

The Missionary Origins of Modern Ecumenism
Milestones Leading up to 1920



Christ appearing to Saint Peter of Alexandria in a vision as a weeping child wearing a tunic that was torn in two by the heretic Arius. (Icon from the Monastery of Anapavsa, Meteora, 16th century).

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“There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5).

“...Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Rev. 2:4-5).

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Front Cover Photograph: The First World Mission Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1910.

Back Cover Photograph: Metropolitan Germanos, the main author of the 1920 Encyclical of the Church of Constantinople “To the Churches of Christ Everywhere” and Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple at a Faith and Order meeting in Edinburgh, 1937.

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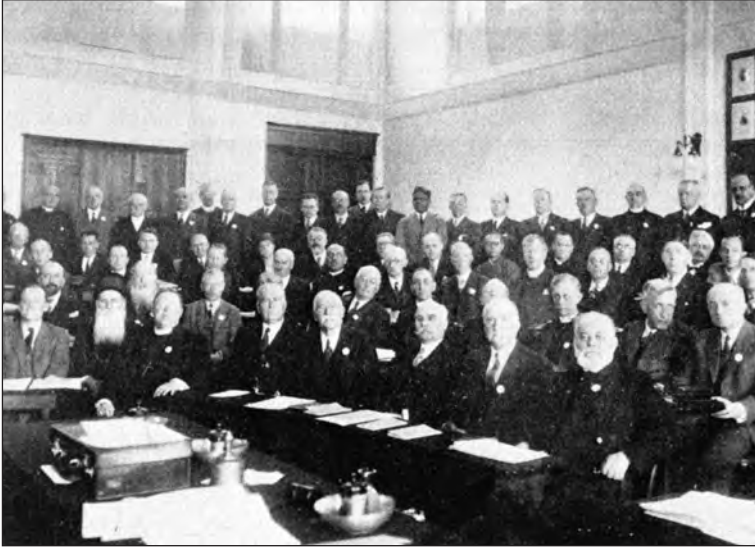
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Preface

The impact of the contemporary ecumenical movement on the life of the Church in the 20th century has been immense. Orthodox involvement has steadily increased over the years and is now generally accepted as a given by many. Still, many questions remain unanswered or unasked. How did the modern ecumenical movement begin? What were the causes, motivations, and reasons for its development? Why and how did the Orthodox first become involved? Did the movement for Christian unity begin with the 1920 Encyclical "Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere" and arise out of a search for "unity in truth" and doctrinal agreement, as it often maintained?

In this lecture, I have attempted to give answers to these questions, basing my analysis on authoritative sources of ecumenical history, so that we might be brought face-to-face with the historical record. If each of us individually, and the Church as a whole, is to see the question of ecumenism holistically and catholicly, and not narrowly or colored by ulterior motivations, it is essential that we become familiar with the Evangelical Protestant roots of ecumenism and how these played a role in our own involvement. Doing so will contribute to the inauguration of a long-needed inter-Orthodox dialogue, a dialogue with the potential to lead to that longed-for unity in our approach to the heterodox and the question of ecumenism.

It is my hope and prayer that this small offering will contribute



Historic meetings such as this in Utrecht (1938) in the formative years of the movement all trace their origins back to the First World Mission Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 (see page 31 for diagram).

Visible in the first row (far right) is Metropolitan Germanos of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and (far left) Bishop Irenaios of the Church of Serbia.

substantially toward this blessed desire: the unity of the Orthodox, for which Christ prayed (Jn. 17:21-23), for the mission of imparting salvation to the world.

Fr. Peter Alban Heers

St. Martin, Pope of Rome, confessor

April 13, 2007

INTRODUCTION

The Historical Record and the Ecclesiological Framework of Ecumenism

Among many Orthodox Christians today it is generally accepted that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement began with the Patriarchal Encyclical of 1920 “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere.” Furthermore, it is generally believed that the movement for Christian unity arose out of a search for “unity in truth” and doctrinal agreement. It will, thus, come as a surprise to many to discover that the historical record disproves both of these assertions beyond a shadow of a doubt.

History shows that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement has its roots in the Protestant missionary movement of the 19th century and its inspiration in the desire of Evangelical Protestants to achieve a “unity in fellowship” amongst themselves for greater success in the mission field. Willem Saayman, a Protestant scholar of missiology, begins his study on mission and unity with the following words: “The ecumenical movement does not derive simply from a passion for unity; it sprang *from a passion for unity that is completely fused in mission.*”¹ The union of mission and

1. Saayman, Willem A., 1984. *Unity and Mission*, Pretoria: University of South Africa (emphasis mine). That the contemporary ecumenical movement has its immediate origins in the 19th century Protestant missionary movement is generally accepted among historians. “The contemporary search for the unity of the church was initiated within the framework of the mission endeavour. The missionaries were among the

ecumenism, however, was not something arrived at quickly or painlessly for the Protestant world. It grew slowly in the soil of global confessional alliances and comity² agreements among the Protestants in the second half of the 19th century, and continued in the international student movements and missionary conferences, becoming a new paradigm of ecclesiastical unity – *for the conversion of the world*. It became, from 1910 onwards, the basis upon which the Ecumenical Movement was built.³

It is, thus, apparent that, long before the 1920 encyclical was sent out and the Orthodox entered into the discussion, the

first to look for ways and styles of witness in unity, recognizing that the scandal of Christian divisions and denominational rivalries hindered greatly the impact of their message.” *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today*, Preparatory Paper No 1 for the WCME conference in Athens, May 2005. See also chapters 7 and 8 in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1968*, Edited by Routh Rouse and Stephen C. Neil, WCC, Geneva, fourth edition, 1993. Fr. George Tsetsis appears to hold a different opinion in his article *The Orthodox in the Ecumenical Movement*, where he states: “Ecumenism both as a theological challenge and as an expression of Orthodox willingness for Christian unity was experienced in our Church during the 1st, 5th, 11th and 16th centuries. *It re-emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century when the Ecumenical Patriarchate took its afore-mentioned initiative* [the 1920 encyclical – ed.], in order to foster cooperation and promote unity” (emphasis mine).

2. In this context, comity refers to the avoidance of proselytizing members of another religious denomination.

3. See: *Goheen, Michael W., As the Father has sent me, I am sending you: J.E. Lesslie Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000), chapter 2: *From Christendom to a Missionary Ecclesiology*, <http://www.library.uu.nl/digiarchief/dip/diss/1947080/inhoud.htm>.

presuppositions and parameters of encounter were set and they did not, even in the slightest, reflect or even acknowledge Orthodox ecclesiological principles.⁴ The ecclesiological framework in which the ecumenical movement was forged, formed, developed and exists to this day is, with slight adjustments, the product of 19th century Evangelicalism.

In this paper we will examine this “evangelical ecclesiology,” the “pre-history” of ecumenism, its origins in Protestant mission, and the historical and theological context into which the Orthodox entered the ecumenical movement. In particular, we will stop at five major milestones through which ecumenism passed on its way to Orthodox involvement.



William Carey, one of the chief pioneers of Evangelical missions.

4. But, then again, as we will show further on, neither did those Orthodox who first took part in the movement call for or even advance such principles as a pre-requisite for participation.

END OF PREVIEW

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