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From division to dialogue and beyond: the quest for Eastern and Oriental Orthodox unity

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The modern quest for unity of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches goes back to the mid-20th century, beginning with informal consultations in the 1960s and continuing with the work of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue in the 1980s onward. This has led to a paradoxical situation. The Christological issues that prompted the division of the churches in the 5th century appear to have been resolved, yet the division continues. Why? This article begins by exploring the specific context of our current quest for unity: the modern ecumenical movement and modern historical scholarship. Then, after surveying pre-modern quests for unity, the article explores some of the ways in which liturgical and disciplinary differences came to be invested with new meaning, becoming symbols of division rather than expressions of legitimate diversity. We may now have reached a point where such differences no longer are taken automatically as signs of Christological disagreement, yet the impulse towards reunion of the churches appears to have slowed in recent decades. New questions have arisen. Who has the authority to lift anathemas which the churches hurled against each other in the past? What is the meaning and authority of an "ecumenical council"? How will the results of dialogue be received and effectively implemented in church life? The basic question now is whether we really desire unity more than the disunity of the *status quo*.

Keywords: Council of Chalcedon, ecumenical movement, Cyril of Alexandria, Emperor Justinian, Severus of Antioch, Eulogius of Alexandria, oikonomia, azymes, Trisagion hymn, Nersess the Gracious, anathemas, ecumenical council, "diaspora".

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От разделения к диалогу, и дальше. Поиск единства между халкидонскими и не-халкидонскими Православными Церквами

Джон Х. Эриксон

Современная фаза в богословском диалоге между халкидонскими и не-халкидонскими Православными Церквами берет свое начало в 1960-х гг.; в конце 1980-х гг. была создана Двусторонняя комиссия по богословскому диалогу. Однако ее работа лишь подчеркнула весьма парадоксальную ситуацию: христологические споры V века, казалось бы, оказались разрешенными, однако раскол преодолен не был. Почему? В начале данной статьи, автор рассматривает специфику поиска евхаристического единства между халкидонскими и не-халкидонскими Церквами в современном контексте, в контексте современного экуменического движения и исторической науки. Предоставив обзор предшествующих попыток объединения, автор приводит детальный анализ богослужебных и уставных различий, которые получили полемическое значение и стали скорее символами разделения, нежели проявлениями подлинного и естественного литургического многообразия. В наше время, богослужебные различия не воспринимаются автоматически как символы христологического разделения, однако импульс к объединению халкидонских и не-халкидонских Церквей за последние десятилетия заметно ослаб. Появились новые вопросы. К примеру, кто имеет право снять анафемы, щедро налгавшиеся обеими сторонами в минувшие столетия? Каково значение и каковы права "Вселенского Собора"? Какое применение результаты богословских договорённостей обретут в жизни каждой из Церквей? Базовым остается вопрос: действительно ли желают Церкви единства, или же они довольствуются сохранением *status quo*?

Ключевые слова: Халкидонский Собор, экуменическое движение, Кирилл Александрийский, император Юстиниан I, Севир Антиохийский, Евлогий Александрийский, икономия, опресноки, трисвятое, Нерсес Милостивый, анафемы, вселенские соборы, "диаспора".

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Henry Chadwick (1920-2008), distinguished church historian and veteran observer of the ecumenical scene, was fond of remarking that the chief reason for Christian division today is division itself. Whatever may have been the issues initially leading to division, a division once established very quickly takes on a life of its own, as each side tries to justify its own role in the division. Differences that in themselves would not have been church-dividing are invested with new meaning, to the point of becoming symbols of division rather than examples of legitimate diversity. Signs of special divine favor are discovered on each side, whether in supernatural portents or in the steadfastness of new confessors and martyrs. Competing ecclesial structures are erected. Anathemas are hurled. And even if the issues that led to the division are eventually resolved, the division itself — buttressed in these many ways — remains.

These generalizations certainly hold true if one looks at the long history of relations between the Eastern, or Chalcedonian, Orthodox Churches and the Oriental, or Non-Chalcedonian, Orthodox Churches. As these commonly-used designations suggest, both families of churches regard themselves as orthodox, as "right-believing," or (more accurately) as "right worshipping." But they have differed on their position with regard to the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) and the definition on Christological dogma made at that council. Their long and often painful division thus goes back nearly 1600 years. In last decades of the twentieth century relations began to improve, yet developments have been both encouraging and frustrating. Encouraging — because theological dialogue, first informal in the 1960s, then formal in the 1980s and 1990s, has led to the conclusion that the Christological issues that initially prompted the division of these churches have been resolved, so that continued division can no longer be justified on dogmatic grounds. Frustrating — because the division does continue. At this point the reason for the division of our churches seems to be division itself. A review of relations between our churches since the mid-twentieth century may place in sharper relief both how far they have come in their quest for unity and also how many divisive and potentially divisive issues remain.

The year 1951 marked the 1500th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon. In a letter commemorating that anniversary, Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople quoted with approval St. John of Damascus, who in the eighth century observed that those who do not accept the terminology of Chalcedon were "nevertheless Orthodox in all things," and he called for theological dialogue with the Non-Chalcedonian churches. The openness of Patriarch Athenagoras stands in contrast to the way in which Chalcedon was presented in popular literature of the period. On the Chalcedonian side, Chalcedon then as now was numbered as the fourth of the seven ecumenical councils; and just as the other ecumenical councils, it was remembered chiefly in terms of the heresy it condemned. Just as I Nicaea had condemned the Arian heresy, I Constantinople the Macedonian heresy, and Ephesus the Nestorian heresy, so also Chalcedon had condemned the monophysite heresy. Those whom the Eastern Orthodox (or for that matter Western Christians) today refer to as Oriental Orthodox or Non-Chalcedonians most often were called monophysites in popular books of the period. The genesis of this heresy and its condemnation at Chalcedon were presented more or less like this: The Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) quite rightly had condemned Nestorius for emphasizing Christ's humanity to the point of separating Him into two persons; by contrast Nestorius' chief opponent, Cyril of Alexandria, emphasized Christ's divine nature, and followers such as Eutyches quickly enough carried this to an extreme, to the point of denying Christ's human nature; so Chalcedon, basing itself on the carefully balanced Christology of the Tome of Pope Leo of Rome, quite rightly condemned this monophysite heresy, this heresy which held that Christ had but one nature, *viz*. the divine.

This, of course, is the stereotype that was widespread among the Eastern Orthodox *circa* 1951. Comparable stereotypes also existed among the Oriental Orthodox. For most Orthodox, however, whether Eastern or Oriental, the climate of opinion has changed considerably since then. Why?

First of all, we must acknowledge the contribution of the modern ecumenical movement. Both the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches have criticized certain developments within the ecumenical movement. At the same time, both have benefited from the ecumenical movement in diverse ways. The very dialogue which has brought these churches so close to unity and full communion is, in many respects, a product of the ecumenical movement and, more specifically, of the close contacts and resulting friendships which this movement made possible. Back in the early 1960s, two then-young staff members of the World Council of Churches, Nikos Nissiotis and Paul Verghese — later Paulos Mar Gregorios — of the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church, sensed the fundamental unity of the Eastern and Oriental churches. They succeeded in winning over their respective church authorities, and in turn — at first in conjunction with meetings of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches — a series of informal consultations began (1964-1971). Participants included, among others, Georges Florovsky, John Meyendorff, John Karmires, John Romanides, John Zizioulas, Paul Verghese, and V. C. Samuel. In an atmosphere of mutual respect, relatively free from the cultural and political pressures that had doomed earlier attempts at reunion, leading theologians from both sides were able to address the subject of Christology from a fresh perspective, concentrating not on what divides (as in older polemical literature) but rather on what unites (in this case, our common father from the early Church, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and his formulation "one incarnate nature of God the Word").

Already the joint statement issued by the first of these informal consultations (Aarhus 1964) could declare: "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.... On the essence of the Christological dogma we found ourselves in full agreement. Through the different terminologies used by each side, we found the same truth expressed." The second informal consultation (Bristol 1967) extended agreement to include virtually every hitherto-disputed aspect of Christology: "Some of us affirm two natures, wills and energies hypostatically united in the one Lord Jesus Christ. Some of us affirm one united divine-human nature, will and energy in the same Christ. But both sides speak of a union without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. These four adverbs" — which of course lie at the heart of the Chalcedonian definition — "belong to our common tradition. Both affirm the dynamic permanence of the Godhead and the Manhood, with all their natural properties and faculties, in the one Christ".

Building on the work of these and subsequent informal consultations, an official Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches began to meet in the 1980s. In its agreed statements on Christology, the Commission repeatedly and unequivocally affirmed the churches' full agreement on the substance of the faith, notwithstanding differences in terminology. "In the light of our four unofficial consultations (1964, 1967, 1970, 1971) and our three official meetings which followed (1985, 1989, 1990), we have understood that both families have loyally maintained the authentic Orthodox Christological doctrine, and the unbroken continuity of the apostolic tradition, though they may have used Christological

terms in different ways" (Chambésy 1993). Indeed, as the documents of the dialogue point out, "Our mutual agreement is not limited to Christology, but encompasses the whole faith of the one undivided Church of the early centuries" (Anba Bishoy 1980), including, for example, the veneration of icons[1].

While the modern ecumenical movement has contributed significantly to the progress in relations between our churches, one must acknowledge an even greater debt to modern historical scholarship. During the twentieth century, our churches began to engage not only in synchronous dialogue — dialogue with each other and with other churches involved in the ecumenical movement — but also in diachronous dialogue — dialogue with their own past. They discovered, among other things, that their popular presentations of the period of church history in question were gross oversimplifications. After Chalcedon, Christological positions whether among those accepting the council or those rejecting it were much more varied and fluid than popular presentations suggested, making it difficult any longer to view one "side" as purely orthodox or the other as purely heretical.

Among those rejecting Chalcedon, there were indeed some who put forward positions that quite properly could be described as monophysite, most notably Julian of Halicarnassus, who asserted that Christ's body was by nature incorruptible from the moment of the union, even before the resurrection, so that "even though Christ wept over Lazarus, it was his incorruptible and divine tear that raised him from the dead". But as modern specialists beginning with Lebon demonstrated conclusively, mainstream "monophysites" like Severus of Antioch simply sought to continue the *mia physis* Christology of St. Cyril of Alexandria[2]. They spoke of "one incarnate nature of God the Word," but this did not mean that they denied the fullness of Christ's humanity. In fact, much of their energy was spent in combatting the apthartodocetism of Julian of Halicarnassus and others like him, who compromised the fullness of Christ's humanity by arguing that it was essentially different from our own[3].

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[1] Reports of the four unofficial consultations (1964-1971) and the agreed statements and proposals of the Joint Theological Commission have been widely available for many years. The consultation reports appeared in English in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 10.2 (1964-65), 13 (1968), and 16.1 and 2 (1971). They also were featured in *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite? Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology*, Paulos Mar Gregorios, William H. Lazareth, and Nikos A. Nissiotis, eds. (1981). Geneva: WCC Publications. The agreed statements and proposals of the Joint Theological Commission appeared with related material in *St. Nersess Theological Review* (1996), 1.1, 99-110. Both the consultation reports and the Joint Commission's agreed statements and proposals are included in Christine Chaillot, ed., *Towards Unity: The Theological Dialogue Between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches* (1998); and in Thomas FitzGerald and Emmanuel Gratsias, eds. *Restoring the Unity in Faith: The Orthodox – Oriental Orthodox Theological Dialogue*, published jointly by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the Americas and the Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches of America (2007). Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press. See also the massive 519-page compendium of texts and documents edited by Christine Chaillot, *The Dialogue Between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches* (2016). Volos: Volos Academy Publications.

[2] Lebon, J. (1909). *Le monophysisme sévérien.* Louvain.

[3] On Severus, his Christology, and its significance for dialogue today, see Andrew Louth, Severus of Antioch: An Orthodox View, in Chaillot, ed., *The Dialogue…*, 55-63; and Behr, J. (1998). Severus of Antioch: Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Perspectives, *St. Nersess Theological Review,* 3.1-2, 23-35, also included in Chaillot, ed., *The Dialogue*…, 64-73.

At the same time that Non-Chalcedonian monophysitism was being reassessed, Chalcedonian Diphysitism was also being reassessed. Reacting again the older and characteristically Western approach which saw ancient church history and dogmatic development as culminating and indeed ending with Chalcedon, scholars like Fr. John Meyendorff called attention to developments after Chalcedon and indeed to neglected aspects of Chalcedon itself[4]. As Fr. Meyendorff often emphasized, at Chalcedon it was not just the Tome of Pope Leo of Rome that was the touchstone of orthodoxy. Whenever a difficult moment arose in the proceedings, the witness of Cyril, not just of Leo, was invoked. In addition, as Meyendorff and other scholars pointed out, Chalcedon itself left a number of issues unresolved, both in Christology and in the inseparable area of soteriology. Many — indeed perhaps the majority — of those who rejected Chalcedon did so on the grounds that it could be interpreted in a Nestorian way and that it had rehabilitated certain Nestorian sympathizers — personages like Theodoret of Cyrus, who with some justice have been labeled crypto-Nestorian. This possibility was eliminated only after yet another council, the fifth ecumenical council by Eastern Orthodox reckoning, in Constantinople in 553 A.D., during the reign of Emperor Justinian. This council once again emphasized the authority of St. Cyril, condemned the suspect Nestorian sympathizers, and fully incorporated into its definition the "theopaschite" formulations which those rejecting Chalcedon had long regarded as essential for orthodoxy. After 553, there could be no thought of rejecting or simply ignoring Chalcedon within the Byzantine imperial church, but it was also clear that Chalcedon could be interpreted only in the light of the Christology of St. Cyril of Alexandria and, behind that, the soteriology of St. Cyril. In short, Chalcedon, the fourth of the councils regarded as ecumenical in the Eastern Orthodox Church, does not stand alone. It must be read in the light of the fifth and subsequent councils.

The modern ecumenical movement and modern historical scholarship have indeed helped bring our churches closer. They are now able to view both each other and their own histories in a new perspective. But we should not conclude from this that the present rapprochement is simply the result of modern relativism or the "pan-heresy of ecumenism," as some self-styled traditionalists might charge. Even during the long centuries of division there were some on both sides who recognized that differences between the churches' preferred Christological formulations were essentially verbal rather than substantive. And during those centuries there also were efforts to reach agreement and to restore communion. These early efforts are instructive and merit closer examination. They illustrate what both sides — at the time at least — regarded as the proper basis for reunion.

Attention already has been drawn to Emperor Justinian's efforts in the sixth century to address the legitimate concerns of those who did not accept Chalcedon. The council which he summoned did not in fact achieve its goal of unity. By that point both sides had begun to erect parallel, competing hierarchies, and ethnic, national and political issues were further aggravating what had begun as a theological dispute. The chief reason for division was becoming division itself. Yet efforts at reunion continued — and indeed intensified — under

[4] See especially his *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (1975). Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Justinian's successor, Justin II, who issued what has been called "a manifesto of Neo-Chalcedonian theology." Addressing all his Christian subjects, he affirmed that orthodox Christology can be expressed both in Cyrillian terms ("one incarnate nature of God the Word") or in Chalcedonian terms ("the difference of natures is not annulled by the union..."); and he called on all parties to unite on the basis of *orthodoxia*, avoiding "unnecessary disputes about persons or words, since the words [used on either side] lead to one true belief and understanding"[5].

One problem, of course, is that emperors of every age tend to become impatient when their initiatives are not immediately crowned with success. In Christian antiquity imperially sponsored dialogue often alternated with imperially sponsored persecution of dissidents. No doubt some churchmen were happy to go along with the persecutions, just as they went along with the dialogues. But there also were those who rejected force. One such was John the Faster, a sixth-century patriarch of Constantinople. "What did the dissidents do or say that deserves persecutions?" he asked. "If pagans have been justified and amnestied, how can I persecute Christians who are blameless in their Christianity and, so it seems to me, have more faith than we?"[6]. Another noteworthy figure is John the Merciful, Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria, who is honored as a saint by both sides because of his even-handed charity.

During this early period there were also important developments in how each side viewed the ecclesial status of the other. In the wake of Chalcedon, some self-proclaimed champions of *akribeia*, or "strictness," on both sides tried to ransack the archives of the churches to expunge the names of long-dead "heretics" and insisted on the rechrismation and reordination of those "repenting" of their former adherence. This approach, however, was vigorously resisted and ultimately defeated by moderate churchmen on both sides, who explored the proper limits of *oikonomia*, or "prudent pastoral management." For example, Severus of Antioch, leading Non-Chalcedonian theologian of his age, railed against what he called "the heresy of the self-appointed re-anointers," i.e., those of his fellow Non-Chalcedonians who advocated rechrismation of Chalcedonians. On the Chalcedonian side too, we can see an analogous development in canon 95 of the Synod in Trullo, a synod which for the Chalcedonian Orthodox possesses ecumenical authority: Those coming over from among the Non-Chalcedonians are to be received simply by profession of faith, not by anoint ing with chrism or, *a fortiori*, by rebaptism.

While much of this discussion of *oikonomia* and its limits proceeded case by case, there was at least one attempt at a systematic presentation, a treatise on the subject by the seventh-century Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria Eulogius[7]. His work expresses what I take to be the accepted position of Chalcedonians and Non-Chalcedonians like: (a) By *oikonomia* a temporary concession can be made in matters of practice to avoid irremediably damaging the peace of the Church (e.g., Paul's

[5] Evagrius, *Eccl. Hist.* 5.4, as cited by Meyendorff, J. (1989). *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions,* Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 262.

[6] John of Ephesus, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.15, ed. and trans. E.W. Brooks (Paris and Louvain: 1935-36), cited by Meyendorff, J. (1989). J. Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions,* 264-5.

[7] The treatise, against a union patched up between two Non-Chalcedonian factions, is preserved only in resumé in Photius' *Bibliotheca*, cod. 227, (1969). ed. René Henry. Paris, 70.

circumcision of Timothy); (b) by *oikonomia* differences in theological terminology can be tolerated indefinitely; (c) by *oikonomia* technical barriers to communion — an occasional heretic's name in the diptychs and other vestiges of past error — can simply be ignored. But in no case may present purity of faith be compromised.

The proper basis for unity is *orthodoxia*, even if this is expressed in different Christological formulas. This was the conviction of leading figures on both sides in antiquity. This also was the conviction of the theologians who participated in the informal consultations between the churches in the 1960s and 1970s. This also forms the basis for the agreed statements issued subsequently by the official Joint Commission for Dialogue. But as is pointed out so often, *orthodoxia* involves not only right belief but also right worship, and in antiquity and continuing in the Middle Ages many differences in worship that would not in themselves have been church-dividing came to be invested with new meaning, becoming symbols of division.

Particularly instructive are the ways in which certain distinctive Armenian liturgical practices, such as the use of azymes (unleavened bread) and a chalice unmixed with water in the eucharist, come to be linked to Christological doctrine. The origins of these practices are unknown, but they certainly antedate any division of the churches. By the late sixth century, however, they were becoming symbols of Armenian identity *vis-à-vis* the Greeks, who used leavened bread and wine mixed with warm water in the eucharist. Refusing an invitation from Emperor Maurice to come to Constantinople to discuss reunion, Catholicos Movses II in 591 declared: "I will not cross the River Azat nor will I eat the baked bread of the Greeks nor drink their hot water"[8]. By the late seventh century these distinctive liturgical practices, already symbols of national identity, had become even more potent symbols of Christological doctrine. Reflecting the aphthartodocetism of Julian of Halicarnassus, which was then in the ascendancy in the Armenian Church, Catholicos Sahak III (d. 703) argued that the use of unleavened bread and the unmingled chalice signifies the incorruptibility of Christ's body and blood[9]. The Byzantine Church quickly enough responded in kind. The Synod in Trullo (691-92 A.D.) almost certainly had Sahak's treatise in mind when it decreed that any bishop or presbyter who does not mix water with the wine in the eucharist is to be deposed, on the grounds that he thus "proclaims the mystery incompletely and tampers with tradition" (canon 32)[10]. Very possibly Trullo also had Armenian liturgical practice in mind when it decreed "Let no man eat the unleavened bread of the Jews..."

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[8] *Narratio de Rebus Armeniae* (1952), ed. G. Garitte, Louvain: Peeters, cited by Findikyan, M. (1996). Liturgical Usages and Controversy in History: How Much Diversity Can Unity Tolerate? *St. Nersess Theological Review,* 1.2, 197, to whose discussion of liturgical diversity the present summary is deeply indebted. On this episode and others from this crucial period in Armenian ecclesiastical relations with Constantinople, see Garsoian, N. (1999). *L'Eglise Armenienne et le grand schisme d'Orient,* Louvain: Peeters, especially 267-77.

[9] *Girk' Tlt'oc'* [Book of Letters] (1901). ed. J. Ismireantz, Tiflis, 475-76; French trans. with extensive commentary by van Esbroeck, M. (1995). Le discours du Catholicos Sahak III en 691 et quelques documents armeniens annexes au Quinisexte, in *The Synod in Trullo Revisited*, ed. George Nedungatt and Michael Featherstone, Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 323-454 at 431; English trans. Findikyan, "Liturgical Usages", 198-99.

[10] The canon in question takes pains to correct Sahak's manifestly incorrect interpretation of a passage from St. John Chrysostom's homilies on Matthew. Chrysostom was condemning the ancient sect of the Hydroparastatae, who substituted water for wine in the eucharist, not those who mix water with the wine. On this and other aspects of Sahak's treatise and its importance in the history of Byzantine — Armenian relations, see van Esbroeck, "Le discours" *passim*.

(canon 11). In any case, in subsequent polemical literature the issue of the bread and wine of the eucharist figures prominently, often to the exclusion of deeper theological reflection. Thus, despite their common rejection of Chalcedon and the generally Severan orientation of their shared Christology, the Armenian and Syrian churches in the Middle Ages sometimes attacked each other precisely because of such liturgical differences. So also, as schism yawned between the Byzantine and Latin churches in the eleventh century, Byzantine polemicists transferred their anti-azyme arguments from the Armenians to the Latins, notwithstanding the latter's manifestly Chalcedonian Christology. Use of leavened bread and mingled wine, or conversely unleavened bread and pure wine, immediately marked a community as either heretic or orthodox, no matter what Christological doctrine the community in question actually held.

Other liturgical practices became equally divisive. Consider, for example, the Trisagion: "Holy [is] God! Holy [and] mighty! Holy [and] immortal! Have mercy on us!" The origins of this troparion are disputed, Non-Chalcedonians claiming an Antiochian provenance and Chalcedonians attributing it to a heavenly vision when earthquakes were threatening Constantinople in 438-439 A.D. Even more disputed is its interpretation. To whom is the troparion addressed? In its original form, it *may* have been addressed to Christ. This, in any case, is how the Non-Chalcedonian Patriarch Peter the Fuller of Antioch understood the troparion when he interpolated the theopaschite clause "who was crucified for us" into it sometime between 468 and 470 A.D., at a time when many Chalcedonians regarded any theopaschite formula with deep suspicion. Quickly enough the Trisagion became yet another bone of contention. Among Non-Chalcedonians, Catholicos Sahak III went so far as to trace the origins of the Trisagion, interpolation and all, to St. Ignatius of Antioch at the end of the first century[11]. In response to his claims, the Synod in Trullo (691-92) condemned the interpolation "as being foreign to true piety"; and by the time of the earliest Byzantine commentary on the Divine Liturgy, that of Patriarch Germanos I in the early eighth century, the troparion was being interpreted as addressed to the three persons of the Trinity, "Holy God" referring to the Father, "Holy Mighty" to the Son, and "Holy Immortal" to the Holy Spirit[12].

A final example illustrates particularly vividly the ease with which a minor liturgical difference can be transformed into a symbol of division. In the Coptic, Syrian and Armenian liturgical traditions, a week of strict fasting — variously called the Fast of Heraclius, the Fast of Ninevah, or the Forefast (*Arachavorats*) — precedes the "Forty-Day" Great Fast of Lent. The same week in the Byzantine tradition calls only for abstinence from meat, not from dairy products. The historical development of the fasting practices of these various liturgical traditions is complex, but the differences between them were not the result of any dogmatic differences[13]. Yet in the context of church division, these differences came to be

[11] On Sahak's argument and Trullo's response, see van Esbroeck, "Le discours..." *passim.*

[12] R.F.T[aft], "Trisagion," in the *Dictionary of Byzantium* (1991), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2121; Brock, S. (1985). The Thrice-Holy Hymn in the Liturgy, *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review,* 7.2, 24-34; Janeras, V.-S. (1967). Les byzantines et le trisagion christologique, in *Miscellanea liturgica in onore di sua eminenza il Cardinale Giacomo Lercaro* 2, Rome, 469-99.

[13] See: Talley, Th. J. (1986). *The Origins of the Liturgical Year,* New York: Pueblo, 168-222.

given a polemical explanation. Here is the rubric given in the Byzantine *Triodion* for Cheesefare Sunday, which introduces the week in question: "During this week the accursed Armenians fast from eggs and cheese, but we, to refute their damnable heresy, do eat both eggs and cheese for the entire week." What one side does is enough to prompt the other to do the opposite! We see here the tragic way in which our sense of ecclesial identity has, in the context of division, been formed by opposition rather than by reference to a common faith. The characteristics by which we identify ourselves and our churches as "orthodox" all too often have been simply those extrinsic elements which make us different from others.

Must differences of worship, once invested — however artificially — with dogmatic significance, continue to divide? In the course of the Middle Ages, a few conciliatory voices could be heard. Worthy of special mention is St. Nersess the Gracious, who in the twelfth century entered into some very promising discussions with the Byzantine *didaskalos* Theorianos, head of the patriarchal school and ambassador of Emperor Manuel Comnenos. St. Nersess agreed, first of all, that there was indeed unity of faith, Chalcedon notwithstanding. He writes: "I find nothing in the horos [of Chalcedon] against the Orthodox faith, and I am astonished that those before us opposed it so strenuously"[14]. He also is able to place an irenic interpretation on the liturgical diversity that distinguished the churches. For example, he observes concerning the Trisagion: "...whether one says [it] to the Holy Trinity, as you do, or to the Son alone, as we do, both are pleasing to God when they are said without contention"[15]. Unfortunately, initiatives towards reunion in St. Nersess' day were not carried through. The "guardians of Orthodoxy" in Constantinople were less than enthusiastic about the emperor's ecumenical initiatives whether towards the Armenians or towards the Latins[16]. The *vartabeds* of eastern Armenia were slow to respond. By the time they did, the mood and — more decisively — the geopolitical situation had changed. With the battle of Myriocephalon (1176) the last remnants of Byzantine hegemony in eastern Anatolia were swept away, eliminating whatever strategic advantages either side might have gained by reunion. The right moment for reunion had come — and gone.

Are modern efforts to restore unity any more likely to succeed than those of the twelfth century? In the twentieth century the ecumenical movement provided a more auspicious political climate than that of the twelfth century, and modern scholarship has provided a clearer, more dispassionate understanding of many of the issues which have divided the churches in the past. Reflecting some of the progress that has been made in discussion of liturgical differences, the Joint Commission's subcommittees on liturgical and pastoral issues, meeting in Damascus in February 1998, agreed — among other things — "that the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches basically maintain the old liturgical traditions in their local liturgical types, which co-existed in the undivided Church." They also declared that liturgical issues have to be theologically clarified to indicate that they are in agreement with our common

[14] *Theoriani Disputationes cum Armeniorum Catholico,* I, PG 133:204B, as cited by Aristides Papadakis, *The Christian East and the Rise of the Papacy* (1994). Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 116.

[15] *Encyclical Letters of St. Nersess Shnorali* (1871). Jerusalem, 138, cited by Findikyan, "Liturgical Usages...", 207.

[16] "Guardians of Orthodoxy": The expression is Paul Magdalino's, in *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143-1180* (1993). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 386-88 *et passim.*

Christological Statements. For example, the expression "who was crucified for us" in the Trisagion hymn can be properly understood only in a Christological interpretation, while the hymn without this phrase can be understood both in Trinitarian and Christological senses. In the same spirit, the use of unleavened bread and unmixed wine by the Armenian Orthodox Church in the eucharist can be explained without any implications for the Christological consensus[17].

We may indeed have reached a point where liturgical differences will no longer be taken automatically as signs of christological disagreement. Nevertheless, one can sense that the impulse towards reunion of the churches has slowed. Articles published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, soon after the Joint Commission issued its agreed statements on Christology, could speak optimistically of "recent strides toward reunion" and "last steps to unity"[18]. Since then, however, opposition to reunion on the basis of the agreed statements of the Joint Commission has mounted in Greece, Jerusalem, and in some Russian diaspora circles, and on the Non-Chalcedonian side, in some Ethiopian diaspora circles. Reflecting this changing tide of opinion, an unsigned article in a "traditionalist" Orthodox periodical bears the title: "Patriarch Bartholomew Attempts to Strong-Arm the Church into Union with the Monophysites"[19].

This opposition to the work of the Joint Commission does not appear to be based on Christological concerns. For example, a widely circulated 1995 "Memorandum of the Sacred Community of the Holy Mountain [Mount Athos] Concerning the Dialogue between the Orthodox Churches and the Non-Chalcedonian Churches" refers to the actual substance of Christology only in passing, with very little elaboration[20]. Objections coming from both sides have focused rather on liturgico-canonical issues, and more specifically on the anathemas which the churches hurled against each other during their many centuries of division. According to the 1990 agreed statement of the Joint Commission, "Both families agree that all the anathemas and condemnations of the past which now divide us should be lifted by the Churches in order that the last obstacle to the full unity and communion of our two families can be removed by the grace and power of God. Both families agree that the lifting of anathemas and condemnations will be consummated on the basis that the Councils and

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[17] Communique of the meeting of the Subcommittees on Liturgical and Pastoral Issues, February 2-5, 1998, Damascus, Syria, points 3 and 4, *Episkepsis* (1998), 555, 15. The English text — practically incomprehensible in the original press release — has been lightly modified for greater grammatical and lexical clarity.

[18] See, for example, John Meyendorff, "Chalcedonians and Non-Chalcedonians: The Last Steps to Unity," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* (1989), 33.4, 319-329; Thomas FitzGerald, "Toward the Reestablishment of Full Communion: The Orthodox-Orthodox Oriental Dialogue," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* (1991), 36.2, 169-181; Theodore Pulcini, "Recent Strides Toward Reunion of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches: Healing the Chalcedonian Breach," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (1993), 30.1, 34-50.

[19] In *Orthodox Life* (1995), 45.3, 39-41, where it is followed by a lengthy critique of the Joint Commission and of the churches participating in it.

[20] Ser. no. ph2/116/455, May 14/27, 1995, available online in slightly modified form at http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/mono_athos.aspx (last accessed August 2, 2022). See the trenchant critique of the memorandum by Alexander Golitzin, "Anathema! Some Historical Perspectives on the Athonite Statement of May, 1995," *St. Nersess Theological Review* (1998), 3,1-2, 103-117, especially 106-109; and my own "Anathema: An Obstacle to Reunion?" in *St. Nersess Theological Review* (1998), 3,1-2, 67-75, now also included in Chaillot, ed., *The Dialogue*..., 197-203.

fathers previously anathematized or condemned are not heretical" (para.10). But so far this has not been done. Instead, in "traditionalist" quarters on both sides, the same kinds of questions have arisen: How can we lift these anathemas without betraying our holy fathers who imposed them in the first place? How can we enter into communion with those who honor as saints precisely those whom our holy fathers in the past anathematized as heretics?

One can read statements from both Oriental and Eastern Orthodox arguing precisely this. For example, according to a popular-level presentation of the position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church:

> "to lift the anathemas imposed in the past upon those Chalcedonian Fathers and to accept them as saints would dishonor those Oriental Orthodox Church Fathers who condemned the Chalcedonians.... Since these anathemas have been observed for about 1500 years by our Holy Fathers as inscribed in our liturgical texts and hymnody, they shall not be lifted"[21].

Much the same attitude can be seen in the memorandum from the monks of Mount Athos, which vigorously objects to "purging the liturgical books of texts which refer to the Non-Chalcedonians as heretical." As the memorandum continues:

> "The sacred services of many holy confessors of the Faith, of many righteous Fathers, and especially the Holy Fathers of the Fourth Council in Chalcedon will be mutilated. The Synodikon of Orthodoxy will practically be silenced... We ask: Are all the texts referred to above simply ornamental elements in Orthodox hymnology so that they can be painlessly and harmlessly removed, or are they basic elements of Orthodoxy, whose removal will cause the eradication of what we understand as Orthodoxy".

Practically inseparable from the question of anathemas is the question of the meaning and authority of ecumenical councils. The Oriental Orthodox regard three councils as ecumenical, the Eastern Orthodox, seven. It was in councils four through seven that Oriental fathers like Dioscorus of Alexandria and Severus of Antioch were condemned; and it was in these councils that Leo of Rome, condemned as crypto-Nestorian by the Orientals, was hailed as a pillar of right belief. According to the Joint Commission for Dialogue, a sufficient basis for reconciliation is the fact that both families of churches confess the *faith* of all seven of the councils recognized as ecumenical by the Chalcedonians, even though they do not accord the same ecumenical authority to all these councils. But is this sufficient? According to some Eastern Orthodox, the Orientals must indicate their full and unqualified acceptance of seven ecumenical councils; they must accept not only the substance of the faith of these councils but also their disciplinary norms and terminology — and presumably also their anathemas. For example, Patriarch Diodorus of Jerusalem in 1997 wrote a letter to Patriarch Ignatius of Antioch protesting, among other things, the latter's eagerness to move forward to reunion on the basis of the work of the Joint Commission. "According

[21] *The Ethiopian Tewahido Church* (New York?: n.d.) 108. Complicating the ecclesio-political life of the Ethiopian Tewahido Church has been the schism in its diaspora between supporters of former Patriarch Merkorios (r. 1988-1991) and Patriarch Paulos (r. 1991-2012) and his successor in Addis-Ababa Patriarch Mathias (r. 2013-present). After his forced abdication in 1991, Merkorios went into exile in Kenya and thereafter in the United States, where a Synod-in-Exile gathered about him. In 2018 representatives of the patriarchate in Addis Ababa and of the break-away synod, assisted by Ethiopia's Prime Minister, met in Washington D.C. where they finally negotiated an end to the 26-year-old schism.

to Holy Tradition," Patriarch Diodorus avers, "the Non-Chalcedonians ought to accept absolutely and completely all the terms and canons of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, in its entirety, as well as the following Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Ecumenical Councils, also in their entirety"[22].

Here ancient writers like Patriarch Eulogius of Alexandria were far more generous and forgiving. They could be so because they recognized that councils — even ecumenical councils — do not invent or produce the faith of the Church. Councils bear witness to the faith of the Church, and the adequacy of their terminology — and of their anathemas and canons — must always be evaluated in the light of this faith. If in fact both families of churches confess the same faith of all seven of the councils recognized as ecumenical by the Chalcedonians, and if they recognize that councils four through seven did not add anything to this faith but only responded to perceived distortions and errors, would this not be a sufficient basis for reconciliation?

A final but especially critical issue is the problem of reception. How, practically speaking, will the results of dialogue be effectively implemented in church life? In 1993 the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the churches issued proposals for the lifting of anathemas, whereby full communion would be restored. The lifting of anathemas, says the Joint Commission, should be done "unanimously and simultaneously by the Heads of all Churches of both sides." This has not been easy to accomplish. On the Chalcedonian side, there is disagreement even over how the necessary unanimity is to be attained and proclaimed. Must everything depend upon the convocation of a Holy and Great Council, or can some other mechanism be found? This remains to be seen. Although the subject had been touched upon in preliminary discussions, it was not addressed at the Holy and Great Council of Crete (June 2016), which gathered hierarchs of ten of the fourteen universally recognized autocephalous Orthodox churches. Notably absent were hierarchs of the Patriarchate of Antioch, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Given the impasse in inter-Orthodox relations that arose in 2018 concerning the ecclesial status of Ukraine, it is unlikely a mutual lifting of anathemas on the part of the Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox churches will take place any time in the foreseeable future.

In any case, once anathemas are lifted, how will the churches enter into a life of communion that is not just a formality, into a relationship that will allow an ever deeper sharing of insights and gifts? Here the Joint Commission offers no guidance. It simply says that "matters relating to ecclesiastical jurisdiction should be left to be arranged by the respective authorities of the local churches...." This too may be a difficult task. Within the Eastern Orthodox family of churches, it has been extremely difficult to maintain adequate structures for communion. While internally Eastern Orthodox Christians have not disagreed about Chalcedonian dogma, they have disagreed about the application of some of the Chalcedonian canons, especially those relating to the role of the Patriarch of Constantinople within this family of churches. The Oriental Orthodox Churches thus far have had very different mechanisms for inter-church relations. These structural imparities

[22] Letter no. 361, May 17, 1997.

undoubtedly will make coordinated action and formulation of common policies even more difficult than at present.

The absence of common structures for communion will be felt especially acutely in the so-called "diaspora." In the future, in a reunited Church, how will pressing practical problems of disunity be addressed? Such questions seem not to have been considered at the highest inter-church level, in the work of the Joint Commission, but sooner or later they will have to be faced on regional and local levels, even if there is no formal lifting of anathemas. Indeed, the real unity of the churches at this point may depend less on the agreement of professional theologians and international commissions than on the presence of a common mind and ethos in the faithful of our congregations on local and regional levels. As both church families have always insisted, *homologia* — confession of faith in the form of creeds and agreed statements — is inseparable from *martyria* — the lived-out witness to the faith in daily life. Our hope and our prayer must be that, when unity between thep churches is finally restored, our faithful will experience this as a living reality and not simply as a matter for specialists.

The question at this point is whether we really desire unity more than our present disunity. Will we continue to be divided simply by the power of division itself? At the present time we seem to prefer the disunity of the *status quo.* Our cherished anathemas and preferred formulas give us a sense of security. Without them, our very identity seems threatened. Of course, much of Christian doctrine arose precisely because of the need to define the truth in opposition to heresy. But the words in which the truth is expressed are not the same as the truth itself. Failure to recognize this can lead to the kind of situation described by St. Gregory of Nazianzen. He notes how, when we try to lift a handful of water to our lips, some can be found slipping through our fingers:

> "In the same way, there is a separation not only between us and those who hold aloof in their impiety, but also between us and those who are most pious — a separation in regard both to such doctrines as are of small consequence and to expressions intended to bear the same meaning"[23].

Certainly this is the situation in which the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox still find themselves today. If these church families can overcome their division of centuries, if they can recognize in each other the same one faith, if they can enter into a life of communion in the deepest sense of that word, their reunion will be a sign of promise for all Christians.

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[23] *Or.* 21.35.