identical! If the catholicity and universality of the Church was really linked with the Empire, then we can easily understand some consequences for the Church history, including the one after the schism of Chalcedon in 451. It is commonly admitted today that the Oriental Christians separated themselves from the imperial Byzantine Church not only for theological, but also for political, cultural and other reasons, i.e. as a reaction to the oppression of ethnic identity and local cultural expression by the imperial power.<sup>15</sup> Further Hellenization was also an unavoidable effect of this Byzantine dominion in the Oriental regions (mainly Syria, Palestine, Egypt), in regions with particular expressions of Christian theology (e.g. Antioch and Alexandria). Chalcedonian Orthodoxy gradually became mainly Greek in its cultural expression and liturgical experience.

In addition to that, the “*lex orandi*”, so important for the Chalcedonian Orthodox ecclesiological and theological self-consciousness, came to be identified exclusively with the Byzantine liturgical tradition, and therefore to the belief that only within the frame of this tradition could the authentic experience of holiness and divine-human communion (θέωσις) be acquired. Besides, in recent times, the Chalcedonian Orthodox have hardly known, studied, or accepted patristic traditions other than that of the Greek Fathers, while almost totally ignoring the Syriac, Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian Church Fathers, also a result of the one-sidedness of the dominant role of the “neopatristic” model of doing theology.<sup>16</sup>

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of renewal for Eastern Orthodox theology. However, at the same time it was also—precisely because of the way in which this “return to the Fathers” was perceived, especially by some of the so-called “heirs” of Florovsky’s legacy—a time of introversion, conservatism and of a static or fundamentalist understanding of the concept of Tradition, which very often came to be equated with traditionalism, a reality quite evident in the way representatives of the monastic milieu or conservative Eastern Orthodox theologians still conceive and interpret today the Christological debates of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

It is evident, therefore, that a serious study of the Church Fathers of the other traditions (in our respect, of the different Oriental Orthodox traditions) is badly needed in the context of the official bilateral dialogue. We must study all these little known important patristic sources in depth and with a really

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<sup>15</sup> This Oriental resistance to the Byzantine power, to the imperial Church, and to its predominantly Greek culture and expression was often violently rejected by the state authorities, adding to the religious and cultural divide a strong feeling of oppression and defiance. If the Eastern Orthodox were rightly expecting that Roman Catholics should ask forgiveness for all their aggressions and acts of pillage inflicted during the Fourth Crusade and the Frankish conquest of the Greek East, Oriental Orthodox might also in turn legitimately expect a similar gesture on behalf of the Byzantine Orthodox for all the suffering and oppression endured over centuries of Byzantine dominion of the Oriental provinces of the Empire.

<sup>16</sup> We should however notice that Fr. Florovsky abundantly uses in his writings the Latin Fathers. For a comprehensive and critical overview of the neo-patristic trend in contemporary Eastern Orthodox theology see among others P. Gavriluk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

ecumenical spirit. In this way we can go beyond the various existent misunderstandings so as to correctly interpret and fully receive these patristic sources and their theological truth as belonging to the one common Tradition.

*1d. The Growing Influence of the Monastic Milieu*

We cannot understand the Eastern Orthodox reactions to the Ecumenical Movement in general and to the bilateral dialogue with the Orientals in particular, without taking into account the decisive role, and growing influence of the monastic milieu on the Chalcedonian Orthodox faithful. Over the past few decades, Eastern Orthodox monasticism has undergone a remarkable spiritual renewal and also significant economic, and in some cases even political empowerment, which first took place at the end of the 1960s on Mount Athos. Later, this renewal spread to the whole Eastern Orthodox world, both in traditional Orthodox countries (such as those in Eastern Europe) and also in the diaspora (for example in North America and even in Africa), and the Church of Antioch (Syria and Lebanon) being the last places where the Athonite spirit was exported.<sup>17</sup> Monastic renewal nowadays too often displays the strengthening of fundamentalism and anti-ecumenism. In addition, Orthodox monasticism is becoming more and more visible by its tendency to patronize the ecclesial body and to engage in a worldly fundamentalist activism. Furthermore, there is a growing tendency among monastic milieus of frequent and open accusations aimed at bishops and lay theologians and even Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs, especially those involved in the ecumenical movement and the bilateral dialogues, charging them with the betrayal of Orthodoxy and theological minimalism or relativism.

One gets the impression that nowadays many of the monastics seek to be considered as the ultimate authority and the genuine voice of Orthodoxy, even though many monks have no serious theological education, but believe and claim that many local Orthodox Churches have been diverted from the proper and authentic Orthodox path. For them, it is clear that even decisions taken at a Pan-Orthodox level<sup>18</sup> or any achieved agreements with the Oriental Orthodox which have taken place at the official theological level<sup>19</sup>—the preparation and final wording of which contributed also at different stages by conservative or

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<sup>17</sup> Despite this Athonite expansion and growing influence in Syria and Lebanon, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East signed (in November 1991) and reaffirmed (in February 2013) a limited intercommunion and mutual pastoral solidarity with the Syrian Orthodox Church. Following the Pastoral Agreement between the Coptic Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria (2001), a limited mutual pastoral unity was also extended to the faithful of these two Churches.

<sup>18</sup> For example the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Consultation of Chambéry (1986), concerning the participation of the Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement.

<sup>19</sup> For instance according to the 1993 Official meeting of the Joint Eastern Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox Commission: “In the light of our four unofficial consultations (1964, 1967, 1970, 1971) and our three official meetings which followed on (1985, 1989, 1990), we have understood that both families have loyally maintained the authentic Orthodox Christological doctrine, and the unbroken continuity of the apostolic tradition, though they may have used Christological terms in different ways”.

“traditional” Orthodox theologians, like Ioannis Karmiris or Fr. John Romanides—cannot be accepted in practice, if they do not get the prior approval of the ultra-Orthodox movements. These movements continue to exert a kind of spiritual and ecclesial supervision over the Chalcedonian Orthodox throughout the world, a sort of universal jurisdiction over local Churches.

## *2. Hidden Elements of Eastern Orthodox Christian Tradition in the Service of Reconciliation and Unity*

The current unpleasant condition of Eastern Orthodoxy notwithstanding, several hidden or, for ideological reasons, downgraded elements of its theology, experience and Tradition, continue to be an invaluable means towards the healing of the breach between the two Church families. Despite the temporary impasse of the Official dialogue, one could hermeneutically draw on various aspects of the more or less common Tradition of the primitive Church, in order to formulate and further develop the theological vision that would facilitate an honest and frank rapprochement between the two Church families.

### *2a. Doctrinal Development: Is it Possible?*

In his essay published in 1845<sup>20</sup>, the late Cardinal John Henry Newman, based on a detailed account of the early patristic tradition, argued that it was possible for the Church to further re-state its teaching in a more profound and clear way, while remaining faithful to the content of the earlier formulae. In our case, even though various contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologians re-acted against any sort of doctrinal development,<sup>21</sup> this negative attitude did not prevent yet other theologians from re-envisioning this crucial issue.<sup>22</sup> Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, for instance, an outstanding and widely respected Romanian theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became a strong advocate of doctrinal development on the part of Eastern Orthodox theology. Following his argument, as it was clearly expressed in one of his articles focusing on the issue at hand,<sup>23</sup> one should be ready to admit that even though the revelation of truth is fully manifested in Christ, human beings, due to their creaturely contingency, no longer find themselves at the same stage of spiritual readiness, capable of receiving or replying to the divine call with the same conceptual tools employed by their precedents. While the content of faith still remains the same, being thereby in spiritual continuity with the early Church to properly define it, namely it does not experience the

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<sup>20</sup> The standard edition of Newman’s classic work is: John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Foreword by Ian Ker (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Daniel Lattier, “The Orthodox Rejection of Doctrinal Development,” *Pro Ecclesia* 20, 4 (2011): 389-410.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “The issue of Dogmatic Development in Contemporary Orthodox Theology,” in *Dogma and Terminology in the Orthodox Tradition Today*, eds. I. Tulcan, P. Bouteneff and M. Stavrou (Sibiu: Astra Museum, 2015), 157-169.

<sup>23</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, “The Orthodox Conception of Tradition and the Development of Doctrine,” *Sobornost* 5 (1969): 652-662.

same problems, challenges or reality in our modern world, “hence comes the justification and the necessity for employing new words, metaphors and formulas in order to express the mystery”.<sup>24</sup> As Staniloae himself further explains, referring also to the early Church Fathers,

These new expressions by which certain aspects insufficiently realized before are grasped, these more articulate experiences and more complex effects of the activity of Christ, which are more adequate to the richness which is in Him and to the more profound problematic of a humanity which is spiritually more advanced—all these represent what Vincent of Lerins calls a *progressus in idem* (...) It is the same *motus stabilis* or *status mobilis*, of which St. Gregory of Nyssa speaks, who maintains that only he who makes progress remains steadfast for he remains in the same line, while he who is not constantly progressing falls into dullness, because the meaning of formulas which are not refreshed becomes covered with dust, and obscured by usage.<sup>25</sup>

It is evident, therefore that the employing of new expressions to re-state earlier *formulae* does not account for any deviation from the original meaning or the true content of the right faith, but is related with the always new reality of the surrounding settings that necessitate a move of accommodation on the human side, so as to better grasp, experience and live the Orthodox faith and the mystery of salvation. Since the Church is considered as a living Body, as a “way of being” and “mode of existence” (Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas) and not merely or primarily as a fixed and petrified institution, the necessity of a continuous re-incarnation of the good news of the Gospel<sup>26</sup> and its theological expression in the most adequate and spiritually capable expressive concepts is something that is required by the very nature of the ecclesial faith and tradition itself, rather than by any external sociological, political or cultural factor; this is due to the fact that the Person of Jesus Christ is “for ever the same”. In this respect efforts were undertaken by not only eminent Eastern and Oriental Orthodox scholars to provide a more accurate or inclusive term to interpret the famous Cyrilian formula (“One nature of the God the Logos incarnate”) in terms of “miaphysite”<sup>27</sup> that accounts for a “*composite* nature” (equivalent to ‘person’ or ‘*hypostasis*’ in Chalcedon) and not for one simple numerical nature. This allows to go beyond the former Christological polemic. This new wording of “miaphysite” allows to re-state the earlier formula and to understand better the real Christological status of the Oriental Orthodox, without repeating the ambiguous term used until now, namely the “monophysite”, which has been rejected by the Oriental Orthodox themselves and considered as wrong in the context of the bilateral dialogue.

At the same time, a positive reception of doctrinal development does not account for any radical departure from the formation of faith by the early Church, especially in terms of content. As Staniloae puts it,

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<sup>24</sup> Staniloae, “The Orthodox Conception of Tradition,” 659.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010): 5-36.

<sup>27</sup> See relative articles in this volume. Additionally the most recent by Sebastian Brock, “Miaphysite, not monophysite!,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 37 (2016): 45-51.

new words and expressions must not drive out those which were valid at the beginning, but must indeed be constantly verified in the light of them, so that the Church may be sure that the new expressions do not take us away from the mystery of Christ's action, lived at the beginning in its integrity. The new expressions must be incorporated amongst those by which the mystery of Christ was revealed at the beginning, so that the original expressions may recover their freshness, and the meaning of the new ones may convey the same mystery of the action of Christ as did the original ones.<sup>28</sup>

Besides, Staniloae himself has worked out a similar model of doctrinal development in relation to the necessity of reformulating the Cyrilian formula and the *Horos* of Chalcedon.<sup>29</sup> He continuously insisted on the need to re-work the ancient *formulae* of faith in the sense that human language cannot fully and definitely grasp and express the fullness of faith. In this regard he echoes another well-known Eastern Orthodox scholar and historian, the late Fr. John Meyendorff who explicitly states that,

theological terminology can only partially, and always somehow inaccurately, express the Truth. It is nothing else than a means of communication, an instrument used by the Church to convey its teaching. This is why the Orthodox is not, and has never been, a "confessional" Church. It never accepted to be defined—and therefore limited—by the text of a Confession. Neither the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, nor the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils can be considered as defining the fullness of Orthodoxy. If the Creed has acquired a permanent value by its inclusion in the Liturgy, the conciliar definitions are essentially *ad hoc* statements, which can be understood only against the background of the heresy condemned by them. They do, of course, reflect and witness to an absolute and unchangeable Truth, but this Truth is a living One, which exists in the organic continuity of the One Church of Christ. A Council is ecumenical, and its decision is "infallible" when it has defined *something* of this permanent and organic Truth, while no human words, and therefore no conciliar definition, can pretend to have exhausted it. Conciliar definitions, while they cannot be simply revoked without the Church ceasing to be Christ's Church, can be complemented and reinterpreted, just as the Fifth Council has complemented and interpreted Chalcedon.

And he continues by saying that,

Doctrinal statements and definitions are made *necessary* by the life of the Church in history. One cannot avoid them for the simple reason that the human mind is constantly at work, that *it* constantly searches, and often errs. The function of the Church resides in giving it some guidance: the doctrinal continuity of the Orthodox Tradition is a witness of the presence in the Church of the Spirit of Truth. Thus, the Chalcedonian definition, just as all the definitions which preceded it or followed it, was not necessary in itself, but because there was a concrete danger of the Gospel of Christ being betrayed. This danger came from the heresy of Eutyches, who ceased to see in Christ a human nature totally consubstantial to us. And, in fact, such a heresy was and is present, explicitly or implicitly, in many aspects of Church life, especially in the East, and Chalcedon is a safeguard against it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Staniloae, "The Orthodox Conception of Tradition," 660.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the suggested new formulation in Ciprian Toroczkai, "Towards an Expanded Formula of the Chalcedonian Dogmatic Definition? Fr. Dumitru Staniloae's Contribution to the Dialogue with Non-Chalcedonian Churches," GOTR 59 (2014): 145-160, here at 152. Cf. also Răduca's article in the present volume.

<sup>30</sup> Meyendorff, "Chalcedonians and Monophysites after Chalcedon," *op. cit.*

In this perspective, it should be further mentioned that in the Statements of the Official dialogue, the Oriental Orthodox Churches have several times affirmed that they rejected Eutyches.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding now St. Cyril's formula "One *physis*/nature of God the Logos incarnate", so much debated during the time of Chalcedon and after it, we should accept that it could be re-worked in-depth so as to "throw new light onto the content expressed"<sup>32</sup>; this was in fact the work of the Commission of theologians during the Official bilateral dialogue, with the publication of Statements. Their study and work allowed to go beyond any difference in language or the complex philosophical background and the complicated meaning of several concepts used by the Greek Fathers (nature, *physis*, essence, *hypostasis*, person). Today, after the joint doctrinal agreement, and the understanding that the real Christological faith of the Oriental Orthodox Churches is not "monophysite" in content, it is our Christian and real ecumenical duty to express the common faith in a way that is acceptable to both sides, without any further useless mental and psychological imposition, or degradation of any of the two traditions. This means that the great Greek philosophical tradition and Chalcedonian theological heritage can be mutually shared as well as the great heritage of the Oriental Orthodox.

The theologians of both Church families have underlined that the real difference between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Church is only a *terminological* or verbal one (about the Greek word *physis* and its interpretation and translation). On another side, the use of the *prefices* "in" and "out" in the phrase by Pope Leo of Rome, included in the *Horos* of the Council of Chalcedon: namely the expression "in two natures" in order to maintain the distinction of the natures in Christ after the union, was accepted by the Chalcedonians; and "out of two natures", before the union, was accepted by the non-Chalcedonians.<sup>33</sup> Is it not the time for the theologians to accept that the two *formulae* can be seen as similar, being thereby another way of ending the Christological dispute between the two families of Churches?<sup>34</sup>

#### *2b. The Relevance of a Theology of the Holy Spirit*

Therefore, the question that naturally arises is the following: How is the Church capable of redefining an earlier *formula* of faith, which caused so much hostility and animosity between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox communities that otherwise share everything in common, such as the importance of and practice in the liturgical and patristic context, spiritual and ascetic life, and much more? How can this be possible without the guidance by the Holy Spirit, as this is the deep belief of the Orthodox tradition?

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<sup>31</sup> See the appendix of this volume for the relative texts.

<sup>32</sup> Staniloae, "The Orthodox Conception of Tradition," 660.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, see V. C. Samuel, "One Incarnate Nature of God the Word," in *Does Chalcedon divide or Unite?*, eds. Paulos Gregorios, William H. Lazareth and Nikos Nissiotis (Geneva: WCC, 1981), 90.

<sup>34</sup> See the article of Getatchew Haile, "The Christology of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwāhədo Church," published in the present volume.

The Church as a living Body is always and really guided by the Spirit of God, capable of clearly admitting the insufficiency of its historical and human life, insofar as it is still *in via* towards the coming Kingdom of God. A robust theology of the Holy Spirit, which breathes wherever He likes, would ascribe to the Church freedom from any natural, ethnic, or cultural ties that prevent its renewal towards unity, according to Christ's will (John 17:21). In the context of theological dialogue, this requires of course the work and study of the theologians chosen by the Church who themselves have to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

Without denouncing the particular traditions formulated since the occurrence of the division, a severe theological endeavour needs to take seriously into account the role of the Holy Spirit, Who provides the people of God with the *freedom* to employ even new terms and formulations whenever this is necessary. Such an attitude allows to make re-interpretations also in the context of our bilateral dialogue, being at the same time "in solidarity" and without contradicting the content of the past definitions, and bringing sufficiently to light what earlier *formulae* did not succeed in elucidating fully in relation to the mystery of God. Ecclesial faith and life cannot remain underdeveloped throughout the centuries and unto the ages, since they represent the actual situation of the Body of Christ with regard only to his human side.

Ultimately, all, theologians, officials of the Church and others, must also admit that even the most nuanced theological terminology always fails to adequately express *all* the aspects of the divine mystery once and fully revealed in history in the Person and life of Jesus Christ. Moreover, and in a parallel way, the Churches and the faithful should be ready to admit their own failures and insufficiencies on their human side, so as to be able to work towards a healing of historical breaches that cause unpleasant splits onto the Body of Christ. This is possible only with the power of the Holy Spirit.

### 2c. An Eschatological Outlook

A comprehensive theology of the Holy Spirit will also manifest the relevance of an *eschatological outlook (and ontology)* in the midst of the debate around the need for assimilating the different doctrinal *formulae* to achieve the most proper *synthesis*. As it has been rightly argued<sup>35</sup> Eastern Christianity in general is characterized by an overemphasis on a meta-historical, liturgical perception of reality, which also accounts for a strong eschatological orientation. Without in principle denouncing the historical reality, due to the central role that the Eucharist in particular, and the divine Liturgy in general occupy in the ecclesial experience and life of the Church, the Kingdom of God is given a primary role in manifesting the very truth of reality.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. for instance John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary Press, 1985), 15-26, 123-142; idem, "Implications ecclésiologiques de deux types de pneumatologie," in *Communio Sanctorum. Mélanges offerts à Jean-Jacques von Allmen* (Genève, Labor et Fides, 1982), 141-154; republished in: Métropolitain Jean (Zizioulas) de Pergame, *L'Eglise et ses institutions, textes réunis par l'Archimandrite Grigorios Papathomas et Hyacinthe Destivelle*, O.P. (Paris, Cerf, 2011), 29-47.

Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon<sup>36</sup> by existentially re-working the sacramental theology of the prolific writer of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, St. Maximus the Confessor, argues for a new ontological account that overturns the understanding of causality as it is evident in our everyday, historical condition. In this light and while according to our experience, echoing the perspective of the ancient thought that the past comes first, and has priority over the future, following in this respect the natural, deterministic sequence of things, in its Christian understanding the future causes things to be, namely it has an *ontological* priority over the past. In this perspective, the past *formulae*, without losing their significance as a preliminary step on the part of the early Church to define the Apostolic faith and describe aspects of the mystery of salvation, will be finally judged as true only at the eschata, when the eschatological state of things will be fully manifested. Therefore, by taking into account this quite creative and fruitful perception of an eschatological ontology, the Church is not only allowed but it is also obliged to follow the restorative breath of the Holy Spirit which makes all things new again, without the fear of deviating from the once fully revealed and recorded truth. An eschatological ontology then makes possible the expression of the saving truth in new formations when this will facilitate the efforts towards the overcoming of any breach for the sake of Church unity. Any terminological or cultural misunderstanding or division is by no means justified from a theology and a Church that is constantly guided by the Holy Spirit which leads them to the realization of the fullness of truth. Therefore any blind insistence on the external aspects or wording of the past *formulae*, besides the justifiable reservation one might have against a threat of relativism, often leads to a possible departure from the *regula fidei*, to the extent that the forms of the dogma (in Greek, Syriac and other languages and expressions) gain priority over the content of faith. This is in fact the real case with the terminological impasse ensuing from the Greek philosophical terms employed by the Chalcedon *Horos* and the Cyrilian terminoly, which more or less caused in principle the split between the two families.

This eschatological “outlook”<sup>37</sup> in theology, and not as it was often considered by scholastic textbooks as the last chapter of Christian Dogmatics, can become very useful, to the degree that it provides the Church with freedom and space to re-interpret its own faith by using the most adequate conceptual tools over the centuries. The Church, regarded as the living Body of Christ, should not be in fear of any formal change or even reformation that will further elucidate the mystery of redemption, in clearer and more comprehensive terms than the earlier forms which are more or less bound by a specific context, that is the Hellenistic context in that time dominant but not any more. This does not account for a doctrinal *relativism* resulting from a continuous translation of faith in the contemporary idiom. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit will present the

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. Luke Ben Tallon (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 39-82.

<sup>37</sup> John D. Zizioulas, “Déplacement de la perspective eschatologique,” in *La Chrétienté en débat*, eds. G. Alberigo et al. (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1984), 89-100. The same paper is now published in Métropolite Jean (Zizioulas) de Pergame, *L'Eglise et ses institutions*, op. cit., 459-473.

Church with the necessary time (*kairos*) that accounts for the necessary reformation or change without any fear of doctrinal deviation that would cause greater problems or would lead to a deepening of the past animosity and controversy. The equivalent of change and freedom in the Church is not relativism of tradition or faith, but the distinction in, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which carefully paves the way towards a deeper experience of faith, until the end of times.

## 2d. Contextual Hermeneutics

A sort of a petrified and ideological perception of patristic theology was often considered as the *sine qua non conditio* of fidelity to the Church, even though after centuries of this dominant reality, serious academic work clearly presented the fact that facets of this monolithic and homogenous construction of the past history of theology were more or less an ideological construction which did not account for the real historical context. This is for instance the case with the condemnation of the historical non-Chalcedonian leaders, namely Dioscorus of Alexandria (5<sup>th</sup> c.) and Severus of Antioch (6<sup>th</sup> c.), who while they are nowadays fully recognised by specialized theologians as Orthodox in their Christological faith and theology, have been condemned, however, by the Chalcedonians for canonical and political reasons irrelative to their Orthodox faith.

Given this reality, it seems appropriate and urgent to raise the question of the possibility of *contextual theology* and *hermeneutics* within Orthodox thought. The idea of *contextual theology* implies that there is no theology in the abstract—no ahistorical, unaltered and timeless tradition, “not text without a context”; theology occurs only in specific historical and cultural contexts and in response to specific questions and challenges. If one takes into consideration the specific questions that the Chalcedon Council and the non-Chalcedonian theologians attempt to address, surprisingly enough one would find that both struggled for a definition of the very same faith, by using however different conceptual tools, with different mentalities in the context of different theological schools (mainly Antioch and Alexandria).

This shows the very need of a contextual theology or rather a contextual *hermeneutics*<sup>38</sup> that will go beyond a simple historical, anachronistic interpretation of theology and history, not viewed only by the so to say “winners” of Chalcedon (the so-called Chalcedonians who imposed their views). This contextual approach can shed light onto the various hidden circumstances and conditions that play an important role in the subsequent developments, from the time of Chalcedon until today. It can provide a useful means of overcoming the still dominant mutual, official, ecclesiastical estrangement, to the degree that it will show that theology and Church history are a more complex reality than it is often considered by various conservatives or even fundamentalists of both sides. Alongside a very deep historical work is needed together with a careful

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Aristotle Papanikolaou, “From Sophia to Personhood: The Development of the 20th c. Orthodox theology from S. Bulgakov through V. Lossky and D. Staniloae to Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas,” unpublished paper presented at the Seminar organized by the Volos Academy for Theological Studies with support from the Virginia Farah Foundation, Athens, Greece (May, 2016).

theological interpretation of the common tradition so as to elucidate the core elements of the common faith devoid of any ideological construction or cultural sovereignty of the one over the other. For this purpose, Eastern Orthodoxy is necessitated to further address the following question that naturally arises from an adoption of a contextual hermeneutical methodology: Is Chalcedonian Orthodox theology exclusively wedded to Greek philosophical categories, or could it continue to elucidate the mystery of the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ by legitimizing the use of other theological categories, including those of the Oriental Orthodox?

### *3. In place of a Conclusion*

One thing that it is made evident from an exploration in Church history and theology is that Church unity is not a ready made or given condition, but a *gift* of the Spirit that will be bestowed on the Churches when they become ready to encounter each other, with knowledge and work, and in a spirit of freedom, humility and love, in order to heal all the paradox divisions in the perspective of an undivided Church, the real and full Body of Christ. This is a common goal given to the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox families through their present theological and pastoral dialogue, in an era when increasing fundamentalism and religious Muslim radicalism challenges the very existence, presence and witness of historic and traditional Orthodox communities, especially in the Middle East.