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A Hope-filled Anthropology: Report on the Buffalo Agreed Statement

Abstract

The first part of this paper offers an overview of the international dialogue between the Anglican and Orthodox Churches, especially between 2012 and 2015, in the lead-up to the publication of the most recent Agreed Statement after the 2015 meeting in Buffalo, USA. The Buffalo Agreed Statement addresses itself to questions of theological anthropology, and the second part of this article introduces the discussion of these questions under the headings used in the Statement itself: the human person in creation; the image and likeness of God; and body, soul and personhood.



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1 Introduction to the Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue

The history of interaction between the Orthodox Church and the *Ecclesia Anglicana* goes back to the Celtic and the pre-Schism Anglo-Saxon saints, whose lives are now receiving increasing attention from English-speaking Orthodox. There was also significant albeit discontinuous contact during the formative period of the modern Anglican Church, from the 1559 Elizabethan Settlement to the early 18th century.

The second half of the 19th century and into the 20th century saw increasing contacts through emigration of Orthodox Christians into the English-speaking world and increasing informal conversation between hierarchs and theologians of both Churches.

The official dialogue began in 1973, with the first meeting of the Anglican – Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Discussions (A/OJDD) in Oxford. This led to the Moscow Agreed Statement of 1976 and the Dublin Agreed Statement of 1984. The dialogue, which was reconstituted in 1989 as the International Commission for Anglican – Orthodox Theological Dialogue (ICAOTD), continued to meet on a regular basis.

In 2006 the Commission produced the Cyprus Agreed Statement, focussing on the doctrine of the Triune God and the nature of the Church. This was followed in 2015 by the Buffalo Agreed Statement, on the nature of the human person in the image and likeness of God. The Commission is comprised on the Orthodox side of delegates from the historic Orthodox Patriarchates and particular Autocephalous Churches, and on

the Anglican side of delegates representative of the worldwide Anglican Communion, and appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, through the Anglican Communion Office in London. During this whole period, the bilateral dialogue has been informed by and grounded in the experiences of practical cooperation between Anglicans and Orthodox people and communities around the world.

In an earlier edition of IJOT¹, I outlined the Commission's progress in its discussion of theological anthropology up to and including the 2011 meeting at Shen Vlash in Albania.² Here I would like to take the story further and say something of the meetings between 2012 and the launch of the Buffalo Agreed Statement in 2015.

The Commission met, at the invitation of the Church of Wales, in Chester in September 2012. During this meeting Commission members took the time to visit some of the holy places of North Wales, and to consider the common heritage shared by both Churches in that part of the world. Discussion papers presented covered three areas of common concern: the themes of human sexuality, the human person in creation, and nature and grace.

Human sexuality, including considerations of marriage, celibacy, friendship and homosexuality, were and are both controversial and very much in the news. An Anglican paper on these issues reflected on the profound changes in the understanding of marriage and sexuality that took place in the early 20th century, in which marriage came to be seen no longer as primarily for the purpose of procreation but rather as a matter of companionship, and indeed friendship. These changes can be viewed in the Lambeth Conference resolutions of 1930,

¹ See: Duncan Reid, Report: Discussion of Theological Anthropology by the International Commission for Anglican – Orthodox Theological Dialogue, in: IJOT 2:4 2011, <http://orthodox-theology.com/media/PDF/IJOT4-2011/Duncan-Reid.pdf>.

² 'Discussion on Theological Anthropology by the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue', in *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, 2011, 2 (4), pp. 147-155.

as compared with those of a decade earlier, and the newer Anglican wedding liturgies published in the inter-war decades. At the same time there was a rediscovery of the high regard for friendship that we see in some mediaeval writers (the English Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx was cited, and Richard of St Victor also comes to mind), replacing the centuries-long distrust of 'particular friendships' that characterises much of both Catholic and Protestant spiritualities. Anglicanism traditionally sees celibacy as a vocational possibility, but not a necessity to be imposed. In this way, Anglicanism mediates between polarized Protestant and Roman Catholic positions in which marriage and celibacy respectively had come to be seen as tokens of the identity of the 'true Church.'

This paper was supplemented by an 'informational overview' of recent debates and decisions about homosexuality within Churches of the Anglican Communion. This paper was offered for the information of the Orthodox delegates as to the range of discussion within the Anglican Communion. The Orthodox paper on these topics outlined the covenantal nature of both celibacy and marriage, and the circumstances under which divorce is permissible in the Orthodox Church. The subsequent discussion highlighted the contemporary phenomenon of the single life, chosen but not as a religious vocation, the increasing popularity of civil partnerships, and the impact of resurgent Islam on all areas of ethical debate, especially around issues of personal and interpersonal morality. It was noted that both Churches contain a broad range of views on and pastoral responses to issues of sexuality, though Orthodox are less inclined than Anglicans to debate such matters in the public forum.

The human person in creation was the area in which we found the greatest consensus, and which offers the most immediate potential for practical cooperation and collaboration. The Symposia on environmental and ecological concerns hosted by the Ecumenical Patriarch are well known. An Anglican paper was presented that looked at a 19th-century Anglican

anticipation of current ecological thinking. The Commission undertook to initiate further exploration over the next twelve months, especially looking at recent thinking on the part of indigenous communities within both Churches.

The third area of discussion focussed on the question of nature and grace. The Orthodox paper on this issue began from the premise that the mission of the church is one of enculturation or contextualization of the Gospel; that is, saying the same things in new languages. When the early church borrowed technical terms from Greek philosophy, this was an appropriate enculturation of the Gospel at that time. We should not read these terms primarily as they were used in philosophy, but as reconstituted to convey a new message, in the light of the new content of divine revelation.

Words are to be understood from their new usage, not simply their past usage. Nature (*physis*), in these early Christian writers, refers, it was argued, to the essence (*ousia*) of God, but the dynamic side of that essence. In the church fathers it thus refers not to fallen nature, nature outside of any reference to God (as it does in both ancient philosophy and modern scientific usage), but to the uncreated nature of God or else to created nature as God intends it to be. So nature and essence are not to be set against one another. God sees our nature as human beings as good (Genesis 1), and this goodness retains a sense of human freedom about God.

The corresponding Anglican paper took 'nature' in the created order as the underlying meaning of the term 'nature.' It is this nature that is 'subjected to futility,' but in hope (Romans 8). There is always some prospect of grace, but there can be very different experiences of grace. Some individuals have never felt alienated from God; others sense a radical alienation and a sudden liberation.

The 17th-century English poets George Herbert and John Donne were cited as examples of these differing experiences of God's grace. Both papers emphasized the relationship between grace and freedom, allowing the possibility of a synergy or

cooperation between God's grace and the freely exercised human will.

Subsequent discussion, however, highlighted differences of approach in the two traditions. Anglicans continue to live with the heritage of Western mediaeval nominalism, in which 'nature' came to signify everyday nature in isolation from God (as indeed it generally does in the natural sciences), and Grace suggests some supernatural gift which, when added to nature, lifts nature out of the morass of alienation in which it finds itself. This strikes me as significantly different from the proposal in the Orthodox paper that nature should be understood primarily about God's being. Although not so obviously controversial as the more immediate questions of sexuality and the environment, this difference in approach strikes me as being in need of further discussion, as it continues to be a source of potential misunderstanding in the future.

Other papers tabled but not discussed in depth concerned human rights and the history and prospects for the dialogue. These were referred to the following meeting, in 2013, when the Commission met at the invitation of the Church of Serbia, in Novi Sad. As in Albania in 2011, members of the Commission saw a Church that had grown rapidly after the collapse of communism. His Holiness Patriarch Irinej had very recently addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations on the occasion of the 1700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan, promulgated by Emperor Constantine, and arguably the first legislation in history to enshrine the concept of religious freedom.

In 2013 Novi Sad was also a city still recovering from the effects of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign. At this meeting, the principal new material for discussion was concerned with the understanding of holiness in both Churches. Most of the time, however, consisted in shaping the material on theological anthropology already presented at the earlier meetings since 2009 into a cohesive text. This was in turn refined by two sessions of a Drafting Committee in 2014, at the Anglican

Communion Office in London and later at the Phanar in Istanbul.

The meeting at St George's Anglican College in Jerusalem in September 2014 allowed the Commission to visit the holiest places for all Christians, and also brought Commission members face to face with the plight of the Palestinian people. The Commission listened to the heartfelt appeal from the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Theophilos III, to support and empower Christian minorities to continue to live, in safety, in the Middle East. This message was strongly reiterated when the Commission visited a predominantly Christian peace and reconciliation initiative in Bethlehem, within the Palestinian Territories. As at every meeting, the Commission received detailed reports of developments in each of the member Churches.

The Anglican reports in this session were focussed on the priorities outlined by the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as the resumption of dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox Churches after an eleven-year interval. The Orthodox delegates reported on planning for the forthcoming Holy and Great Council, as well as issues facing particular member Churches. Even at this late stage in the drafting process there was some heated debate concerning the term 'image and likeness of God', especially as to whether 'likeness' should be understood as an extension of natural human capacities or rather as growth in spiritual maturity (so that human capacities are fully developed under the rubric of 'image').

The final meeting before the publication of the Buffalo Agreed Statement was held in Buffalo in the United States, in September 2015, where the Commission enjoyed the generous hospitality of a vigorous diaspora community, the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation. Reports from the Anglican delegates included the acknowledgment of the decisions to ordain of women bishops in the Church of England, and the blessing of same-sex marriages in the Episcopal Church

of the USA. Both these measures elicited expressions of concern from Orthodox delegates. The Orthodox report included an expression of solidarity with Armenia on the centenary of the 1915 massacres, ongoing plans for the Holy and Great Council, scheduled to convene at Pentecost 2016, and initiatives to address the problem of climate change, including a joint declaration by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Ecumenical Patriarch.

2 The Buffalo Agreed Statement

The Buffalo Statement, published after 2015 meeting, is divided into an Introduction followed by three thematic sections on:

- The human person within the created order,
- The image and likeness of God, and
- Body, soul, and personhood.

The Introduction speaks of the glory of God made manifest in creation, including the human person. The human person is to be understood primarily regarding our relationship with the Triune God. Our fullest human potential is revealed in Christ, who both enables us to face who we are, and who manifests the God who calls us to become more fully human.³

As human beings, we are called to share in both God's creative work and God's Sabbath rest.⁴ The cover of the printed edition, a detail from the Resurrection fresco in the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora, shows the risen Christ drawing Adam and Eve from their graves into this new life of God's Sabbath rest.

³ *In the Image and Likeness of God: A Hope-Filled Anthropology. The Buffalo Statement agreed by the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue, 2015* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2015), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

2.1 *The human person within the created order*

Section I, on the human person within creation, addresses the sources of our theological anthropology in scripture and tradition. Each human person is to be approached as an inexhaustible mystery, who emerges and continues to emerge from relationships. This ongoing dimension of interrelationship involves a capacity for Christ-like *kenosis* and creativity. Each person is unique and can exercise a freedom 'in and for God' in whose service is perfect freedom. Section I thus covers the essential mystery of human personhood, its relational nature, and the unique value of each person. Questions of self-sacrifice, creative co-operation with God, and the dialectic of freedom and obedience are critically discussed. The emphasis is on God's creativity and our human participation in this creativity.

2.2 *The image and likeness of God*

Section II turns to consider our creaturely being as image and likeness of the uncreated God. This can be understood in different ways, but the important thing is the dynamism of growth that this ancient expression conveys. Mary is seen by both traditions, 'next after Christ and never apart from him,' as the 'highest example of what it means to be human.'⁵ Humanity is nonetheless a 'fallen yet not forlorn' reality, in whom the divine image and likeness have become 'obscured (...) but not obliterated'.⁶

There is an implicit reference to the classical definition of the human being as a rational animal in this section, but with the specifically patristic Christian caveat that reason is more than mere rationality and must be understood to include discernment.⁷ This definition is also supplemented by a

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

reflection on our human responsibility for the earth and its non-human creatures: 'stewardship is not to be interpreted as implying that the created order is merely an asset to be exploited, to be treated as an *it* rather than a *thou*'.⁸

The section is completed with a reflection on human creativity in the arts and sciences, but also a warning against making idols of any such manifestation of human creativity. Section II thus considers the fundamental biblical metaphor of 'image and likeness' for the nature of human beings. Beginning with the distinction between created and uncreated, it moves on to consider growth in moral responsibility. Mary is seen as a model for human responsiveness and action about God's call.

The section moves on to discuss the implications of both the trinitarian nature of God and the incarnation of the Word for our standing in the image and likeness: the call to stewardship of the creation, our responsibility to other animate life forms and ecosystems more generally, our sense of purpose as human beings, the role of the arts and sciences and the need for caution about confusing uncreated with created entities.

2.3 Body, soul, and personhood

Section III is concerned with our status as creatures who are both embodied and ensouled. These characteristics, however, are not to be opposed to each other in any dualistic sense. Respect for the body touches on the whole question of human rights and human dignity. The body is destined to be transfigured in the resurrection body to which we look in hope. The section moves to consider gender difference, including 'the complex questions raised in the case of those for whom the differentiation between male and female is not experienced as clearly defined.'⁹ This in turn leads on to a consideration of the

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

relationship between personhood and community, drawing on the African notion of *ubuntu* ('I am because you are') that has played such an important role in Anglican thinking (and practice) in recent years.¹⁰ This section also highlights the ambiguous role of culture in giving expression to the Gospel. Section III thus looks at the question of body and soul as components of our human personhood.

In this section, there are considerations of spiritual growth and the nature of freedom; gender and other differences; community and various ways of living in the community: marriage, monastic and single life, and friendship. The section goes on to discuss the value of human life in all its life stages, the dignity of the human person and our eschatological hope of glory.

Fittingly, the Agreed Statement concludes with a hymn to God the Trinity by St Gregory of Nazianzus, a hymn that invokes the praise of all living creatures, and the passage from St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new'.

So where is the dialogue to go from here? The official Communiqué from the Buffalo meeting states:

This agreement lays the foundation for continuing dialogue on ethical decision-making in the light of this vision. At its future meetings the Commission will consider the practical consequences of this theological approach to personhood. The Commission anticipates ongoing study in areas such as bioethics and the sanctity of life, as well as human rights and ecological justice.¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

¹¹ <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/09/international-commission-for-anglican-orthodox-theological-dialogue-communication-2015.aspx>, accessed 25 February 2017.

In keeping with the progressive nature of the dialogue since 1973, the next stage will move from general anthropological principles to specific ethical questions touching human birth, life, and death. Many of these issues are relatively new: they have become ethical problems because of recent developments in science and technology.

Life can now be generated *in vitro*, cloned, and artificially enhanced and prolonged, and these possibilities have thrown up a host of ethical problems. Other questions are occasioned by changing social attitudes, especially in the West, to matters such as gender identity: what is, and what should be, the status in the churches of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people?

In their preface to the Buffalo Statement, the co-chairs wryly remark that these questions may be less amenable to an agreement or even convergence than the theological issues discussed to date: 'it is also possible that we shall not agree entirely concerning the practical consequences of our theology of personhood.'¹² It may also be the case, however, that some members of the more diverse and representative Anglican team that will attend the upcoming meetings may find their thinking closer to Orthodox representatives. This remains to be seen. In any case, it will be important to test the limits of the dialogue by considering these potentially divisive questions.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. x.