Mission in Central and Eastern Europe: Realities, Perspectives, Trends

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THE STORY OF THE LAUSANNE–ORTHODOX INITIATIVE: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

This article presents the personal perspective of the author as a core group leader of the Lausanne–Orthodox Initiative (LOI). It outlines the history of the initiative and it describes the first three LOI consultations, and some of their outcomes, as well as the plans of the leadership group for future similar encounters. The second part of the paper discusses the opportunities and the obstacles of this Evangelical–Orthodox dialogue on missions, and it explores various prospects for the development of cooperation in holistic mission between Orthodox and Evangelical communities around the world.

The Early History

Sometime in 2009, in preparation for the third Lausanne Congress, that was held in 2010 in Cape Town, I have received a message from Douglas Birdsall, the executive leader of the Lausanne Movement. I have met Mr. Birdsall as a member of the Lausanne Theology working group, led by Christopher Wright. His question, which, as it became clear later, he also addressed to other Lausanne leaders, was a simple one: could we suggest names of a few Orthodox leaders who are engaged, one way or another, in dialogue with Evangelicals, and would be willing and able to participate as external observers at the Cape Town Congress?

Because of my commitment to Evangelical–Orthodox cooperation in my own country, Romania, I was in contact with such people and I did recommend a few, as did others. As a result, three Romanian Orthodox priests participated in this event, where they met with a few other fellow Orthodox leaders, Eastern and Oriental, and they were actively involved in the plenary sessions and the small group meetings organized during the congress.

Alongside the Orthodox group, there was also present at the congress a group of Catholic leaders, from various parts of the world. I had myself the privilege of having a Catholic bishop as a member in the small group to which I was assigned during the congress, and that was a delightful experience. Canon Dr. Andrew Norman, Principal of Ridley Hall, in Cam-
bridge, England, was the official Lausanne host for these ecumenical observers. During the congress, he hosted a number of meals and formal meetings with the guests from outside of the Evangelical communion.

It is not clear if Douglas Birdsall envisioned a concrete follow up of such contacts after the Cape Town Congress; probably not in well-defined terms. Nevertheless, he surely hoped that the seeds planted in Cape Town would bring fruit into the future.

The Lausanne Congress in Cape Town

Strangely, in God’s providence, it was a distressful event, which happened during the congress that played an important role in the establishment of the LOI.

In one of the plenary sessions at the Cape Town congress, Paul Eshleman, Vice President of Campus Crusade and head of Strategy Commission of the Lausanne Movement, did a presentation on ‘unreached people groups’, which created a serious stir among a number of ecumenically minded participants. The reason for this was that, in his presentation, Mr. Eshleman reported as unreached with the Gospel the majority of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox people groups in the diaspora. A number of us, scandalized by this anti-ecumenical offence, have protested formally to the Lausanne Movement leaders. Not long after the event, I have personally written to Paul Eshleman, in order to inform him about the offence brought through this insensitive act to our ecumenical guests. To his credit, Mr. Eshleman apologized for what happened and promised to correct the errors in the document and ‘to send out a revised listing of the Unreached People Groups to those who made commitments to People Groups at the Lausanne Congress.’1 I was not able to check if this really happened, but I hope it did.

Towards the end of the congress, one of the Oriental Orthodox leaders present there, Bishop Angaelos, from the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, contacted Mrs. Leslie Doll, and one of the Lausanne senior leaders, Mrs. Grace Mathews. He suggested that the Evangelicals and the Orthodox should do something together in order to bridge the gap of misunderstanding and mistrust that separates us. This idea was in perfect synchrony with the hopes of Mr. Birdsall that prompted him to invite ecumenical observers to the Cape Town event. The immediate outcome of all this was the establishment of LOI. A second result was the Lausanne–Catholic Initiative, which unfortunately has been later abandoned, even before it has really taken off, mostly because of the opposition to it of some less ecumenically minded Lausanne leaders.

1 Quoted from Paul Eshleman’s email message to the author, dated 6 December 2010.
The LOI Leadership

Bishop Angaelos and Mrs. Grace Mathews became co-chairs of this initiative, having Canon Mark Oxbrow, from Faith2Share in Oxford, UK, as the facilitator. They have subsequently called a number of like-minded Evangelical and Orthodox leaders to join them in the LOI steering committee, which was going to meet, virtually and face to face, a number of times a year in order to explore together mutual understanding, respect, and support. They also explored the possibility of collaboration in missions between the two ecclesial communities, with a view of organizing a larger consultation, possibly in June 2012.

The steering committee includes presently up to twenty members from various Orthodox (Eastern and Oriental), and Evangelical (mainline and low church) communities from different parts of the world. The Core Group of this committee, made up of up to twelve members, leads current LOI activities. There is also a group of Advisors, which includes a number of experts. One of the first tasks of this initial group was to define more clearly the goal of LOI. The LOI mission, as found on the LOI website, is as follows.

The goal of the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative is to reflect constructively on the history of relationships between Orthodox and Evangelicals in order to work towards better understanding, and encourage reconciliation and healing where wounds exist. Through this process, Evangelicals and Orthodox will be mutually enriched and strengthened in the work of mission, working towards mutual respect, support and cooperation in the spirit of our Lord’s prayer for His Church in John 17.²

The LOI Consultations

Since its inception, in 2011, until 2015, the LOI steering committee has organized three Orthodox-Evangelical consultations, with 60-70 participants in each of them, representing the most important Orthodox and Evangelical communities in Western, Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East, Africa, Asia, and the United States. The first two consultations (in 2013 and 2014) were organized at St. Vlash Orthodox Academy in Durres, Albania, at the invitation of His Beatitude Metropolitan Anastasios Yanoulatos, the head of the Orthodox Church in Albania.

The Communique of the first LOI consultation sums up well the hopes and prospects of this initiative:

As we move forward together, the goal of the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative is to reflect constructively on the history of relationships between Orthodox and Evangelicals in order to work towards better understanding, and encourage reconciliation and healing where wounds exist. Through this process Evangelicals

² Available at: <http://loimission.net>.
and Orthodox will be mutually enriched and strengthened in the work of mission, working towards mutual respect, support and cooperation in the spirit of our Lord’s prayer for His Church in John 17. To achieve this goal the Lausanne–Orthodox Initiative is committed to encouraging members of its two traditions to: pray for each other and study Scripture together; encourage mutual understanding, respect and appreciation of one another’s tradition and practice; promote collaboration in mission wherever this is possible; build short-term and long-term mission partnerships; and facilitate the exchange and sharing of resources for mission.³

The third LOI Consultation, that took place in September 2015, was organised at Sofia Centre in Helsinki, Finland, at the invitation of His Eminence Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland. As the final communiqué days, during this event, besides the current topics, participants were invited to reflect, from their particular perspectives, on the great challenge of the refugee crisis created by the war in Syria:

The critical realities of contemporary mission and the need for Gospel ministry were brought home to the consultation on Wednesday afternoon when an Orthodox youth worker joined the consultation, by Skype, from Aleppo, Syria, and spoke of the tragedy which continues to unfold in his country. This was also the week during which the refugee crisis in Europe escalated, forcing governments to open borders and reconsider their humanitarian responsibilities.⁴

Two successive attempts, in 2014 and 2015, to organise such a consultation in Romania were not successful because of the strong opposition to ecumenism in some ecclesial circles, mostly Orthodox, but also Evangelical, in that country.

The LOI website has been the main vehicle for disseminating the various contributions at the three LOI consultations. One may also find there an impressive list of resources related to the interface of Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism, both in terms of theology and of missions. The website is also the means of sharing constantly relevant news, and prayer requests related to the interaction of Evangelicals and the Orthodox, and is open for any other relevant contributions.

The most important presentations made during the plenary sessions of the first two LOI consultations have been published in 2015 by Regnum Publishers, in Oxford, United Kingdom.⁵ The book deals with important topics like Biblical roots of mission, evangelism and Christian witness vs. proselytism, ‘canonical territory’ and other ecclesiological implications of mission, soteriology in general and conversion in particular, Scripture and Tradition, etc.

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³ Available at: <http://www.loimission.net/st-vlash-consultation/communique/>.
⁴ Available at: <http://www.loimission.net/2015-loi-consultation-communique/>.
Previous Evangelical–Orthodox Encounters

This was certainly not the first formal Evangelical–Orthodox encounter in history. In the last half century, a number of theological dialogues between Evangelicals and the Orthodox have been organized, in which representatives of the two ecclesial communities explored together what unites and what separates them. One specific incentive for these encounters was the somewhat surprising synergy that the Orthodox have found with Evangelical members of the World Council of Churches (WCC), in their common attempt to counteract the liberal theological agenda of some of the Protestant members of that ecumenical organization.

These dialogues have resulted in a number of publications which, undoubtedly, have contributed to a better understanding of the degree of theological compatibility between the two communities. WCC was not the only institution that initiated such ecumenical contacts. The British Evangelical Alliance, for instance, has published in 2001 the results of such a dialogue between Evangelicals and the Orthodox in the United Kingdom. In addition, in Romania, Evangelical and Orthodox theologians have met in 2009 and explored their current relations, at the launch of the Romanian translation of the book *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, which was organised at the University of Cluj-Napoca by Fr. Stelian Tofană, professor at the Orthodox faculty in that university. He was joined in this event by the author of this paper and by Dr. Bradley Nassif, one of the key contributors to the book.

The Changing Ecumenical Landscape

It is beyond any doubt that such initiatives are beneficial for both communities. However, by themselves, they will not be able to make disappear the differences between the two communities. The realisation of this fact, in

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6 Among the books published, we could mention the following: Huibert van Beek and Georges Lemopoulos (eds), *Proclaiming Christ Today: Orthodox–Evangelical Consultation, Alexandria, 10–15 July 1995* (Geneva / Bialystok: WCC / Syndesmos, 1995); Huibert van Beek and Georges Lemopoulos (eds), *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope: Orthodox–Evangelical Consultation, Hamburg, 30 March–4 April 1998* (Geneva: WCC, 1998); Tim Grass, et al (eds), *Building Bridges. Between the Orthodox and the Evangelical Traditions* (Geneva: WCC, 2012). To these we could add a much larger number of articles in theological and ecumenical journals.

7 Tim Grass (ed.), *Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church: A Report by the Evangelical Alliance (UK) Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE)* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001).


the last years, has led the ecumenical movement to a process of redefi-
nition. As Fr. Ioan Sauca, WCC Associate General Secretary for Ecumenical
Formation and Education, suggested during the last LOI consultation,
younger ecumenical leaders are not so much interested anymore in theo-
logical dialogues, because of the perceived risk of these becoming attempts
to alter participants’ confessional identity. They are also suspicious of ef-
forts to bring about (institutional) ecclesial unity, because of their tendency
to reduce Christian identity to the lowest common denominator, ending
possibly in a compromise on the essentials. Rather, they are much more
ready to engage with others in common action, leading to human flourish-
ing, expressed in justice and reconciliation in the communities where they
live. It is for similar reasons that the LOI, in the spirit of the Lausanne
Movement, has adopted a focus on missions rather than on doctrinal defi-
nition.

Besides the need to redefine the aims of ecumenical efforts away from
a search for theological agreements, with a move towards common action,
we have to admit that classic ecumenical dialogues have resulted in insigni-
ficant cooperation in the field, between various ecclesial communities.
Through his work in World Vision International, the author of the present
essay has been involved constantly with church leaders and church com-
munities in the field in the last two decades. As we have observed, at least
in certain parts of the world, like Eastern Europe and the Middle East, ecu-
menical relations between various Christian confessions not only did not
progress, but in fact became even more problematic that in the past.

Obstacles and Opportunities

After the fall of communism, which kept under oppression most majority
Orthodox countries, ecumenical relations, including those between Evan-
gelicals and the Orthodox, have improved tremendously for a few years.
However, this positive evolution could not be sustained and relationships
between the two communities are presently worse than they were before
1989 and presently we can barely see any signs of hope for the future. The
reasons are very diverse. On the one side, Western missionary organisa-
tions started targeting the newly opened countries, which they considered
‘unreached’ with the Gospel, if not straight ‘pagan’. To be fair, Western
missionary agencies tended to treat in the same ‘imperialistic’ manner the
Evangelicals in these countries, which they have often completely ignored,
if they could not subordinate to their expansionist purposes.

On the other side, Orthodox communities in these countries have wit-
nessed a growing nostalgia for, and attempts to restore the privileged status
that this community enjoyed before communism, and, implicitly, a subser-
vient status for minority religious communities, which were often severely
persecuted under regimes dominated by the Orthodox hierarchy.
Besides this mostly political dynamic, we have witnessed all over Eastern Europe a resurgence of philetism – the idea of defining a nation’s identity as a blending of denominational and ethnic compositions, expressed in convictions like, ‘to be Russian (or Romanian, or Serbian, etc.) means to be Orthodox’, or worse, in bellicose slogans like ‘Orthodoxy or death’. This is an old heresy, which has been condemned at the Orthodox Synod held in Constantinople, in 1872, yet it is quite alive in many Orthodox contexts today, whether in majority Orthodox countries or in the Orthodox diaspora. It is true that the decision was never fully accepted by the larger Orthodox churches. Such realities could not encourage in any way the growth of trust between the two traditions, let alone genuine cooperation.

Indeed, as the saying goes, ‘there is a lot of water under the bridge’ that aims to cross the divide between various Orthodox and Evangelical communities. Many Evangelicals are proselytizing Orthodox people, which they consider actually as non-Christians and idolaters, while the Orthodox majority is often using state mechanisms to restrict and persecute Evangelicals, which they describe as sectarians, schismatics, and heretics. Such realities have created huge historical barriers between the two groups, which are not easy to overcome. Yet, in both the Orthodox and the Evangelical communities there are plenty of people of good will, who believe that these undeniable difficulties can be progressively eliminated,

• when leaders and simple members of the two communities will be ready to admit their (and their own communities’) faults in creating such difficulties for Christian partnership in missions;
• when they will admit to their prejudices and will be ready to go beyond meetings and dialogues, to actually cross the ‘bridge’ over the divide, and to start working together with believers from the other community, as fellow members of the Body of Christ, pursuing the missio dei in a broken world in need of faith, hope, and love.

This is precisely what the LOI efforts try to accomplish, by God’s grace. Although LOI has been the result of a meeting of minds and hearts of some Lausanne leaders and of a number of Orthodox leaders, it does not mean that it has enjoyed the constant support of the entire leadership of the Lausanne movement or that there is a consensus about it among Orthodox hierarchy. Unfortunately, there are Lausanne leaders who are not so happy with such ecumenical dialogues on missions. The same is true of a number of Evangelical leaders in Eastern Europe who, strangely, given their claimed Gospel commitment, cannot forget, nor forgive, the persecution to which their communities were submitted under Orthodox dominated regimes in their countries. There may, or may not be a connection, but, as a

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matter of fact, beyond the first few months, none of the LOI related activities and meetings have been funded by Lausanne, but by other Christian agencies, like the American Bible Society (ABS), and a number of private donors, both Orthodox and Evangelicals. Furthermore, it has been particularly difficult to get funding for LOI from Orthodox sources, which is not unique for such ecumenical initiatives.

At the same time, there are enough Orthodox hierarchs and centres of power (like many of the leaders of the monastic communities on Mount Athos) which are firmly against any ecumenical engagement of Orthodox communities, and are, as such, as sectarian in their views as some of the Evangelical leaders. This grim reality underlines not only the particular difficulties encountered by the LOI efforts, but also its importance for the common witness to the Gospel of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

LOI promises not to shy away from such ‘hard places’, in both Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. As James Stamoolis says in a document addressed to the core group of the LOI steering committee, in its meeting in January 2016, what we need in order to move forward is ‘a recognition of differences among those who worship the same Triune God and understand that salvation is only in Jesus and that with the power of the Holy Spirit we can live lives that are fulfilling, because they are lived as God who want us to live, and kerygmatic, in that Jesus is proclaimed to a lost and dying world that is without God, therefore without hope (Eph. 2:12)’.

**Future Prospects**

One of the hopes of LOI leaders was that our efforts will lead to initiatives for actual collaboration in missions between Orthodox and Evangelical believers. We have to admit that, even if we have seen a few such attempts, we have not been yet very successful in this direction. When we have discussed about our disappointment in this area during the last meeting of the core group of LOI steering committee, we have realised that, in fact, such initiatives may flow more naturally from a regionalisation of LOI consultations, a direction that we have decided to take during the coming years.

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11 ABS is particularly interested in this initiative in light of its cooperation with both Orthodox and Evangelicals in majority Orthodox countries, particularly in Eastern Europe.

12 The ‘holy mountain’ of Athos hosts the most important Orthodox monastic community in the world, including twenty monasteries, plus other houses and hermit cells. On this, see more in G. Giacumakis, Jr., ‘Mount Athos’, in J.D. Douglas (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978). The Synaxis (council) of Superiors of the twenty Holy Monasteries of the Holy Mountain of Athos have often made strong statements against the ecumenical engagement of various Orthodox churches (see on this an example from 1999, available at: <http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/athonite_bartholomew.aspx>.

not to the detriment of, but in parallel with (possibly less frequent) global events.

A number of such regional initiatives have been discussed already during the last two LOI consultations. One of them envisions organising an African event, in October 2016, in Ethiopia, at the invitation of the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. There are also plans for organising such a consultation between Evangelical and Orthodox leaders in the United States, and possibly India. The newly established Osijek Institute for Missions Studies (OSIMS), in Croatia, might also become a centre of coagulation for interactions between Evangelicals and Orthodox leaders in Central and Eastern Europe.

One other important direction for the LOI process is that of organising issue based consultations, the first one being theological education, as we can read in the Communique of the LOI Consultation in 2015: ‘Late one evening almost one third of the participants attended an “optional” session on theological education and the formation of leaders within our respective communities. The aim was to learn what is being done, and could be done, to build better relationships between our respective communities and to influence a younger generation of leaders’.\footnote{Available at: \url{http://www.loimission.net/2015-loi-consultation-communique}.}

We have already begun to make plans for a gathering of theological educators from the two ecclesial communities, possibly in the Autumn of 2017, with a view of finding ways in which Evangelical and Orthodox theological schools and educators could work together to inculcate in the next generation of church leaders a better reciprocal understanding and more positive and fruitful cooperation between the two traditions.

In the same vein, there have been already a number of teacher exchanges between Evangelical and Orthodox schools, as well as participations of theologians from both traditions the theological research conferences. Yet, to be fair, most invitations to such interactions have been issued by Evangelical schools and we are still waiting to see more Orthodox theological schools reciprocating.

We need to underline at this point that a critical factor for the future of this initiative is the extent to which we will be able to attract to it younger Orthodox and Evangelical believers, who are passionate about seeking justice and reconciliation in their communities, together with Christians from other church traditions.

Again, the effectiveness of the LOI process, in terms of impact, depends largely on the extent to which we use the most adequate means of communication for disseminating its concrete results. In a world in which printed media, like religious books and theological journals, on one side, and institutions, on the other, have a decreasing impact, it is essential that we use effectively virtual media and a networking approach for promoting better
understanding and cooperation between Orthodox and Evangelical Christians. As the younger generations are more media savvy and naturally inclined towards networking as means of interaction, we hope that they will increasingly play a more central role in taking the LOI process to a new level.

God seems to be doing these days something new in the area of Christian unity. As we have seen above, younger ecumenists do not see their distinct confessional identities as an obstacle, but rather as an asset, for reciprocal spiritual enrichment in inter-denominational cooperation. Such common missional engagement will bless the world with a more consistent effort towards building justice and reconciliation, and will bring joy to the heart of the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who prayed that we all ‘may be one’, as the Father and the Son are one (John 17:11).