

The Cultural and Religious Divide between East and West

In Ukraine, I once saw a genealogy of the Christian Churches in the shape of a tree with side branches. It was of Russian Orthodox making, but the presentation of the non-Orthodox Churches proved to be rather respectful. Orthodoxy, Eastern Christianity was covered with a luxuriant top and, of course, it was depicted as a straight trunk firmly rooted in the fertile ground on which our Lord and Saviour had sown his message; a thick branch to the right was the Roman Catholic Church and from that grew a second less developed branch – the Protestant Churches. A healthy leaf top covered both. The post-communist Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Kiev, which came into being in 1992 and is considered to be a creation of the first Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk, this C/church was pictured as a disconnected arid branch floating on air. And finally, the Greek Catholic or Uniate Church: a branch which departs from the Orthodox stem; and becoming ever thinner, it runs to the Catholic branch but does not carry any leaves.

Meanwhile, this greening tree is a nice biblical metaphor which does not only express the viability and vitality of the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Churches, but simultaneously it demonstrates that these Churches, to which the metaphor is being applied, equally root in the truth with the big 'T'. They are truly loyal if not always perfect representations of the one Church of Christ.

This morning and in the afternoon we will learn more about ecumenism, in Romania and in Ukraine, and than especially between the Orthodox tradition and the Greek Catholic or Uniate Church which finds itself squeezed in between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

Ecumenism has become a grand old lady and somehow it seems superfluous to further explain its purpose and necessity. In our era, however, the co-existence of various and contradictory values and ethical norms and truths are taken for granted, and it might be a good thing to redefine the desire for a harmonious together of all Christian religions. I will do no such thing, but present just a few remarks on that topic at the end of this presentation.

We will start off with a short review of the ecumenical atmosphere in the Netherlands over the last 40 years or so. By doing so, we will find a general explanation, why we Dutch people tend to find the differences between various confessions less relevant. In what follows, and in spite of many resemblances – think of that green tree –, we will try to uncover some of the differences between East and West which actually runs quite deep, deeper than the confessional differences in the Netherlands.

Ecumenism in the Netherlands

Even if the Dutch Christian churches lived together in separate worlds from the 16th up to the 20th century, and even if the one Calvinist Church was more equal than the others, the state forced all Churches to adopt an attitude of toleration. Issuing rules and regulations, the Churches themselves tried to restrict the contacts of their members with the heretics.

Since the 1920s in the urban areas and more noticeably since the 1960s many believers succeeded quite easily to apply this spirit of toleration in their personal lives. Firm religious ties were undone in a matter of years, because: 1, in the urban areas church and social control slowly ebbed away; 2, a more positive theological evaluation of differences came about; and 3, because of the ease with which church control was discarded and subsequently a personal standpoint was taken.

The fact that from the second half of the 19th century all the faithful participated in more or less the same Dutch cultural identity and shared a common history and language undoubtedly contributed much.

In fact, it turned out that long cherished and precisely defined theological differences had become relatively unimportant to a large number of believers. More relative and more unimportant than the awareness that all Christians drink at the same source, i.e. the bible and the Church of Jesus Christ. And perhaps also because numerous differences are so subtle to be appreciated outside the context of theological science or outside the community of theologians. Furthermore, the Churches are no longer large enough communities which can effectively shut out differences of thought and of opinion, as it was the case before the 2nd Vatican council within the Dutch Roman Catholic Church.

In the Netherlands only a handful will still feel a great desire to fight heretics or schismatic believers in words, let alone in deeds.

Next to Communalities, Cultural and Religious Differences

A short *phenomenology* of Eastern and Western Christianity shows that both strands have important points in common – just as Christianity and non-Christian religions do. Here we could think of different, mostly external phenomena: faith in a higher force or power; the ritual as a celebration of life itself; the so-called *rites de passage* surrounding birth, marriage and death; holy books; a caste of spiritual professionals; prayer practices, mediation techniques and so forth.

Next to more external similarities, Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism share some important and profound resemblances, which prove themselves to be exclusively and fundamentally Christian. E.g.: faith in a personal, essentially good God; redemption through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; loyalty to the first ecumenical councils until the 4th council of Constantinople which ended in 880; an almost identical creed as the most important *short version* of Christian faith; the bible and the writings of the Fathers of the Eastern Church.

If we talk about dissimilarities, it should be clear that these too can only be dealt with in a summary fashion. Nevertheless they somehow mark the divide between East and West, as do the examples I will provide here below.

This notion of a divide between different spheres of Christianity is clearly present in a nice collection of speeches by the former bishop of Hildesheim, Josef Homeyer: *What will support us in Europe? The Church and its responsibility* which appeared in 2004. Homeyer, former president of Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, mentions two important differences. 1. 'Europe's universalism', i.e.: the universal aspiration of its intellectual and religious traditions. Human rights are for all mankind, not just for Europeans. And the Roman Catholic Church itself holds a claim to universal truth. 2. The appropriation of the 18th c. philosophical Enlightenment tradition with its emphasis on intelligibility and reason, critical research, democracy and man as an individual. In short, Orthodoxy has had too little Enlightenment and Protestantism too much. In between we find the Roman Catholic tradition with exactly the right amount, thus bishop Homeyer.

As a matter of fact the German bishop formulates a threefold distinction: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant... but, in spite of divergences between Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, they are considered here as a variation on the theme of Western Christianity.

The Differences

The differences are listed here below. In the left column you see some markers of Eastern Christianity, while in the right column you will find those of Western Christianity. Again: reality is more differentiated and, most of all, richer.

Eastern Christianity	Western Christianity
Mystical theology/ contemplation	Theology as a science/ reason/science and technology/acting
Divinisation	Forgiveness of sins
Love/Reconciliation	Solidarity/Justice//Procedures
Collectivism/Adjust yourself to whatever tradition transmitted	Individualistic/Creatively construe your own life/Self-development
National	Cosmopolitan/Universal

These are rather fundamental differences, which received more emphasis since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – this to express more clearly the proper Orthodox confessional identity. All Churches, the Orthodox Churches included, have begun a difficult, not always very successful theological, societal and cultural re-orientation which aims at reconciling conservative forces with these which are more prone towards change. The forces of change, however, usually live on the fringes of the Orthodox Churches.

Theological Differences

In the 19th century Orthodoxy broke with a rather scholarly and dry way of teaching and studying theology and returned to the source: the Fathers of the Eastern Church of the first millennium. Theology once again turned to mystical, religious experience, because without it, in the words of the Russian Orthodox priest Pavel Florovsky who was murdered in 1937, it is merely *dry swimming*.

Florovsky's criticism seems very much applicable to the Roman Catholic seminary theology, which took shape in the 19th century, then prevailed until after the 2^d Vatican council and is still being thought here and there in Eastern Europe. Professor W.A.M. Luijpen o.e.s.a. labelled this kind of theology already in 1952 as rational, abstract, a teaching of life with much teaching and little life, and certainly without much connection to the most central figure of our faith, Jesus Christ. By the way, when looking for an alternative W.A.M. Luijpen made a crucial and typical Western error, that is, seen from an Orthodox point of view: though respecting tradition, he turns to modern philosophy to facilitate a closer connection to the concrete and daily experiences and problems of the faithful.

Examples of Differences in the Theological Domain

Theological systematisation is very much present surrounding the Roman Catholic teachings on the sacrament of matrimony. It is almost impossible to dissolve a marriage, not so much for pastoral or moral reasons, but because allowing church divorces and second marriage would oppose the notion that the sacraments can only be administered once. In more common language: sacramental theology comes under pressure, since the destructive reality of an unsuccessful marriage demands a solution. This solution is being given *sub specie* of a tough moral theological conclusion: in most cases the believers are expected to remain alone, to live chaste and to pray much for help.

In Orthodox tradition the faithful can have a divorce and remarry more easily. There, the theology of the sacraments saves reality. In the case of incompatible characters or, for example, a derailed husband or wife, divorcees can make a new start when continuing on the same old road slowly would have dried out spiritual life and a fresh begin offers solace. Here, doctrine is not stronger than life itself. Life is judged from one case to another, e.g. by the local bishop in the Russian Orthodox Church.

While in the Eastern tradition the emphasis lays more on contemplation, in Western theology more weight is contributed to trust in the good functioning of reason, technology and science, and an activist approach to life. The philosophical Enlightenment tradition – reason, science, activism –, this intellectual tradition has never been integrated or dealt with properly in the Orthodox Churches, and has been discarded in a rather perfunctory manner over and over again. I remember the example of an Orthodox monk who was very proud of the fact that he did not have any books in his dwelling. After all, reason and thought only make man move away from God. Not so in Western theology. The aforementioned bishop Homeyer reminds his readers, how the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas gave equal rights to faith and reason.

This sometimes radical and negative criticism of such an essential human property as reason is, is being mirrored by Western theology which is inspired by Father of the Church Saint Augustine, i.e. his vision of natural or biological man, and especially his attitude towards sex. The Dutch publisher Martin Ross usually refers to it as *this very terrible thing* – it is still often regarded as such.

Western activism reaches further back, of course, than the Enlightenment of the 18th century – it is firmly rooted in Western Christian tradition. This activism is closely connected to the central role of the forgiveness of sin. Prayer, mass and, since the 20th century, the frequent use of the sacraments go along with good works, hard work, modesty and a simple way of life. Meanwhile, a Christian ought to be rather humble about his abilities to master his or her sinful nature.

In this respect the Orthodox tradition seems more optimistic: man has been given the possibility to become like God – Christ became man, so man may become like God. This goal, however, is closely connected to liturgy which is at the centre of Orthodox religious life, while activism is often frowned upon.

The Social and Political Dimension

Love and reconciliation are opposed to solidarity, justice and democratic structures. Seen from the East rational procedures as a means to shape society are very much distrusted. E.g.: democracy, justice and solidarity which are means to evenly distribute goods like political freedom, social commitment, wealth, charity and so forth. After all, reconciliation, love, justice, solidarity in Europe are human qualities and not the product of anonymous structures. This may explain Orthodox distrust of the European Union, but there is more to say about that – later.

Serbia's most authoritative theologian Justin Popovic (+1979), for example, wrote that the 'social question' was a Western invention, because if believers would view themselves as the one body of Christ there could not exist a social question at all. There would be, as a necessary consequence, a balance between the individual and society.

More recently, in August 2007, a high-ranking cleric of the Moscow Patriarchate, archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, strongly commented on democracy in the West, where allegedly conflict is the driving force of progress. Chaplin said: 'Multi-confessionality, multiparty systems, separation of powers, competition, administrative conflicts – all that the present political system takes such pride in – are symptoms of spiritual unhealthiness. The very existence of a pluralistic democracy is none other than a direct result of sin.' Predicting the imminent downfall of Western democracy and lauding Russia's political system, Chaplin put forward the 'conciliar ideal of the unity of Church, nation, and state' as an alternative.

Of course, Western democracy can be regarded as the result of the fall of man, but this is true for any political system. However, criticism and fear of Western democracy and of its underlying Enlightenment philosophy, which is linked to secularism, does not dismiss Orthodoxy of its task to think more profoundly about a just societal order. Realising that the Orthodox Churches lived for 45 to

70 years under totalitarian rule and that any political system exists *post lapsum* (after the fall), it remains a profound mystery why the Western political order is so heavily criticised. Equally unclear is the alternative that is being proposed to us.

By the way, the idea that the Enlightenment produced Auschwitz as well as the death camps of Stalin, in which the aforementioned bishop Homeyer indulges himself as well, is far too simplistic to be true. Then, aren't communism and nazism rather representatives of anti-Enlightenment? The big Enlightenment philosophers Voltaire and Kant would never have dreamt to have the likes of Hitler or Stalin as their inheritors. The question should be raised whether chronological succession is unjustifiably interpreted as causal succession. Furthermore, Eastern and Western Christianity did better to ask themselves whether century long anti-Semitism contributed to Auschwitz.

Individualism and collectivism

Much more than Western Christianity does, Eastern Christianity lives from the notion that the individual should adjust his or her deeds and thinking to existing traditions and habits which are already at hand. Individual self-realisation, creativity and originality are values that do not enjoy high esteem. These last 10 years this attitude is very much displayed in the fight against the legalisation of homosexuality and gay marriage – an almost adolescent protest against the West. As such the theme is barely relevant in the local context, then, after all, being a homosexual in Eastern Europe in the 21st century is very much comparable to being a leper in the 19th century.

Behind all this lays a more fundamental criticism of individual freedom as the most basic principle of legislation. In stead, the starting point should be: love and reconciliation of all men – something that, in the end, presupposes that all men are *deep down* the same, or should become the same, that society can be totally harmonious and that the state should enforce this harmony – therefore: no *multis*, no *pluris*. The Western conception of human rights, for example, does focus on the individual albeit not exclusively. The individual stands at the centre and chooses among or invents various life projects, which may but do not necessarily correspond with prevailing social or church norms.

In July 2008, the Russian Orthodox Church dedicated a document to this very issue. In chapter 4, § 7 we read: 'The use of political and civil rights should not lead to divisions and enmity', then: 'The Orthodox tradition of conciliarity implies the preservation of the social unity on the basis of intransigent moral values. The Church calls upon people to restrain their egoistic desires for the sake of the common good.'

This doesn't sound too unreasonable, but meanwhile it remains unclear to what extend the individual could contribute more to society than just dissolving in the social body? The absence of power brokering, multiparty systems, individual preferences, of the *multis* and the *pluris* presupposes complete knowledge of present and future societal good and evil. Western Christianity is more modest and would find it rather difficult to identify with authoritarianism. And justly so.

After all, this Orthodox point of view entails a certain danger. In the West, authorities must prove themselves to the citizens by showing their reliability and adequate use of expert knowledge, while in the East citizens obey to them simply because they are authorities. This *adjusting oneself to existing traditions and the demands of authorities* will inevitably lead to what W.A.M. Luijpen wrote with about Roman Catholic theology some 50 years ago: rational, abstract, a teaching of life with much teaching and little life.

The Fatherland

Discussing the theology of the aforementioned Justin Popovic, a notorious Serbian nationalist, a Church *watcher* once asked himself whether Popovic mistakenly took Serbia for God as object of his devotion. This is quite understandable then apparently the Orthodox Churches don't seem to mind too much to raise their nation, country and people to a higher level in the history of salvation. Seemingly, a kind of divinisation of national traditions, culture, history and so forth takes place as well.

The Romanian Orthodox Church, for example, uses a rather raw, nationalistic language, which boils down to two arguments: 1, we are a majority, so we are right; and 2, being Romanian and Orthodox are identical. Over the last two years the Ministry of Education removed evolution theory from the secondary school curriculum – in the past Orthodox and Greek Catholic politician had requested this –, God as a philosophical theme disappeared as well, as did the philosophers Voltaire, Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus. Public television and religion class are being used to blacken other religions than Romanian Orthodoxy.

Thus – the real Romanian adheres to Romanian culture, history, mentality and so forth, which runs down through the ages in a straight line. Furthermore, he or she speaks Romanian and belongs to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Whoever deviates from this pattern is a stranger, merely a guest, e.g. the Roman Catholic and Protestant Hungarians in Transylvania, who should behave as such.

Romanians themselves who deviate from the Romanian pattern must be brought back to the Romanian sphere. This explains the positive attitude and approval of the Romanian Orthodox Church towards the destruction of the Uniate Church in 1948. Through their reintegration into the Orthodox Church the Greek Catholic believers, with their strange preference for the pope of Rome and Western theology, became fully Romanian again. For the very same reason the historic memory of the Uniate Church is erased, from the history books and from the landscape of Romania: A number of churches have been torn down, monuments that remind of Greek Catholics or of their Church are altered, history is rewritten. One and a half year after the entry of Romania into the European Union, in May 2008, a former Greek Catholic church building in Ungheni was demolished!

Romanian Orthodox theologians have pondered on the possible consequences of the admission to the European Union for Romania's national autonomy and mentality – a question that must have a special meaning for a national or ethnic Church. Thus, theologian Răduț Seliște proposed a Romanian mission to convert Western Europe to Orthodoxy. Well, lets wait and see.

Conclusion

More recently the friendship model has been put forward as an element of ecumenical imagery. According to me this is not a very helpful metaphor to describe the relation between the Christian Churches. After all, friendship is very much based upon personal and individual qualities like sympathy and emotion. It presupposes a free choice and mutual consent and above all the freedom to speak one's mind, loud and clear if must. The coalescence of the Christian Churches, however, is founded on a heartfelt inner necessity: the awareness of being the same yet diverse. Everything considered, there is no free choice, on beforehand. Furthermore, a feeling of urgency often leads to covering up those things that offend the spirit of ecumenism.

The family metaphor seems more adequate. But the family imagery has some flaws as well. If we compare the modern, more or less individualised family with the classical, pre-modern family, we see that in the first case friendship qualities determine the quality of mutual relations, while in the latter case unconditioned mutual aid is the touchstone.

However, a good metaphor should express the fundamental differences which put unconditioned and mutual respect to a genuine test on the one hand but without wanting to destroy this respect on the other. Perhaps these differences are less relevant to us relativistic Dutchmen and women, but they are real all the same. Orthodox theology and culture are different and not only challenge but hurt some main tenets of our Western theology and culture. This should be taken into consideration too.

Meanwhile, we may find comfort in the words of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who said that the possibility is of a higher quality than reality itself. The things which are possible are plural, surprising and new, while that what exists here and now is what it is nothing less and nothing more. This insight is a nice and modern version of the old *Deus semper maior* – God is always bigger – of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: the depth of reality greatly surpasses our infinite yet limited human understanding. A rich, surprising and bright future, therefore, awaits us.