

Orthodox Churches: Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian - A Resume of Some Recent Contacts - Paulos Mar Gregorios Retrieved from Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios, The Star of the East website on July 9, 2016

<http://paulosmargregorios.in/?p=2115>

Few people are aware that two of the largest separations in the Universal Church took place more than fifteen centuries ago. The first was the break between the Church of the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries. A remnant of that large Church of the Persian Empire which once extended to East China and South India now survives as the Church of the East, more popularly known in the West as Nestorian Christians.

The second was a split within the Church of the Byzantine Empire itself, between the Hellenic and Latin peoples on the one hand and the Christian peoples of the ancient civilizations of Syria and Egypt on the other. The remnants of this latter group, which was also quite numerous and flourishing before the rise of Islam and even later, now find themselves in the five 'Oriental Orthodox Churches' of Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Armenia and India. They reject the name 'monophysites' applied to them by Western scholars. They believe in the one incarnate nature of God's Word – in *mia phusis*, one united nature (*tewahdo*, 'one'-d, as the Ethiopians call it) of Jesus Christ the God-Man, but certainly not in *mone phusis*, which would mean one nature only.

The controversy stems from the Council of Chalcedon (451), but the split itself is difficult to date. The Churches of Syria and Egypt rejected the Council of Chalcedon, first because they felt the procedure there was coercive and therefore not properly conciliar, and second because they were opposed to any addition to the Symbol of Nicea, Ephesus and Constantinople.

The Oriental (as distinct from Eastern, a necessary quibble) Orthodox Churches have in general rejected the Council of Chalcedon as contrary also to the spirit and teaching of Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), who is their authority in matters of Christology.

The *definitio fidei* of the Council of Chalcedon was felt by these Churches to be approving of the Tome of Leo, which later, according to them, not only contradicts the teachings of Cyril, but goes beyond Cyril to make statements which they regard as positively heretical.

Today many Oriental Orthodox theologians are disposed to accept the formal confession of faith in the definition of Chalcedon as in basic agreement with their Christological tradition, with insistence, however, on one textual variant:

Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all with one voice teach that it should be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the Same [consisting] of a rational soul and a body; *homoousios* with the Father as to his Godhead, and the same *homoousios* with us as to his manhood; in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of the Father before ages as to his Godhead, and in the last days, the Same, for us and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin Theotokos as to his manhood;

One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, made known in two natures [which exist] without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the difference of the

natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and [both] concurring into one Person (*prosopon*) and one *hypo-stasis*-not parted or divided into two Persons (*prosopa*) but one and the same Son and Only-begotten, the divine Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from of old [have spoken] concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers has delivered to us.' 1

The textual variant is 'of two natures', in place of 'in two natures'.2 'Of' is acceptable to the Oriental Orthodox, 'in' is difficult. But the Greek text of the minutes of the Council has 'of'.

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This brief article is not the place to enter into the substance of the controversy itself. 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. This fact was formally recognized by theologians of both sides in their unofficial consultation held at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, 11-15 August 1964. They issued the following statement:

Ever since the second decade of our century, representatives of our Orthodox Churches, some accepting seven Oecumenical Councils and others accepting three, have often met in ecumenical gatherings. The desire to know each other and to restore our unity in the one Church of Christ has been growing all these years. Our meeting together in Rhodes at the Pan-Orthodox Conference of 1961 confirmed this desire.

Out of this has come about our unofficial gathering of fifteen theologians from both sides, for three days of informal conversations, in connection with the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission in Aarhus, Denmark.

We have spoken to each other in the openness of charity and with the conviction of truth. All of us learned from each other. Our inherited misunderstandings have begun to clear up. We recognize in each other the one Orthodox faith of the Church. Fifteen centuries of alienation have not led us astray from the faith of our Fathers.

In common study of the Council of Chalcedon, the well-known phrase used by our common Father in Christ, St Cyril of Alexandria, *mia phusis (or mia hypostasis) tou Theou logon sesarkomene* (the one *phusis* or *hypo-stasis* of God's Word incarnate) with its implications, was at the centre of our conversations. 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. Since we agree in rejecting without reservation the teaching of Eutyches as well as of Nestorius, the acceptance or non-acceptance of the Council of Chalcedon does not entail the acceptance of either heresy. Both sides found themselves fundamentally following the Christological teaching of the one undivided Church as expressed by St Cyril.

The Council of Chalcedon (451), we realize, can only be understood as reaffirming the decisions of Ephesus (431) and best understood in the light of the later Council of Constantinople (553).

All councils, we have recognized, have to be seen as stages in an integral development and no council or document should be studied in isolation.

The significant role of political, sociological and cultural factors in creating tension between factions in the past should be recognized and studied together. They should not, however, continue to divide us.

We see the need to move forward together. The issue at stake is of crucial importance to all Churches in the East and West alike and for the unity of the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit, Who indwells the Church of Jesus Christ, will lead us together to the fullness of truth and of love. To that end we respectfully submit to our Churches the fruit of our common work of three days together. Many practical problems remain, but the same Spirit Who led us together here will, we believe, continue to lead our Churches to a common solution of these.'

His Grace Bishop Emilianos of Meloa (Oecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople)
The Very Rev. Professor G. Florovsky (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, Oecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople)
The Very Rev. Professor J. S. Romanides (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople)
The Very Rev. Professor Vitaly Borovoy (Russian Orthodox Church)
His Grace Archbishop Mar Severius Zakka Iwas of Mosul (Syrian Orthodox Church)
His Grace Metropolitan Mar Thoma Dionysius (Orthodox Syrian Church of the East)
The Rev. Professor J. Meyendorff (Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of North America)
Professor G. Konidaris (Church of Greece)
His Grace Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan (Armenian Apostolic Church)
His Grace Bishop Karekin Sarkissian (Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholicate of Cilicia)
The Very Rev. Like Siltanat Habte Mariam Worqineh (Ethiopian Orthodox Church)
The Rev. Professor V. C. Samuel (Orthodox Syrian Church of the East)
Dr. Getachew Haile (Ethiopian Orthodox Church)³

There has been no official action on the part of the Churches on either side directly confirming the statement of the theologians. It has, however, been welcomed by both sides as a significant contribution to the discussion.

Official actions by the Churches have proceeded independently of the Aarhus decisions, though not unaffected by them.

The Conference of the Heads of Oriental Orthodox Churches, which met at Addis Ababa in January 1965, stated:

Though in our concern for the reunion of Christendom we have in our minds the reunion of all Churches, from the point of view of closer affinity in faith and spiritual kinship with us we need to develop different approaches in our relationship with them. This consideration leads us to take up the question of our relation with the Eastern Orthodox Churches as a first step. We shared the same faith and communion till the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and then the division took place.

Concerning the Christological controversy which caused the division, we hope that common studies in a spirit of mutual understanding can shed light on our understanding of each other's positions. So we decide that we should institute formally a fresh study of the Christological doctrine in its historical setting to be undertaken by our scholars, taking into account the earlier studies on this subject as well as the informal consultations held in connection with the meetings of the World Council of Churches. Meanwhile, we express our agreement that our churches could seek closer relationship and co-operate with the Eastern Orthodox Churches in practical affairs. 4

On the side of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, in their meeting of 9 June 1965, took a formal decision, which includes a practical proposal for the restoration of communion between the two families of Churches. After having stated that 'the systematic promotion and working out of relations with these venerable Churches is fully in accordance with the view and desire of our Churches', the synodical decision laid down the following proposal:

In view of these facts, and on the basis of the experience that our Orthodox Church has gained in her contacts with other Churches and Christian confessions, the progressive steps for the further development of the relations of our Holy Eastern Orthodox Churches with these venerable Churches of the Orient can now be formulated in the following manner.

Preparation of the ground through various approaches through all forms of communication, exchange of visits at various levels, exchange of professors, students, etc., paralleled by theological preparation of the work which could be analyzed as follows:

(a) the setting up on both sides of theological commissions, one inter-Orthodox, the other inter-Oriental, on the lines of the Orthodox-Anglican and Orthodox-Old Catholic commissions.

(b) Study separately by these two commissions of the various topics that touch directly on the theological differences between the Orthodox and Oriental Churches, which could be considered under the following heads:

I. The historical reasons for the conflicts between the Churches.

II. The present Christological position of the two Churches.

III. Other different general topics of a dogmatic, historical or canonical nature (ecclesiastical order, administration, jurisdiction, etc.)

(c) After these topics have been studied by the two sides separately, their theological conclusions, those of the Orthodox and of the Orientals, shall be submitted to their Churches for criticism and responsible judgment.

(d) In case the theological work of the two sides is deemed inadequate, separate and parallel pan-Orthodox and pan-Oriental conferences are to be convoked, in order to make definite formulations regarding the theological conclusions of the two sides.

(e) After the decision of these pan-Orthodox and pan-Oriental conferences regarding the respective theological conclusions, the convocation of the Orthodox Churches to a pan-Orthodox Synod for the formally ecclesiastical confirmation of the agreements reached, and to pronounce, from the Orthodox side, the conciliar decision on these matters. An analogical procedure will be followed by the Oriental Churches in accordance with the practice of their Churches.

(f) After the decisions have been taken on the high conciliar level, a joint meeting shall be convened of the heads of the Churches, on both sides, for finally ratifying and proclaiming before the world their union and to give liturgical expression to the great event.

These decisions have now been re-affirmed in a Patriarchal memorandum dated 8 June 1966, almost exactly a year later; but the appointment of the Commissions has been proceeding at the usual Orthodox pace. Some of the Orthodox Churches in communion with Constantinople have taken quick formal action—among them the three major Churches of Russia, Rumania and Greece. Others are understood to be moving more slowly.

As for the Oriental Orthodox, the Standing Committee of the Oriental Orthodox Churches has appointed itself as the theological Commission on their side, with the power of co-option, willing to meet with the Eastern Orthodox Commission as soon as practicable after the latter comes into existence.

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Meanwhile, the 15-centuries-old mutual suspicion has also been finding opportunities to express itself. Professor Trembellas of the Greek Orthodox Theological Faculty of Athens raised the issue of 'Monothelism' (that there is only one will in Christ) as a charge against the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Churches.⁵

Catholicos Vazken of the Armenian Church in his Gontag (encyclical) of 4 July 1965, emphasized unity in diversity, and asked that 'each historically developed Christian Church with its saints, doctrines, traditions, etc., should be preserved in their purity, whole and unmixd, and unchanged, without the addition or subtraction of an iota'. His view was that

Doctrinal and Christological differences are no longer impediments to or conditions for the maintenance of amicable relations and for the brotherly co-operation of Churches. Efforts for unity through the re-examination of doctrinal positions so as to effect uniformity are still premature. Such efforts may open the door to new disputes, new misunderstandings and new dissensions.⁶

These two objections reflect some of the apprehensions on both sides. On the one hand, there is the fear that the separation in the fifth and sixth centuries may have been caused by more than cultural tensions or terminological misunderstandings. Professor Trembellas and Professor Verhovsky of the St Vladimir's Russian Orthodox Seminary in New York belong to this school, and their hesitations would have to be taken up seriously in the forthcoming meetings.

The fear of Catholicos Vazken, who has not yet formally joined the conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches, is also a widespread one. Small Churches on both sides are afraid of being

absorbed by their larger neighbour, whether in the USSR or in Egypt. In personal discussion among theologians, it has however been explicitly affirmed that, if some day by the grace of God communion is restored between the two sides, this would leave the present jurisdictional and liturgical status of the Churches completely intact. Neither the Armenian Church in the USSR nor the Greek Patriarchate of Alexandria, for example, would have any interference in their administrative autonomy.

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It is quite unrealistic to hope that a separation that has lasted 1,500 years will be removed in fifteen years. But what has already happened in our time in the ecumenical field is always so surprising that none of us can dare to set limits to the working out of God's plans for His One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Notes

Eng. tr. in R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon*, London, S.P.C.K., 1953, pp. 210-11.

Ek duo phuseon, instead of en duo phusesin. The Greek text of the records of the Council has the former, but many Western scholars have assumed the latter to be the original-without sufficient ground, it seems.

The papers and minutes of this consultation have been published by the Greek Orthodox Theological Review, volume x, number 2 (Winter 1964-1965), 50 Goddard Avenue, Brookline, Massachusetts 02146, U.S.A., 168 pp. Price \$3.00.

The Oriental Orthodox Churches Addis Ababa Conference, January 1965. Edited by the Interim Secretariat, Oriental Orthodox Conference, Addis Ababa, August 1965, pp. 109-10.

In *Ekklesia*, 1-15 September 1965, no. 17-18, pp. 458-9.

Eng. translation in *The Armenian Church*, July 1965, published from 630, Second Avenue, New York.