

4-2004

Aagaard & Bouteneff's "Beyond the East-West Divide: The World Council of Churches and the Orthodox Problem" - Book Review

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Gavrilyuk, Paul L. (2004) "Aagaard & Bouteneff's "Beyond the East-West Divide: The World Council of Churches and the Orthodox Problem" - Book Review," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 5.
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away from their traditional approach to politics and towards a more grass roots approach to the church's role in society. The old top-down way of getting things done is yielding to the workings of the empowered laity who are finding their own voice. One may assert that this dynamic is evidence not only of democratic enthusiasm, but of the gradual embodiment of the Second Vatican Council's vision of the Church as the whole People of God that acts in accordance with the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity as well.

The above minor critical observations notwithstanding, readers come away from this work thoroughly instructed on how the structure of the Catholic Church is a central determinant of the church's participation in postcommunist East Central Europe.

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Anna Marie Aagaard and Peter Bouteneff, *Beyond the East-West Divide: The World Council of Churches and "the Orthodox Problem."* Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001. - Reviewed by Paul L. Gavriluk.

In 1920 the Ecumenical Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople issued an encyclical "Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere." This landmark document, which urged cooperation between the Eastern Orthodox and other Christian communions, became one of the first building blocks of the Ecumenical Movement of the twentieth century. The encyclical was prompted partly by the tragic consequences of the First World War and by the establishment of the League of Nations. It was proposed that various Christian denominations form a similar league with the possibilities of collaboration in education, charitable work and in other areas. After a period of initial formation, the World Council of Churches (WCC) emerged as a fusion of the three already existing ecumenical streams: Missionary, Life and Work, and Faith and Order movements. Most Orthodox Churches became members of the WCC since its first Assembly held in Amsterdam in 1948. From the beginning, the Roman Catholic Church refrained from becoming a full voting member of WCC, while maintaining involvement in several important commissions, including Faith and Order, as well as participating as a full member in some National councils.

At present, the WCC is comprised of 337 member churches with the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox being represented by 23 members. As Anna Marie Aagaard and Peter Bouteneff point out in the introduction to *Beyond the East-West Divide*, since Protestant membership steadily increases this situation guaranties more and more pronounced "minority status" to the Orthodox churches within the Protestant-dominated WCC (p. 5).

While the clouds in relationships between the Protestant and Orthodox constituents of WCC have been gathering for a long time, the first clear sign of a storm appeared in 1997, when the Georgian Orthodox Church decided to withdraw its membership from the Council. This decision was made under pressure from the five influential monasteries in Georgia, which threatened to separate

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from their Patriarchate. This move led to bloody revolts and public accusations of Patriarch Elia II of the 'heresy of ecumenism' by the monks. As long as the Orthodox clergy and faithful continue to be misinformed regarding the nature and purposes of the ecumenical movement,¹ most attempts to bring about the unity between Orthodox and non-Orthodox will lead to internal divisions among the Orthodox.

The decision of the Georgian Church prompted other Orthodox Churches to give more concentrated attention to the issue whether the Orthodox position was properly represented by the WCC. To address this situation, fifteen Eastern Orthodox Churches held a crisis meeting in Thessaloniki, Greece, in May 1998. The overall support for ecumenism affirmed at the meeting evidently did not stop the Bulgarian Orthodox Church from following the Georgian Church and abruptly discontinuing its membership in the Council in December of the same year. To forestall the snowballing of "the Orthodox problem," a Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC was formed shortly after the Bulgarian Church had left the Council.

Beyond the East-West Divide (2001) was written by two members of the Special Commission, as a prelude to its final report, issued in September 2002, and available at <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/gen-5-en.html>. The final report was well received by the Orthodox churches and even prompted a recent appeal to the Bulgarian and Georgian churches to reconsider their status in the WCC.

Peter Bouteneff is an Orthodox theologian who teaches at St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York. Anna Marie Aagaard, who teaches theology at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, and who from 1991 to 1998 was one of the presidents of WCC, represents the position of the Protestant members of the Special Commission.

In the jointly written introduction the authors point out four areas of concern for the Special Commission: (1) the organization of the WCC; (2) the style and ethos of the WCC; (3) theological convergences and differences between Orthodox and non-Orthodox; (4) existing models and new proposals for a new structural framework of the WCC (pp. 8-9). Bouteneff's essay, which follows in the first chapter, addresses what he rightly considers to be the apple of discord: the incompatibility between Orthodox ecclesiology and the vision of the Church tacitly accepted by the WCC. In her rejoinder Aagaard articulates a ground plan of common worship and highlights what the Orthodox side needs to do in order to embrace this vision.

Bouteneff begins his discussion of ecclesiology by asking a number of open-ended questions about the nature of the Church. He reduces all main ecclesiological visions to two principal starting points. According to the first point, the Church consists of all Christian denominations taken together as a whole (p. 18). Bouteneff calls this view "denominationalist" and argues, in our judgment correctly,

¹ The author of the present lines was unpleasantly surprised by the amount of anti-ecumenical pamphlets circulating and widely available in Russia and other post-Soviet countries. Despite its very low quality, this material is very popular among ordinary believers. Many church affiliated religious educational institutions do precious little to combat and even openly encourage anti-ecumenical propaganda.

that this view is implicitly embraced by the Protestant members of the WCC. The second view accords to the Orthodox Church a privileged status of *the* Church from which all other Christian denominations are separated in various degrees (p. 18).

The author subsequently provides a sketch of an Orthodox ecclesiology, based upon the creedal affirmation that the Church is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” Bouteneff points out that these characteristics are both a divine gift, which has already been embraced and lived out by the Orthodox Church in history, and a calling that can be fully realized only in the eschaton. The author admits that individual members, as well as groups within the Church, have committed grievous sins throughout history. At the same time, he affirms the creedal holiness of the Church, as the body of Christ. Bouteneff refuses to introduce sharp dichotomies of invisible and visible, heavenly and earthly, militant and triumphant sides of the Church, in order to dissolve the tension involved in saying that one and the same Church is both holy and consists of sinful members (25-6). Bouteneff proposes that when individual members of the Church come together, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they become sinless as being parts of the sinless body of Christ.

It is hard to see what is gained by this rather questionable identification of the Church’s holiness with her sinlessness. Clearly, personal holiness is not at all the same as absence of personal sins. Only in bad pieces of hagiography do we find saints converted into impeccable superhuman heroes. Correspondingly grand claims about the sinlessness of the Church make for bad ecclesiology and lead to a climate in which a loving criticism of one’s church becomes impossible. It would be inaccurate to extend the metaphor of the sinless body of Christ to the Church. Christ’s unique and unrepeatable sinlessness is precisely where the metaphor breaks down.

Discussing the issue of the unity of the Church, the author maintains that the schisms do not penetrate to the unified essence of the Church (35). If the unity of the Church is to be treated as concrete and historical, it would appear that this unity did break down, at least in the event of the Great Schism between the East and the West in 1054. The fundamental presupposition of the ecumenical dialog is that the visible unity among Christian churches is lost and needs to be recovered. The statement that the unity of the Church cannot be lost at all is, therefore, unlikely to become a fruitful starting point of such a dialog. In addition, the sense in which catholicity implies that the Orthodox Church is ‘complete’ with respect to the means of grace warrants more extended discussion. It should be noted that both of these claims--that the Orthodox church possesses unbreakable unity and the fullness of the means grace--parallel Roman Catholic ecumenical ecclesiology, as stated in one of the Documents of Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (paragraph 3).

Although there was no shortage of ecumenically relevant Orthodox reflections on ecclesiology in the twentieth century, there is no agreed upon dogmatic statement on the nature of the Church and on the status of the non-Orthodox comparable, for example, to Vatican II documents *Lumen Gentium*, *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Ut Unum Sint*, among others. Bouteneff correctly acknowledges: “it is difficult to point to a clear, agreed, Orthodox position on the non-Orthodox.” (p. RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXIV, 2 (April 2004) page 38.

38, cf. p. 49) This makes the task of an Orthodox ecumenical theologian far more daunting than that of the Roman Catholic one. At the same time, the core theological beliefs of the Orthodox, as expressed in the Nicene creed, are relatively easy to identify. For the Orthodox, no unity would be possible without the resolution of differences in the matters of dogma. Common worship, and especially common sharing in the sacrament of the Eucharist, is impossible without prior agreement upon the fundamentals of faith. Future dialogue could be built on the basis of the WCC's commitment to the Trinitarian faith, the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the acknowledgement of baptism in the name of the triune God.

In a companion essay, Aagaard takes up the issue of ecumenical worship. She asks, under what conditions and what kind of common worship would be possible? She argues that if Christians refuse to pray together, they might as well refuse to be engaged in theological disputes together. It is her central claim that communion does not begin with theology, but rather with common worship (p. 67).

Aagaard proposes to take as a foundation of ecumenical worship the structure of the Sunday service, as sketched by the second century theologian Justin Martyr in his *First Apology*. Justin mentions the following elements: gathering together, reading from scripture, sermon, bringing of bread, wine and water, thanksgiving and community's amen, communion, and, finally, collection for the poor (p. 69). It is certainly true that these elements proved to be enduring in the liturgies of both East and West. However, it appears to be rather arbitrary to make a mid-second century liturgy a single reference point. Why should not one have recourse to a fourth century liturgical *ordo*, which can be reconstructed with much greater precision? What compelling reasons do we have for using Justin Martyr's *Apology* and not, for example, *Didache*, or Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition*, or some reconstruction of the Eucharist in the NT? A coincidence that Justin's *ordo* correlates nicely with the one accepted by Aagaard's own Lutheran Church of Denmark does not strike me as a particularly compelling reason for using it in the ecumenical gatherings.

The author subsequently sets out three normative principles of worship that must be followed by the churches that strive for unity: (1) basic liturgical components, outlined above, must be present; (2) the pattern of the liturgy of the word followed by the liturgy of the sacrament must be clear and not obscured by additional details; (3) baptism in the name of the triune God must be an event shared by community as a whole (p. 78). Building upon the work of a Greek Orthodox theologian Petros Vassiliadis, Aagaard argues that the Orthodox need to make nine radical revisionist 'steps' in order to satisfy the previously stated normative principles. These steps include the abolition of silent prayers, current structures of iconostasis, and all elements that obstruct the clarity of the liturgy (p. 81). The author suggests that the Orthodox theologians needed to do more to enlighten their constituents about the desirability of these changes. Aagaard ends her chapter with a rather sketchy account of doctrinal differences between the Orthodox and the Protestants.

Aagaard's contribution fails to address "the Orthodox problem" adequately for several reasons. According to the official report, the special Commission on Orthodox participation was supposed to work on the "necessary changes in structure, style, and ethos of the Council."² Instead, Aagaard lays out the changes in style and ethos that need to be embraced by the Orthodox side, in order to conform to the Protestant ecumenical vision of the council. Making her central claim that the ecumenical worship itself has a potential of bringing about unity, Aagaard simply dismisses an Orthodox objection that the participation in the sacraments can only be a sign of already achieved doctrinal unity. Before the discussion of significant doctrinal differences the Orthodox cannot be expected to endorse the emerging liberal Protestant political orthodoxies, such as, for example, inclusive language with reference to God, politically correct treatment to homosexuality, and the ordination of women, as they are expressed in the WCC's worship. Aagaard is also insensitive to the fact that the liturgical revolution proposed by Vassiliadis, if attempted, will most certainly cause a schism within the Orthodox Church. Aagaard demonstrates precisely the kind of insensitivity to the Orthodox ethos that the Orthodox members of the WCC protested against.

The result is that the two authors of the book appear to talk past each other. True, their respective contributions concern two different aspects of the Special Commission's work. Nevertheless, Aagaard almost completely fails to address the major Orthodox objections that received a very thorough treatment in the Special Commission's final report.

In addition, the book is plagued with numerous editorial defects. There are minor misprints on pp. 81, 85 and 91. The subheading: "Justification by faith alone: seven ecumenical councils" juxtaposes two entities, the doctrine of justification and the ecumenical councils, in a tantalizingly confusing way. Finally, Aagaard never makes clear the intended force and meaning of frequently used pleonasm "koinonia-communion" and the significance, if any, of its two variations: "communion-koinonia" and "communio-koinonia."

Although *Beyond the East-West Divide* succeeds in conveying the point that conflicting ecclesiologies are at the heart of the present crisis, the book fails to bring the conversation beyond the divide. The present "ecumenical winter" (p. 112) may turn out to be very cold and long-lasting.

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² In fact the Commission, as evidenced by its Final Report, managed to make several important proposals, such as the change from the majority vote on ethical and social issues to consensus model for making such decisions. If it is passed by the WCC, this proposal will give the Orthodox members the right to veto the decisions of the WCC. See 'Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox participation in the WCC,' sec. C, par. 1.

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