

Father Daniel Degyansky

ORTHODOX
CHRISTIANITY
and the Spirit of
Contemporary
Ecumenism

Edited by
Bishop Auxentios of Photiki



CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST
ORTHODOX STUDIES

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Second Edition

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Foreword by
Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna



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FOREWORD

It was with some pleasure that I first read Father Degyansky's essay on the ecumenical movement and the Orthodox Church. This is a difficult subject and there are few individuals who approach it with a moderate spirit. All too often, those who are directly involved in the ecumenical movement have such a deep personal investment in its activities that they not only lose their objectivity, but are resistant to the entreaties of anyone who would call the movement into question. Since ecumenism has taken on the colors of a crusade, some of its more avid advocates have come to think of those who do not march enthusiastically under its banner as the "enemy": narrow-minded, unthinking bigots who wallow in the mud of religious intolerance and who cannot see beyond the confines of their own sectarian thinking. On the other hand, not a few of those who have criticized ecumenism have done so not because of doubts about its real aims and goals, but because they are indeed militant individuals of a sectarian mind who cannot imagine that a firm commitment to what they understand to be the truth can—indeed must—acknowledge and respect the right of others to think wrongly or differently. In circumstances where the advocates of toleration have created a tyranny of relativism and the meanderings of bigots have served to obfuscate the inconsistency of that tyranny, a moderate voice is, once more, a delight indeed.

No doubt some readers, having read what I just wrote about Father Degyansky's moderation, will proceed to read his analysis of the contemporary ecumenical movement and conclude that I am wrong in my observations. He does, to be sure, argue that the Orthodox Church has compromised itself by participating in ecumenical worship services and in prayer with the non-Orthodox. He cites evidence that the ecumenical movement has often compromised itself with political and social agendas that violate its stated purposes. And some of the material which he quotes comes

from Orthodox sources which are, in my mind, beset by an intolerance and a lack of charity inconsistent with basic Christian precepts. But the Orthodox Church should not be convicted of bigotry simply because it believes itself to be the criterion of Christianity, of truth itself, especially since its traditions and worship date to the earliest Christian times. Nor can one call the Church's Canons intolerant when they forbid believers to pray with the heterodox, in order to avoid compromising the purity of the truth with its adulterated derivatives, but nonetheless unremittingly exhort the Faithful to pray for those outside the Church. And while one might regret the witness of certain Orthodox extremists, their overstatement of facts does not impugn the truth of the facts which they adduce in support of their hyperboles. Again, it is only the spirit of modern ecumenism and its tyrannical relativism which make of perfectly rational claims to ecclesiastical primacy the stuff of religious bigotry.

Orthodox critics of the ecumenical movement, then, must not be measured against the claims of ecumenical relativists or the recalcitrance of Orthodox extremists. The objective observer must understand that a moderate attitude towards ecumenism cannot violate the boundaries of our Faith. Our moderation has to be seen in context. And in context, it is not we Orthodox critics of the ecumenical movement who are guilty of bigotry, but many ecumenists themselves. As a Greek Old Calendarist, a few years before the advent of the ecumenical movement I would have been hailed as a conservative man of conscience for not violating the Canons of my Church by participating in common worship with the heterodox—one of the “true” Orthodox believers, as even today the man on the Greek street refers to the Old Calendarist zealots. And no one would have assumed that, because of my strong Orthodoxy, I was an enemy of religious tolerance. Today, however, ecumenism has changed things; in fact, it has changed the Orthodox Church itself in a very subtle but divisive way.

Under the communist yoke of Eastern Europe, many Orthodox Hierarchs became the toadies of their atheistic rulers. Seeking to show that they were tolerant of religion and, as recent revelations have shown, to expand their espionage network through operatives in the Church, the communist régimes of the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries provided support for ecumenical contacts between Orthodox Church leaders and the religious leaders of the West. These “agents in cassocks” often became the “official” spokesmen for Eastern European Orthodoxy in such bodies as the World Council of Churches. Joined by the Patriarch of Constantinople, who hoped to court Western sympathy for his plight in the ghetto of the Phanar in hostile Turkey, these leaders were all too quick to violate their Church’s Canons. The Soviet and other Eastern bloc Bishops were malleable to the point of betraying their Faith. Constantinople and its wealthy American and Western European Exarchates were also willing to compromise the very structure of the Faith, becoming the Church of the “Pope of the East” and thereby creating an “official” Orthodoxy in world ecumenism which has disenfranchised us traditionalists. Seeing what these “official” Orthodox representatives will do in the name of ecumenism, we traditionalist Orthodox seem, by comparison, anti—everything good and upright. Our anti—ecumenism meets with the flat disapproval both of Orthodox ecumenists and heterodox who are accustomed to dealing with Orthodox who have set aside the limits imposed by our Faith.

As the victims of ecumenical politics, we traditionalist Orthodox, as I have said, are the ones who should raise our voices in complaint. We have a right to stand and to say that we are not bigots. We are not advocates of religious intolerance. In fact, many of us believe that the primacy of the Orthodox Church need not be a stumbling—block to dialogue with the non—Orthodox Christian world, but a point of attraction. For we who are of moderate spirit hold to our beliefs not out of arrogance, but out

of love for our traditions. We do not think that we hold in our hands something which is ours, but which is universal, catholic, and the domain of all those who confess Christ. We, in the end analysis, are the ecumenists, for we have maintained the integrity of the Faith at the same time that we offer it to others in the pure form in which it was handed down to us from the Apostles. We have not succumbed to that “officialdom” of the world by which Christianity is deadened. We have not preached with words that are betrayed by our actions: of intolerant relativism in the name of mutual understanding, of apostasy in the name of love, or of unity among men at the cost of those precepts which unite us first to God.

If the moderation of his traditionalist Orthodox response to ecumenism is lost on the reader, this is not the fault of Father Degyansky, then, but the fault of ecumenism itself. For his words convict the spirit of contemporary ecumenism of hypocrisy and misrepresentation. Those who are true lovers of toleration and mutual respect between men and women of different faiths—and I do not doubt that this includes many people who sincerely but blindly embrace the ecumenical movement, not knowing its true nature—will find in this book the true Orthodoxy which ecumenical “officialdom” has silenced. Finding false ecumenism unmasked, they will also no doubt rejoice that voices of true ecumenism, true toleration, still abound.

*Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna and
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From his “Foreword” to the book