

Byzantine Ecumenism

Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun (University College Stockholm)

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This ecumenism antedates the modern “ecumenical era” by sixteen centuries. Unlike the latter, it was often enforced by coercion. To sustain church’s unity, Christian emperors did not hesitate to apply the methods of their pagan predecessors. At the same time, they also tried to bring opponents to the same table for a dialogue. Emperor Justinian, for example, introduced the earliest form of ecumenical dialogue for the adversaries and supporters of Chalcedon. Imperial authorities also promoted rapprochement between divided theological groups through councils. Countless councils happened during the period of Trinitarian/Christological controversies, for which reason I call it the period of *synodomachia*.

Most of these councils were ecumenical—in two senses. First, they were pan-imperial and thus represented the entire *oecumene*—the Greco-Roman world. Second, they aimed at the restoration of the Christian unity and thus were ecumenical in the modern sense of the word. Probably the earliest council of this sort was convened by Constantine only one year after he had signed the Edict of Milan (313). In 314, he initiated a bishops’ meeting in Arles to give a solution to the Donatist schism, which ravaged the western part of northern Africa.

A decade later, Constantine initiated a similar council to give a solution to another issue, which emerged in the eastern part of northern Africa. This issue is usually called “Arianism”.

To bridge post-Chalcedonian divisions, Emperor Justinian, whom I consider the greatest figure in the Byzantine ecumenism, designed a theological project, which we nowadays call neo-Chalcedonianism. It featured both theological and political aspects. Theologically, neo-Chalcedonianism comprised the meta-dialects of both Cyril of Alexandria and Chalcedon. Politically, it condemned Origen and the “three chapters”. Neo-Chalcedonianism put its own theological accents—on the logical categories of property (*poiotes*, ποιότης; *idiotes*, ιδιότης), activity (*energeia*, ἐνέργεια), and will (*thelema*, θέλημα).

To promote his ecumenical project, Justinian consulted prominent theologians of his time, such as Severus of Antioch and Leontius of Byzantium, and held an ecumenical council, in 553 in Constantinople. This one was probably the most “ecumenical” (in the sense of ecumenism) among ecumenical councils. It was designed from the beginning to the end with

the sole goal to bridge gaps between the divided ecclesial groups. From this perspective, the council of Constantinople 553 was opposite to the least “ecumenical” (in the sense of ecumenism) councils of Ephesus in 431 and 449, which promoted the interests of only one, Alexandrian, party. The neo-Chalcedonian project, initiated by Justinian and continued by his successors, after internal controversies and crises mentioned earlier, was reconfirmed by the ecumenical council of Constantinople in 680-681.

Neo-Chalcedonianism failed to reconcile the divided church in the sixth-seventh centuries. However, it became a basis for reconciliation between the Byzantine and Oriental fellowships in the end of the twentieth century, when their representatives signed Agreed Statements in 1989 in Anba Bishoy Monastery (Egypt) and in 1990 at the Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy (Switzerland). Only in our time, the ecumenical project of Justinian seems to begin working.

Byzantine ecumenical activities targeted primarily the “Great Schism I” caused by the Christological controversies in the fifth century. When the Eastern Roman Empire weakened and eventually disappeared, the global ecumenical agenda became gradually dominated by the Western Christianity, where the Roman see, supported by new ambitious political powers, such as the Frankish state, launched its own ecumenical projects. These projects were based on the ecclesiology, which had been in making since at least the papacy of Gregory I (590-604).