

A Retreat from Ecumenism in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe?

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I'm not much of a prophet. For example, in 1990 I was predicting a bear market and possible recession in the near future. (I was off by at least a decade.) But around the same time I did unwittingly make a prophetic statement. In a TV panel discussion marking the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I was appearing with Joan Campbell, then General Secretary of the National Council of Church, in midst of a crisis relating to Orthodox suspension of membership in that ecumenical body. We were asked to supply a "teaser," a pungent one-liner at the very beginning of the program intended to dissuade viewers from switching channels. Mine was: "The Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and with it, communism. With it also fell ecumenism as we have known it." My words have proven true. The 1990s saw a significant Orthodox retreat from ecumenical involvement - or at least a rethinking of ecumenical involvement, second thoughts about ecumenical involvement. And this retreat shows no signs of abating in the 2000s.

(a) For example, the Orthodox churches have been increasingly critical of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the world's most visible and comprehensive ecumenical forum, whose name has been virtually synonymous with the "ecumenical movement" since its formation in 1948; and they have been reassessing their participation in that body. Georgia withdrew from the WCC in 1997; Bulgaria announced its withdrawal in 1998. In May 1998 a high-level inter-Orthodox meeting in Thessaloniki, summoned in anticipation of WCC's 8th Assembly (Harare, December 1998), called for

Orthodox delegates to abstain from voting and to boycott ecumenical worship events. At the Harare assembly itself, representatives from Georgia and Bulgaria in fact were present under the category of "advisors," and the Thessaloniki resolutions were unequally observed. Nevertheless the Orthodox were significantly less visible in Harare than in previous WCC assemblies. The delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, consisted of five persons instead of the usual twenty-five, none of them bishops. Orthodox protest at Harare might have gone further - even to the point of walkout - had the assembly not decided to form a Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, which is only slowly beginning to function.

(b) Orthodox relations with the Roman Catholic Church have fared no better. Some of you may recall Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's speech at Georgetown University during his 1997 visit to the United States, in which he spoke of the churches as being "ontologically different" - the famous "friends, brothers, heretics" speech. And keep in mind that His All Holiness is an old ecumenical hand! Many other high-ranking Orthodox hierarchs, most notably Patriarch Alexei II of Moscow, also have been even more sharply critical, about issues to which we shall be returning. The international Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church has not met in plenary session since 1993; while a meeting is scheduled for this coming June, many seasoned observers anticipate yet another last-minute

cancellation. On a more positive note, we may note recent papal visits to Romania, Georgia, and other eastern points. The Romanian visit at least seems to have been a great success. On the other hand, in Georgia church officials tried hard to down-play the religious significance of the papal visit to that country; at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai joint prayer was studiously avoided; and in Jerusalem Patriarch Diodorus made a point of noting that he had not prayed with the pope. And of course, despite Pope John Paul II's oft-declared wish to visit Russia, Patriarch Alexei of Moscow has been opposed to such a visit, and no invitation has been extended.

This is just a sampler from recent news stories. How are we to interpret such developments? Is this apparent Orthodox retreat from ecumenism in the 1990s a direct consequence of the fall of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe? Certainly this could be argued. In the early 1990s St. Vladimir's Seminary began to get an increasing number of students from Eastern Europe. One of these, from the former Czechoslovakia, I remember particularly clearly. I had been expressing some enthusiasm for ecumenism, and he was frankly shocked: "When the communists were in control, we had to be ecumenical. Now we can be Orthodox." The same point has been made in a more nuanced way by Samuel P. Huntington in his best-selling *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). In the late 1980s, he argues, the collapse of the communist effectively ended the clash of ideologies that had characterized the cold war period and revealed older, more fundamental civilizational cleavages, among them the cleavage between the "West" and the "Orthodox" civilization of Russia and the Balkans. The question arises: Is ecumenism - like liberal democracy and for that matter communism - in fact simply a product of the West, one of its many ideologies, whose universal claims and aspirations will inevitably fail in the emerging world order, now that

western hegemony can no longer be taken for granted? I don't know the answer to this question. But if we are even to attempt to answer it, we must keep in mind the shape of the ecumenical movement and of Orthodox participation in it *before* the fall of communism. What was ecumenism "as we knew it"?

The modern ecumenical movement, as standard accounts tell the story, began in the early 20th century, with events like the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh (1915), when the mainstream Protestant churches of North America and Europe began to recognize the scandal of extending Christian denominational divisions to the mission field. In fact origins of the ecumenical movement are rather more variegated. Already in the late 19th century Anglicans, for example, were keen to promote mutual recognition churches of "catholic" tradition based on agreement on basic issues of faith and order, above all, on the historic episcopate. In any case, Orthodox churches were involved in such strivings for wider Christian unity from the beginning. Already in the 19th century there were important contacts especially of the Russian Orthodox Church with Anglicans and also with Old Catholics. Better known are initiatives of Patriarchate of Constantinople, especially its famous 1920 encyclical "Unto all the churches of Christ wheresoever they be...both individually and as the whole body of Christ." The encyclical proposes creation of a *koinonia* (fellowship, communion, council) of churches analogous to the League of Nations. Some unstated assumptions in the encyclical should be noted. It takes for granted that "the whole body of Christ" is an assemblage of national churches, some Orthodox, some not, but in any case "established" in some form or another; churches which, despite differences in doctrine and polity, share the same basic moral teachings and values; churches which face, in the post-war decline, certain common problems: "alcoholism gaining ground daily; superfluous luxury on the increase under the pretext of making life more beautiful and

pleasurable;... gross license and indecency in literature, painting, the theater and music, posing respectably as good taste and sophistication in the fine arts..." The encyclical encouraged various cooperative efforts - a common calendar, exchanges of letters, educational exchanges. But above all it called for "mutual respect of the customs and usages common to each church." More concretely this meant an end to Protestant proselytization in Orthodox lands. In effect the encyclical was saying, "You be the church in your place; acknowledge the fact that we are the church in our place."

The interwar period saw continued Orthodox involvement in the ecumenical movement, particularly in the work of Faith and Order, the doctrinal wing of the movement. Prominent theologians like Georges Florovsky played an important role in the formation of the WCC in 1948. Of course, notably absent during the interwar period was the Russian Orthodox Church, which, under unrelenting persecution on the part of the new Soviet State, was very nearly liquidated. But the situation of the Russian Church changed dramatically with the World War II. After Hitler's invasion of Russia, the church vigorously supported the struggle against fascist aggression, and in return Stalin allowed election of a new patriarch (the office had been vacant since 1925), the reopening of many parishes, and restoration of institutional life - but under close government supervision. And with the extension of communism following the war, the same pattern came to be applied to Orthodox church life throughout the Soviet bloc. What were the results for ecumenical involvement? At first, during the cold war, the results were not at all promising. In 1948, for example, a council was held in Moscow to mark the 500th anniversary of autocephaly of the Russian Orthodox Church. The council, comprised for the most part of bishops from Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe, in effect denounced the WCC then in formation as a tool of capitalist warmongers; its aim - to become an "ecumenical church with political

power," rather than "reunion of the churches by spiritual ways and means." So also, for good measure, the council denounced the Vatican for its support of fascism and its global political ambitions. But in the 1960s, as cold war gave way to "peaceful coexistence," the ecumenical scene changed yet again:

(a) At the New Delhi assembly of the WCC in 1961, the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe joined the WCC *en masse*. Their membership was advantageous for all concerned. In various ways Orthodox membership made the WCC itself more "ecumenical," more global, more sympathetic to the diversity of situations in which Christians struggle in their witness to the gospel. At the same time, membership gave the Orthodox Churches in question an opportunity to be seen in the West and gain contacts in the West, thus also raising their status back home. And the price seemed negligible. The WCC itself from the 1960s onward was becoming ever more concerned about issues like racism, liberation, and economic justice; it was especially sensitive to the strivings of churches and peoples of what was then the "third world." The Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe could express concern about such issues with little risk of running afoul of the communist authorities back home - and indeed they might benefit by contributing in this way to building up a good image for the socialist states, and possibly even a cadre of fellow travelers.

(b) In the 1960s important changes also were taking place in Orthodox - Catholic relations. Vatican II gave the Catholic Church a new ecumenical orientation, which expressed itself in several ways. Most conspicuous in the press were the dramatic meetings between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople and the inauguration of a "dialogue of love." Less conspicuous but more significant for our theme today was a shift in Vatican policies towards the communist bloc, as the rigid confrontational

stance of Pius XII gave way to a more pragmatic *Ostpolitik*. Noteworthy here are Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Peace on Earth* and also his personal charm in receiving communist dignitaries. To Khrushchev's son-in-law, for example, he remarked: "I know you are an atheist, but won't you receive an old man's blessing?" This new approach to the communist world included important bilateral contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church. There seems to have been a mutual understanding: The Russian Orthodox Church would tacitly assist in the pastoral care of Catholics, particularly Eastern Catholics, in the Soviet Union; the Catholic Church would tacitly accept the Russian Orthodox Church's position as *the* church in the Soviet Union. Here again, the improved relationship was advantageous for all concerned.

This was ecumenism "as we knew it" before the fall of communism: benign opportunism and smiley faces all around. It was made possible not so much by common interests as by the absence of any obvious and immediate conflicts of interest. This is not to discount the importance and value of this phase in the ecumenical movement. Important theological work was done. The Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church began to meet and, in dense but rewarding joint statements, explored such themes as "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Trinity" (Munich 1982 - the Commission likes long titles!). Within the WCC the Orthodox churches contributed significantly to that great milestone of the ecumenical movement, the Lima Document *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* or BEM, and - more generally - to a new interest in spirituality and liturgy among Protestants. But on the Orthodox side at least, this ecumenism remained at the level of professional theologians and high church dignitaries. For the faithful in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, ecumenism brought little more than the occasional photo of the pope greeting a prominent hierarch, or

of a long row of Orthodox bishops, all with their black klobuks and jeweled panagias and crosses, seated prominently in a WCC assembly.

But by the end of the 1980s, dramatic changes were underway in Eastern Europe that would shake "ecumenism as we knew it" to its foundations. These changes first affected Orthodox - Catholic relations, by raising in an immediate and pressing fashion an old issue that had been largely ignored during the "dialogue of love": the issue that the Orthodox have called "uniatism." Though the very term these days is eschewed in polite ecumenical discourse, it nonetheless is expressive of the conflicting claims, mistrust and pain that characterized Orthodox - Catholic relations until the 1960s.

For the Orthodox, at least, discussion of this difficult subject should not take as its point of departure the forced suppression of the Eastern Catholic Churches in western Ukraine, Slovakia and Romania following the communist take-over after World War II, as though return to the *status quo ante* were the obvious and only appropriate solution. Discussion should rather go back to Brest (1596) and the subsequent "unions" which brought so many Eastern Christians living under Polish or Hapsburg rule into the Roman communion but at the price of spiritual and canonical unity with their Orthodox brothers and sisters. The issue of "uniatism" was never wholly absent even in the heyday of the "dialogue of love." Some argued that theological dialogue with Rome should not begin until "the abolition of uniatism and the incorporation of the members of the uniate churches either in the Latin Roman Catholic Church or in the Orthodox Church, upon their free choice." To be sure, Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* did create an improved atmosphere for dialogue. Reunion was now conceived of in terms of reconciliation of "sister churches" rather than as unilateral submission. At the same time the council's *Decree on the Eastern [Catholic] Churches*

did little to resolve the issue of “uniatism.” The term “uniate” itself, once used with pride by the Roman communion, had long since come to be considered as pejorative. “Eastern Rite Catholic” also was no longer in vogue because it might suggest that the Catholics in question differed from Latins only in the externals of worship. The council affirmed rather that Eastern Catholics constituted *churches*, whose vocation was to provide a bridge to the separated churches of the east. But if, as subsequent dialogue was emphasizing, the Orthodox churches themselves are truly “sister churches,” already nearly at the point of full communion with the Roman Church, what rationale - apart from purely pastoral concern for Christians who might otherwise feel alienated and possibly betrayed - can there be for the continued existence of such “bridge churches”?

These ecclesiological questions were not explicitly addressed by the Joint International Commission in the early stages of its work. It seemed better to begin official theological dialogue by discussion of what Orthodox and Catholics hold in common rather than what divides them. Yet these questions did not go away, and the great changes which began to transform Eastern Europe in the late 1980s brought them again to the fore. As the Eastern Catholic Churches emerged after decades of suppression, disputes immediately arose concerning control of properties that had been in their possession before 1946-49 but which the communist authorities had since seized, most often handing them over to the Orthodox. The Orthodox have argued that such disputes should be resolved by mutual negotiation in such a way as to take into consideration the present religious situation, i.e., the actual preferences of the local communities and, in cases of division, the religious needs of both factions. In fact Rome and the Russian Orthodox Church reached an agreement along these lines for western Ukraine in January 1990, but local Ukrainian Catholics objected strenuously to the idea of local “plebiscites.” In the words of one of

their leaders, Ivan Hel, “the lawful owners [i.e. the Ukrainian Catholics] are being asked to plead with those who stole their property.”

Such seems to have become the Eastern Catholic position throughout Eastern Europe: *restitutio in integrum*, all property seized by the communist authorities at the time of suppression must now be returned. But while adherence to this legal principle might seem the obvious solution at first glance, the actual situation is more complex. Consider the case of the Monastery of St. Nicholas near Mukachevo. Initially established by the Orthodox at the end of the 14th century, it became the residence of the Eastern Catholic bishop following the Union of Mukachevo (1664). It was totally rebuilt as a Basilian monastery ca. 1800, thanks to the generosity of a local magnate, only to be confiscated by the Soviet government in 1947 and given over to a group of Orthodox nuns when their own four convents were seized and demolished. In the early 1990s the local Eastern Catholic bishop was demanding its return. But what was to become of the 95 Orthodox nuns then living there? What immediate need for the property did the Eastern Catholics have? Rigid insistence on the principle of *restitutio in integrum* would hardly do justice to the complexity of this and so many other concrete situations in Eastern Europe.

Another major area of concern for the Orthodox has been proselytism - and here the offenders include not only the Catholic Church but also the many other religious groups that have been streaming into Eastern Europe’s new religious “free market” - Moonies and other cults, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Evangelical Protestants, Pentecostals, often very well financed from the West. These of course are groups with little or no connection to the ecumenical movement, and indeed in many cases hostile to it. But even some mainstream Protestants have gotten into the act. For example, the Methodists have appointed a bishop of Moscow. And other mainline churches have joined the chorus of protest that

arose in the West when the Russian Duma passed a bill aimed at limiting activities of foreign religious groups in Russia. Little wonder that the Russian Orthodox Church is irritated! In effect it is saying, "You, our ecumenical partners for so many years, instead of helping us rebuild church life after our decades of patient suffering, are entering into direct competition, disregarding the deep historical roots and actual presence of the Christian Church already here." Also disappointing for the Orthodox Churches has been the expanded activity of the Roman Catholic Church. Specific complaints have focused on appointment of Catholic bishops (a) in numbers disproportionate to actual needs and Catholic population (a complaint especially in Romania, where at stroke five new Eastern rite and six new Latin rite bishops were appointed by Rome without prior consultation with or notification of the Romanian government or the Romanian Orthodox Church); or (b) in places not historically Catholic (a complaint especially in Russia, where bishops have been appointed in cities like Novosibirsk and Moscow, again without prior consultation or notification). Of course, according to Rome, such appointments were made solely for pastoral reasons and "not from the least intention of proselytism" (Cardinal Sodano, Vatican Secretary of State, 1991). Yet the Orthodox would question the propriety of such unilateral appointments, made as they are without consultation with the local Orthodox "sister churches." They fear a resurgence of that triumphalist mentality of the Counter-Reformation epoch which viewed the Orthodox East as mission territory ripe for "conversion." Their fears mount as they see not only various cults and sects but also well-financed Catholic "Fatima fanatics" (to use the expression of a great expert on religion in Russia, Fr. John Long S.J.) moving in from the West to "evangelize" Russia by diverse questionable means. And their fears are not allayed when they discover that nearly all the new episcopal appointments are Polish.

From what I have said so far, you may have concluded that I agree with Huntington. Now that secular ideologies like communism have failed, civilizational differences - ultimately religious differences - are taking on new importance. In the old days, according to Huntington, "A Western democrat could carry on an intellectual debate with a Soviet Marxist," but now, "It would be impossible for him to do that with a Russian Orthodox nationalist" (ed. cit. 142). So too in the realm of ecclesiastical relations: Once a western Christian, whether Protestant or Catholic, could carry on a theological discussion with an Orthodox Christian from Eastern Europe. But now Christians of east and west no longer speak the same polite ecumenese. Dialogue has broken down, and ecumenism is revealed for what it really always was: a western phenomenon into which the Orthodox were drawn only because of unnatural political circumstances. You may have concluded that this is my position. It is not. Certainly considerable evidence could be advanced to support such a position. Consider the Kosovo crisis. Public opinion in Russia was overwhelmingly in support of the suffering Orthodox brothers and sisters of Serbia. The same was true in Romania, despite that country's dreams of joining Europe. The same was true in Greece, despite that country's membership in NATO. Yet I would offer a somewhat different explanation for the fall of ecumenism as we knew it. Are we witnessing a "clash of civilizations"? Or are we witnessing tensions and clashes within civilizations, clashes and tensions that cross geographic, religious and civilizational boundaries?

Permit me to return to an earlier point. I was pointing out some of the assumptions behind early Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement as presented, e.g., in 1920 encyclical of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. This encyclical took for granted that churches of east and west upheld the same moral values. It took for granted that one could in fact speak of the *churches* of east

and west. It took for granted that the Church Universal was meant to be a communion of local churches. It took for granted that the Orthodox churches were the actualization of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, but it also implicitly recognized that other local churches - even though separated for a variety of reasons, some very grave - nevertheless were not wholly sundered from church fellowship, that some bonds of communion remained, allowing the possibility of dialogue aimed at greater unity and fuller communion. But not all Orthodox would agree with these assumptions. Some would take Orthodox claims to be the one true Church in an exclusive rather than an inclusive sense, so that outside the canonical limits of the Orthodox Church as we currently perceive them there is simply undifferentiated darkness, in which the pope is no better than a witchdoctor. How are we to evaluate these conflicting views? The exclusive view today claims to represent true Orthodoxy, traditional Orthodoxy. In fact - as I could argue at greater length - this "traditionalist" view is a relatively recent phenomenon, basically an 18th-century reaction to the equally exclusive claims advanced by the Roman Catholic Church in that period. Nevertheless this view has gained wide currency today. But where? And how? And why?

In fact this modern Orthodox "traditionalism" until quite recently made little headway in the traditionally Orthodox lands of eastern Europe. It has developed in the West, and it has thrived in the West, indeed here in the United States, especially in Greek Old Calendarist circles (including several monasteries in the United States) and in the closely allied Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (headquartered on East 93rd Street in New York City). Time does not permit us to trace here the ideological evolution of these groups. What is important to note is that those most committed to the "traditionalism" they preach are not pious old ethnics and emigres but more often zealous converts to Orthodoxy. Like Western converts

to Buddhism and other more or less exotic religions (New Age, Native American...), these converts are attracted by their new faith's spirituality, which seems so unlike what the West today has to offer. They also are especially quick to adopt those elements which they deem most distinctive, most antiwestern, about their new faith - not just prayer ropes and headcoverings but also an exclusive, sectarian view of the church that in fact is quite at odds with historic Orthodoxy. Superficially their message, proclaimed on numerous websites, may seem to be at one with that of the established, "canonical" Orthodox Churches - at one with some of the statements of Patriarch Bartholomew or the Russian Orthodox Church, which, as we have seen, have been critical of the WCC and the Vatican. But in fact their message is different, even radically different. Their message, in my opinion, is more a product of the late modern or post-modern West than an expression of historic Eastern Christianity.

(a) Consider current critiques of the WCC. The complaints of mainstream, "canonical" Orthodox churches center on two issues: (1) *Representation*. The Orthodox are in a permanent minority position in the WCC, and with that organization operating more by the principle of majority rule than by consensus, their voice seldom can be heard. The WCC therefore should be restructured. (2) *Agenda and ethos*. According to the Orthodox, the shared morality and values that made possible the ecumenical quest for unity and common witness to the world now seems to have been abandoned within the WCC, at least by the elites of the mainstream Protestant churches of North America and Western Europe who play such an important role in the WCC's programmatic work. Instead, the Orthodox charge, positions on abortion, gender, etc., are being advanced that run quite counter to Orthodox teaching and belief - and in fact quite counter to the teaching and belief of many Protestants, both in the declining churches of the West and even more in the growing churches of Africa and Asia. But

now consider the critique offered by today's Orthodox "traditionalists." According to them, *any* participation in or involvement with the WCC or similar bodies represents a capitulation to the panheresy of ecumenism; Orthodoxy's claim to be the one true Church is relativized, a "branch theory" of the Church is tacitly accepted, and church canons against prayer with heretics are repeatedly violated in practice and in principle.

(b) Consider also critiques of the Balamand Statement. Here, first, a little background may be necessary. With the reemergence of the Eastern Catholic Churches in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the Joint International Commission, on Orthodox insistence, set aside its earlier plan for theological work and took up the issue of "uniatism." The eventual product was an agreed statement issued in Balamand, Syria, in 1993, "Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion." The statement's purpose was preeminently practical. Its guidelines, for example, call for avoidance of those forms of philanthropic activity that might be construed as attempts to "buy" new converts to the detriment of the other church; avoidance of all forms of violence; mutual respect for each other's places of worship and even sharing of facilities when circumstances require; consultation before the establishment of new pastoral projects which might unnecessarily parallel or even undermine those of the other church in the same territory; resolution of differences (e.g. over property) through fraternal dialogue rather than by recourse to the civil authorities or to merely legal principles, etc. The similarity between these guidelines and the positions long advocated by the Orthodox is obvious. The Joint Commission hoped that "by excluding for the future all proselytism and all desire for expansion by Catholics at the expense of the Orthodox Church," it had "overcome the obstacles which impelled certain Orthodox churches to suspend their participation in the theological dialogue. To this end, the statement insisted:

Because of the way in which Catholics and Orthodox. once again consider each other in their relationship to the mystery of the Church and discover each other once again as sister churches, this form of apostolate... which has been called uniatism, can no longer be accepted either as a method to be followed or as a model of the unity our churches are seeking.

At the same time, however, the Statement acknowledged the Eastern Catholic Churches' "right to exist and answer to the spiritual needs of their faithful."

With this background in mind, let us consider reactions to the Balamand Statement. First, it should be noted, Eastern Catholics in places like Romania and Ukraine were not at all pleased, because the statement tacitly rejected their demands for *restitutio in integrum* of properties. They denounced the Balamand Statement as an example of "anti-Catholic ecumenism." According to one Eastern Catholic Bishop in Romania, "no one can oblige us to accept all the points of the document in question because this is not a dogmatic issue expressed by the Holy Father or by a Vatican Council which would demand our acceptance." Clearly this bishop, like so many uniates in Eastern Europe, remains frozen in a pre-Vatican II mindset which cannot conceive of Catholic - Orthodox relations in anything other than confrontational terms. But what of Orthodox reactions? Among most of the Orthodox Churches, and particularly those most immediately affected by the "uniate problem," the Romanian and Russian Orthodox Churches, there was initially cautious optimism, provided that Balamand Statement's recommendations were "accepted and applied by both sides." Subsequent criticism on the part of these churches has claimed - and with some justice - that Catholics, particularly Eastern Catholics right there on the spot, in fact have not applied Balamand's guidelines and recommendations;

that in fact Catholics still aim at expansion at the expense of the Orthodox. On the other hand, “traditionalist” critiques have criticized Balamand on quite a different point. They have criticized its underlying ecclesiological principles and above all its use of the concept of “sister churches.”

This is ironic, since it is precisely the concept of “sister churches” that the mainstream “canonical” Orthodox Churches have been trying hardest to advance on the international level. In employing the language of “sister churches,” the Orthodox have in mind the ecclesiology which was characteristic of the early centuries of the Church’s life and is still characteristic of Orthodoxy, according to which the Church Universal is conceived as a *koinonia* of local sister churches. While full eucharistic communion between these churches sometimes has been broken by disputes of all sorts, including disputes over doctrinal issues, some elements of communion generally have remained (respect for sacred places, charitable assistance, etc.), allowing hope for future reconciliation. From the 11th century onward, this understanding of ecclesiology began to fade in the west as popes began to claim Rome as the “universal mother Church.” Against such claims, the East reasserted its ancient understanding. For example, in the 13th century - not at all a good century for ecumenism, witnessing as it did the Latin Crusaders’ sack of Constantinople in 1204 - Patriarch John X Camateros writing to Pope Innocent III insisted that “Rome is the first among equal sisters of the same dignity.” Significantly, the expression “sister church” did not cease to be used for the western church even after full eucharistic communion ended. For example, in 1948 Patriarch Alexei I of Moscow - certainly no great friend of the Roman Catholic Church - nevertheless could refer to it as a “sister church.” What is remarkable about the use of the expression since 1963, when Patriarch Athenagoras I and Pope Paul VI reintroduced it into modern Orthodox - Roman Catholic dialogue, is not that the Orthodox should use it with reference

to the Roman Church but that Rome should use it with reference to the Orthodox Churches. While the precise significance and practical implications of the expression have not been fully explored - it is not, after all, a technical term in canon law - , it must be acknowledged that its use by modern popes represents a remarkable breakthrough in Orthodox - Catholic relations.

If I didn’t have a truly Orthodox sense of time, I would end here. But I should like to add one point. I have argued that the Orthodox retreat from ecumenism over the last decade is not a simple phenomenon, nor is it monolithic. Mainstream “canonical” Orthodox and “traditionalist” Orthodox operate from very different perspectives. But the line between mainstream and traditionalist is becoming fuzzier. Traditionalist rhetoric has been affecting the mainstream. Let me give one example: the withdrawal of the Orthodox Church of Georgia from the WCC. This withdrawal was prompted by the threat of schism on the part of a significant monastic element if the church did not withdraw. Was this monastic element simply expressing the instinctive civilizational reaction of Orthodoxy to the alien western ideology of ecumenism? Was this a case of the Orthodox now being Orthodox? So readers of Huntington might argue. The story is not so simple. The literature emanating from this monastic element is very interesting. It could have been cribbed from “traditionalist” websites and publications here in the United States - the same rhetoric, the same accusations, the same claims, the same misinformation and disinformation. The Georgian Church as a whole, and certainly the catholicos, was not inclined to turn its back on the rest of mainstream Orthodoxy. Most of the monastic demands - e.g. to break communion with any Orthodox church that continued to participate in the ecumenical movement - in fact were rejected; leaders of the attempted schism were summoned to repent or face deposition. But to defuse the situation, a situation created in large part by alien “traditionalist” propaganda

coming in from the West, the Georgian Church did announce its withdrawal from the WCC.

To sum up: Has there been an Orthodox retreat from ecumenism in post-communist Russia and Eastern Europe? Yes. But this retreat cannot be explained simply by reference to dark and anonymous underlying civilizational forces. Any explanation must also take into account the relative ease with which pressure groups, sometimes quite small, can spread their preferred ideologies in our post-modern world. And any explanation must take into account the fact that such pressure groups are at work not only in the Orthodox east but also in the west and indeed throughout the world today.

Suggestions for further reading:

Bouteneff, Peter, "The Orthodox at the Harare Assembly," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 42 (1999) 79-84.

Erickson, John H., "Concerning the Balamand Statement," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42 (1997) 25-43.

-----, "The Formation of Orthodox Ecclesial Identity," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 42 (1998) 301-14.

The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholics in Dialogue, ed. John Borelli and John H. Erickson (Crestwood NY and Washington DC: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press and United States Catholic Conference, 1996) - includes agreed statements of both U.S. and international dialogues.