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Encounter between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox: an Example of Spiritual Communion according to Sergius Bulgakov's Theology of Ecumenism

Abstract

The history of ecumenism with Christians in the Middle East does not receive as much attention as with other groups; however, it has proven to be no less fruitful. Such is the story of the encounter between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox. Coming out of centuries of isolation, the encounter of the Eastern Orthodox with the Copts of Egypt was a deeply moving one. The Eastern Orthodox being at the peak of their theological revival in the Russian diaspora (known as the Russian Religious Renaissance), their experience of modern ecumenism dates back to their encounter with



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Anglicans at the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius. Critical to this was Sergius Bulgakov's notion of "spiritual communion" – communion as close to actual eucharistic communion as can be despite its absence. Ecumenical encounter between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox from the 1960s onwards might be regarded as another example of spiritual communion. Eucharistic communion is not yet restored, however, the congruency of heart and in mind that manifested then and continues to exist constitutes evidence of this. This recognition of spiritual communion gives hope to the prospect that the reality of eucharistic communion between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox can be restored. Progress in ecumenism might be facilitated by closer collaboration in recognition of a common direction; this in turn, might engender the trust that makes further ecumenical progress a reality.

Keywords

History of Ecumenism, Ecumenical Theology, Sergius Bulgakov, Spirituality, Oriental Orthodox

1 Introduction

In the history of modern ecumenism, certain examples stand out in their ability to unite Christians in extraordinary ways, transcending the centuries' old divisions that exist among them. Numerous such encounters took place in the 20th century.¹ And

¹ Although its roots can be identified beforehand, modern ecumenism is essentially a product of the 20th century. This paper considers in depth ecumenism between the Eastern Orthodox and the Anglicans at the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, while other notable ecumenical developments of the 20th century included the establishment of the

while the present landscape has been characterized by some as a “winter of ecumenism”,² some examples stand out because of their simplicity and their enduring ability to demonstrate that hope in unity is not a futile exercise. One such example is the encounter between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox. This is a magnificent story of two groups coming out from years of isolation in recognition of the fact that a common tradition existed between them. Eucharistic communion is yet to be restored. However, the history of this particular encounter stands as a testament to the potential that can be accomplished. It is also a ready example of a theology of ecumenism that was proposed Fr Sergius Bulgakov in his interpretation of the notion of spiritual communion.

Understanding why this is the case and why it gives hope to ecumenism is the subject of this paper, which consists of four parts. This paper also considers the purpose of spiritual communion and its value in facilitating ecumenism. Firstly, we will consider the historical challenge of encounter between Christians, particularly between those of Europe and those of the Middle East; secondly, we will consider the historic emergence of a theology of ecumenism in the first half of the 20th century with help from the theologians of the Russian diaspora, particularly Bulgakov; thirdly, we will give particular consideration to his notion of spiritual communion, which was expressed at the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (FSASS) but was an idea with a broader purpose; and finally, we will consider whether the ecumenical encounter between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox is an example of this. The conclusion will consider the na-

World Council of Churches and in anticipation of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

² G. R. Evans, *Method in Ecumenical Theology: The Lessons So Far* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 118.

ture of the present impasse in ecumenism and will consider how further engagement might be facilitated.

2 Historical Barriers to Encounter between Christians

Looking at the history of the encounter between various groups of Christians, historians must properly consider the complexities of various schisms that have emerged over many years. Schisms in the Church are too often seen exclusively in relation to the Great Schism between Rome and Constantinople. Kallistos Ware is right in recognizing that the date of the Schism, 1054AD, is but the culmination of a process,³ and, considering the landscape of Christianity as a whole, the problem of schisms in the Church as a whole must be considered in their own right. In respect of the Christians of the Middle East, Anthony O'Mahoney makes the point that despite being numerically small, they are uniquely significant.⁴ He quotes the Jesuit scholar Samir Khalil Samir, who gives recognition to their uniqueness on the basis of several characteristics. This includes their understanding of their place in Christianity in respect of having apostolic succession, their rejection of any sense of being "minority", and also, their perception of being a "unifying bridge"

³ Kallistos Ware writes: "But the schism, as historians now generally recognize, is not really an event whose beginning can be exactly dated. It was something that came about gradually, as the result of a long and complicated process, starting well before the eleventh century and not completed until sometime after." T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 51.

⁴ A. O'Mahoney, Christianity in the Middle East: Modern History and Contemporary Theology and Ecclesiology. An Introduction and Overview, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, 65:3-4 (2013), p. 233.

between East and West.⁵ Large in number and significant given the number of groups that exist, Christians from that region constitute a significant presence in addition to those people that are typically associated with Eastern and Western Christendom.

A full consideration of ecumenism in the entirety of the Christianity of the Middle East, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Here our discussion will focus on the Coptic Orthodox Church and the history of its modern encounter with Eastern Orthodoxy. For the Eastern Orthodox, its modern theological revival is often referred to as the “Russian Religious Renaissance”.⁶ It is broadly comprised of Russian emigres who, after the First World War, found refuge in England, France, and later in the United States. A critical result of this revival was an extraordinary amount of scholarly work that was produced over a relatively short period of time. Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky – all protagonists of this movement – also became household names in the history of modern theology. This is also where the history of Eastern Orthodox encounter with the Copts came about, albeit at a later time. However, to grasp the significance of that encounter one must first contend with the background of the situation that its initiators had to face. The catastrophic lack of contact between the Eastern and the Oriental Orthodox over a number of centuries rendered any possibility of meaningful contact difficult. The Arab conquest of

⁵ S. K. Samir, as quoted in Anthony O’Mahoney, “Christianity in the Middle East: Modern History and Contemporary Theology and Ecclesiology. An Introduction and Overview”, pp. 233-234.

⁶ This term originates in an original history of the theology of the Russian Diaspora by the Oxford-based scholar of the 1960s Nicolas Zernov. N Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963).

Egypt and the schism that followed the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD⁷ contributed to this significantly.

The modern aspect of this catastrophe is plain to see, for example, in 19th century writings of the pioneers of encounter between Christians of East and West. One need not look far to identify sentiments that characterised the intellectual classes of the day. To present-day readers their tone comes across as high-minded and overbearing, but still, their record bears witness to the lack of contact between Christians and what happened as a result of that. An example of this can be found in a recollection by Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, the Dean of Westminster, from 1869, in his presentation of a series of lectures on “The Eastern Church” – a term incorporating both the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox. The following passage reflects his impressions of Christians in the Middle Eastern Christians as a whole:

And the Churches which have sprung up in those regions retain the ancient customs of the East, and of the primitive age of Christianity, long after they have died out everywhere else. Look for a moment at the countries included within the range of Oriental Churches. What they lose in historical they gain in geographical grandeur. Their barbarism and their degradation have bound them to the local peculiarities from which the more progressive Church of the West has shaken itself free. It is a Church, in fact, not of cities and villages, but of mountains, and rivers, and caves, and dens of the earth.⁸

⁷ The website of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of London provides a good summary of the specific history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. <http://www.copticorthodox.london/the-coptic-orthodox-church/history/> Accessed 22-2-2019.

⁸ A. P. Stanley D. D., *Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church with an Introduction on the Study of Ecclesiastical History*, (London: John Murray, Albermarle St, 1869), pp. 3-4.

And despite his tone, Stanley becomes enchanted when he encounters the Copts of Egypt, whom he describes as uniquely preserving ancient rituals and customs. This was especially the case in relation to their connection with ancient Egypt. Stanley continues:

But the Church of Egypt is much more than just the relic of an ancient sect. It is the most remarkable monument of Christian antiquity. It is the only living representative of the most venerable nation of all antiquity. Within its narrow limits have now shrunk the learning and the lineage of ancient Egypt. The language of the Coptic services, understood neither by people nor priests, is the language (...) of the Pharaohs (...) the intelligence of Egypt still lingers in the Coptic scribes, who are (...) used as clerks in the offices of their conquerors, or as registrars of the water-marks of the Nile.⁹

Curiously, however, in his own experiences, Stanley does not appear to seek fellowship with the Copts. This is most likely to be a symptom of the realities of the time and the isolation that Christians of that region faced. A culture of isolation appears to have resulted from the challenges of their history. They had not yet opened up in the way that their descendants did after the ecumenical movement began. The reality was that encounter between Christians separated by centuries of division and conflict was extremely daunting.¹⁰ Accurate knowledge and under-

⁹ A. P. Stanley D. D., *Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church with an Introduction on the Study of Ecclesiastical History*, p. 9.

¹⁰ It is wrong to say that all contact was broken between Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians. It always proved difficult and unsuccessful. In fact, several attempts at reconciliation were made by Byzantine emperors and others. Metropolitan Paulos Ma Gregorios and Nikos Nisiotis, "The Four Unofficial Conversations: An Experience of Joy and Hope", in C. Chaillot and A. Belopopsky, *Towards Unity: The Theological Dialogue Between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, (Inter-Orthodox Dialogue Orthdruk, 1998), p. 46.

standing of each other was hard to come by because of ignorance that resulted from lack of contact. Inaccurate comments and facts appearing in historical records demonstrate the extent of the limitations that characterised even accomplished scholars. For example, Stanley erroneously refers to the Copts as *Monophysites*.¹¹

The consistency of this reality is evidenced in the fact that other travelers from that time presented similar problems. For example, in 1881, the Russian traveler N. P. Kondakoff published a book in two volumes about his travels to Egypt. The first part was about St. Catherine's Monastery on Sinai, which is not surprising given that it was a landmark in that part of the world that was in eucharistic communion with the Russian Orthodox Church. The second part of Kondakoff's book was about art treasure.¹² At no stage, however, did he mention the Copts. This absence is actually an affirmation of the fact of those Christians' isolation. While one particular historian has demonstrated that one Russian bishop recognised the Copts as Orthodox,¹³ this was an isolated case. It wasn't until the 20th century that the emergence of ecumenism resulted in productive encounter between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox.

¹¹ A. P. Stanley D. D., *Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church with an Introduction on the Study of Ecclesiastical History*, p. 9.

¹² O. V. Volkoff, *Voyageurs Russes en Egypte*, (Publications de L'Institut Francais D'Archeologie Orientale Du Caire, 1972), p. 34.

¹³ H. Krylov, "Perspectives of Unity Between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches", conference paper presented at "Copts in Modernity", St Athanasius College, Melbourne, 13-16 July, 2018.

3 The Nature of the Early Ecumenical Movement and its Theological Implications

To be sure, the historic isolation of the Christians of the Middle East did not last forever. But before discussing that ecumenical engagement and how it came about, there is a need to better contend with the modern context - the development of modern ecumenism and its Orthodox component. Paradoxically, the political catastrophes of the first half of the 20th led to the breaking of centuries' old barriers between Christians. Eager to establish a socialist utopia, the Bolsheviks expelled most of Russia's useful intellectuals to the West.¹⁴ These included Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdaiev and Nikolai Lossky, all of whom became prominent in the intelligentsia of the Russian diaspora. Movement of people resulting from political turmoil resulted in encounter between people who otherwise probably would not have met. A large contingent of emigres settled in Paris at the newly established St. Serge Orthodox Theological Institute.¹⁵ However, primary sources also reveal a particularly dynamic ecumenical encounter in England under the auspices of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (FSASS). This was and still remains a thriving fellowship of Orthodox and Anglicans, who gather at conferences and publish the journal *Sobornost Incorporating Eastern Churches Review*.¹⁶ However, the critical point to emerge from this is that while this encounter engen-

¹⁴ This history is the subject of a work by Lesley Chamberlain. L. Chamberlain, *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2006).

¹⁵ The website of the St. Serge Orthodox Theological Institute provides a basic history. Fondation et rayonnement, <http://saint-serge.net/presentation/histoire.html>. Accessed 6 February 2019.

¹⁶ Present publications are available at this website: <http://sobornost.org/journals.html>. Accessed 4-6-2019.

dered improved understanding between Christians, it also led to a theology of ecumenism that suited the needs of the times.

In order to understand this new and emergent theology of ecumenism, it is helpful to begin with the critical history of the theology of the Russian Religious Renaissance. Traditionally scholars have tended to categorise the work of the Russian Religious Renaissance into “schools of thought”: the so-called “Russian School” and the “Neo-Patristic Synthesis”.¹⁷ However, scholars have increasingly moved away from this categorisation. In relation to that way of categorising and its inability to adequately reflect the history at hand, Paul Gavrilyuk refers to it as a “facile dichotomy”.¹⁸ Kallistos Ware also recognizes the need to look for a voice that transcends these divisions.¹⁹ I would like to contend that something of a unified voice transcending these divisions can be found in the theological perspectives that emerged at the beginning of the ecumenical movement.

Of all the theologians of the Russian diaspora, Bulgakov was the first who proposed a theology of ecumenism – an understanding in the present suggesting a way by which unity could be accomplished at some stage in the future. He outlines this in his formidable essay: *By Jacob’s Well: On the Actual Unity of the*

¹⁷ This original categorisation can be traced back to Alexander Schmemmann, who intended it to be broad in scope, not in the sense of the two mutually exclusive “schools of thought” that it has subsequently become. A. Schmemmann, *Russian Theology: 1920 – 1971, An Introductory Survey*, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 16:4 (1972), p. 178.

¹⁸ P. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3.

¹⁹ K. Ware, *Orthodox theology today: trends and tasks*, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 12:2 (May 2012), p. 114.

*Divided Church in Faith, Prayer and Sacraments.*²⁰ There he postulated theologically what happens when encounter between Christians takes place. He began with the acknowledgment that too often attention is paid to that which divides Christians - especially in relation to sectarian boundaries. In contrast, Bulgakov makes the original but self-evident point that when the Church transcends its institutional limitations and encounters God, the interface between confessions becomes transformed, leading to a new reality. This requires a recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit in facilitating unity between Christians, which, for Bulgakov, results in the attainment of something without precedent in the Tradition of the Church. This, for him, constitutes a rejection of the tired old institutionalism which is the greatest obstacle to unity. This is also the point of ecumenism. Bulgakov explains this as follows:

The harsh, unbending, unrelenting institutionalism of the one saving Church conflicts (...) with a service in the Spirit (...). There exists between the Church and the churches not only a relationship of mutual exclusion, but also one of concordance. This unity is simultaneously something already given and something we must attain to. (...)

The way of "oecumenical" Church life, which strives for Church unity, is simultaneously associated both with a fuller realisation of confessional differences and a growing consciousness of unity. But although there seems to be no escape from this antimony, the Spirit of God actually transcends it through a new kind of synthesis that is brought about, not by means of a new agreement or compromise, but by a new inspiration.²¹

²⁰ S. Bulgakov, *By Jacob's Well - On the Actual Unity of the Divided Church in Faith, Prayer and Sacraments*, *Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius*, 22 (1933), p.17.

²¹ S. Bulgakov, *By Jacob's Well - On the Actual Unity of the Divided Church in Faith, Prayer and Sacraments*, p. 8-9.

Reading what Bulgakov wrote in the early decades of the 20th century, much of his argument rests on the notion that aside from differences between confessions, unity in the Church is much more than just a matter of doctrinal agreement. It is, altogether, recognition of Christians' encounter with God, the work of the Holy Spirit, ultimately realised in eucharistic participation. Bulgakov's usage of the word "antimony" in the above extract is not accidental: across his theology, it ubiquitously refers to a unique place in which God's work, in humans and in apophatic terms, is recognized, known and experienced.²² Ware is insightful in saying that Bulgakov's summative contribution to the theology of ecumenism is in his overall argument that unity, if achieved, needs to be realised in eucharistic participation, not in discussion.²³

Bulgakov's frustration with the ecumenical status quo is particularly evident when he rails against over-the-top polemical discussions, which he refers to as "tournaments between theologians".²⁴ He also makes the contentious and radical point that when gathered in Christ, as in the Gospel words "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them",²⁵ an organic sense of unity in God is something that is

²² Brandon Gallaher explains the notion of antimony and how it is common in Bulgakov. He defines it in relation to Bulgakov as follows: "It (antinomism) holds that in theological truths you have two statements which are mutually contradictory and they need to be held together through a podvig, a spiritual act of faith." B. Gallaher, "Sophiology: Is it Traditional?", paper presented at the conference "The Newness of the Old": Tradition, Doctrine and Christian Life Between Preservation and Innovation', Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, 31 August – 1 September 2018.

²³ K. Ware, personal communication.

²⁴ S. Bulgakov, *By Jacob's Well – On the Actual Unity of the Divided Church in Faith, Prayer and Sacraments*, p. 17.

²⁵ Mt. 18:20.

already present. It follows, then, that divisions in the Church are essentially a result of human shortcomings in not meeting their responsibility to step up to the unity that is there to be accepted. It is mainly for this reason, according to Bulgakov, eucharistic communion is not yet realised. Bulgakov writes:

But of course the Holy Spirit alone can make it clear that reunion is not far away, but already exists as a fact which only needs to be realised. But it must be realised sincerely and honestly for the sole purpose of expressing our brotherhood in the Lord. And the way towards the reunion of East and West does not lie through tournaments between theologians (...) but through a reunion before the altar.²⁶

To be sure, ultimately Bulgakov did not underestimate the real challenge of the re-establishment of eucharistic communion. He later reflects on this with his correspondence with Gillet.²⁷ Full eucharistic communion continues to elude most Christians, and Bulgakov's attempt to re-establish it in a partial way as something that would further ecumenism at the FSASS did not go far. In 1934, Bulgakov submitted his proposal for "partial intercommunion" to be established at the FSASS between Orthodox and Anglicans who were in dogmatic agreement and who had a special episcopal blessing.²⁸ The proposal itself was, in the

²⁶ S. Bulgakov, *By Jacob's Well – On the Actual Unity of the Divided Church in Faith, Prayer and Sacraments*, p. 17.

²⁷ S. Bulgakov, *Spiritual Communion*, *Sobornost* 1:4 (December 1935), p. 3.

²⁸ The background to the history of Bulgakov's to establish "partial intercommunion" between the Orthodox and the Anglicans has been explained by Brandon Gallaher in a comprehensive two-part journal article. Anastassy Gallaher, "Bulgakov and Intercommunion", *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review*, 24:2 (2002); an earlier account of the controversy was provided by Henry Hill. Henry Hill, *Father Sergius Bulgakov and Intercommunion*, *Sobornost*, 5:4 (Winter 1966): 272-276.

words of one scholar, “very weak”.²⁹ Paul Ladouceur also notes that the essay *By Jacob’s Well* was part of a polemic Bulgakov was having with Florovsky, who stood against this proposal.³⁰ However, despite scholars’ reluctance to take it seriously as something that had a realistic prospect of succeeding, it continues to be a source of keen interest to theologians frustrated by the difficulty of creating meaningful and lasting progress in ecumenical relations.

4 Bulgakov’s Compromise: the Notion of Spiritual Communion

There was, however, despite all this an enduring aspect of Bulgakov’s proposal. In further correspondence with Fr Lev Gillet, another member of the FSASS, Bulgakov wrote that although the Orthodox and the Anglicans were at that time “deprived of *communion in sacris*”, they were already in a state of “spiritual communion”.³¹ This term, spiritual communion, is not universally accepted – Nicholas Afanasiev, the theologian who later coined the term eucharistic ecclesiology, did not like it,³² which might be expected given his particular focus on eucharistic theology at a later stage. Others have since referred to it as “somewhat nebulous”.³³ The term itself is attributed to Origen.³⁴

²⁹ A. Gallaher, Bulgakov and Intercommunion, *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review*, 24:2 (2002), p. 9.

³⁰ P. Ladouceur, Two Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Sergei Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky, *Ecumenism*, Winter-Spring 2015, p. 38.

³¹ S. Bulgakov, Spiritual Intercommunion, *Sobornost*, 1:4 (December 1935), p. 4.

³² Н. Афанасьев, *Церковь Духа Святого*, (Paris: YMCA Press, 1971), p.71.

³³ A. Gallaher, Bulgakov and Intercommunion, *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review*, 24:2, p. 15.

Curiously, however, the notion had precedent in modern Anglican practice. Instances of this are not difficult to find: one can be found, for example, in instructions by Bishop Cecil John Wood, the Bishop of Melanesia who in 1916 prescribed conditions necessary for missionaries to be able to partake of “spiritual communion”. This was only for when the Blessed Sacrament was not available. One condition was that the communicant (of spiritual communion) be aware of the need for repentance and the other was that he have “real faith that Christ died to save mankind”. Wood noted “that certain benefits are received by the soul as a result.” This indicates that while regarded it as beneficial, he did not regard it to be of the same calibre as eucharistic communion. He is clear that the communicant should never regard spiritual communion as a substitute for the eucharist, but rather accept this as an alternative in its absence, for “his soul's good as surely as if he were partaking of the consecrated elements in the service of the Church.”³⁵ Given then, the usage of the term among Anglicans, Bulgakov's usage of it is uniquely interesting.

In an immediate sense for Bulgakov, however, spiritual communion constituted an acceptance of the fact that a certain kind of communion already existed present despite the absence of eucharistic communion in ecumenical groupings such as the FSASS. This was spiritual communion, which for him was as close to full communion as can be in the absence of the eucharist. Bulgakov reveals this in *By Jacob's Well*. Spiritual communion, he notes, constitutes life in the Spirit and is revealed in ecumenism without eucharistic communion being re-

³⁴ Н. Афанасьев, *Церковь Духа Святого*, p. 71.

³⁵ C. J. Wood, *A Form of Spiritual Communion*, (Auckland: Wilson & Horton, 1916). http://anglicanhistory.org/oceania/wood_communion1916.html Accessed 7-6-2019.

established. Bulgakov identified this in relation to ecumenical gatherings that he had recently attended. For example:

During the Lausanne Conference this feeling of a kind of common spiritual experience of unity in Christ was remarkably strong. It became clear to all that something had happened above and beyond anything written down in the reports and minutes. On the other hand, apart from this kind of experience as such, there cannot be any Christian unity; for this can only be realised through Christian inspiration in a new vision of Pentecost, for which we aspire and which, in part, we already obtain. This unity in Christ (...) is a kind of spiritual communion of all in the one Christ, established long before actual communion from the same chalice can take place.³⁶

Bulgakov's interpretation of spiritual communion is important to our argument because it genuinely explains the keenness and the extraordinary enthusiasm that characterised early ecumenical encounters such as at the FSASS. After centuries of ignorance and very little contact, the geopolitical catastrophes of the 20th century precipitated an unlikely but unexpectedly productive ecumenical encounter. Eucharistic communion was obviously a distant prospect: however, for them spiritual communion reflected a reality that was ready before them. It was authentic, genuine, and it afforded hope that unity (in the eucharist eventually) was a realisable prospect.

This excitement and depth of connection in ecumenical encounter is something that was recorded widely. Another example is an account of the lesser-known Russian theologian, Myrrha Lot-Borodine. She was another émigré in Paris and is regarded as

³⁶ S. Bulgakov, *By Jacob's Well – On the Actual Unity of the Divided Church in Faith, Prayer and Sacraments*, p. 12.

the first female Orthodox theologian of modernity.³⁷ Her modern biographer, Teresa Obolevich, relates the fact that among the Russian exiles in France, she did not have much time for ecumenism when it just took the form of theological discussion. Her correspondences reveal, however, that this view changed when she took part in ecumenism in England in the vicinity of the FSASS. Ecumenism then was not a matter of finding compromises for the sake of unity later on. It was, rather, unity in the experience of the Spirit – spiritual communion. In 1937 she attended a conference of the Russian Society of the Rapprochement of the Anglican and Orthodox Churches. Afterwards, she related the following sentiments to the Athonite monk, Vasily Krivoshein, according to the principle of spiritual communion, which, in this case, was experienced in a combined session of practicing Benedictine silence:

I admit that I had hitherto treated the ecumenical movement quite negatively, for the reason that it calls upon the Orthodox consciousness to find compromises. However, confronted by the world's religious situation, my suspicions towards "English Protestantism" (in fact, I am talking only about Anglo-Catholics) has changed radically. First of all, I was struck by the depth of the individual prayer experience, that is, what is most weak in our Russian spirituality (of course, I mean the secular one). The best proof of this is the complete confusion that almost all Russians showed at this meeting (...) when Fr Talbot, the famous Benedictine preacher, suggested a "retreat" – a daily prayer in silence. The young people had no idea what to do and only a few tried to practice the Jesus prayer which was not so easy for them. Indeed, the venerable notion of "spiritual work" has long been lost in even the most advanced circles,

³⁷ T. Obolevitch, Myrrha Lot-Borodine – the First Female Orthodox Theologian, conference paper presented at the "Unfading Light", University of Oxford, 7-8 March 2019.

and nobody teaches us about meditation and *oraison ac-*
quire; alas, we cannot even read the Gospel.³⁸

Not unexpectedly, such sentiments were not uncommon. Another example is that of Nicolas Zernov, who wrote of his own experiences at the FSASS. He emphasised the fact that the Orthodox and the Anglicans benefited from each other. In his recollections later on Zernov revealed the reality of the spiritual communion for the members of the FSASS:

Mere theological debate would probably have resulted in failure. Both sides spoke on their own wavelength and found it difficult to grasp the problems of the other. But a realisation of their brotherhood in Christ came in the Chapel, where every morning Orthodox and Anglicans together worshipped the same Saviour. There the linguistic, theological and ideological barriers were removed and... oneness was experienced.³⁹

Such was the experience of early ecumenism. However, this emerging sentiment did not escape the attention of Christians further afield. Coming out of their own isolation, by the second half of the 20th century Christians in the Middle East also demonstrated an eagerness to connect with others. But by what principles could a semblance of unity be established, especially when eucharistic communion was unrealistic? I believe that the early protagonists of ecumenism were not alone in recognising the value of spiritual communion. A similar approach was actually proposed by Matthew the Poor, the well-regarded Coptic monastic of the 20th century known as *Fr Matta el Meskin*. Like Bulgakov, he criticised the singular focus of re-establishing unity through theological discussion. For him, unity could only

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Nicolas Zernov, *The History of the Fellowship of St. Alban & St. Sergius: A Historical Memoir* by Nicolas and Militza Zernov (1979). www.sobornost.org/Zernov_History-of-the-Fellowship.pdf. Accessed 4-6-2019.

be realised in the way that Bulgakov saw it being attained: by “surrender to God”, in other words, in Christ, and ultimately, before the altar. Failing that, only the equivalent of spiritual communion remained. Neither eucharistic communion nor its absence is directly mentioned in the writings of Matthew the Poor, however, the fact of it being the non-negotiable condition of unity is implied in the following words, attributed to and later reported on in a journal of the FSASS, *Eastern Churches Review*:

The insistence which is laid upon the demand for unity at this present time, when the different churches are complaining of flagging faith in their clergy and their laity, of spiritual weakness and the refusal of the young to consecrate their lives in the Lord, leads us to set out our ideas in order (...). We must not say: Let us seek union with each other, and then together seek union with God (...). Unity will not come through ecclesiastical diplomacy (...). It will come when all of us have learned to surrender everything to God.⁴⁰

Therefore, despite the fact that it did not feature in the early ecumenical movement, ecumenism between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches proved to possess, I believe, a foundation consistent with the principles that were critical to ecumenism at the FSASS a generation earlier. As will be argued below, it was uniquely hopeful and came to be productive because of this convergence of views. It was, like at the FSASS, because of the degree to which principles were shared between the protagonists of the encounter.

⁴⁰ Christian Unity: A Coptic Voice, *Eastern Churches Review* IV:1 (Spring 1972), p. 72-73.

5 Ecumenism between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox

Actual ecumenism between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox did not begin until the 1960s. By this time the Second World War had already happened and the conditions of the early ecumenical gatherings were no longer the same. However, the need to “do something” after the catastrophe of another world war was also felt, and this resulted in a newfound interest in Christian renewal and in ecumenism. The ecumenical movement became, compared to before the war, more international and widespread. In France, *Sources Chretiennes* was founded with the aim of making patristic literature more accessible, while Christians around the world had high expectations in relation to the Second Vatican Council.⁴¹

The prospects for Eastern Orthodox theology were also upbeat. Bulgakov passed away in 1944,⁴² but the approach that he fostered did not go to waste. Moving away from understanding the

⁴¹ The attitude of the Orthodox to the Second Vatican is summed up in the following comments by Anthony Bloom at the Hammersmith Christian Unity Conference in May 1965: “Those of us who have been attentively observing the results of the Vatican Council sessions in the life of the parishes, either here in this country or abroad, cannot help being deeply impressed by the new spirit which we sense and whose fruits are so obvious in inter-church relations. Last year and the year before, I had occasion to take part in ecumenical work in France, where teams of Catholic priests and Protestant pastors were working together; I was impressed by the change of atmosphere which one could note there. One of my Orthodox friends said (was it with pleasure or with a certain fear?) that if Roman Catholicism recaptures the fullness of the truth, then quite certainly the Roman Catholic Church will become Orthodox faster than we.” As quoted in *Vatican II and the Eastern Churches: Two Short Comments*, *Eastern Churches Review* 1:1 (Spring 1966), p. 19.

⁴² B. Gallaher, The “Sophiological” Origins of Vladimir Lossky’s Apophaticism, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 66:3 (Aug 2013), p. 297.

theology of the Russian emigres as a dichotomy of two “schools”, previously, we proposed that ecumenism as spiritual communion demonstrated a more unbroken, unified trajectory in the history of the Russian Religious Renaissance. New opportunities presented themselves with the new geopolitical conditions. However, the principles of Eastern Orthodox participation in ecumenism did not change in a fundamental way. Echoing Bulgakov’s notion of spiritual communion, the baton was passed on to others. Florovsky featured strongly. Paul Ladouceur notes, “while Bulgakov was the most prominent Orthodox theologian of the first half of the 20th century, it was Florovsky who dominated Orthodox theology in the second half of the century, with his call, widely heard, to return to the patristic sources of theology.”⁴³ On the whole, the degree of Florovsky’s influence on the ecumenical movement after the Second World War is comparable to Bulgakov’s influence before it.

As we previously noted, scholars are also increasingly agreeing that the differences between Bulgakov and Florovsky are not as significant as once thought. There might be more in common between them than they themselves were aware of. There was also some agreement between them in respect of the fact that theology is essentially a creative process. This is relevant to their respective approaches to ecumenism. In appraising how scholarship views Florovsky, Brandon Gallaher notes that with neo-patristic synthesis, he “bequeathed to Orthodox theology a paradigm for being Eastern Orthodox in a modern world dominated by the cultural patrimony of the West”.⁴⁴ And, likewise, Florovsky railed against referred to as a “theology of repeti-

⁴³ P. Ladouceur, *Two Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Sergei Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky*, p. 36.

⁴⁴ B. Gallaher, 2016. *A Re-envisioning of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis? Orthodox Identity and Polemicism in Fr Georges Florovsky and the Future of Orthodox Theology*, p. 2.

tion”, contending that one “should be unafraid to respond to theological contexts that were unforeseen by the Fathers even if that means going beyond the initial sense of their words.” In relation to Florovsky, then, Gallaher concludes that “we are called... to creatively and spiritually return to the sources (...)”⁴⁵. This is the essence of his notion of his neo-patristic synthesis:⁴⁶ it was a synthesis of theology based on patristic study, not just a repetition of the content of patristic writings.

In this regard, the enduring record also demonstrates that Florovsky’s approach to ecumenism was not that distant from Bulgakov’s notion of spiritual communion – this, of course, being consistent with Bulgakov after his proposal for “partial intercommunion” was dropped. And, while Bulgakov’s hope of eucharistic communion acting as an inspiration for ecumenism was not abandoned by some,⁴⁷ it lingered only as matter of

⁴⁵ B. Gallaher, 2016. *A Re-envisioning of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis? Orthodox Identity and Polemicism in Fr Georges Florovsky and the Future of Orthodox Theology*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Florovsky coined this phrase at the First Congress of Orthodox Theology in Athens in 1936.

⁴⁷ Hope for the restoration of intercommunion was maintained by some individuals despite Bulgakov’s proposal not being approved by the FSASS, but in time it was resigned to the realm of private opinion. A notable proponent of the establishment of sacramental union as a means of achieving progress in ecumenism was Nicolas Zernov, who wrote at a later stage in regard to ecumenical relations between Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox: “As for the assertion that communion in the sacraments is impossible without first overcoming theological differences, history has shown that learned debates alone cannot solve problems such as papal infallibility. If we rely on them alone, then we must put aside all hope of restoring unity. The infallibility of the Papal See, as it was formulated by the First Vatican Council, is unacceptable to the Orthodox. It is hardly likely that the Orthodox could succeed in persuading the Catholics by discussion to give up this dogma, since the whole structure of the Catholic Church is founded upon it. But what is impossible for men is possible for God. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in answers to prayers for God’s help

private conviction without being anybody's official position. These compromises, achieved in the 1930s, meant that the Eastern Orthodox were able to take a coherent approach to encounter between themselves and others. It is possible that the corresponding reduction in expectations also led to greater progress. I would also like to contend that in a way consistent with our comparison of ecumenism between Bulgakov and Matthew the Poor, this "reduced" notion of spiritual communion was actually a feature of the encounter between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox when they finally met at a later stage.

Actual ecumenical encounter between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox can be traced back to 1964 when four unofficial consultations took place before formal processes commenced. Florovsky attended the first three.⁴⁸ Records also indicate that critical theological misunderstandings (especially over Christology) were quickly overcome. Critical to this was discerning the nature of where it all went wrong. Paul Verghese notes that the original cause of the schism was the non-acceptance by the Churches of Syria and Egypt of the Council of Chalcedon of 451AD. He attributes this to the non-Chalcedonian's perception that the procedures of the Council were coercive and not conciliar, and also due to their opposition to any addition to the Creeds of Nicea, Ephesus and Constantinople.⁴⁹ On the Christological question, however, Verghese positively notes that the expression "of two natures" was acceptable to the Oriental Or-

changes are occurring in both Churches." Nicolas Zernov, *Sunset Years: A Russian Pilgrim in the West*, (London: The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983), p. 77.

⁴⁸ M. Attia, *The Coptic Church and the Ecumenical Movement*, (Cairo: Bishopric of Youth Affairs, 2001), pp 21, 24 & 30.

⁴⁹ P. Verghese, *The Orthodox Churches – Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian*, *Eastern Churches Review*, I:II (Autumn 1966), p.136.

thodox in contrast to alternative “in two natures”.⁵⁰ And, thus, the protagonists of this particular engagement were impressed by the fact that the significance of the Christological disagreement was less than might have been anticipated.

This, critically, led to the ironic situation in which resolving such challenges in modernity turned out to be easier than earlier in history. This is not entirely surprising given the historic isolation of the Christians in the Middle East. This also affirms the notion that genuine knowledge and understanding was previously hampered by the catastrophe of their history. Verghese observes this in his report on the encounter between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox in *Eastern Churches Review*, the journal of the FSASS:

What is truly noteworthy is the fact, however, that the issue between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Eastern Orthodox Churches (those in communion with Constantinople) seems much less clear today, fifteen centuries after the controversy. Our Christological and ecclesiological traditions, even after fifteen centuries of separate development, show a remarkable harmony.⁵¹

Echoing this, the following was noted in the *communiqué* of the first unofficial consultation, held in Aarhus, Denmark: “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.”⁵² Following that, striking (and hopeful) words were reaffirmed at the second unofficial consultation in Bristol in 1967. This reaffirmed the remarkable unity of mind and spirit that was known to all who partici-

⁵⁰ P. Verghese, *The Orthodox Churches – Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian*, p. 137.

⁵¹ P. Verghese, *The Orthodox Churches – Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian*, p. 137.

⁵² M. Attia, *The Coptic Church and the Ecumenical Movement*, p.19.

pated in just two consultations. It was sufficient to affirm an agreed position on Christology, which read as follows:

The remarkable measure of agreement so far reached among the theologians on the Christological teaching of our Churches should soon lead to the formulation of a joint declaration in which we express together in the same formula our common faith in the One Lord Jesus Christ whom we all acknowledge to be perfect God and perfect Man.⁵³

This agreement was reaffirmed at the third unofficial consultation in Geneva in 1970.⁵⁴

Clearly, such encounters bear a resemblance to the air of excitement and anticipation that was experienced by Bulgakov and others in the heyday of the FSASS. Both appear to have had fewer obstacles to overcome in comparison to other encounters. Several years later, one account of the four unofficial consultations described it as "An Experience of Hope and Joy".⁵⁵ Recognising the encounter between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox as akin to the early ecumenical experiences, it is possible to agree with the Joint Declaration of the Orthodox Churches in Belmont in 1972 stated in relation to the unofficial consultations, which boldly predicted that "Complete unity was not... a far-fetched idea, but a pressing need for continuity."⁵⁶ This, I would contend, is an example of spiritual communion.

Documents from the further consultations confirm that ecumenism between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox was successful because of the degree of that which was already shared. This constituted a commitment to the notion that, according to

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 23.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 25.

⁵⁵ P. Mar Gregorios and N. Nissiotis, "The Four Unofficial Conversations: An Experience of Joy and Hope". These two Church traditions of the East, although they have led a separate historical life. Accessed 15-6-2019.

⁵⁶ M. Attia, *The Coptic Church and the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 35.

Florovsky, theology was “unafraid” to “respond to theological contexts that were unforeseen by the Fathers”. This, also, constituted an active response to the Spirit and was, like in the 1930s, a manifestation of spiritual communion. Ladouceur correctly notes that in general, Florovsky’s participation in ecumenism was predicated on the notion of “witness... with no genuine possibility of a genuine meeting of equals in ecumenism”.⁵⁷ However, in this instance there appears to have been something more. This does not contradict the earlier caution that he expressed in respect of Bulgakov’s proposals. The later sentiment was expressed well in 1981, after Florovsky’s passing, when in commentary on the subject the re-establishment of eucharistic communion seemed close:

These two Church traditions of the East, although they have led a separate historical life, show today very great similarities in dogmatic faith, ecclesiology, liturgy and spirituality. This is due to their common fidelity to the ancient tradition, thought, life, and principles of Church authority and administration. These similarities have been made more manifest in the contemporary ecumenical movement. They have encouraged reciprocal trends on both sides towards re-establishing a particular and closer relationship between them today. They have also stimulated the organization of a special dialogue for restoring full Church communion amongst them.⁵⁸

On the whole, these words characterise well the spiritual communion that continues to exist between the Eastern and the Oriental Orthodox. Eucharistic communion has not yet been restored, and positions, likewise, have not progressed much from the original dialogues. At the second Joint Commission for

⁵⁷ P. Ladouceur, *Two Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Sergei Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky*, p. 37.

⁵⁸ P. Mar Gregorios and N. Nissiotis, “The Four Unofficial Conversations: An Experience of Joy and Hope”, p. 46.

Theological Dialogue between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, the *communiqué* reaffirmed earlier conclusions by referring to the occasion as an encounter between those that have now become known as the “two families of Orthodox Churches”,⁵⁹ with Pope Shenouda – the Coptic Patriarch of the time – appealing “to the participants to find a way to restore communion between the two families of Churches”.⁶⁰ This sentiment evokes Bulgakov’s original proposition that the path to unity resides in the restoration of eucharistic communion, which presupposes spiritual communion as already existing. It also evokes Matthew the Poor when he stressed that unity not be found in “ecclesiastical diplomacy”, but in Christ. The final *communiqué* read as follows:

Words would serve and express the essence, which is our common search for restoration of full communion: ‘this division is an anomaly, a bleeding wound in the Body of Christ, a wound according to his will that we humbly serve, must be healed’... As two families of Orthodox Churches long out of communion with each other we now pray and trust in God to restore that communion on the basis of the common apostolic faith of the undivided Church of the first centuries which we confess in our common creed.⁶¹

6 Conclusion

Thus, looking at the history of modern ecumenism, particularly between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, what is most striking is the extraordinary congruency of mind and heart that was

⁵⁹ “Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches”, *Sobornost Incorporating Eastern Churches Review*, 12:1 (1990), p. 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 78-79.

attained at the consultations between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox – both at the first unofficial consultations, as well as at the official proceedings which took place later. There was also – in this case between Bulgakov and Matthew the Poor – an emergent theology of ecumenism that variously evolved during the course of the 20th century, embodied in Bulgakov’s notion of spiritual communion. This was, to those who recognised it, communion in the absence of the ability to commune eucharistically. It was, in my view, active theology reflecting the work of the Spirit in the present.

Returning to the present, the state of ecumenism has variously been described as the “winter of ecumenism” or a “situation in transition”.⁶² Meaningful progress has been slow if non-existent, reflecting a curious stop in contrast to the fast pace of progress in the 20th century. However, it is also the case that theologians might heed the example of those original encounter, firstly with Bulgakov at the FSASS and later with the encounter between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox as evidence of the fact of ecumenism working well. This was clearly aided by the historical trajectory, because the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox were both on their way out of historic isolation, and for the most part already shared a common tradition. This encounter made sense, because it jointly reflects where they both came from and where they were going.

The final matter to consider in this regard of course is the notion of spiritual communion. The inability of restoring eucharistic communion should not become an excuse to reject the notion that a degree of communion already exists which must be regained if we are to be true to the Spirit’s work. One way of reigniting progress is to look at further interaction between

⁶² K. Raiser, *To Be the Church: Challenges and Hopes for a New Millennium* (Geneva: WCC Publications, Risk No. 78, 2004), pp. x-xi.

Eastern and Oriental Orthodox theologians. Collaborative work such as in scholarship is likely to engender greater knowledge of the spiritual communion that presently exists, which, we hope, will be sealed by the restoration of full eucharistic communion in the not too distant future.

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