

The Ecumenicalness of the Ecumenical Patriarch

Recently the Turkish court has decided what the State had long been saying: Bartolomew, who calls himself the “Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch” should drop the term “Ecumenical”. The court decided thus because they conceive the Patriarchate as the Turkish part of the Orthodox Church, set up for the Orthodox Christian minority present in Istanbul and Turkey, but not as an international “ecumenical” Church.

Bartolomew during the recent Orthodox Youth Conference confirmed what The Patriarchate has often repeated in this discussion: the term “ecumenical” has been applied to the Patriarchate since the 6th century and has therefore a historic significance but no political intention. It is a term to be used within the Orthodox Church and theology, not as a claim to power in the secular field. So the Turkish state should not be alarmed by the use of it.

It is indeed as if Italy would all of the sudden attack the Vatican for the fact that the Church can not claim to be “catholic” as that term means “universal” (whereas “ecumenical” means “the inhabited world”) because it is a claim they cannot stand up to as they are obviously not representing every person on earth, not even every Christian. Of course it would be rather inappropriate of any state to rule in such a way, as the term has no substantial political claim. It has a theological meaning to be used within the Church, as was recently clear again when the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith published a document that stirred some commotion in the press and religious world.

(see: <http://www.yunusnews.com/node/231>)

But that is not the end of it. The Patriarchate has diminished considerably since its origin. It has also for a large part been cut off from its homeland (Greece) and has thus been walled in a bit in Istanbul where the majority is Muslim. On top of it the Turkish state does only allow the Patriarch to be of Turkish citizenship. If a next Patriarch will have to be chosen, this might create quite a problem, as the Orthodox Church is also not allowed to reopen their seminary to educate their priests. Which means that the Orthodox have to choose their successors out of a pool they are not allowed to educate fully in their religion. The Patriarch has been strongly advocating a reopening of the seminary on the island of Heybeliade in Istanbul.

It is only reasonable that the Patriarchate tries to show its width and range in an effort to get both the international community as well as the national Turkish state to except their legitimacy to a certain status and following from it, the right to, for example, education of their own group.

But is the Ecumenical Patriarchate truly that international and ecumenical?

First of all any claim of the Patriarchate of being Ecumenical can not extend beyond the Orthodox Church. So the Catholic or Protestant Churches are not accounted for. Although the Orthodox consider themselves (again, just like the Catholics) to be the true Church of the followers of Christ (“orthodox” means “correct”), that is only a stance of the Orthodox Church itself and this view is of course not shared by the other denominations.

Within the Orthodox there are also many divisions, and, as most people know, there is no single authority like a pope combining all the Orthodox. The members of the Eastern Orthodox Church – which itself is only a part of the Orthodox Church – are largely based in Russia, Greece, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. This Church is split up in 4 smaller autonomous churches (e.g. Finland, Japan, ...) and 14 (or 15) autocephalous churches (e.g. Constantinople, Alexandria, ...). Even the Church of Greece is such an autocephalous church, and thus no longer falls under the Patriarchate of the Constantinople and only keeps some special links with her “Mother Church”.

Constantinople claims jurisdiction over all areas outside the canonically defined territories of other Orthodox churches. These areas would include Australia, Southeast Asia and even the whole Western hemisphere. Yet this jurisdiction, based on a canon out of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, is disputed.

But about two thirds of the Orthodox in North America, gathered in the Orthodox Archdiocese of America, do fall under the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Patriarchate also enjoys an even greater majority in the UK. There is no denying then that the Patriarchate, which is based in Istanbul, does stretch a lot further than only the Greek Orthodox minority of Turkey.

On top of it, though disputed in various ways, the patriarchate has had a long tradition of being considered as the “first among equals”. Supported on the fact that it was the original patriarchate of Constantinople the Patriarch of Constantinople is seen as the most honored of the patriarch. Yet this is rather a symbolical position and not really a juridical one. It has nonetheless since long put him in a position of intermediary and facilitator between Orthodox churches when they are in conflict or in the relation between the whole of the Orthodox Church and the other Christian denominations and religions.

Although this status is not accepted without reserve by other Orthodox, the present Patriarch has been honoring this symbolic position and making himself worthy of the term “ecumenical” – certainly in its common sense of bringing about unity between the various denominations – through his continues effort on the matter of interreligious dialogue, for example during the successful historic meeting with Pope Benedict XVI. Even in the secular field Bartholomew has been building bridges as he joined hands with environmental movements, earning him the nickname of “Green Patriarch”.

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