

Educating ecumenically

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I'd like to start with the official documents which regulate the practice and give guidelines for the ecumenical dialogue and the ecumenical education for the Orthodox Church.

One of them, which is called "Basic Principles of Attitude to the Non-Orthodox"² is well known, the second "WCC International Inter-Orthodox Consultation on The Ecumenical Movement in Theological Education and in the Life of Orthodox Churches"³ is less known and unfortunately isn't translated into Russian.

The first document, rather conservative, regards the non-orthodox Christians as the communities which are not the Church, but have some grace. It states the necessity of ecumenical dialogue, but it sees the dialogue only in the form of testimony to the non-orthodox Christians. It also marks the importance of collaboration in the field of public morality, and social service, and opposes proselytism in Russia. Nothing is said about the exploration of the spirituality of others or the possible benefits from studying the other traditions, nothing about the joined testimony of faith in Christ Jesus or the prayer together.

The second document from Romania is more interesting because of its awareness of the possible sectarianism in the Orthodoxy, so it offers some observations and suggestions on education in ecumenism, such as:

1. the broad discussion not only in the church structures but also in the academic circles and in the seminaries about the nature of participation in the ecumenical movement, and the involvement of the opposing parties in this dialogue (if possible),
2. the self-critical approach to the Orthodox own ecclesial life in the spirit of humility,
3. the recognition of the impact of the dialogue with other Christians (in their thought, in understanding our own roots),
4. the new approach to the depicting of other Christians, free from apologetics and polemics,
5. academic exchange for the students and researchers, etc.

I find this document very encouraging, but the problem is that these points are proclaimed during the international forums for the prepared audience.

At the same time the ecumenical dialogue is viewed as unnecessary and false by the majority of Russian Orthodox Christians. As they maintain, the Orthodox Church already has all the truth and the ecumenical involvement demands more tolerance than they can afford.

For example, there was a priest Daniil Sysoev, he was killed not so long ago for his anti-Islamic speeches. He is viewed by some as the martyr and one can find his books in every Moscow church book shop. In one of his sermons he says: "We don't want somebody to perish in Hell, so we pray for the non-orthodox – in order for them to become Orthodox". Then he equates all non-orthodox with Satanism, and mixes together with Islam and sects. He states: "We can be proud of our Orthodoxy because our truth is grounded in the Trinity, so we can boastfully demonstrate superiority of our faith and preach that all the others will perish if they stay as they are"⁴. The movement founded by him engages young passionate Christians and finds semi-official support in the Church circles. One of his spiritual descendants is a priest Georgy Maksimov who is responsible for the mission among non-orthodox Christians in Moscow and

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² <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/attitude-to-the-non-orthodox/> and <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/418840> in Russian

³ [WCC International Inter-Orthodox Consultation on The Ecumenical Movement in Theological Education and in the Life of Orthodox Churches Sibiu, Romania 9-12 November 2010](#)

⁴ <https://youtu.be/tphAoO3TOEU>

abroad. He finds ecumenical dialogue funny and despises those who are involved in it⁵, and his method of mission is to convert Catholics and Protestants to Orthodoxy. He teaches at the Moscow seminary and academy, publishes books under the Church permission and is a member of different Church institutions. He finds support from the general audience because most of the Orthodox Russians outside Moscow or St. Petersburg don't know the difference between protestants and sects, and are fearful that "ecumenists want to destroy the Church".

At the other side of the spectrum we have spontaneous super-ecumenism which represents itself in the veneration of Vassula Ryden, a very ambiguous figure, with her message of the unification of all the humanity under the Lordship of the Trinity, or those who do not know their own Orthodox tradition, even despise it, but want to practice something new and exotic borrowed from the others.

The most common form of normal ecumenism for Russia now is the Taize trips for youth, and participation in the Catholic ecumenical movements such as Chemin Neuf with its Cana division for the families, or simple friendships and marriages between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians.

So this is the landscape of Russian attitudes towards ecumenism and ecumenical contacts, and we have to consider it in our activities, otherwise we ourselves can be proclaimed heretics. Once we had to close the educational program for the missionaries in Moscow (I did it with the hierom. Dimitry Pershin, N.Ponomareva and A.Sharafutdinov) because we were accused of imposing the Protestant or even Charismatic approach toward the Bible group readings from Alfa-course – it was a lie, but it worked. Now we became more experienced and we check whom we invite and what can we say before the general audience. This rule worked for the series of non-official Orthodox-Protestant consultations on theological issues held by Hosanna community (A. and K.Chernyak) together with Sergey Koryakin and some Evangelicals. I don't like it but I have to ask those who want to study at our college who is their favorite missionary. And if it is f. Daniil Sysoev or one of his friends it is a strong case to recommend the applicant some other institution.

I'm not sure that all the Christians and even Christian teachers are called to some special efforts on the path of ecumenism. It must be a special call, I suppose. But we can work on overcoming prejudices and building trust and respect between Orthodox and non-Orthodox. For this I would propose several points:

- ***to start as early as possible through the non-formal meetings.*** In Russia and Ukraine all Scripture Union teams consist of both Orthodox and Protestants. They read the Bible together with adolescents and it is a great testimony of the Church unity for the teenagers. Some of these teens and group leaders lately become our students, and there is no need to educate them about the ecumenism. On the contrary, they themselves can educate their colleagues;

- ***to read the Bible more than any other books during the catechism and throughout the educational process.*** In the Bible we see the amazing variety of devotional styles or types of spirituality: devotion of the patriarchs is different from the devotion of the prophets or scribes – and still they are all God's people! In the Bible we see the unity of the ancient Church, although the differences between Pauline Christianity and Jerusalem Center could be much more serious than between modern Christians. And it is in the Bible we find the most important – the Lord's plea and command to His disciples to love one another and to be one as He is one with the Father.

- ***to explore the different traditions of Bible interpretation.*** When we see that some interpretations from the Reformed tradition are as relevant for us as the Church fathers' interpretation, we start to appreciate these traditions without even making special ecumenical courses. It is the love of God that motivated M.Henry or W.Barklay or N.T.Wright to work on their commentaries (I specially mention the commentaries of the UK origin translated into Russian) – and we feel it, and as we feel it we feel fraternal love on our behalf. Even Hebrew

⁵ https://vk.com/id293099986?w=wall293099986_14904

interpretations of Scripture can play its role in this – we see that the treasure of Scripture belongs not only to the Orthodox Christians, and through this we gain humility. In Russia the special question are the Bible translations. Our official Synodal translation dates back to the middle of the 19th century. In the past 30 years Adventists managed to organize a well-qualified team of interpreters and made a new translation, the best one among others. We use it as a supplement in our college, and I'm pretty sure the students are grateful to the Adventists for this work.

- ***to promote the information about the well-known ecumenically-thinking figures and to notice ecumenical episodes in the lives of the present-day saints.*** A good example of the faithful servant of God is better than one thousand words. We don't push the ecumenical agenda – it can have the aversive affect. But when we talk about the biblical studies and pastoral care we can't avoid father Alexander Men who was an outstanding scholar, missionary - and he was ecumenically open, he borrowed from other traditions in order to improve the community life of his parish. We can see some peculiar examples of ecumenism in the most conservative Orthodox circles - for example in the prayer book of the last Russian all-known starets Ioann Krestyankin we find a prayer of St. Francis, and it also makes impression;

- ***to encourage the participation of students from other denominations in the educational process.*** When we don't know anybody from other tradition, we can be fearful and full of prejudices. When we see that other Christians also love Christ and try to live according to the God's commandments, when we find that we can learn from them, it changes a lot. We had Pentecostals, Catholics and Methodists, and it was a blessing, and this experience is not only ours, there are mixed groups in the Biblical-Theological Institute of St. Andrey and the Theological institute of St. Thomas the Aquinas.

- ***to teach courses on the religious thought of the 20th century*** – K. Barth, R. Bultmann, P. Tillich, J. Maritain, D. Bonhoeffer and the others. This was my personal experience: when I was reading them I found out that the ideas of some of these thinkers are more congenial to me than some 3rd class orthodox traditionalists. I see how this course now transforms the minds of our students, making them more interested in other Christians.

- ***to study the culture of other traditions and to see if they answer to our present-day problems.*** A well-known Russian monk Petr Mescherinov started with J.S.Bach. He researched his heritage, translated his works and introduced Bach to the Russian Orthodox audience as the great composer and also as a great man of faith. At the same time he taught at the youth courses and saw the growing number of young Christians who don't go to Church but still say that they believe. After years of studying orthodox ascetic authors he started to read the early protestants such as V.Weigel, J.Arndt and G.Teerstegen and found out that they observed the same processes and didn't see it as a catastrophe but as a step towards more mature Christianity. Translations and public activity of f. Petr now supports the interest to the Protestant tradition among educated Orthodox Christians in Russia.

- ***to send the students abroad or invite lecturers with the ecumenical experience.*** I don't think it needs commenting.

These points proved to be effective in building trust and love in the hearts of our Orthodox students towards the Protestants. At the same time there is one obstacle which can destroy all the efforts and which we Orthodox can not overcome ourselves – because it doesn't depend on us. I mean that we are more or less in agreement about the main teaching about salvation, Lord Jesus and the Trinity. But if the Protestants continue to change moral teaching, to reinterpret commandments soon these measures will not work because the Orthodox majority simply could not regard them as Christians.

So I see an open door of opportunities, but there are the obstacles also. I pray to my Lord Jesus Christ to help us to read the signs of the times, not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewal of our mind to discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. I hope educating ecumenically - which has the aim of fulfillment the Lords' prayer and commandment to love each other and to be united together - is among these things.