Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans

Diplomacy, Theology, and the Politics of Interwar Ecumenism

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Introduction

Many people are apt to think that theology is the splitting of hairs of academic theory and of the work of theologians as having no relevance to the practical problems of life. They are of course wrong, and the truth is the exact opposite of what they suppose. Nothing is so powerful in practice as a theological idea.

—Roger Lloyd

The most widely cited creed in Christendom, the Nicene Creed, celebrated its sixteen hundredth anniversary in 1925. That summer, on the last Monday of June, members of the Church of England and curious onlookers from throughout London and Great Britain entered Westminster Abbey to witness a splendid sight. For the first time since the split between the Eastern Orthodox and the Western churches in 1054—indeed, for the first time ever—two patriarchs from the East had set foot on British soil. The two old men, Patriarch Photios of Alexandria, a dwindling outpost of Christianity in predominantly Muslim Egypt, and Patriarch Damianos of Jerusalem, a patriarchate now under British protection and plagued by financial and ethnic strife, sat with six other Orthodox bishops along the north wall of the Abbey, facing a long line of eager but somewhat puzzled Anglican bishops, all arrayed in their scarlet convocation robes.

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The English bishops—a widely diverse group—processed en masse up the nave. Their numbers included a strong contingent from the Church of England’s Catholic wing (the “Anglo-Catholics”). The Anglo-Catholics constituted a significant, conservative faction within the church. They tended to place heavy emphasis on the liturgical life of the church; they took seriously the notion that the church’s sacraments—which many identified as seven (baptism, the eucharist, penance, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction) as opposed to the two (baptism and the eucharist) recognized by the Church of England’s Thirty-nine Articles—bestowed grace upon the recipient. And they insisted that the Church of England—just like the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church—had preserved unbroken the historic episcopate since the time of St. Peter by laying hands on priests during their ordination (a doctrine known as apostolic succession).

The Anglican canon John Douglas, bedecked in the regalia befitting the knight commander of the holy sepulcher (a title bestowed on him recently by Patriarch Damianos), followed the bishops. Douglas, who would be appointed in 1933 the Church of England’s honorary general secretary of the Council on Foreign Relations and who spoke often and wrote profusely on matters of theology for the Anglo-Catholic wing of the church—particularly on his insistence that the Anglican Church find ways to unify itself with his like-minded Orthodox brethren—had spent countless hours pushing and cajoling the hierarchs in the Anglican and Orthodox Churches to arrange this trip. Many of the English chaplains who attended to the prelates were members of the English Church Union (ECU), a formal organization of like-minded Anglo-Catholics. But the procession of Anglican bishops and the crowd of onlookers also included a good number of Anglican Protestants (Anglicans who preferred their liturgy in small doses, had little use for Catholic theology, and emphasized grace above works), as well as Evangelicals (radical Protestants who considered Scripture the primary authority for Christian doctrine and conduct and understood salvation as an intensely personal matter), many rather unsure what they were doing in the Abbey with such unusual men representing a strange and exotic branch of . . . Christianity?

Greek and Russian Orthodox prelates followed Douglas. Two English chaplains attended each prelate, as did Eastern priests and archiman-
drites in copes of gold cloth. Crowned in a white headdress with a silver cross, Bishop Veniamin of Sevastopol—who had been forced to flee his Crimean city after the Bolsheviks seized it—headed this group. Behind Veniamin, also in white copes and headdresses, came the Russian Metropolitan Antonii of Kiev, now living in Serbia, and the Russian Metropolitan Evlogii, based in Paris. Antonii and Evlogii together oversaw most of the Russian exiles in Europe, exiles who not only lived in two distinct geographic and cultural regions but also espoused two radically different notions of what it meant to be an Orthodox Christian in exile and a former subject of the Russian tsar. In just one year both metropotians would find themselves and their respective flocks in formal schism, launching a series of vituperative accusations through open letters. But today they walked side by side, carrying their staves topped with serpent heads, in tense but formal unity.

Behind Evlogii and Antonii walked Metropolitan Germanos, a frequent visitor to Britain as the official representative of the patriarchate in Constantinople. This once-great patriarchate was now only a shadow of its former self. The patriarch of Constantinople—the “ecumenical patriarch”—was universally recognized among Orthodox churches as the first among equals, the spiritual heir of the Byzantine Empire, the sometime arbiter of disputes among the various patriarchates, and the only patriarch authorized to call an ecumenical council. But by 1925 much of the territory once overseen by the patriarch of Constantinople lay under the control of a new, insistently secular Turkish state. Only a few years before, the Turks had threatened to eliminate the patriarchate entirely; British pressure in the person of Lord Curzon prevented such a drastic step, but matters remained dire. Turks and Greeks fought bitterly after the first world war, with atrocities on both sides. Turkey lost almost its entire Greek and hence Christian population in the early 1920s, when Greece and Turkey agreed that Greece would deport all its Turks to Turkey and Turkey would deport all its Greeks to Greece. In 1922 Kemal Ataturk forced the ecumenical patriarch, Meletios—a great fan of Britain, a frequent seeker of British aid, and the first Orthodox patriarch to recognize the validity of Anglican episcopal orders (i.e., the legitimacy of Anglican priests and bishops)—to abandon the city and his flock. Germanos, now surrounded by Anglican and Orthodox bishops, did not know what lay in store for him or his church. He was delighted
to be in the premier cathedral in England, but he had weightier matters on his mind.

The prelates settled in, a sermon was delivered, and the archbishop of Canterbury administered the eucharist. The Eastern patriarchs and prelates removed their headaddresses as the archbishop prepared to consecrate the elements. But they did not partake. They could not, for they were in the midst of an Anglican service, and the Anglican and Orthodox Churches—to the regret of many in both—had no provision for intercommunion. A gulf filled with theological disputes, political interests, suspicion, and ignorance separated the two. Although Anglicans and Orthodox had assembled to celebrate the Nicene Creed, they did not even agree as to whether the creed should state that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father,” as the original one formulated in 325 asserted, or whether the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son”—this later addition known as the *filioque* (Latin for “and the son”).

The Orthodox had good reason to seek rapprochement with the Anglicans. The conclusion of the first world war found Britain in control of Orthodox holy places in Palestine. Mindful of the British role in protecting the patriarchate of Constantinople after the Great War, many Orthodox saw Britain as their only hope as they faced the political and economic challenges that lay before them. They hoped for money, and they craved the political muscle they believed the archbishop of Canterbury could flex. Russian exiles from the Bolshevik Revolution flooded into Western Europe and England, hungry and impoverished, and they looked to the generous efforts of the English-organized Russian Clergy and Church Aid Fund for assistance.

Many in the two churches shared a sense of spiritual kinship. Both churches believed they represented the authentic church of Christ. Their mutual distrust of the Roman pontiff and their insistence that the Roman Catholic Church—not either of them—was responsible for the break with each, led some of their theologians to wonder whether their differences were merely cosmetic.

The years between the world wars witnessed the most concerted effort to bridge the gap between Orthodox and Anglicans. Some of Russia’s greatest theologians, notably Georges Florovsky, Sergei Bulgakov, and Anton Kartashev, found themselves forced from their homelands and in sudden proximity to members of the Anglican Church who were
fascinated by their theology and liturgy. Greek theologians such as Hamilcar Alivizatos and Panteleimon Komnenos developed an abiding interest in the Anglican Church. The interwar years witnessed the two great ecumenical conferences of the twentieth century in Lausanne, Switzerland (1927), and Edinburgh, Scotland (1937), where members of both churches rubbed shoulders. Russian and English students, horrified by a war that led many to question the very meaning of existence, sought answers in the hope of a unified Christian faith and founded at Oxford in 1927 the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, an organization that continues to this day.

This, then, is the story of efforts toward rapprochement by two churches and their ultimate failure to achieve formal unity or intercommunion. It is the story of idealism, altruism, political calculations, personal feuds, diplomatic posturing, and theological disputes, all of which combined both to propel and to undermine this grand ideal. This last point is crucial, and it constitutes one of the primary theses of this narrative: those forces that initially inspired contacts between Anglicans and Orthodox are the same forces that ultimately obstructed or undermined progress. In other words, the political and diplomatic concerns that drove representatives of disparate confessions together ultimately impeded a successful resolution to the theological problems at hand. Turmoil in the Balkans, concern about the autonomy of the ecumenical patriarchate within the new Turkish state, anxiety about the fractiousness of various national branches of the Orthodox Church, disputes between the British and Russian states, and a desire to settle conflicts among feuding Russians in exile—all these considerations argued for and precipitated serious ecumenical work. But they also made such work nearly impossible.

This account situates itself in the context of the larger ecumenical movement. Both Anglican and Orthodox ecumenists had an abiding sense of their place in a potentially revolutionary, worldwide project of church reunion. The Eastern Orthodox faith is, in a sense, unable to conceive of disparate “churches”—ecumenism is not, to the Eastern Orthodox mind, a movement so much as a state of right being. For the Orthodox, ecumenism indicates not the coming together of different churches but rather the returning of splinter groups to the one, true church: the holy, indivisible body of Christ. Thus the Orthodox never conceived
of negotiations with the Anglican Church simply as the unification of two like-minded bodies but as a step leading toward the restoration of the church.

The problem with such a conception of the church, however, emerged clearly as the Orthodox discovered how far afield the bewildering array of protestant sects had traveled over the centuries. The major ecumenical conferences in Lausanne and Edinburgh provided a rude awakening for the Orthodox delegations. This diverse, fractious, protestant world—a world the Orthodox now confronted more directly than at any time in history—proved disorienting. Optimistic hopes for the reunion of Christendom dashed up against the shoals of Protestant “errors” and even “heresy,” resulting in profound disenchantment and, at times, outright despair. The result was a temptation either to turn the focus from these Protestant groups toward like-minded colleagues within the Anglican Church or, in some cases, to give up altogether on the institutional structures of the ecumenical bureaucracy. Leading Orthodox leaders in the ecumenical movement found themselves deeply disillusioned. Many Protestants came to view the Orthodox and conservative Anglicans as troublesome gadflies and obstructionists impeding reunion efforts.

This study thus constitutes an important chapter in the history of the ecumenical movement. The interwar period marked the high point of ecumenical hopes, hopes unrealized and followed by the near-abandonment of attempts to find theological unity and institutional unification. While many Orthodox and Anglican leaders from the interwar period continued to work within the ecumenical movement after World War II, their new forum was now the World Council of Churches, an institution whose name constitutes a tacit admission that unity was not possible and that cooperation among distinct bodies—especially in the social sphere—provided the only real opportunity for meaningful action. This study attempts to explain how the modest aims and lowered expectation during this period emerged from the incredibly ambitious goals entertained between the wars. It demonstrates, in short, why the twentieth-century ecumenical movement—especially under the aegis of the World Council of Churches—so drastically scaled back its goals and expectations.

Ultimately, however, this story tells us even more about the internal workings and struggles of the Anglican and Orthodox Churches.
In essence, this is the story of two churches trying to find themselves, struggling to solve internal questions brought to light by external challenges. As important factions of the Anglican and Orthodox Churches sought to move closer to one another, each church faced internal divisions and debates that at times erupted into real crises. While Anglicans tried to decide what they thought of the Orthodox, they also tried to decide what they thought of each other. And while the Orthodox tried to make sense of the Anglican Church (was it Protestant, Catholic, or some inscrutable hybrid?), the Orthodox churches tried—often in vain—to maintain some semblance of unity among themselves. Ecumenism revived and intensified in-house problems that—if not exactly dormant—at least rested more quietly than when exposed to the light of ecumenical dialogue. This study argues that ecumenical challenges brought to light serious divisions in each confession, divisions that to date have not been adequately acknowledged or explored either by representatives of these respective confessions or by scholars of the ecumenical movement.

Accounts of these discussions and debates filled the pages of the Orthodox émigré press, the popular magazines of England, the journals of the Orthodox religious intelligentsia, the theological periodicals of England, and the burgeoning ecumenical press. Western European Protestant, Evangelical, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox periodicals all took a keen interest in the discussions. Some of the major participants published memoirs. Letters to the editor inundated the popular and religious press and flew among and between members of the two churches. The Church of England's Press and Publications Board churned out endless reports and transcripts. *Put',* the primary journal of the Russian religious intelligentsia in emigration, followed the debates closely, as did the official organs of the Russian church in emigration. New journals such as the *Christian East* sprang up both to chronicle and promote the endeavors and to publish documents and opinions from around the Orthodox world.

Given the plethora of primary sources available for the study of this grandiose endeavor, it is surprising how little attention it has received. No serious scholarly study exists. Histories of the Orthodox emigration and the Church of England in the twentieth century have alluded to the discussions but only in a cursory or perfunctory manner.4 V. T. Istavrídís devoted part of his work, *Orthodoxy and Anglicanism,* to the interwar
movement, but his account is a somewhat sterile chronology of theo-
logical concerns,⁵ and it makes little attempt to place the discussions in
the context of the larger ecumenical movement, the challenges facing
each church, and the social and political struggles facing the Orthodox
world and the Church of England.⁶ Indeed, it is this larger context—
politics, war, revolution, emigration, exile, and internecine squabbles—
that explains both the tremendous hopes and the abject failures, and it
is what ultimately makes the story so compelling.