

The Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue

by Helle Georgiadis

With the stage set for a Catholic-Orthodox dialogue one is inclined to welcome any book which might have a bearing on this matter, since the lack of material available in Western languages is a serious difficulty in preparing for such a dialogue. Fr Schmemmann, Dean of the Russian Orthodox Seminary in New York, has a long record of ecumenical activity and any book by him is bound to raise hopes among the friends of the Orthodox in the west. It is therefore all the more disappointing that *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*¹ makes such an equivocal contribution to this dialogue.

In fairness to the author it must be said that the book, which originally appeared in Russian, was intended for the non-specialist Russian Orthodox of the diaspora. But, as has been shown by the Second Vatican Council, the internal affairs of any Christian communion have ecumenical relevance, and thus what the Orthodox say to each other in these days is also of concern to those outside their communion.

The book is a history of the Orthodox Church, starting with the Book of Acts and ending with the Russian Church before the Communist Revolution. This, too, is disappointing, since the last fifty years have raised issues which vitally affect Orthodoxy today, particularly the question of jurisdiction, which will continue to complicate inter-Orthodox relations for many years to come. As an exposition of Orthodoxy Fr Schmemmann's book is unconvincing. His point of view, expressed in the concluding paragraph, that 'the true Orthodox way of thought has always been historical' is a very personal one and suggests Western influence which also shows itself in other ways throughout the book. There is an extraordinary absence of any trace of the dynamic eschatology so characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy. Nor is there any clear expression of the importance of tradition in Orthodox thought. The reader is left to conclude, perhaps unfairly, that the author sees tradition only in its limited and accidental link with the purely 'historical'.

One of the problems in a dialogue with the Orthodox is the absence of a common language. Certainly the Greek patristic heritage, shared with the Catholic Church, offers a basis for this, but the Christian West, and in particular the present cultural idioms of

¹*The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* by Alexander Schmemmann, Harvill Press, 42s.

thought in the West, are very far removed from the era of the Greek Fathers. Considerable work has been done on the Catholic side by scholars who have studied in depth and with sympathy both the patristic and Byzantine past of the Orthodox tradition and its more recent developments. But dialogue requires response from the other partner to the conversations, and this is still largely absent on the Orthodox side.

Fr Schmemmann is one of a group of potential Orthodox spokesmen who have studied in the West and taken an active part in the ecumenical movement, especially through the World Council of Churches. One of the effects of such contacts on the author has been to develop a critical and often very objective approach to his own Church. This in itself has value, but he remarks on the last page than many people regard the history of the Church as 'a temptation and disillusionment' and that in his book too they will find grounds for both. His sincerity and desire for the welfare of the Orthodox Church are unmistakable, but at least some of the grounds for disillusionment which he gives seem to arise from a lack of depth and a failure to appreciate the supernatural elements in the complex motives which inspire men's actions.

This is shown, for example, in his treatment of the Byzantine and Greek aspects of Orthodoxy, but the most obvious examples of this kind of superficial judgment on past history occur in the references to relations between the Orthodox and Rome. It is disturbing to find that a theologian with Fr Schmemmann's background can still write of the Council of Florence in terms which echo only the bitter polemics of that period. Although in an earlier passage he mentions with satisfaction Dr Dvornik's defence of Photius when dealing with events leading up to the schism of 1054, there is nothing elsewhere to suggest that the author is familiar with recent Catholic writings on this period or on the Council of Florence.

The author dismisses the Union of Florence as a tragic aberration on the part of the Greeks who were too feeble to stand up to the bullying of Rome and fearful of the imminent advance of the Turks on Constantinople. In one passage in the book (p. 252) Fr Schmemmann appears to deplore the lack of ecumenical feeling among the Orthodox, when, having broken with Rome, they had no wish to have any further contact with Catholics. But nowhere in the book is there direct evidence that the author himself would welcome a resumption of such contacts.

This lack of interest in reunion is one of the strange paradoxes of Orthodoxy. Both the Orthodox and Rome claim to have the full truth, to be the true Church of Christ on earth. The logic of such a position is surely expressed in the desire to share this truth with others. This logic the Church of Rome has always followed, often in the past with clumsy attempts to attain by force that which could not be achieved by reasoning. But the Orthodox, until very

recently, have kept themselves aloof from those outside their communion.

Fr Schmemmann does show indirectly that this passive role was partly forced on the Orthodox by the pressures of Islam, and he gives a useful reminder that the West can only understand present-day Orthodoxy by taking full account of the many centuries of oppression under Moslem rule which afflicted all the Orthodox Churches except the Russian. In this century some Orthodox have taken active part in ecumenical matters, though hitherto these contacts have been mainly with Anglicans and Protestants and in the World Council of Churches. In the last fifty years the patriarchate of Constantinople, under various incumbents, has consistently supported the ecumenical movement, though it is only under the present patriarch, Athenagoras I, that these initiatives have been extended to Rome. All this, however, falls outside the time-span within which the author has confined his book.

Friendly relations between the Orthodox and the Catholic Church at an official (or even unofficial) level began with Pope John's invitation to the Orthodox to send observers to the Second Vatican Council. Pope Paul has continued to promote this friendship with vigour and imaginative sympathy. The Jerusalem meeting between him and Patriarch Athenagoras is the real watershed in this *rapprochement* between Rome and Constantinople, and both the pope and the patriarch have followed it up with acts of friendship and reconciliation designed to show that it was much more than an isolated act of courtesy.

The meeting however could not have taken place, nor could there have been any real follow-up, without the Council. The decree on Ecumenism, for example, has greatly impressed the ecumenically-minded Orthodox and has encouraged them to recognize that a true dialogue with Rome is possible. But perhaps the most significant ecumenical aspect of the Council has been Pope John's decision to invite observers and to take them into the full confidence of the Council. Whether the observers agreed or not with what was decided by the Council, the fact that nothing was hidden from them has meant above all that the fear that Rome was motivated by secret politics and sinister purposes has been banished and replaced by the recognition that the Catholic Church is sincere in her ecumenical role. Fr Schmemmann's book, however, provides an unwelcome reminder that this in itself is not enough to open the way for unity with the Orthodox; the will for unity must also be present on both sides. As it happens, he was one of the (Russian) Orthodox observers at the earlier sessions of the Council, as a personal guest of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, but his antipathy for Rome seems unabated.

But mutual trust is the indispensable foundation for friendship, and the meeting between the Pope and Patriarch Athenagoras, the

cordial reception given by the Patriarch to Patriarch Maximos of the Melkites last year and to Cardinal Bea this year, would not have been possible if any fear remained that Rome was not sincere. The way is open now for the genuine differences in doctrine to be explored in an atmosphere of trust. Both Pope Paul and Patriarch Athenagoras have made it clear that they are eager for the dialogue to start. But whereas the Pope can speak for the whole Catholic Church, the position of the Oecumenical Patriarch is much more complex.

One might describe this position as being midway between that of the Pope and that of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In addition to authority over the patriarchate of Constantinople, the Oecumenical Patriarch has jurisdiction over the Greeks in the diaspora, which include several million in north and south America, and also over some small Orthodox communities in various parts of the world, mostly emigrants. He has a special relation with the Church of Greece, although it is now autocephalous, and all the other autocephalous Orthodox Churches recognize him as the *primus inter pares* among Orthodox patriarchs. In the last resort it might be claimed that the test of Orthodoxy is to be in communion with him, but, the Russians would hastily add, only if he abides by the norms of Orthodox tradition. This last caveat means that if he led the patriarchate of Constantinople into communion with Rome, the other Orthodox patriarchs would quickly repudiate him as having fallen into heresy. This explains Patriarch Athenagoras's caution in approaching Rome and the importance he attaches to the need for unanimity in Orthodox ecumenical relations.

It must not be forgotten that the rise of the Patriarchate of Moscow (which, theoretically at least, includes the largest proportion of Orthodox) as an independent patriarchate derives directly from the Union of Florence. The Russians believed, and Fr Schmemmann shows that they still believe, that in signing the act of Union, Constantinople betrayed the true faith, and that from that time the responsibility for preserving true Orthodoxy passed to the Russians. The same could happen again, and though something might be gained by an early reunion between Rome and Constantinople, this would certainly split the Orthodox world, and the resulting antagonism would prejudice the chances of reunion with the Russians for many generations.

The Russians, on the other hand, have shown that they are not above running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. When Pope John invited the Orthodox to send observers to the Council, the Patriarch of Constantinople took the constitutional line of inviting all the Orthodox Churches to decide on a common policy. This was at the first pan-Orthodox conference at Rhodes in 1961. At that time the Russians expressed very negative views, and as a result Patriarch Athenagoras declined to send observers to the

opening session of the Council. At the eleventh hour, and without consulting the other Orthodox Churches, the patriarchate of Moscow unexpectedly sent two observers to Rome. The Greeks not unnaturally regarded this *volte face* as a trick, and much of the Church of Greece's own hostility towards sending observers to Rome stems from reaction to this Russian 'coup'.

The principle of Orthodox unanimity in opening a dialogue with Rome was still upheld, paradoxically also by the Russians, at the third and most recent pan-Orthodox conference in Rhodes last autumn. This followed the Jerusalem meeting earlier last year, and it was confidently hoped that the conference would agree to a major step forward in relations with Rome. The Russians were firmly against any such move. It may be that their refusal had something to do with the change on the political front which had just taken place in Moscow. This time the Greeks were determined not to be baulked a second time by the Russians. Controversy was heated, but in the end a compromise resolution was unanimously agreed to by which it was officially decided to postpone a final decision until after the end of the Second Vatican Council; but in the mean time each Orthodox Church was free to engage in ecumenical contacts with Rome as it wished.

Since the last Rhodes conference the Patriarch of Constantinople has shown that he intends to continue his friendly relations with Rome, and if a full dialogue cannot proceed at once, at any rate the channels of communication will be kept wide open. How far he can actually go remains to be seen. The Church of Greece is still hampered by the intransigence of the elderly Archbishop of Athens who presides over its synod. He has the support of fanatical elements but his anti-Rome attitude is attracting increasing criticism in the responsible press, and many members of the Greek Church, predominantly among the laity and younger clergy, are impatient to have a more forward-looking primate. Apart from ecumenical matters, the Archbishop has many critics of his domestic ecclesiastical policies, and his personal antagonism towards Rome may prove in the long term to have rallied the supporters of friendship with Rome.

The outcome of the fourth session of the Council, especially if it proves to be the last, will be crucial for the development of Orthodox relations with Rome. Once the Council is concluded, the Orthodox are committed to reviewing their attitude to the opening of an official dialogue with Rome. The attitude of the Moscow Patriarchate and other Orthodox Churches under communist governments is bound to depend in some measure on the prevailing policy of the Kremlin. It seems probable at present that the best chance for making useful progress will come from unofficial discussions between Rome and separate Orthodox Churches. The Russians argue that the Orthodox are not yet ready for a dialogue, and there is some truth in this. On the other hand, it is important not to lose

the tide of goodwill which exists at present. It can also be argued that the Orthodox will never be prepared for this dialogue until they have studied the Roman position dispassionately, and their studies would be carried out more profitably in the company of living spokesmen for the Catholic Church than from books and official documents.

In the meantime it is important that the dialogue with the Orthodox should not be confined on the Catholic side to the Pope and the small band of scholars interested in Orthodoxy. If the majority of the Orthodox can only see Rome through a fog of prejudice which has accumulated through the ages, it lies equally in the power of Catholics to dispel it by their friendship and concern for their Orthodox neighbours. This is certainly the view of the Council Fathers expressed in the Degree on Ecumenism. In the chapter on *The Special Position of the Eastern Churches* it is expressed as the urgent desire of the Council (para. 18) that every effort should be made towards the realization of this unity, especially by prayer and fraternal dialogue, and the Council recommends 'the pastors and faithful of the Catholic Church to develop close relations with those who are no longer living in the East but are far from home, so that friendly collaboration with them may increase in the spirit of love, to the exclusion of all feeling of rivalry or strife'.
