

# Dogmatic History as an Ecumenical Task

By A. Edward Siecienski\*

The word “ecumenical” elicits a variety of emotions in the Orthodox world, some of them rather negative. While many celebrate the achievements of recent dialogues, like those that took place at Ravenna, Chieti, and Alexandria, others bemoan any participation in the ecumenical movement as a betrayal of the Orthodox faith, where truth is sacrificed at the altar of tolerance. In this latter group are those who condemn the “pan-heresy” of ecumenism despite the Holy and Great Council’s clear teaching that ecumenism is an essential part of Orthodoxy’s mission in the world, that is, to seek “the unity of all Christians on the basis of the truth of the faith and tradition of the ancient Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils”<sup>1</sup>. According to the Council it is not a task we can choose to ignore, and it is certainly not one we can condemn “under the pretext of maintaining or allegedly defending true Orthodoxy”<sup>2</sup>.

While meetings of hierarchs and theologians are usually the chief markers along the ecumenical road –we think, for example, of the 1964 meeting of Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem– the truth is that these milestones would not have occurred without the work of biblical scholars, theologians, and historians who paved the way forward chiefly by looking back. It is not an accident, for example, that the years before the Jerusalem meeting saw the publication of Francis Dvornik’s monumental study on the so-called Photian Schism, which definitively put to bed the long-standing and corrosive view of Photios

---

\* A. Edward Siecienski is Professor of Religion and the Clement and Helen Pappas Professor of Byzantine Culture and Religion at Stockton University in New Jersey, U.S.A.

1. “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World,” <https://www.holycouncil.org/rest-of-christian-world> [10.5.2023].

2. Ibid.

in Catholic circles<sup>3</sup>. John Meyendorff's edited book on the primacy of Peter, first released in 1963, while not an ecumenical work *per se*, began the process of evaluating the person and ministry of Peter freed from the polemics that had dominated Orthodox thinking on the papacy since the Fourth Crusade<sup>4</sup>.

This scholarship was aimed at a more objective examination of Christian history than was possible in the poisoned atmosphere of earlier years, when polemicists, many of whom exercised an appalling lack of Christian charity, dictated the agenda. For centuries Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians read history solely to prove their denominational claims, maintaining that their respective positions could be validated by a carefully curated selection of proof-texts. The results rarely surprised – Catholics found ample proof of the pope's infallibility and universal jurisdiction during the patristic period, while Orthodox and Protestant Christians brought forward the ghosts of Popes Virgilius and Honorius to prove them wrong. History was simply another weapon to be used in the battle one against the other.

But this is not the experience of most modern scholars, at least those I have been fortunate enough to know, work with, and profit from. For example, my last book could not have been written without the friendship and cooperation of three scholars in particular – Chris Schabel, a Latin Catholic, Yury Avvakumov, an Eastern Catholic, and Demetrios Bathrellos, an Orthodox priest. Studying the issues that have long divided the Christian East and West –the *filioque*, papal primacy, azymes, Purgatory– one discerns in twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship a clear shift in intent. No longer is church history studied for denominational aggrandizement, but rather for a better objective understanding of the facts. Often this has necessitated an *Aufklärung*, or “clearing away” of old biases and prejudices and called for a new cooperation among scholars of different churches. In examining the history of those doctrines that have historically divided Christians,

---

3. Fr. Dvornik, *The Photian Schism: History and Legend*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1948.

4. J. Meyendorff (ed.), *The Primacy of Peter: Essays in Ecclesiology and the Early Church*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York 1992.

Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant scholars now find themselves engaged in a common struggle to understand not only the genesis of these divisions, but also the various theological and ecclesiastical attempts to overcome them.

In this paper I would like to address four ways that the work of these scholars, especially those engaged in dogmatic history, can be regarded as genuinely “ecumenical” even if the scholars themselves are not engaged in ecumenism, properly speaking. In short, I maintain that dogmatic history has increasingly become a sort of ecumenical workspace in which the catholicity of the Church is witnessed in the scholarly cooperation of Christians of all denominations.

The first way modern church history, and in particular dogmatic history, has contributed to ecumenism is in the way it has stressed the catholicity of the church far more than previous generations. I can remember being a theological student in the 1980’s and taking a course called the *History of Christian Thought*. We studied the Church fathers, and even the Great Schism, but after 1054 developments in the Christian East were never mentioned. Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, the Athonite fathers, none were part of the curriculum. When I was asked to review a small book on church history a few years later, I discovered the same dynamic at play, and I wrote to the publisher saying: “If you wanted to write an introduction to the history of the western church, you have succeeded, but if you wanted a history of the universal church you have failed spectacularly”.

Lest we think that this dynamic only applies to the West, we should remember that as far back as the Council of Ferrara-Florence the Greek delegates on several occasions pleaded their ignorance of the Western fathers, and of theological developments in the post-Schism West<sup>5</sup>. Figures like Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas were denounced

---

5. At the Council, when the emperor asked the Greek delegates for their opinion on the authenticity of the Latin writers the majority declared: “Till now we have never known the Latin saints nor read them”. See J. Gill (ed.), *Quae supersunt Actorum Graecorum Concilii Florentini: Res Florentinae gestae*, CF 5, 2, 2, Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, Roma 1953, p. 427; V. Laurent (ed.), *Les «Mémoires» du Grand Ecclésiarque de l’Église de Constantinople Sylvestre Syropoulos sur le Concile de Florence (1438-1439)*, CF 9, Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris 1971, p. 440.

rather than studied, with all post-Augustinian thought labeled somehow incompatible with the Orthodox tradition<sup>6</sup>.

Of course, early attempts by historians to be more inclusive did not go perfectly. The first generation of scholars that did try to understand the so-called “other side” often failed to shed their preconceptions. One thinks, for example, of Adrian Fortescue’s remarkably uncharitable and patently false description of Photios in the 1917 Catholic Encyclopedia<sup>7</sup>. Even more objective scholars such as Joseph Gill, whose work on the Council of Florence remains, in many ways, unsurpassed, could not escape making certain erroneous conclusions based on a jaundiced view of Mark of Ephesus<sup>8</sup>. From the Orthodox side, early attempts to understand Latin thought led many scholars to denounce scholasticism as a peculiarly Western invention, allegedly antithetical to Orthodoxy, despite the extensive use of syllogistic reasoning by figures like Photios and Nilos Cabasilas.

Thankfully, this state of affairs began to change in the mid to late twentieth century, thanks to both Catholic and Orthodox writers who began to see the impossibility (and inadvisability) of ignoring half the Christian world. One thinks, for example, of Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou and the publication of the *Sources Chrétiennes* in the 1940s,

---

6. See, for example, J. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin*, transl. George S. Gabriel, Zephyr Publishing, Ridgewood, NJ 2002.

7. The article described Photios’s “insatiable ambition, his determination to obtain and keep the patriarchal see, [which] led him to the extreme of dishonesty [...]. To keep this place Photius descended to the lowest depth of deceit. At the very time he was protesting his obedience to the pope he was dictating to the emperor insolent letters that denied all papal jurisdiction [...]. He stops at nothing in his war against the Latins. He heaps up accusations against them that he must have known were lies. His effrontery on occasions is almost incredible”.

8. Gill believed that Florence was “a success that failed” and that “if some one cause is to be assigned” for its failure “that cause was Mark Eugenikos, metropolitan of Ephesus”. For Gill, Mark was an inveterate anti-Latin who was so “impervious to argument” that he convinced himself that all the Latin sources must be spurious because they contradicted his own understanding. His “obstinacy” and “rigid abstention” served as a “permanent reproof” for the Greek delegation (who were not of a “high intellectual calibre”), leaving them “with the feeling that they had betrayed the tradition of their Church”. J. Gill, *Personalities of the Council of Florence and Other Essays*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1964, pp. 62-64.

which they explicitly linked to reproachment with the Orthodox<sup>9</sup>. Not only was there a heavy emphasis placed on the Greek fathers, but also the inclusion of post-schism Eastern figures like Symeon the New Theologian, Nicholas Cabasilas, and Nicéas Stéthatos. In the East, studies like those of Marcus Plested on *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*<sup>10</sup> and the Fordham Conference on Orthodox Readings of Augustine<sup>11</sup> genuinely tried to understand and engage these important Western figures rather than rely on older, and perhaps more biased, views.

Thankfully, in today's world there are few, if any, scholars who would think it possible to write a history of "the church" without a genuine engagement with the whole ecumene. Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox historians are today united by the belief that engagement with the church's history means that no part of it can be ignored. As Robert Louis Wilken observed, as "late as the 1940's it was assumed, at least among most Protestant thinkers that the chief points of reference for theology were the Bible, the Reformers, and the nineteenth-century thinkers. There would be an occasional genuflection in the direction of Augustine or Anselm of Canterbury, but the Greek Church Fathers, the Byzantines, and the medievals were seldom part of the conversation. Today it is unthinkable that one can do serious theological work without reference to the full sweep of the classical Christian tradition"<sup>12</sup>.

Naturally this has meant engaging with beliefs and figures that differ from those of one's own faith tradition – Catholics reading Luther, Protestants reading Palamas, Orthodox reading Wesley. And while an earlier generation might have been tempted to dismiss the writings of these so-called "heretics," modern scholars have discovered something astounding within. Luther could write beautifully of the *Theotokos*, as he

---

9. De Lubac later recalled that the series was originally conceived by Rev. Victor Fontoynt as "an instrument of rapprochement with the Orthodox Churches". H. de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned His Writings*, transl. Anne Englund, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1993, p. 94.

10. M. Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

11. G. E. Demacopoulos and Ar. Papanikolaou (eds.), *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York 2008.

12. R. L. Wilken, "Jaroslav Pelikan, Doctor Ecclesiae," *First Things* (August 2006); <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/08/jaroslav-pelikan-doctor-ecclesiae>. [10.5.2024].

did in his commentary on the Magnificat<sup>13</sup>. Wesley seemed to understand and teach *theosis*<sup>14</sup>, and Palamas may have actually read and utilized the writings of Augustine on the Trinity<sup>15</sup>. While earlier generations were happy to ignore or see only difference, this new re-engagement between the East and West has discovered a hitherto unimagined level of convergence.

The second way church history can be seen as ecumenical is in its methodology. Although there is legitimate disagreement surrounding the possibility of any reading of history being genuinely “objective”, over the last century Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox scholars engaged in writing church or dogmatic history have increasingly tried to shun the biases of the past. Some of this was, of course, necessary, as modern scholarship made certain older views historically untenable. For example, one could not, as a Catholic, hold to Fortesque’s view of Photios in light of the evidence produced by Dvornik. One could not, as an Orthodox Christian, claim that the Greek delegates at Florence were starved into submission and prevented from speaking freely after the work of Joseph Gill<sup>16</sup>.

Yet there is a deeper reason for this shift, and it had to do with increased engagement and cooperation between scholars of different denominations, who began to use each other’s work in their own. It is interesting, for example, to note the Catholic response to the work of Lutheran theologian Oscar Cullman. Cullman, whose 1953 book *Petrus, Jünger, Apostel, Martyrer: das historische und das theologische Petrus-problem*, discussed the origins of the papacy in non-polemic terms, although he came to conclusions that seemingly challenged traditional Catholic

13. M. Luther, “The Magnificat”, in: Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis 1956.

14. See, for example, S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (ed.), *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York 2002.

15. R. Flogaus, “Palamas and Barlaam Revisited: A Reassessment of East and West in the Hesychast Controversy of 14th Century Byzantium”, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 42, 1 (1998), pp. 1-32; idem, “Inspiration-Exploitation-Distortion: The Use of St. Augustine in the Hesychast Controversy”, in: Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou (eds.), *Orthodox Readings of Augustine, op.cit.*, pp. 63-80.

16. See especially J. Gill, “The Freedom of the Greeks in the Council of Florence”, *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 12 (1969/70), pp. 226-236.

views<sup>17</sup>. Rather than denunciations Catholic scholars engaged Cullman in dialogue, even if they eventually disagreed with him<sup>18</sup>. Cullman's work was eventually used as a jumping off point in official dialogues, including the Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic book on *Peter in the New Testament*<sup>19</sup>.

This same dynamic occurred in Orthodoxy, especially in those countries where Catholics and Orthodox lived side by side. Think, for example, of the contributions of Afanasiev's eucharistic ecclesiology to the work of Henri de Lubac and Vatican II, which, according to Louis Bouyer "put a finger on an essential point, which is, as it were, the key to the ecclesiology of the New Testament and the earliest fathers"<sup>20</sup>. On the other side, Orthodox scholars profited by the renewal of trinitarian studies following the publication of Karl Rahner's *The Trinity*, even if they criticized certain conclusions he drew in the work<sup>21</sup>. John Zizioulas, for example, praised Rahner for re-discovering the biblical and patristic truth that the "unity of God, the one God, and the ontological principle or cause of the being and life of God does not consist in the substance of God but in the hypostasis, that is, the person of the Father"<sup>22</sup>. Simply put, in their common labours Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox scholars are not simply learning *about* each other, they are learning *from* each other.

A third way dogmatic history has become increasingly ecumenical is the growing number of people, from a wide variety of Christians denominations, who are engaged in it. I speak here chiefly from my own experience in the United States, where a field like patristics was historically dominated by Catholic and Orthodox scholars, although a few notable Protestant exceptions (such as Everett Ferguson) must be

---

17. O. Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr: a historical and theological study*, transl. Floyd Filson, SCM Press, London 1961.

18. See, for example, Ot. Karrer, *Peter and the Church: An Examination of Cullman's Thesis*, Herder and Herder, New York 1963.

19. R. Brown, K. Donfried, and J. Reumann (eds.), *Peter in the New Testament*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis 1973.

20. L. Bouyer, *The Church of God: Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit*, transl. Charles Underhill Quinn, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, IL 1982, p. 142.

21. K. Rahner, *The Trinity*, transl. Joseph Donceel, Herder and Herder, New York 1970.

22. J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York 1985, p. 40.



made. However, over the last 25 years things have begun to change, and the number of Protestant, and particularly Evangelical, scholars engaged in patristics, has risen dramatically. The Church Fathers are being read and studied as biblical commentators, whose grasp of Scripture is something Evangelical Christians genuinely appreciate. It is not an accident that a series like the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* was published by IVP, an Evangelical Publishing House under the direction of a Thomas Oden, a Methodist theologian.

Some might claim that this is nothing new. After all, Adolf von Harnack wrote his magisterial *Dogmengeschichte* over a century ago, and he was a Protestant. This is true, but I would not be the first person to point out that von Harnack, for all his greatness, was hardly a model of objectivity. Yes, von Harnack chronicled the development of Christian teaching, but only to demonstrate the corruption of Christian dogma that occurred when the pure seed of the gospel took root in the soils of Hellenism. For von Harnack, Roman Catholicism was nothing more than the Roman Empire in fancy dress, where once-free Christians subjected their souls to the despotic orders of the Roman papal king. Orthodoxy, he wrote, was even worse, for this church, with “its priests and its cult, with all its vessels, saints, vestments, pictures and amulets, with its ordinances of fasting and its festivals, has absolutely nothing to do with the religion of Christ. It is the religion of the ancient world, tacked on to certain conceptions in the Gospel; or rather, it is the ancient religion with the Gospel absorbed into it”<sup>23</sup>.

Compare this to the conclusions of Jaroslav Pelikan, whose 5-volume *Christian Tradition* in many ways tried to improve upon the work of von Harnack. Completed while he was still a Lutheran –Pelikan would convert to Orthodoxy in 1998– *The Christian Tradition* became the gold standard for dogmatic history in the English-speaking world<sup>24</sup>. In the United States it is currently used in Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant seminaries, and one would be hard pressed to find the smallest hint of

---

23. A. von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, transl. Thomas Bailey Saunders, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York 1901, p. 241.

24. J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols, University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 1971-91.



denominational bias in any bit of it. Pelikan saw himself as a “teacher of the Church”, not as the apologist for any one denomination, and in doing so became a model for all Christian scholars of what a dogmatic historian should be.

The fourth way dogmatic history is ecumenical is perhaps the one that can be the most controversial, for it involves the belief that by looking back into the church’s past one can, perhaps, find new avenues forward, especially along the path to unity. Dogmatic history need not be explicitly “ecumenical” in order to do this, although many dogmatic historians, and here I would include myself, do focus their work on trying to understand and solve issues that are ecumenically problematic. The *filioque*, the papacy, azymes, purgatory, clerical celibacy – these are issues that have historically divided the Eastern and Western churches. Yet understanding the genesis of these disputes, the theological and non-theological factors that helped them to become church-dividing issues, and the figures on both sides whose writings may offer a way out – these are precisely what dogmatic historians can offer.

I will cite but two examples from my own work. The first concerns the *filioque* and those authors such as Maximos the Confessor, Gregory of Cyprus and Gregory Palamas who, even as late as the Council of Florence offered a way out of the dialectic that had grown up between procession “from the Father and the Son” and “from the Father alone”<sup>25</sup>. Recently, both in Vatican Statements and in dialogues between the two churches, the writings of these three authors are explicitly cited as the most promising path forward for finally resolving the longstanding dispute<sup>26</sup>. Re-discovering the riches of the past offers new possibilities for the future. Moving forward by looking back.

---

25. See A. E. Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

26. “According to St Maximos, echoing Rome, the *filioque* does not concern the ἐκπόρευσις of the Spirit issued from the Father as source of the Trinity, but manifests his προῖέναι (*processio*) in the consubstantial communion of the Father and the Son, while excluding any possible subordinationist interpretation of the Father’s Monarchy”. English translation found in: “The Greek and Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit”, *Catholic International* 7 (1996), pp. 36-43.

The second concerns the papacy, and the biblical, patristic, and historical material that all sides use in their efforts to understand the question<sup>27</sup>. There is no doubt that disagreement still exists over some key questions, but what is remarkable is that these more often stem from diverse understandings of the materials themselves rather than from a denominational reading of it. And while the gordian knot of Vatican I will not easily be undone, one can look to Patriarch Manuel II's plan for establishing union, laid out in 1253 and approved by Pope Innocent IV, as a potential way of re-imagining the exercise of the papal office as it pertains to the Christian East<sup>28</sup>. Even on the level of the official dialogues, the agreed statements at Ravenna, Chieti, and Alexandria all achieved something because they used the past as a basis for future cooperation<sup>29</sup>.

27. See A. E. Siecienski, *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

28. The plan involved restoration of the pope's name in the dyptichs, "complete acknowledgement and profession" of Rome's primacy over the other patriarchal sees, and recognition of its right to hear appeals from Greek clergy. In disputed matters of faith the pope's decisions were to receive "canonical obedience" from all "provided they did not oppose the gospel and the canonical precepts". At councils the pope would have the right to "give his opinion before others, [...] have precedence in proposing his judgment", and on all decrees he shall have "the first place and the first signature". In return, the emperor and patriarch asked only for the return of Constantinople and the restoration of Greek bishops to those sees now held by their Latin counterparts". T. T. Haluščynskij and M. M. Wojnar (eds.), *Acta Alexandri PP VI (1254-1261)*, Typis Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae, Roma 1966, p. 28; Engl. transl. J. Gill, *Byzantium and the Papacy 1198-1400*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick NJ 1979, pp. 92-93.

29. English translation of the Ravenna Document: "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity, and Authority" in: John Chryssavgis (ed.), *Primacy in the Church*, vol. 1, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, NY 2016, pp. 405-420. For Chieti: "Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church", <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese1.html>. For Alexandria: "Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today", <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/document-d-alexandrie---synodalite-et-primaute-au-deuxieme-mille.html> [10.05.2023].

All that said, one must be careful of the temptation to write off the disagreements of the past as either “linguistic misunderstandings” or “steeped in prejudice”, that can solved today simply because we know more than our forebears. It is, perhaps, among the chief sins of modernity to assume that we are somehow better and smarter than the ancients just because we have the benefit of hindsight. A true ecumenism must avoid both the Scylla of “least-common denominator” joint statements that gloss over genuine differences, and the Charybdis of anti-ecumenical thought that believes our differences are insoluble and always have been. History teaches us that both approaches are incredibly unhelpful, and perhaps no-one knows this better than the people who study it.

Regardless of how one feels about “ecumenism” *per se*, there is no doubt that the Orthodox Church has benefited from the more “ecumenical” or “universal” approach to dogmatic history I have described. The Orthodox have been broadened in discussion with their fellow Christians and have been able to give the rest of the Christian world a taste of the *orientale lumen*. That is, they have both taught and learned. If, in this study of history, we can also advance the unity of Christians, a goal towards which Christ himself prayed on the night before his death, then we will have done the church an inestimable service.