

On Ecumenoclasm: Who Can Be Saved?, Public Orthodoxy blog - [Paul Ladouceur](#)

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Orthodox ecumenists and anti-ecumenists both start from the same fundamental ecclesiological principle, succinctly expressed in an [anti-ecumenical statement of the Sacred Community of Mount Athos in April 1980](#): “We believe that our holy Orthodox Church is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ, which possesses the fullness of grace and truth.”

But pro-ecumenical and anti-ecumenical Orthodox draw radically different conclusions from this one principle. Ecumenists, focusing on the notion that the Orthodox Church possesses “the *fullness* of grace and truth,” conclude that other Christian churches *also* possess grace and truth, if not in their fullness. This realization opens the door to considering non-Orthodox Christians as true brothers and sisters in Christ and hence to the possibility of dialogue in love, growth in mutual understanding of each other’s faith and traditions, and discovery of common elements which unite Christians of different denominations. This does not mean that all Christian communities are equal in matters of faith and doctrine, since Orthodox ecumenists agree with anti-ecumenists that the Orthodox Church *alone* possesses the *fullness* of the Christian faith and is the *true* visible Church of Christ.

For Orthodox anti-ecumenists, the presence of the fullness of grace and truth found only in the Orthodox Church means that grace and truth are *absent* in non-Orthodox Christian communities, that their members are heretics and hence deprived of the means of salvation. A [recent declaration of Bulgarian clergy and monastics](#) states for example that “the apostolic and millennium-old patristic tradition unequivocally considers that heretics are outside the ship of the Church and as a consequence, beyond salvation.”

The theology behind these affirmations reposes on a rigorist interpretation of St. Cyprian of Carthage’s famous dictum “No salvation outside the Church.” Cyprian held that salvation is possible only in the visible Catholic (Universal) Church and that those outside, even in other nominally Christian bodies, could not be saved. Modern retention of this doctrine, which is not at all sustained in Orthodox Tradition, constitutes a misreading of the main body of patristic theology and of the history of the early Church. As Fr. Georges Florovsky points out, the strength of Cyprian’s dictum is that it is a tautology: “salvation” and “Church” are seen as one and the same. The question is then, What is the Church? Florovsky concludes from the practice of the early Church in not systematically re-baptizing Christians (or even at times re-chrismating them or re-ordaining clergy) returning to the Catholic Church from schismatic and heretical groups, that the Church considered that sacramental grace exists in Christian communities other than the Catholic Church herself – in other words, the sacramental, charismatic or mystical boundaries of the Church do not correspond with the visible canonical boundaries of the Orthodox Church, but go well beyond. Florovsky demonstrates that Orthodoxy follows Augustine’s sacramental theology and the practice of the early Church of

seeing in the recognition of the validity of sacraments outside the Catholic Church the continuation of links of heretics and schismatics with the Church of Christ.

The theological consequences of asserting that non-Orthodox Christians are deprived of the means of salvation are monumental. Even assuming, generously, that all baptised Orthodox (realistically, perhaps 150 million people) will be saved, this means that the remaining two billion Christians will be condemned to eternal damnation, basically for not being Orthodox. And presumably, extending this reasoning to its logical conclusion, salvation is impossible for all non-Christians as well. Thus of the current world population of some 7.4 billion, only some 150 million (about 2%) are even eligible for salvation.

A doctrine which denies the possibility of salvation to the bulk of humanity violates several fundamental principles of Orthodox theology. In the first place, it denies that God is a good and loving God who seeks the salvation of all humans, but rather turns God into a cruel divine caricature who creates humans whose only final destiny can be eternal torment. This is not at all the Orthodox notion of God as the Lover of Humankind (*philanthropos*), the Merciful One (*eleémón*), Benefactor (*energetēs*), the Most Compassionate (*panoiktírmōn*).

The denial of all possibility of salvation outside the Orthodox Church also violates several other basic tenets of patristic anthropology. The *a priori* condemnation of most of humanity to damnation is a form of predestination, a doctrine which the Orthodox Church has consistently rejected over the centuries. It is also contrary to the fundamental teachings of patristic anthropology that all humans are ontologically equal, created in the divine image, and that all possess free will and are each and every one responsible for his or her own destiny, in cooperation with or in resistance to divine providence and mercy. As in the parable of the talents, each person is responsible for the measure of divine light and truth freely offered to him or her (Mt 25:14-30).

Finally, in affirming that divine grace is not and cannot be present beyond the visible Orthodox Church, this theology seeks to impose human-devised limits on divine action. On the contrary, Orthodox Tradition steadfastly maintains that God is indeed a God of love and mercy, who freely provides the means of salvation for Orthodox, non-Orthodox and non-Christians in the context of the existence of each person, in ways that may be unknown or incomprehensible to human understanding. The Incarnation of Christ means that all men and women, throughout all time, can be saved.

The recognition that God acts beyond the boundaries of the visible Orthodox Church constitutes the basis, the prime justification and the imperative for Orthodox participation in ecumenical endeavors. Goodness, divine presence and salvation are found not only where we think that they should be, but where the Holy Spirit, in absolute divine freedom, blows throughout all time for every person, who thus has the possibility of being born of the Spirit (Jn 3:8; 1:3).

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On Ecumenoclasm: What Is Church?- [Paul Ladouceur](#)

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On April 22, 2016, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church [issued a decision](#) containing its objections to the draft document of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church on ["Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World."](#) The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece [took a similar decision](#) on May 26, 2016. The brief decision of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which contains no theological justification for its positions, rejects the use of the appellation "Church" to refer to non-Orthodox Christian denominations; it objects to the inference that Christian unity has been "lost"; and it deplors the absence of affirmation that the only way to Christian unity is the return of "heretics and schismatics" to the Orthodox Church. Neither the Bulgarian nor the Greek decision go as far as [an earlier declaration of Bulgarian clergy and monastics](#) which postulates that "heretics are outside the ship of the Church and as a consequence, beyond salvation" – but the practical conclusion is the same.

Concerning the term "Church," the Bulgarian statement reads: "Besides the Holy Orthodox Church there are no other churches, but only heresies and schisms, and to call the latter 'churches' is theologically, dogmatically and canonically completely erroneous." The Bulgarian statement thus identifies the Church entirely and exclusively with the current Orthodox Church. As we pointed out in another post on *Public Orthodoxy* (["On Ecumenoclasm: Who Can Be Saved?"](#)), this theology reposes implicitly on a rigorist and narrow interpretation of St. Cyprian of Carthage's famous dictum "No salvation outside the Church." Orthodoxy has never accepted an interpretation of Cyprian's dictum which limits the Church to a visible institution, but instead recognizes that Christ and the Holy Spirit act outside the visible limits of the Orthodox Church. As Fr. Georges Florovsky expresses this notion, the canonical and the sacramental boundaries of the Church do not coincide – the boundaries of the Church of Christ are a mystery known to God alone.

By limiting the Church to a visible institution, the Orthodox (Byzantine rite) Church, the Bulgarian approach negates the Pauline notion, taken up by many Fathers of the Church, of the Church as "the Body of Christ" (1 Co 12:12-31; Eph.4:11-13; Col. 1:24 etc.). In much patristic and modern reflection on the Church, this came to be expressed as the "mystical Body of Christ," emphasizing that the Church extends well beyond the limits of the limits of the Orthodox Church. Christ is "the Way and the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6). The three characteristics form one whole. Thus wherever there is Truth, there also are the Way and Life – the way and life that are Christ Jesus. The essence of Church is the possession of Truth, the witness to Truth, and access to the means of salvation. While non-Orthodox Churches and communities do not possess the *fullness* of the Truth found only in the Orthodox Church, they nonetheless possess *elements* of the Truth, to the degree to which they witness to Jesus Christ and manifest his teachings. They thus participate in the Church of Christ and hence are indeed members of the Body of Christ, which entitles them to refer to themselves and to be referred to as "Church."

The statement of the Bulgarian Church also repeats the affirmation in the earlier document of Bulgarian ecclesial figures to the effect that "'Christian unity' has never been lost, because the Holy Orthodox Church has never lost its unity and never will." The statement cannot be refuted as such because it is a tautology: here, the "Holy Orthodox Church" is implicitly identical to "Christian unity." By implication too, not only are non-Orthodox ecclesial bodies not "Church," but their adherents are not Christians, since they do not figure in Christian unity.

In a broader context, the statement is, of course, historical nonsense. The ancient Coptic Church of Egypt, and the Armenian and Syriac Churches, and indeed the Church of Rome, were all part of the Catholic (=Universal) Church up to the Council of Chalcedon (451) for the first group, and until the beginning of the second millennium for the Church of Rome. These Churches are no longer in communion with what became known as the Orthodox Church. Where is the continuous unity of the Orthodox Church so confidently proclaimed in the Bulgarian statement?

The statement also conveniently disregards recent ruptures in the Orthodox Church itself, such as the 1996 break in communion between the Churches of Constantinople and Russia over jurisdiction in Estonia, not to mention the current squabble between the Churches of Antioch and Jerusalem over jurisdiction in Qatar. During the period when Constantinople and Russia were not in communion, was the Church of Russia no longer "Church"? Or was it the Ecumenical Patriarchate?

The Bulgarian declaration complains about the absence of affirmation in the draft document of the Pan-Orthodox Council that the only way to Christian unity is the return of heretics and schismatics to the Orthodox Church. Georges Florovsky, a leading Orthodox ecumenist for some four decades, expresses this more delicately: "For me, Christian reunion is just universal conversion to Orthodoxy." Both Florovsky and Sergius Bulgakov, who disagreed on many issues, were united in affirming that only the Orthodox Church possesses the fullness of the truth of Christ - but they never resorted to hitting fellow Christians over the head with insulting epithets (such as "heretic" and "schismatic"), which may be technically accurate, but are far removed from Christian charity. As Jesus taught: "Whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire" (Mt 5:22).

The declaration of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church seeks to derail the engagement of the Orthodox Church to dialogue with other Christians. Orthodoxy must stand firm in its fundamental commitment to act in accordance with Christ's priestly prayer: "That they may be one just as We are one" (Jn 17:22). Witness to the truth of the Orthodox Church must not proceed by hurling insults and manifesting hostility towards fellow Christians, but by humble witness to the Orthodox tradition in sincere Christian love and respect towards all seekers of Truth.

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