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# Orthodoxy in Engagement with the ‘Outer’ World. The Dynamic of the ‘Inward-Outward’ Cycle

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Received: 24 May 2017; Accepted: 20 July 2017; Published: 26 July 2017

**Abstract:** This study explores the tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces informing the activity of the Orthodox Church—both with regard to its interaction with the secular world and the wider ecumenical scene. The Church is called to look inwardly as an essential connection with its intimate sacramental life. This contraction must be followed organically by a movement of expansion—a continuing sacramental interaction with the secular local context and the wider Christian world. This cyclical movement (inward-outward) informs all Christian life in a mutually perpetuating rotation. Although the reaction to any engagement with the ‘outer’ dimensions is often one of rejection, it is nevertheless crucial as it brings fullness and fulfils the vocation and identity of the Orthodox Church.

**Keywords:** practical theology; ecumenism; Orthodoxy

## 1. Introduction

An attempt to construe both practical theology and ecumenism from an Orthodox point of view—in conjunction—was first occasioned, in my case, some fourteen years ago, while studying for a Master of Arts in Pastoral Theology in Cambridge. Not only was I—a lay Romanian student—to gauge and examine my own involvement within the pastoral component of my native Orthodox context, but I was challenged to do so in the uniquely ecumenical context of learning in the Cambridge Theological Federation. What started, however, as a thankless, overwhelmingly intricate task, gave rise to some significant realisations that inspired much of my subsequent understanding of theology. Having also been involved for quite some time in a number of ecumenical milieus and blessed with having acquired a number of inspiring friendships across the world, not far into my research I came to the understanding that ecumenism deals primarily with the inter-relationship between people. That, despite being generally perceived as having a ‘wider’ global, international, inter-denominational orientation, ecumenism starts at the personal level of every Christian. Ecumenism does not seek unity for the sake of unity alone, or as the goal of an established programme or agenda, but it seeks the communion in friendship and love of the Triune God, for sharing the mystery of the one Body of Christ. Ecumenism also springs out of love and concern for our fellow human beings’ salvation and wellbeing. In its essence—I came to realise—the ecumenical vector is akin to pastoral care, it is a ministry, a type of pastoral care that attempts to reach beyond the parish, the diocese, the denomination, and into the wider *oikumene*. ‘Ecumenical’ equals ‘pastoral’ in a wider-reaching sense.

As we will see in the following section, one of the assumptions of Orthodox theology is that all theology is in fact ‘pastoral’ or ‘practical’. An initial mention should be made that the term ‘pastoral theology’ is not used here in its customary Orthodox understanding, which would place it in immediate correlation with the work of the ministers of the Church (priests, deacons or bishops). ‘Pastoral’ is used here in its traditionally Protestant British understanding where it refers to practices that ‘bear upon or form a concern for the Christian community’ (Woodward and Stephen 2000, p. 6). This communitarian,

society-oriented focus is of particular usefulness to this study—as is the implicit connection between pastoral and practical theology. Indeed, in the British context, the terms ‘practical theology’ and ‘pastoral theology’ are interdependent to such a degree that they are often used interchangeably or as a twin concept. While being a branch of practical theology, pastoral theology is arguably its most vital and relevant form of expression as it addresses the immediate and stringent necessities of society. Again, this communitarian focus is of particular relevance in the context of this study, given its specific aim, and so the terms ‘practical’ and ‘pastoral’ will be used here in close association.

If all theology is presumed thus to be ‘pastoral’ or ‘practical’, by the same token it can also be said that all theology has an ecumenical imperative—as will be shown in the second part of this study. Both for practical theology and for ecumenism, there is an emphasis on contextuality, praxis (the practice of theology as opposed to its theoretical approach), and action. To be ecumenical is understood to imply common action, social involvement, a contextual approach (both to groups and individuals), which are also the very goals of pastoral/practical theology/care. A distinctive element in the case of ecumenism is the search for unity, for the catholicity of the Church of Christ, but this is a calling to all theology, irrespective of its focus. Thus, simply doing theology—in its original plenary ‘holistic’ understanding, as participatory endeavor—means implicitly to be at the same time pastoral and ecumenical.

However, Orthodox theology presents baffling internal tensions in both its practical and ecumenical dimensions. When doing practical theology, the Orthodox waver between the calling to personal intimate prayer, between prayer within the context of the local liturgical congregation and the outer involvement within the wider Church community and society at large. This is not only demonstrated by what seems to be an insistence on liturgical and spiritual life, but also by the rather more diffident unstructured approach the Orthodox seem to have towards social involvement. The Orthodox Church has received a degree of criticism for being overly ‘other-worldly’, with a ‘tendency to look inwards and “above” the affairs of this world, thus not focusing on direct missionary action or social service’ (Molokotos-Liederman 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Its ‘established reputation’, according to John Meyendorff, ‘consists in its purported detachment from historical realities, its concern with mysticism, its one-sided dedication to liturgical contemplation of eternal truths, and its forgetfulness of the concrete needs of human society, as such’ (Meyendorff 1979, p. 118). This is something that influential Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky also mentioned when referring to the Russian Orthodox context where, in his view, ‘there was no important movement of social Christianity’ (Belopopsky 2003)<sup>2</sup>.

As regards the Orthodox Church’s relation to ecumenism, this is widely regarded as a ‘problem’ or predicament. The dilemma and associated Orthodox rationale revolves around the strong Orthodox belief that the Orthodox Church is the ‘one, holy and catholic’ Church. This simple algorithm follows a clear-cut logic: the Orthodox Church is the one, true Church of Christ, and, since there can be only one Church of Christ (not several ‘churches’ of Christ), the churches that are not Orthodox are simply outside the one true Church. Reunion of Christians would implicitly mean for the non-Orthodox re-joining the one true Church—the Orthodox Church. Ecumenism, as a move towards the reunion of Christians, can therefore only mean the re-joining of and reunion with the Orthodox Church.

A small—though not fringe or insignificant—and certainly very vocal contingent of Orthodox anti-ecumenists view the mere participation of the Orthodox in ecumenical meetings as a betrayal of their identity and of the truth of faith. In general lines, they accuse Orthodox participants in ecumenical circles of conceding too easily to the dominant Protestant ethos. They argue that this has led to a ‘diluted’ expression of genuine Orthodox ecclesiology, and to the presentation of two contradictory views: on the one hand to an affirmation of the Orthodox Church as the One, True Church, but on the other,

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<sup>1</sup> An article based on research commissioned by the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) between 2008 and 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Paper initially presented (in an earlier version) at the Cambridge Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, UK, 2003.

to an acceptance of a 'plurality' of Churches as part of the Christian world. It is often implied that such contradictions may lead to a rupture or schism within the Orthodox Church or may compromise its integrity. As for the non-Orthodox, these are often described by the anti-ecumenical groups as perilous 'heretics', who attempt somehow to corrupt the purity of the Church. They are 'enemies' or devious adversaries, no longer viewed as our neighbours or fellow Christians.

Again we see here an instinctual reaction of rejection of any outward movement towards the reality situated outside of what are perceived to be ecclesiological borders of the Orthodox Church. The focus tends to be 'inwards', whereas the outward vector is viewed with suspicion and uncertainty. The outside world is once again shut out as a foregone peril and a risky commitment that ought to be avoided. The ensuing problem here—as this study suggests—is not simply an incomplete or insufficient participation of the Orthodox in societal action or ecumenical exchange, however regrettable such shortcomings may be.

The issue is that, in both cases of social and catholicity-bound orientation, failure to engage 'outwards' represents a betrayal of true Orthodox theological commitment and neglect of the original calling of Orthodoxy, which seeks not only to safeguard and internalise the truth of faith, but also to share it with the world in the spirit of love, courage and hope. As we will see below, even when seen as inheritance of 'pure' Christianity and cherished treasure and gift from Christ, Orthodoxy was nonetheless granted to the Orthodox to share and witness with the whole world, with the entire humanity—both closer-by in the societies they live in, but also farther apart in the more distant human quarters. This is not an optional or redundant vector, and failure to understand and follow this calling equates with a major identity crisis for the Orthodox. The inward focus must be followed by an outward movement—in a continuous pulsation—which is what this study will attempt to demonstrate.

## 2. Inwards and Outwards in Orthodox Practical Theology

When addressing practical theology—as well as pretty much every other theological theme—the Orthodox will often start by talking about their life in the Church or about praying for each other. Orthodox scholar John Jillions identifies two essential aspects of Orthodox pastoral theology: 'liturgical life ('where two or three are gathered', Mt. 18:20) and the inner life ('go into your room and shut the door', Mt. 6:6)' (Jillions 2003, p. 164). Each of these aspects, in Jillions' view, reinforces the other (Jillions 2003, p. 164.). For a non-Orthodox this approach may hardly seem convincing, as attendance of Church services and praying for one another does little in practical terms for helping our brothers and sisters in need. After all, 'practical' or 'pastoral' implies an interaction with the others, something that happens outside of oneself, something to do with reaching out to the others. And yet the Orthodox tend to start from inner life, from a withdrawal within. This approach reveals a fundamental tension in Orthodox theology between gathering within the protective space of the Church and engaging with the world, between withdrawal and engagement, between contemplation and praxis. It points to an apparently paradoxical polarity: withdrawal from society, or even rejection of the secular world, but, at the same time, the conscience that the 'outside' secular world needs also be embraced. While these two directions may seem mutually exclusive, they work together as a complementary pair. Mention should be made at this point that this is not, by any means, a tension present only in the Orthodox tradition—as it is bound to underline all Christian thought, irrespective of tradition. Nor is it a novel angle in the field of theology. This study aims to explore how this polarity interplays with the areas of practical/pastoral theology and ecumenism—from an Orthodox vantage point.

This contradictory approach could bring about a certain apathy among Orthodox faithful with regard to their practical social involvement—and we saw earlier that a number of Orthodox theologians think this to be the case. However, in its proper understanding, liturgical life is pastoral *par excellence*, as the Eucharistic liturgy should shape a particular type of community, cultivating in each member of the Church an attitude of self-giving to the other members of the community. As for prayer, this is not properly seen as passive contemplation and individual exercise, but as an inner state generating

action. In an ideal world, prayer should breed and inform both the liturgical life of the faithful and their inner life.

One cannot emphasize enough the centrality of the Liturgy in the Orthodox tradition—seen primarily as a sacramental space, a transfigured universe centred around the mystery of the Eucharist. In the words of Father Georges Florovsky: ‘Christianity is a liturgical religion. The Church is first of all a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second’ (Ware 1964, p. 271). ‘Orthodoxy sees human beings above all else as liturgical creatures’, also wrote celebrated author Kallistos Ware, ‘who are most truly themselves when they glorify God, and who find their perfection and self-fulfilment in worship’ (Ware 1964, p. 272). The Eucharistic Liturgy is not to be seen as self-centred service and action, but as a service for the building of the one Body of Christ. In theory at least, the liturgical assembly is the Father’s House, where the invitation to the banquet of the heavenly bread is constantly voiced and addressed not only to the members of the Church, but also to strangers and to the whole world. This banquet is meant to transport the liturgical community beyond this reality into the life of the Triune God. It is a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven, a journey from our world into the reality of God and back. It is the main channel of communion and communication with God. If we are to recognize the face of Christ in the face of our neighbour, and if we are to show Christ’s responsibility and love to our neighbours, we must be in communion of love with God and always be seeking to deepen still further this life-giving communion. For indeed, ‘this is the nature of love: the more we depart from the centre and do not love God, the more we depart from the neighbour’ (Dorotheus of Gaza and Ciobotea 2001). The spiritual life of the faithful and their individual prayer should be both a preparation for the participation in the Liturgy and, at the same time, a continuation of the prayerful state achieved during the Eucharistic event. In prayer the human being ‘converses with God, he/she enters, through grace, into communion with Him, and lives in God’ (Theophan the Recluse 1966).

Undistinguishable from prayer in the Orthodox tradition is the practice of withdrawn self-examination or *hesychast* life. *Hesychasm* (from the Greek *ἡσυχία*, *hesychia*, meaning ‘silence’ or ‘stillness’) refers to the Eastern tradition of contemplation, as practiced mostly in monastic communities or by hermits, but which remains an injunction for all lay society as well. It is based primarily on Christ’s instruction in Matthew 6:6: ‘But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you’.

Shutting the world out temporarily in quiet and secluded prayer and focusing intently on their ‘secret’ dialogue with God, on their inner spiritual state constitutes for the Orthodox the starting point of all life within the Church. Of course, lay people cannot be *hesychasts* in the same way that monastics can. Too literal an interpretation and application of *hesychasm* could ultimately lead to a dysfunctional life within society. But the community of the Church can use the *hesychast* model of silent still prayer as a paradigm inspiring their spiritual lives. Jillions emphasizes that ‘the invisible but transformed inner life leads to visibly transformed action. [ . . . ] Far from abandoning the world, the transfiguration of the world—society, economics, politics, art, music—becomes possible through Christian praying, living, and acting from within this transfigured inner life’ (Jillions 2003, p. 166). And, referring to the *hesychast* paradigm, Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, also notes that: ‘this activity takes on, at the same time, social character, for when the human person is treated, he/she becomes at once the most sociable of persons’ (Hierotheos 1994, p. 12). Transfiguration through prayer is seen here as a healing process which prepares the Christian for a loving, responsible interaction with his/her neighbours. This, in turn—it is understood—can prompt a gradual change of the entire society.

A significant tension or polarity becomes evident—between the rejection and the embracing of the secular world, between withdrawal from society and its sanctification by bringing Christ’s presence in the midst of the secular world. And the most emphatic model for this tension in the Orthodox world is the polarity between monasticism and life in society. Monasticism represents total and complete devotion to a life in prayer, to a life revolving around the mysteries of the Church. But it is also seen in the Orthodox context as a rejection of the secular world, a world which is inherently bound to

a downward spiral and follows a life different from the life in Christ. Can then Christians be expected to engage with the traitorous secular society in which they live? Is that not, in fact, what Christians are called to do according to the communitarian model they are supposed to follow in their everyday life?

Addressing these two diverging views of the world that Orthodox communities hold, withdrawal and involvement, Orthodox American theologian Stanley Harakas brings a very revealing vision, which addresses not only the monastic universe, but the entire Orthodox society:

One [tendency] is a radical rejection of the world. In this vision only the ‘people of God’ are holy, while the world by definition finds itself in full submission to the demonic. [ . . . ] The other tendency is contrasted to this essential denigration and rejection of the world in what might be called the incarnational vision of the world. Here, the Church sees itself as obligated to reach out to the world, to be somehow a vehicle for injecting at least some measure of the divine in an environment which has rejected it, but which cannot find its own purpose and fulfilment without it. Christian evangelisation seeks to convert it; philanthropy to correct its worst effects upon the lives of people; and social concern to modify its structures for the sake of fairness and justice. (Harakas 1988, pp. 13–14)

It is then in this incarnational vision of the world wherein the Orthodox practical and pastoral theological process takes place, the space in which philanthropy and social concern constitute vehicles for inoculating God’s presence into the world. These two contrasting tendencies are held together in an ‘unresolved, yet mutually influential paradox’ (Harakas 1988, p. 14). Human persons seem to travel tirelessly back and forth between contemplative isolation and immersion in the perilous societal reality, bringing Christ’s divine peace and love to the society, while at the same time carrying the community back with them into the solitude of prayer. While in seclusion, they can only find fullness by relating to the community that speaks of and connects them with God’s triune society. When in the world, they feel like foreigners in an inauspicious secular land, seen as inherently rejecting the truths of faith. In this theological vision, they are rotating incessantly between the two realities and finding sense and strength only in the element of communion—communion with God through the sacraments, as well as the parallel communion with society through a prayerful ministry to the others.

A reconciliation of this apparent contradiction is resolved in the Orthodox world through the special dynamic that exists between monastic communities and the secular world. Monasteries are not closed off to society, their withdrawal does not mean a ‘breaking off’ from the Church community in the city. They are seen as simply drawing to one side to pray, while society is invited outside of its comfort zone to explore such spaces where they can encounter a different paradigm of Christian life. Monasteries do interact with society, sometimes very directly, by organising projects to help the poor, the sick, and the suffering, according to the model of the ancient Basiliades, which were essentially hospitals run by monastic communities. Certainly there is a great deal of spiritual counselling taking place in monastic communities, and people from the secular world often use them as alternatives to secular therapy programmes. Monasticism is not a paradigm whereby a group of people try to save themselves, but it represents a structure that tries to save the world by withdrawing from the world. While this may not always be mirrored by the reality on the ground, this nevertheless constitutes the theological vision that underlies monastic reality in the Orthodox world.

The Orthodox model of pastoral or practical involvement is then not annulled by this tension between the ‘inner’-‘outer’ vectors as a irreconcilable contradiction, but in fact rests on it as a positive constructive complementarity. Orthodox pastoral theology—indeed all theology—is seen as a continuous inward-outward motion, without ever breaking up into its elements. There is not an ‘inward’ without an ‘outward’; there is never any rest or status quo but always a dynamic ceaseless pulsation. A model for such a dynamic model was proposed by Dionisius the Areopagite (5th–6th century AD) in a helpfully visual description:

And the soul hath (1) a circular movement—viz. an introversion from things without and the unified concentration of its spiritual powers—which gives it a kind of fixed revolution,

and, turning it from the multiplicity without, draws it together first into itself. (2) And the soul moves with a spiral motion whensoever (according to its capacity) it is enlightened with truths of Divine Knowledge [ . . . ]. (3) And it moves straight forward when it does not enter into itself to feel the stirrings of its spiritual unity (for this, as I said, is the circular motion), but goes forth unto the things around it and feels an influence coming even from the outward world, as from a rich abundance of cunning tokens, drawing it unto the simple unity of contemplative acts. (Rolt 2007, pp. 98–99)

This three-stage movement is in fact characteristic for any Orthodox approach to theology: the movement within; the movement within is pulled upwards; the circular motion, freed of its inward centripetal drive, turns longitudinally towards the external world. This is repeated in a cycle that characterises the fundamental dynamic of Christian life: ‘retreat to engage’, an individual growth in Christ that is shared with and ‘transferred’ to one’s community. Humans move inward so that they can move outward. Although Dionisius mentions the outward motion as focusing on ‘a rich abundance of tokens’, the internal logic of Orthodox theology implicitly connects this outward movement with human society. There cannot be theologically any action in isolation, but only within the community of the Church, according to the Trinitarian model of God, in the image of whom we humans function—as one multi-hypostatic being.

This possible Orthodox model of practical theology, of societal commitment and ministry focuses first on one’s centripetal movement of inner exploration, on one’s intimate dialogue with Christ in the Trinity. The faithful are thus ‘replenished’ with God’s gift of love, their thoughts and feelings re-calibrated and tuned according to the pattern of the Triune love. The second stage is that of the journey of *theosis*, when the faithful join the communion of the Trinity as the ultimate fulfilment and plenitude of life. This communitarian transcendence takes practitioners to the third stage, when rotation becomes centrifugal and embraces the world and society. This third stage brings completion and gives meaning to the theological act, and is best encapsulated in the liturgical gathering centred around the Eucharist and the sacraments, both inside, within the walls of the church, but also outside the church, in people’s homes and in the squares of the city.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the sacramental life of the Church has two joined dimensions: the ‘sacrament of the altar’ and the ‘sacrament of the neighbour’. The liturgical life and the societal involvement of the faithful are brought into an inseparable complementarity. The Orthodox regard any activity within the Church community—including the pastoral or social one—as implausible, should this not be related or connected to the spiritual, liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. The ‘sacrament of the brother’—the starting point of any pastoral/societal process in the Orthodox context—has its roots in the Eucharistic Liturgy, which it continues and completes. By seeking and achieving deification, by entering into communion with the head of the Church which is Christ, the faithful are implicitly entering into a special and genuine communion with one another. The Church thus becomes a communion of deification, whence union with God starts in communion with the other humans.

Therefore, what may initially seem as a contradiction, becomes the very internal logic of Orthodox pastoral theology. Yes, Orthodox practical theology does start with a ‘self-centred’ movement ‘within’, of prayer and introspection, but only in order to then move ‘without’, towards a selfless communion with the Church community and with the entire society—starting at the local level and advancing in expanding concentric circles to humanity at large, as we will also see next. Like in a breathing movement, the inner vector is to be followed by an outer vector, and then back inwards—ad infinitum. The inner-outer dialectic is not a contradiction but a rotation.

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<sup>3</sup> A more detailed description of this proposed model can be found in “An Orthodox Model of Practical/Pastoral Theology” (Porumb 2017, pp. 127–54).

### 3. Inwards and Outwards in the Orthodox Rapport to Ecumenism

When attempting to define the concept of ‘Orthodoxy’, Orthodox theologians seem to approach it from two main viewpoints: Orthodoxy is seen as a concept antinomic to non-Orthodoxy or heterodoxy; and Orthodoxy is seen as inheritance of and connection to the past, more exactly the Apostolic age and the early centuries of the Church. It is also true that Orthodox scholars are at the same time eager to point out that Orthodoxy is not defined merely as the right alternative to ‘heterodoxies’, but is a concept preceding the appearance of heresies, having its own internal logic and dynamics. In the words of Orthodox writers: ‘Orthodoxy is a living condition, the ceaseless life of the Church’ (Botsis 1980, p. 8); or ‘the true path of faith which has always been carefully preserved in the history of the Church, from of old was called straight, right, [ . . . ] that is, “Orthodoxy”’ (Pomazansky 1994, pp. 23–24). The Orthodox are also keen to emphasize that tradition is not only an inheritance and a connection with the past, but a continuous, dynamic reality inspired by the constant work of the Holy Spirit inside the Church—as we will see below.

It is, however, fair to say that the Orthodox habitually define themselves as defenders of the Apostolic inheritance in the face of erroneous groups. This connection with the legacy of the past is well-known, as the Orthodox see a central importance in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, as well as in the wider and more complex inheritance of the Church—which embraces everything from the importance of the first seven Ecumenical Councils with the role attributed to the Lady Theotokos, to the veneration of the Saints, the Liturgical universe, and all associated rituals, the use of relics and icons, monasticism, fasting, etc.

More importantly, however, the Orthodox Church sees its role in the Christian world as ‘special’ and prophetic, as it alone—it claims—has remained the faithful carrier and witness of the truth of faith, precisely to ultimately call all stranded Christian groups back to the one original Church. In the words of Georges Florovsky: ‘By her inner consciousness the Orthodox Church is bound to claim an exceptional position in divided Christendom. She is also bound to claim for herself an exceptional and peculiar task in all endeavours to overcome the present sore disunity of Christians and to recover that Christian unity which has been given once and has been lost’ (Florovsky 1989, pp. 140–41). Or as Orthodox academic Ioan Sauca put it: ‘The Orthodox Church, by her inner conviction and consciousness, has a special and exceptional position in divided Christendom, as the bearer of and the witness to the tradition of the ancient undivided Church from which all existing denominations stem, by way of reduction and separation’ (Saucu 2004, p. 212).

What then, is the Orthodox Church’s relationship with the ‘divided Christendom’? The Orthodox Church often tends to see other Christians as outside the One Church, their ‘Christian’ character being ‘incomplete’—at best—or even absent, according to some interpretations. The Orthodox Church sees itself as the One Church. Not merely as a continuator of the primal Church, a faithful retainer of its doctrine and ethos, or an inheritor and guardian of the fullness of faith, but *the* Church of the Apostolic age, in all its fullness, unchanged, unbroken and undented. The fact that it now represents only a proportion of the Christian world does not and cannot influence this plenitude, as the fullness of Christ’s faith and truth are more, so to speak, a matter of ‘quality’ rather than ‘quantity’.

When it comes to unity, then, the Orthodox Church does not see it as anything else but the reconstitution of the One Orthodox Church. The only sense it sees in ecumenism is the healing of the schisms that have separated the Christians in the first place. While the Orthodox Church seems to be prepared to accept cultural diversity—which indeed already characterizes the Orthodox universe, made up, as it is, of a multitude of local or national Churches, each with its own characteristic tradition and ethos—it struggles however in accepting a diversity and plurality of churches. ‘The Orthodox cannot accept the idea of a “parity of denominations”’, stated the Orthodox participants following the New Delhi General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961. ‘The Orthodox Church is not a confession, one of many, one among the many’ (World Council of Churches 1999). For the Orthodox, the reunion of Christians means the re-joining of the one true Orthodox Church. The purpose of the

Orthodox participating in ecumenical meetings can only be to try and bring the other denomination back to Orthodoxy.

Yet, this return to Orthodoxy, this ‘conversion’ is not to be seen as submission to some centre of influence: ‘it must not be thought that Orthodox demand the submission of other Christians to a particular centre of power and jurisdiction’, writes Metropolitan Kallistos Ware. ‘Orthodoxy desires their reconciliation not their absorption’ (Ware 1964, p. 317). The other Christians are called essentially to be converted to a way of life—lived according to the doctrines and in the purity of faith of the early Church. This calling to rediscover the purity of Orthodoxy is addressed not only to the non-Orthodox but also to the Orthodox themselves. In the words of Dumitru Staniloae, a major Romanian theologian: ‘Orthodoxy proposes to all Christians a treasure belonging to all and which can serve as a basis for the renewal of all even in the midst of the communities they may belong to. Even the members of the Orthodox Church need to rediscover Orthodoxy’ (De Beauregard and Staniloae 2000, p. 41)<sup>4</sup>.

Orthodoxy, it is believed, has not safeguarded the truth of Christ’s Church *from* the other Christians who are seen as having departed from it and chosen less perfect ways, but, in a sense, *for* them. As a matter of self-identity, Orthodoxy believes it contains within itself, alongside the salvific truth, the structure and model of the Church’s unity, which awaits the return of its separated elements, thus re-accomplishing the quintessential Christ-centred unity and oneness of the Church. ‘Structure’ here refers both to ‘external’ aspects of the organisation of the Orthodox Church—like episcopal structure, hierarchy, conciliar decision-making etc.—and ‘internal’ aspects—like liturgical structure, spiritual practices, teaching etc.<sup>5</sup> Sadly this unifying structure and model of the Orthodox Church(es) works less effectively in practice than in theory, as the Orthodox have some difficulty in gathering together as one Church (see the failed attempt of the Council of Crete, revisited later in this study). However, the truth of faith, Christ himself, cannot bring witness to the world by ignoring the wound and tragedy of division, but struggles continuously to heal and unite. Thus the Orthodox Church should not seek to justify divisions and separate Christians into ‘those who are called’ and ‘those who are no longer called’. Orthodoxy, as the way of life in Christ, by its inherent inner drive and structure, seeks to make itself known in the world, and to unite the world in Christ, according to the model of the Holy Trinity—the supreme structure of unity. Orthodoxy cannot remain detached or indifferent in front of divisions, but it should call for active participation towards unity, as part of its far-reaching aspiration towards renewal and transfiguration of humanity. It ought to address the call to unity not simply to ‘others’ but mainly to itself as the ‘main actor’ in God’s plan of saving humanity.

This is the fundamental tension that becomes evident in the vision that the Orthodox tend to have of Orthodoxy in its relations with ecumenism or with the other Christian traditions: On the one hand, the Orthodox have a tendency to focus on the community of the one true Church, which they perceive to be the Orthodox Church. From this perspective they can hardly summon up any interest towards what is to be found ‘outside’ the Church itself, and lamentably feel little—if any—responsibility towards the various traditions which, despite sharing to a degree the same apostolic tradition, are seen to have veered away from the Church. The ‘ethos’ of these ‘outside’ traditions feels different now, and so do their liturgical and sacramental life in the Church. Thus the responsibility both for the separation and for the efforts invested in a ‘return’ to the former unity of the Church seems to be transferred exclusively—and unjustly—onto the non-Orthodox groups.

On the other hand, Orthodoxy has kept and guarded in fullness the tradition of the early Church in all its complexity—unchanged, it is believed—not only for its own sake, but also—perhaps mostly—for the benefit of the entire humanity, and in particular, it can be argued, for the benefit of its separated

<sup>4</sup> My translation. My Italics.

<sup>5</sup> The Russian document ‘Basic Principles of the Attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church toward the Other Christian Confessions’ states that ‘the Orthodox Church asserts that genuine unity is possible only in the bosom of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church (The Russian Orthodox Church 2000). All other “models” of unity seem to us to be unacceptable.’ Orthodoxy appears thus, in a sense, as the only viable ‘model’ for unity.

brothers and sisters who, though once 'Orthodox', have chosen to be (as the Orthodox often see it), or simply found themselves outside the Church. Ultimately the Orthodox divorce from and the implicit 'excommunication' of the departing groups happened not as a definitive condemnation, 'break up', or definitive dissociation from the outside Christian world. This gesture ultimately had a 'pedagogical' purpose.<sup>6</sup> Whether justified or not, this punitive dismissal was not entirely devoid of love, but aimed at making the 'offending' groups become aware of their mistake, repent, and eventually return to the true faith that they had previously rejected. It was by contrast to the 'erroneous' groups, that the Church proclaimed itself 'Orthodox', that is plainly rejecting the error, but also reminding the offenders and everyone else where the truth had remained safely kept.

On the one hand, then, the Orthodox believe they were granted the crucial mission and responsibility to keep the structure and tradition of the original true Church of Christ. They were entrusted with this invaluable treasure as a salvific platform for the Church, and for the entire humankind. Safeguarding this inheritance as a matter of identity meant that, if human groups or trends were ever to venture, be pushed or 'lured' away from the core of faith, the Church was to remain steadfast to its unchangeable truth, as a beacon forever calling humanity back to the essential core of Christian faith. That is the enormous responsibility that the Orthodox see as entrusted to themselves and it represents nothing less than what they essentially see themselves to be.

On the other hand, the Orthodox are faced again and again with the difficult reality that the former Christian world is now separated and fragmented and that—according to their own understanding of 'Church'—certain Christian groups no longer share in the same unified Eucharistic, sacramental and liturgical universe, and thus appear to be placed in an uncertain dimension which the Orthodox cannot always perceive and acknowledge as 'Church'. While the Orthodox were prepared to exclude from Orthodoxy a great chunk of the former larger Church, they have never managed to ascribe a precise place, role or status for these 'outside' groups. What seems to remain a common perception is that the non-Orthodox have 'voluntarily' placed themselves outside the Church of Christ, which represents essentially the only *locum* and *praxis* and structure for salvation. Moreover, these departing groups have been associated with various heresies of old, having been actively opposed—once, but perhaps now still—to the accepted Orthodox mainstream doctrine of the Church. This could bring an element of risk or a downright threat to those Orthodox Christians brave (or 'foolish') enough to venture outside the secure walls of the Orthodox Church, as it is often claimed by anti-ecumenical advocates. Even the more moderate Orthodox faithful will sometimes fail to see how anything outside the organic body of the one true Church—always the same, never changed or diminished—can have any real relevance for them, particularly as this vision of Orthodoxy as a society 'chosen' to live the life of Christ comes tinted in the rosy glow of a special prophetic calling reserved for the Orthodox alone.<sup>7</sup>

How is the Orthodox faithful or theologian to desire the return of the break-away communities to the former Orthodoxy, when the Church itself does not seem to need or pursue this return? 'The Orthodox Church [ . . . ] is full; it lacks not' (Fr. John Reeves 1996). At the same time, he/she is called to proclaim the right path to all those who have veered outside the Orthodox way. This outlines an antinomy or an existential dilemma between the calling to focus inwardly, on an ever-tightening communion of the Orthodox Church, within the safety of its own ecclesiological borders, of its own sacramental universe—on the one hand. On the other hand, there is the calling—just like in the case of practical theology—to external engagement with the others, not as compromise done in the name of Christian brotherhood and harmony, but as the very identity and purpose of Orthodoxy. Or, to employ the words of Catholic ecumenist Paul D. Murray, when he referred more generally to the Church's drive towards catholicity, this resembles a wavering 'between the centripetal and the centrifugal

<sup>6</sup> According to the Russian Orthodox Church document 'Basic Principles of Attitude to the Non-Orthodox': 'Even while excommunicating one of her members, sealed by her on the day of his baptism, the Church hopes for his return. She considers excommunication itself to be a means of spiritual rebirth for such person.' (The Russian Orthodox Church 2000).

<sup>7</sup> These ideas are developed more fully in *Orthodoxy and ecumenism: Towards active metanoia* (Porumb 2008).

forces of the Spirit's activity in the world; between constant gathering in communion and continual evangelical dispersal and engagement throughout the world' (Murray 2008, p. 18).

It can be argued that this internal tension mirrors to a degree the fundamental tension within Orthodoxy between tradition(s) and Tradition. The tension here is between the inheritance of the tradition(s) of the past, and the current ongoing experiencing of this inheritance in the life of the Orthodox community. Tradition may be an essential characteristic of the Church which connects it with the past, but it is also to be seen as a 'dynamic' reality. According to Greek academic Panagiotis Bratsiotis, 'in the Orthodox Church, tradition is not regarded as a static factor—as many non-Orthodox people think—but as a dynamic one. Loyalty to tradition does not simply mean slavish attachment to the past and to external authority, but a living connection with the entire past experience of the Church' (Bratsiotis 1964, p. 24).

Orthodox theologians needed to reaffirm tradition in a capitalized form, as Tradition (a relatively modern device in Orthodox theology)—a living reality, which, although connecting them with the past, is essentially and eternally 'contemporary', since it concerns the ongoing life of the Church as informed by the Holy Spirit. As put by Patriarch Daniel of Romania, 'the Church is inevitably Tradition, that is to say a dynamic process of continuity and renewal in the Holy Spirit, who bears witness to the crucified and risen Christ, throughout the ages, involving the human and historical dimension as partner in communion with the eternal Trinity' (Ciobotea 2001, p. 157).

The tension here has been resolved by defining Tradition as a dynamic reality, a vision different from tradition as inheritance or hereditary truth. By accepting both concepts operating in parallel, Orthodox theology has embraced this polarity as a fruitful complementary insight. Just like in the case of practical theology addressed in the first part of this study, the reflexive 'internal' approach focusing on a 'household' matrix of spiritual self-analysis has been complemented by a dynamic whirl (energised by the Holy Spirit) which transfigures self-contemplation into an outward ceaseless motion of regeneration and engagement in communion with the Church and the wider world.

No effective resolution however has yet been reached in the case of the internal tension within Orthodoxy between its outreach vector of witness in love to the world and its defensive drive focusing exclusively within, onto its ecclesiological protected universe. What may have seemed like a solution to many Orthodox has been an unfortunate brutal amputation of the outward communitarian vector, replacing it with vehement condemnations of any ecumenical attempt and denouncing as perilous and traitorous any Orthodox engagement with other Christian communities. Thus, 'all non-Orthodox are heretics' according—among many others—to recently-canonized Orthodox writer, Father Justin Popović. 'What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?', he adds (Popović 1975). According to Orthodox scholar Constantine Cavarnos, ecumenical dialogue weakens the 'spiritual immune system', which leads to 'spiritual AIDS' where the sufferer 'becomes completely insensitive to doctrinal differences that distinguish Orthodoxy or true belief, from heresy or false belief' (Cavarnos 1996, p. 54). The internet is crowded with anathemas and condemnations of ecumenism as 'heresy of heresies', 'ecclesiological heresy', 'panheresy', etc.—most of which denunciations come from the Orthodox.

It can be argued that this same reflex against the outward communitarian vector is so embedded in the mind-set of certain Orthodox groups, that it even makes the organisation of an international Orthodox council a strenuous task. The recent long-anticipated attempt to hold a Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete in 2016 (according to the model of the seven ancient Ecumenical Councils, the last of which took place in 787 AD!), was achieved in a rather anticlimactic fashion after being boycotted by the Churches of Russia, Bulgaria, Georgia and Antioch, triggering extraneous denunciations from factions all across the Orthodox world and casting embarrassment on the Orthodox—particularly in light of their oft-affirmed claim that they are 'bearers of, and witnesses to the tradition of the ancient undivided Church' (World Council of Churches 1999). It also cast serious doubt on how well the Orthodox themselves understand their own inner structure and communion. Incidentally, the Council in Crete reaffirmed the Orthodox commitment to ecumenism and condemned those who oppose

ecumenical engagement—which further alienated some of the dissenting Churches. It is true that the way ecumenical processes are conducted today is not without irritating quirks and disappointments, and the ecumenical movement is clearly in need of a reboot, perhaps in a different ethos and following different structures and principles.<sup>8</sup> However, barring the Orthodox faithful—as a matter of jaundiced principle—from any openness towards the other Christians is not only wrong, but in contradiction of what Orthodoxy in its very essence stands for. Even an Orthodoxy defined primarily by opposition to external ‘heterodoxies’ is still supposed to engage with these as a ‘correctional’ force—not to shut itself in in spiteful isolation. Moreover, subscribed within an eminently Trinitarian vision, the Orthodox Church believes the lives of its faithful are to mirror the dynamics of the Triune God, a model which ‘spurs us on to grow and think continuously in spirit, and helps us both pass continually beyond any level we may have already reached in our personal communion with God and among ourselves’ (Staniloae 2005, p. 247).

The catholicity of the Church—as fundamental foundational principle—should mimic the perfect catholicity in love of the Trinity and, despite external human factors being often an obstruction, the Christian drive towards catholicity and communion in love is to remain intact. This energy needs to remain inexorable, ultimately bound to overcome any borders—cultural, ecclesiological or otherwise—just as the scope of each of the Persons of the Trinity is ever-outbound and ever-persistent in loving *perichoresis*. Thus, ceasing all communication and interaction with what is perceived to be a treacherous and dangerous ‘heterodox’ universe cannot resolve the intrinsic tension between the Orthodoxy’s centrifugal and centripetal drives. It can only serve—at most—as temporary suspension of the predicament.

What this study proposes is that here too, the antinomy between the ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ tendencies can in fact operate in complementary rotation. The ecumenical process can clearly be circumscribed within the practical dimension of theology, but this dynamic should not remain an external initiative, a ‘diplomatic’ or ‘political’ endeavour. This paradigm needs to be replaced with a vision of unity resting on Christ’s sacraments and fuelled by Trinitarian love. After all, the urge towards the catholicity of the Church effectuated through an attempt to reach the unity of all Christians comes for the Orthodox from their very eucharistic Liturgy, when the congregation chants: ‘For the peace of the whole world, for the welfare of the holy Churches of God, and for the union of all, let us pray to the Lord’ (Lash 1995, p. 3). The call to unity around the Eucharist is addressed to the whole humankind. According to Staniloae, ecumenism should be seen as ‘a state, a reality in which the Holy Spirit urges the Churches to love each other, as their separation was not only an open conflict but also a lack of love’ (Ciobotea 2001, p. 244).

Thus, ecumenism originates and occurs on a personal and inter-personal level, so to speak only of a programmatic, institutional ecumenism, and thus to ‘depersonalize’ it to a degree may lead to an incomplete understanding of the concept. In exercising its vocation of action and engagement, ecumenism does not break away from theology as an independent ‘specialist’ approach, but should remain an integral part of theology. According to this vision, this kind of ‘spiritual ecumenism’ remains inextricably linked to the spiritual components of Christian life—prayer, liturgy, transformation (*metanoia*). These dimensions inform a spiritual dynamic engagement which leads to a gradual and continuous transformation of the human being. This perspective also points to the fact that ecumenism, as ‘mainstream’ theology, is a calling and a vocation addressed to all, and not only to a specialized few.

For renowned Catholic scholar Yves Congar, ‘ecumenism, presupposes a movement or conversion and reform co-extensive with the whole life of the community.’ For Congar, ecumenism requires ‘a profound moral and even religious conversion’ in oneself, in the process of which one becomes ‘a different person’ (Avis 2012, p. 424)—a vision of ecumenism closely connected to the concept of *metanoia*, transformation. Romanian ecumenist Ion Bria’s concept of ‘the Liturgy after the Liturgy’

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<sup>8</sup> See first chapter (Evans 1996); also, (Aram 1995; Dulles 2007).

reveals the fact that the Orthodox might be interested in placing the ecumenical endeavour within the reality of the 'second Liturgy'—that of concrete action inspired from and nourished by common and individual prayer, constantly anchored in the communion with Christ, and, through him, with the others. In fact, for Bria, 'the Liturgy after the Liturgy' model is seen as 'an inspiration and impulse for reconstructing the Church in history after the Eucharistic model and vision' (Bria 1996, p. 87).

This approach, therefore, implies for the Orthodox a re-deepening and re-discovering of their own faith and identity. Any outward ecumenical process should certainly not imply disregarding or relativizing the Orthodox truth of faith or acting independently from it, but, on the contrary, acting as inspired by the sacramental life of the Church. As so aptly expressed by Murray, the ecumenical process should not be about reaching the lowest common denominator, but 'about becoming more deeply, more richly, more fully Catholic (more fully Methodist, more fully Anglican, etc.)' (Murray 2008, p. 16). Murray's vision gravitates around the twin notions of Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning, where a 'transformational receptivity' maintains a constant spirit of openness to learn and receive from the others—with a view to become gradually and constantly transformed, ever-closer to the plenitude of the life in Christ. Thus becoming more Anglican, Orthodox, Catholic etc. does not mean stubbornly clinging to one's particular distinctive tenets but, on the contrary, to allow oneself to grow and be enhanced continually through learning from others, to become ever more fully Christian in one's own particular context. This process of conversion does not imply 'a loss, nor a diminishment but a finding, a freeing, an intensification, and an enrichment' (Murray 2008, p. 16). Thus, Christians are to become 'more fully, more richly, what we already are' (Murray 2008, p. 6).

When one enters into ecumenical activities and encounters, one must be aware that he/she needs to commit to this reality not only on a programmatic level, but also on a deeply spiritual level. Moreover, although an eminently participatory endeavour, ecumenism remains firmly anchored in the realm of theology and in close connexion with its spiritual components: prayer, liturgy, inner transformation. This means that ecumenical participation is as much about prayer as it is about dialogue and sharing and this type of spiritually-grounded ecumenism could constitute the beginning of a new paradigm, more suited for the twenty-first century: an ecumenism of faith and commitment.

There is a risk involved here, of course, and participants like the ones coming from Orthodox contexts would have to struggle greatly with their fear of losing their identity or betraying their inheritance. This would be however, an ecumenism linked and paired with the life of Church communities and with their sacramental life. It is an ecumenism that concerns every single member of the parish, and not a selected specialised class of theologians, whose work remains clouded in the 'external' sphere of diplomatic dialogue. Trust would thus rest on a different set of parameters which would sanction it to a different degree. While the idea of plunging into an ecumenical endeavour head-on, abandoning all suspicions and fears overnight, and relying solely on faith may be a feasible idea for many, this would have to be, however, a very gradual process, involving a careful and steady process of awareness-building in all the communities of the faithful around the world.

#### 4. Conclusions

Thus, to sum up the findings of our reflection, if tension has a logic in practical/pastoral theology, as a complementary movement between the two 'inner' and 'outer' vectors—so too it is true about ecumenical engagement. The polarity here between isolation (or inward focus) and outreach must not necessarily be seen as a destructive contradiction, but as a constructive constant movement between the two poles. The two extremes might be in fact necessary for the practical ecumenical process to work.

The 'centrifugal' orientation is necessary not as an 'isolation' or 'dissociation', but as a deeper understanding of what Orthodoxy is—as a more intimate connection with the sacramental life of the Church. A true ecumenical engagement would aim not to distil or dilute what Orthodoxy is, but to allow the faithful to become more fully Orthodox, in their life within their Church community but also vis-à-vis the outer Christian world—thus fulfilling the missionary and communitarian requirement intrinsic to their own faith. If this movement within is followed by an outward vector of witness and

engagement, this should be seen only as a complementary aspect making up a continuous rotation, a revolving dialectic of the ecumenical endeavour, just like the case of practical theology.

Any contraction must be followed organically by a movement of expansion—a continuing sacramental interaction with the secular local context of the faithful and the wider Christian world. This inward-outward movement informs all Christian life in a mutually perpetuating rotation or pulsation. Although the reaction to any engagement with the ‘outer’ dimension is often one of rejection, this engagement is nevertheless crucial as it brings fullness, and fulfils the vocation and identity of the Orthodox Church, informed by an ever-increasing catholicity according to the structure of the Holy Trinity.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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