

Book Reviews

***Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism. Resources for Theological Education,*
Regnum Books International, 2014**

Cristian Sonea*

The Church is constantly called upon to rise to the challenges of modern times. Faced with the information revolution, people's freedom of movement, and everything that comes with living in a globalised society, the Church must also bear witness to Christ in a pluralistic society, often referred to as the *global village*, and in a world where, from a demographic standpoint, Christendom's centre of gravity has shifted towards what is generally called the *global south*. It is furthermore challenged to deal with a new manifestation of the Christian life, one that is estranged from tradition, lacking in doctrinal uniformity, and illustrated, for instance, by the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements.

In this context, the World Council of Churches initiated a project entitled *Regnum Studies in Global Christianity* aimed at exploring the issues all Churches struggle with in relation to this radical change marked by the *global south*, focusing particularly on the Churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. As stated by the series' editors, the materials published in this collection wish to help the Churches learn not only from past and present experiences, but also from listening to the *prophetic voice* of the Christian communities in those areas.¹

This year "Regnum Books International", Volos Academy Publication (Greece), in cooperation with the World Council of Churches Publication (Geneva), and the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies published the *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education* (ISBN 978-1-908355-44-7), edited by Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Thomas FitzGerald, Cyril Hovorun, Aikaterini Pekridou, Nikolaos Asproulis, Guy Liagre, and Dietrich Werner. The creation of this handbook, the editors tell us, was prompted by

* Rev. Dr. Cristian Sonea, Assistant Professor of Missiology and Ecumenism and Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca. Address: Piața Avram Iancu, nr. 18, Cluj-Napoca; e-mail: cristisonea@gmail.com.

¹ Pantelis Kalaitzidis et al. (eds.), *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education*, Regnum Books International, 2014, p. ii.

the realisation that in countries with Orthodox communities there is insufficient ecumenical education, a fact responsible for the failure of those Churches to acknowledge the importance of certain topics and figures of the western Christian theology and spirituality of the 20th century, and for impeding those who graduated from Orthodox theology schools from taking part in an authentic ecumenical dialogue.² The suggestion to write a Handbook suited for ecumenical education in Orthodox contexts had already been made in February 2010, following the previous initiatives of the Volos Academy and the Programme on Ecumenical Theological Education of the World Council of Churches (ETE/WCC). The proposal was later reintroduced during the inter-Orthodox consultations on the ecumenical movement in theological education and in the life of the Orthodox Church held in Sibiu, November 2010, as well as in other instances. Moreover, there were many who stressed the need to have a textbook in order to teach ecumenism in Orthodox theology colleges, seminaries, and academies.³

This book is truly impressive, and it is so in several respects. It is 962 pages long, listing contributions from 106 authors from the Orthodox world (by this I mean both the Orthodox Churches in the East, and the Oriental Orthodox Churches) as well as non-orthodox authors who commended this initiative. The volume addresses ecumenism and the involvement of the Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical movement from several perspectives: the historical and the theological views, the perspective of the major theologians who have dealt with ecumenism, the perspective of ecumenical dialogue, that of ecumenical education, and that of the Orthodox contribution to the ecumenical movement; it also provides a bibliography listing the official documents of the Orthodox Church regarding ecumenism.

The texts are divided into nine larger sections preceded by: a *Foreword* signed by His All-Holiness Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch, (p. vx-xvi), by *Words of Greeting* from Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches (p. xvii-xviii), Guy Liagre, general secretary of the Conference of European Churches (p. xix-xx), and Metropolitan Ignatius of Demetrias, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Volos Academy (p. xxi-xxii), and by the *Preface of the Editors* and the *List of Contributors* (p. xxiii-xxviii).

The first section, *Orthodox Churches in the Ecumenical Movement – An Introduction* (p. 1-55), is comprised of texts dealing with the role of Orthodoxy in the modern Christian world, Christian unity and Orthodox identity,

² *Ibidem*, p. xxiv.

³ *Ibidem*, p. xxiv.

the Orthodox understanding of ecumenism and the ecumenical movement, the various aspects of Christian life in connection to the ecumenical issue and the problem of drafting the principles underlying a glossary of ecumenical terminology. The second part, *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism – Foundations* (p. 57-165), presents the biblical and theological bases of the Orthodox involvement in ecumenism, the patristic and neo-patristic model of engaging in ecumenical dialogue, a historical perspective on its participation in the ecumenical movement, as well as a few theological evaluations of the anti-ecumenical stances in the Orthodox world. Part III, *Representative Orthodox Theologians Reflecting on Ecumenism* (p. 167-317), evokes the foremost theologians and the most important leaders of the Orthodox Churches who reflected on ecumenism and their texts on this issue. Part IV, *Ecumenical Dialogue in Various Orthodox Churches and Settings* (p. 319-453), gathers articles on ecumenical dialogue in various Orthodox churches, whereas part V, *Bilateral Dialogues Between Eastern Orthodox Churches and Other Churches and Christians Traditions* (p. 455-541), is a selection of texts from bilateral dialogues of Orthodox churches on theological and ecclesial issues. Part VI, *Ecumenical Perspectives of Oriental Orthodox Churches* (p. 543-603), offers an overview of the dialogues the Oriental Churches had with other Churches and Christian Traditions. Part VII, entitled *Particular Themes and Issues for Orthodox Involvement in Ecumenism* (p. 605-863), deals with the theological problems emerging from the involvement of the Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement such as the common prayer, the nature and unity of the Church, intercommunion, the question of Orthodoxy's dialogue with modern science, the relevance of Orthodox spirituality for the ecumenical movement, the relationship of Scripture and Tradition within the ecumenical dialogue, and the Orthodox understanding of mission and inter-religious dialogue. In addition, the articles present the contributions of Orthodox theology to the understanding of *diakonia*, ecology, engaging youth and laity in the mission of the Church, the problems of proselytism and mixed marriages, as well as an Orthodox view on moral discernment. Part VIII, *Ecumenical Formation in Orthodox Theological Education* (p. 865-947), is a section dedicated to ecumenical education: the need for it, the institutions where it is carried out, the method of teaching ecumenism and several documents on ecumenical education. Part IX is a very useful *Appendix* (p. 949-962) containing a survey of the official references and Orthodox texts on ecumenism.

We have seen the general context in which this volume was published, the editors' special motivation for compiling it, and the content meant to be read and analysed. Consequently, the question that arises is the following: to

what extent can the *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism. Resources for Theological Education* meet the need for ecumenical education?

As long as the goal of ecumenical education is to help develop an Orthodox identity that is consciously applied and to form a type of personality that is open to understanding the other Christian traditions, we consider the *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism* to be a necessary instrument in this endeavour. This work is a substantial source of information rather than a *handbook* on ecumenism *stricto sensu*. It can prove to be a genuine source of inspiration for creating programmes of ecumenical education. The texts offer an ecumenical theology with an Orthodox content, written in an eirenic yet firm style when addressing the fundamental truths of the faith. Even though some of the anti-ecumenist tendencies are presented herein, it may have been significant to also publish a text written by the very people who dispute the ecumenical movement expressing their take on this matter.

Making this book known and accessible within parishes would be the suitable answer to the initiative of the editors who wanted to meet the need for ecumenical education. At the same time it would be a way to collectively take part in this effort, an effort we consider highly necessary. What's more, seen from the angle of the formal instruction being offered by theological education, the publication of this work is extremely helpful. For this reason, we believe that the *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism. Resources for Theological Education* is to be listed among the most important books in the field, as an indispensable work to have in the library of any college of Orthodox theology claiming or aspiring to offer its students a solid ecumenical education.