

Building Bridges

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*Between the
Orthodox and Evangelical
Traditions*

Edited by
Tim Grass, Jenny and Paul Rolf,
Ioan Sauca

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BUILDING BRIDGES

Between the Orthodox and Evangelical Traditions

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Introduction: Why Orthodox-Evangelical Encounter

Ioan Sauca

The dialogue between Orthodox churches and Evangelicals and its emerging outcomes could become one of the outstanding examples of present-day achievement in the ecumenical movement. At first glance, we might consider these two Christian traditions a long way apart historically and culturally, and theologically almost mutually exclusive. Yet some recent encounters between the two, and the ensuing results, have proved the contrary.

Within the context of the World Council of Churches, the first “official” attempt to bring the two traditions closer to one another was initiated during and immediately after the WCC general assembly in Canberra, Australia, in 1991. Following that assembly, three major consultations were organized between 1993 and 1998, at Stuttgart, Alexandria and Hamburg; the proceedings of those encounters have been published. The outcomes of these initial meetings had a considerable impact on the participants and their churches, but also on the programmatic work of the WCC.

From 2000 onwards, this initiative was continued by the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, which included it in its own programme of seminars. In that endeavour, I received particular help and co-operation from two WCC colleagues, Ms Teny Pirri-Simonian and Mr Huibert van Beek. At that time, they were responsible for church and ecumenical relations and had been fully involved in earlier meetings with Evangelicals.

The encounters in Bossey had their own specific profiles, structures and outcomes. As a “laboratory” for the ecumenical movement, the Ecumenical Institute has provided a safe space and free academic platform, where discussion and experience could be shared in depth in such a way that none of the partners in the dialogue would feel threatened. In the new setting,

we decided to adapt the content, structure and ethos of these encounters accordingly, to make them even more focused and meaningful.

Moreover, closer analysis of the relationship between Orthodox and Evangelicals throughout the world gave rise to new dynamics and new questions. Usually, in the dialogue between these two, the ongoing accusatory topics are those related to mission, such as “sheep-stealing” and “proselytism”. From the perspective of Orthodox churches in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the Orthodox are always the “victims”, while the Evangelicals are the “proselytizers”. But the situation has proved to be more nuanced. While conversions from Orthodoxy to Evangelicalism take place in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, similar conversions take place in Western Europe and United States from Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism or other free churches to Orthodoxy. Viewing the whole debate from this perspective, one may legitimately ask such questions as: when does mission become proselytism? Which is in fact the “sheep-stealing” church, the Evangelical or the Orthodox?

Therefore, a decision was taken to reject the eternal mutually accusatory mood in favour of a more profound academic approach to certain basic faith affirmations of both traditions, and to look instead at what is complementary rather than what is mutually exclusive.

Consequently the following features were adopted, which have imparted newness and freshness to the Bossey encounters:

Participation in these encounters has been enlarged in order to include not only Evangelicals from constituencies within the WCC, but also those who did not belong, or who were openly against it or cautious about having any relations with it.

In order to see better the complementarity between the two traditions, former Orthodox who converted to Evangelicalism and former Evangelicals who converted to Orthodoxy were intentionally invited to contribute.

The dialogue has moved from an emphasis on the relational approach to a deeper theological debate on issues which seemed to be either divisive or sources of misunderstanding between the two traditions.

As the meetings took place within the context of the “free academic platform” offered by Bossey, participants were free to express themselves openly because they did not speak on behalf of their churches but on their own account as specialists, church leaders, practitioners or academics in their respective fields. It was made clear from the beginning that the two groups would reflect and debate together on the topics selected but that they were not expected to produce reports or statements indicating complete

convergence. That decision enabled participants to feel less cautious about any consequences in respect to the official positions of their own churches, and freer to be fully involved in the discussions.

The topics chosen for common study were among those most controversial and divisive for the two traditions. The first meeting, held in 2000, dealt with the issue of salvation and focused on the question: was salvation the result of an instant in which an individual was “born again”, a continuous process, or both? In 2002 the topic was the role and place of the Bible in the two traditions, and in 2004 the nature and purpose of the church. The last encounter, organized in 2006, approached the sensitive topic of anthropology. It concentrated its attention on what it means to be human in the two traditions, as this very concept has had important theological and, especially, ethical implications which have come to be divisive for the two traditions.

The Bossey encounters, beyond their profound academic approach, proved to be liberating and enriching spiritual events. The days started and ended in the chapel; the periods of prayer and devotion were organized by members of each group in turn, thus introducing each tradition to something of the worshipping life of the other.

The whole endeavour proved to be more about unlearning than learning. From both sides, people came with stereotypes, caricatures and prejudices about the others. The safe, sincere direct encounters in the chapel, in the conference room and while sharing meals transformed these meetings into events leading to repentance. For example, the Evangelicals became more aware of the richness of the Tradition of the church, the spirituality and depth of Orthodox worship, and its profound biblical content. The Orthodox were also surprised, among other things, to find out that affirming the idea that one is “born again” in an instant does not exclude an understanding of salvation as a continuous process (*theosis*), but rather regards such an event as the concrete starting point of salvation. While the two groups rejected proselytism as an aggressive crusade of conversion and denounced the attitudes underlying the intentional practice of sheep-stealing, both also agreed that mission as witness is an obligation, a responsibility and a call for each Christian. At each encounter, the two groups were encouraged to reflect on what they had learned from, and valued in, the other tradition.

As these meetings were organized under the auspices of the WCC, each time one occurred the group was given the opportunity to visit the WCC

headquarters in Geneva, where they could encounter and dialogue with the WCC general secretaries, Konrad Raiser and Samuel Kobia. Even these “exposure visits” proved to be transformative and liberating. Some of the Evangelical participants, in particular, confessed that it was the first time that they had visited that organization and that they did so with “fear and trembling”. From childhood, some had been taught to see the WCC as the spiritual Babylon spoken of in the Apocalypse (17.5-6); while visiting it they discovered a different reality and came to appreciate and value it.

Based on the rich theological, spiritual and transformative experience of these encounters, the participants have requested that the proceedings of these meetings be published in a book and made available to others who are interested in this endeavour. We have therefore brought together some of the main presentations, along with the conclusions from group discussions as well as testimonies from participants. The editors have focused the content and put the texts into good and understandable English (on one occasion translating a paper from French), but have not attempted to impose coherence of perspective or content upon the material as a whole. One should not, therefore, try to see a linking theme and follow it through the different presentations. Each meeting had its own identity, its own proceedings and its own conclusions. In putting them together, we have tried to remain faithful to these identities and to offer them to the larger public as they were presented. Nevertheless, we hope that this volume will be helpful to all those interested in further reflection and in mutual spiritual and theological enrichment, as well as in reconciliation and co-operation between Evangelicals and Orthodox, both worldwide and at local levels.

Finally, I would like to express sincere thanks to the British Evangelical, Dr Tim Grass, who was our main partner in conceptualizing and organizing the meetings and who contributed to the editing and the publication of this book. My warm thanks go also to Mrs Jenny and Dr Paul Rolph, who attended each of the four meetings organized in Bossey, helping us each time to write the group reports, as well as working extensively on the editing of this book.