

NUMBER III IN THE SERIES

Contributions to a Theology of Anti–Ecumenism



ECUMENISM: A MOVEMENT FOR
UNION OR A SYNCRETISTIC
HERESY?

† Bishop Angelos of Avlona

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**Ecumenism: A Movement for
Union or a Syncretistic
Heresy?**

by
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ORTHODOX STUDIES
Etna, California 96027

1998

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Ecumenism: A Movement for Union or a Syncretistic Heresy?

A. Fundamental Ecclesiological Principles

Since I will be examining, primarily, the dialogues of the ecumenical movement and the repercussions entailed by the participation of the Orthodox therein, I would like us, first, to pay close attention to a very revealing text from the Divine Chrysostomos.

We will examine—let me explain by way of introduction—two basic theses:

- *first*, St. John does not rule out dialogues with heretics—indeed, he shows us how they should be undertaken, with love, courtesy, patience, and understanding;

- *second*, the Saint determines who should conduct dialogues, since, come what may, they are fraught with perils.

Let us look at the text of St. John Chrysostomos:

For this reason I beseech you all to try to heal them [that is, to bring heretics back to the right Faith] with all your might, by talking to them with kindness and gentleness, just as we do to those who have been struck by an inflammation of the brain and have become delirious; for this doctrine of theirs is the product of madness, and their egos are severely inflated.

Wounds that are inflamed cannot endure the touch of a hand, nor any stronger pressure. For this reason, skillful doctors cleanse such wounds with a soft sponge.

Since, therefore, there is an inflammation in the souls [of heretics], just as we cleanse a wound, using a soft sponge, with clean and potable water, so let us draw upon all that we have hitherto said and attempt to check their swelling [that is, their pride—*Ti*] and to cleanse the entire growth.

Even if they insult us, kick us, or spit at us—whatever they may do—, do not abandon the work of healing, my beloved; for those who are engaged in curing a deranged man must put up with many things of this kind. In spite of all of these things, indeed, we should not abandon the attempt, but for precisely this reason we should commiserate with them and shed tears for them, because such is the nature of the illness by which they have been smitten.

I say this to those whose faith is stronger, for whom there is no risk of being influenced by, or suffering any harm from, associating with heretics. Hence, if someone is weaker in faith, let him shun contact with heretics and let him turn away from their gatherings, lest the pretext of friendship with such people become an occasion for him to lose his faith....

In order, therefore, that we not inflict excessive harm on ourselves, let us avoid associating with heretics and let us just pray and beseech God, Who loves mankind and desires that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, that He deliver them from error and the snare of the Devil, and bring them back to the light of knowledge.¹

* * *

Let us dwell on the second part, on the Saint's final exhortation: "I say this to those whose faith is stronger,

for whom there is no risk of being influenced by, or suffering any harm from, associating with heretics.”

Now what are those presuppositions that constitute a strong foundation for Orthodox who participate in dialogues with the heterodox, such that they will be and remain strong, unaffected, and without risk from harm?

We discover these presuppositions in Patristic Tradition, and they are the most fundamental principles of Orthodox ecclesiology. They are the following:

First principle: There is One and only one true Church, which is ontologically identical with the Orthodox Church; every other Christian community, which is not identical or unified in faith with Orthodoxy, is heretical and outside the domain of the Truth and the Church.

In this regard, St. Photios the Great is very clear:

There is one Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ, not many, not even two; gatherings other than this are synagogues of wicked men and an assembly of dissenters; thus do we the true Christians think, thus do we believe, thus do we proclaim.²

Second principle: Only inside the One and only Church, that is, the Orthodox Church, is salvation in Christ unfailingly bestowed, because only She (the Church) is the Body of Christ, and only those who are members of His Body can be in communion with Her Head, which is Christ.

St. John Chrysostomos is categorical on this subject:

For if ‘we are the Body of Christ, and severally members thereof,’ and in this way He is our Head, He cannot be the Head of those who are not in the Body and do not rank among the members.³

Furthermore, the pen of St. Chrysostomos shows in more detail that none of those who are “outside the Catholic Church and Faith” can partake of Christ or have any hope of salvation.⁴

These absolute and immovable ecclesiological foundations of Orthodoxy constitute the unshakable foundations for the attitude of the Holy Fathers towards heretics and for their corresponding pastoral activity, especially with regard to dialogues.

* * *

It should be strongly emphasized that “*the exclusive and sole overriding consideration that governs relations between Orthodox and heretics is,*” according to Patristic Tradition, “*the return of the latter to Orthodoxy.*”⁵

And never are contact, mingling, co-existence, and, still less, co-operation with heretical “gatherings” rendered ends in themselves, since this is strictly forbidden: “Let him [who is weak in faith] shun,” exhorts St. John Chrysostomos, “let him shun contact with heretics, and let him turn away from their *gatherings*, lest the pretext of friendship with such people become an occasion for him to lose his faith.”⁶

And in another place the Holy Father again insists:

Let us repudiate gatherings of heretics, let us cleave unceasingly to the right Faith, and let us display an upright life and conduct that are equal to what we teach.⁷

Indeed, so great is the care and scrupulosity of the Holy Fathers on questions of relations with heretics, that St. Theodore the Studite declares:

'Very great are the threats voiced by the Saints against those who compromise with it [*i.e.*, heresy], *to the point of eating together*'; *'Even if he [viz., one who appears to be Orthodox] accommodates himself to heretics in food, drink, and friendship, he is guilty; this is the judgment of Chrysostomos and, hence, of every Saint.'*⁸

“Dialogues” have failed; ecumenists propose a union of syncretistic co–existence!

The author of this work presents a very succinct overview of the burning issue of ecumenical dialogues and the impartial critical attitude of Orthodoxy, which leads to the following sure conclusions: a) the dialogues have essentially failed; b) participation by Orthodox in the ecumenical movement has influenced their ecclesiological outlook and has led them to formulate a variety of anti–Orthodox theological views; c) this has contributed decisively to the heterodox not returning to the unity of the Orthodox Faith and Church; d) the Orthodox ecumenists, recognizing their failure to attain true union in Christ, are finally accepting an ecclesiological “minimalism,” that is, a unity with the heterodox that is humanistic in nature, a unity of syncretistic co–existence; e) as a natural consequence, this has led them to put an end to Orthodox mission, that is, to suppress the prophetic preaching of repentance to heretics.

All of the above points absolutely justify the Holy Synod in Resistance in diagnosing ecumenism as a syncretistic heresy, from which it is bound to be walled off and against which it is obligated to struggle, always in the hope that a general Orthodox Synod will be convened to bring peace to the Church through the condemnation of the heresy and the heresiarchs.

Front cover photo: Interfaith ecumenism, Milan, 1993: the “Seventh Meeting of Religions for World Peace.” Three hundred representatives of forty–two religions from the whole world took part. Orthodox ecumenists, delegates from the Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Albania can be seen in the midst of Papist, Uniate, Monophysite (Non–Chalcedonian), and Nestorian bishops (the “Christian coalition”).