

Undoing Disunity: An Examination of the Dynamics of Orthodox Ecclesiology in Four Contemporary Situations¹

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Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 241)

In comparison with its Roman Catholic counterpart, Orthodox ecclesiology can seem vague and “untidy,” characterized by ill-defined mechanisms rather than clear canonical process. In this essay, the author takes Orthodox ecclesiology out of the realm of theological abstraction and considers its application in four contemporary cases of Orthodox ecclesiological dispute – in Jerusalem, Bulgaria, Estonia, and England. He identifies a number of dynamics: (1) Because of the inextricable intertwining of religion and nation in Orthodox culture, ecclesiastical disputes are often precipitated by secular cultural agitation, encouraging government intervention in ecclesiastical affairs. (2) Constantinople exercises its *primus inter pares* role as arbiter in such disputes out of a variety of motives and with varying degrees of success. (3) Because this arbitration is often not definitive, opposing factions remain in existence, with a situation of “soft schism” (rather than a definitive break of “hard schism,” i.e., excommunication) developing. (4) In time, one of the opposing parties in the “soft schism” usually gives way through attrition or re-aggregation.

It is this toleration of soft schism – far too messy for Catholic sensibilities – that distinguishes Orthodoxy’s process of resolving ecclesiastical disputes. In the cases considered in

¹ This article is a revision of a paper presented on 27 October 2006 at the seventy-first meeting of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation.

this article, it has already resulted in, or can be expected to result in, restoration of communion between opposing groups.



Introduction

The efficacy of any system of governance, whether secular or ecclesiastical, is gauged, *inter alia*, by how effectively it responds to stress. To assess an ecclesiological model on the basis of abstract theological criteria alone is to neglect the fact that ecclesiology is also an inherently practical enterprise, the purpose of which is to maintain the stability and integrity of the Church.

This essay seeks to examine how Orthodox ecclesiology has functioned in four recent and ongoing situations of tension and crisis: (I) the conflicts in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem; (II) the schism within the Bulgarian Patriarchate; (III) the divisions within the Orthodox Church of Estonia; and (IV) the factionalization of the Russian Orthodox Church in England. Although each of these cases has its irreducible particularities, we shall see (V) that certain common elements emerge, all of which are relevant to an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Orthodox ecclesiology.

I. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem

Since the nineteenth century, serious tensions have characterized relations between the overwhelmingly Arab laity of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and its almost exclusively Greek hierarchy.² From the very beginning of their Mandate in Palestine in 1917, the British recognized that these tensions merited a systematic investigation, a task assigned to the Bertram-Young Commission in 1925. Its final report, submitted to the High Commissioner in June 1925, set out the prob-

² To this day the hierarchy of the Patriarchate is almost exclusively Greek, with, to my knowledge, only one Arab hierarch, Archbishop Atallah Hanna, who, because of his stridently pro-Palestinian stance, has emerged as a controversial figure in relations between the Jerusalem Patriarchate and the Israeli government.

lem in straightforward language. It saw the issue as a fundamentally racial-ethnic one in which the “Greek race” saw itself as sovereign in the Patriarchate, safeguarding the holy places not for the whole of world Orthodoxy but for the “Greek nation.” With the rise of Arab nationalism, this high-handedness became less and less tolerable to the rank-and-file faithful. The Commission report noted, “Deep in the consciousness of many of the Orthodox community there is the conviction that at one time their Patriarchs were not persons drawn from the ranks of an alien corporation, but were their own countrymen.”³

These problems, first identified more than eighty years ago, perdure to this day in some forms. They are also more complicated than they were in the 1920s given the advent of the State of Israel in 1948. The most recent crisis in the Patriarchate brought together growing suspicions that the Greek leaders of the Patriarchate were in collusion with the Israelis, with whom they cut lucrative real estate deals, often through middlemen. With its extensive land holdings throughout the Holy Land, and especially in Jerusalem, the Patriarchate has been supported largely through funds secured through such deals. These arrangements, however, because they gave the Israelis control over significant parcels of traditionally Arab lands, were seen by many Arabs as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. This perception, coupled with the long-standing tensions already mentioned, accounts for the latest crisis besetting the Patriarchate.

During the eight months following the death of Patriarch Diodoros in December 2000, the synod of the Patriarchate set about electing a successor. Under the leadership of the *locum tenens*, Metropolitan Cornelius of Petra, a list of fifteen candidates was compiled and, in accord with the requirements of the

³ A. Bertram and J.W.A. Young, *The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem: Report of the Commission by the Government of Palestine* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 39–40. For a study of the historical background to the tensions between Greeks and Arabs in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, see T. Pulcini, “Tensions between the Hierarchy and Laity of the Jerusalem Patriarchate: Historical Perspectives on the Present Situation,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 36 (1992): 273–98.

Status Quo regulations dating from the Ottoman period, submitted for approval to the secular governments ruling in the patriarchal territory. Quick confirmation came from the Palestinian Authority and Jordan, but Israel withheld its approval of five of the candidates on the list. When its action was challenged in the High Court of Justice, however, the Israeli government finally approved all of the candidates. On 13 August 2001, the synod elected its representative in Athens, Metropolitan Irenaios of Ierapolis, as the 140th Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem.⁴ The Palestinian Authority and Jordan readily validated the election, while Israel again balked, refusing to recognize Irenaios until 31 March 2004.⁵

The Israeli reluctance to recognize Irenaios stemmed, many speculated, from suspicions that he would not collaborate with government policies and programs.⁶ As it turns out, Irenaios was accused by his Arab constituents of blatantly collaborating with the government when, in March 2005, a story broke in the Israeli daily *Maariv* that the Patriarchate had sold a large parcel of property, right off Umar ibn al-Khattab Square near Jaffa Gate, to foreign Jewish investors through bank transactions conducted in Europe. The parcel included two well-known hotels, the Imperial and the Petra, as well as several shops, all operated by Palestinian families.⁷ Emotions

⁴ "Metropolitan Irineos Elected Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem." *Jerusalem Post* 13 Aug 2001. 26 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.Pravoslavie.ru/english/news010813.htm>>.

⁵ "The Patriarchate of Jerusalem," CNEWA, 26 September 2006: <<http://www.cnewa.org/ecc-bodypg.aspx?eccpageID=16>>. The National Council of Churches in the U.S. protested the Israeli government's intransigence in refusing to recognize Irenaios and issued its own resolution recognizing him in November 2003 (www.nccusa.org/news/03patriarchate.html).

⁶ Israeli suspicions regarding Irenaios are forcefully expressed in J. D'Hippolito, "The Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and Terror," *Front Page Magazine* (3 March 2005): <<http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Printable.asp?ID=17234>>.

⁷ More accurately, the "sale" of these properties was in the form of a ninety-eight-year lease, arranged by one Nicholas Papadimas (now a fugitive from justice) through companies registered in the Virgin Islands. According to the terms of the arrangement, the Imperial Hotel was leased for \$1.25 million, and the adjacent Petra Hotel, for \$500,000. Such deals were reminiscent of the extremely controversial lease in 1990 of the St. John Hostel, also located in the Old City, to a right-wing group of Jewish settlers, Ateret Koha-