The Wittenberg-Constantinople Negotiations in the 16th and 17th Century. A Form of Early Ecumenical Dialogue?

In 2017, we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginnings of reformation in Germany. Taking place during the time of Renaissance, the reformation was part of a transformation of mind, culture and art which formed modern thinking. At the University of Wittenberg, Martin Luther requested the end of the Western church’s corruption. His wish was not to establish a new church, but to lead the Catholic church back to its origins. In fact the quarrel about the church’s reform separated the churches of reformation (Lutheran and Calvinist) on the one hand and the Roman-Catholic church on the other hand. The result was not a reformed church but the emergence of Protestantism. Therefore western christianity got more pluralistic. It seems obvious that the attitude of these new Protestant churches was very anticatholic. So they were looking for partners who shared this concern. But the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s situation was different at that time. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, the Patriarch became the head of the Orthodox population in an Islamic state and a time of oppression begun. This paper will focus on the contact between the Protestant and Orthodox churches in the 16th and 17th century. The central questions are: What are these contacts like? Can those encounters be considered an early form of ecumenical dialogue?

Martin Luther, head of the Reformation in Wittenberg, had very limited knowledge of the Orthodox church and its’ believes and was not very interested in accumulating more knowledge. However, Luther’s colleague Philipp Melanchthon, who taught ancient Greek at the University of Wittenberg, was much more interested. He was a member of the humanistic movement, born in 1497 and appointed as a professor in Wittenberg in 1518. After Luther’s death in 1546 he became the head of the Lutheran reformation. In 1543 Melanchthon first encountered Orthodoxy. He received a letter from Antonios Eparchos. Eparchos was born in 1492 at Corfu and had studied in Venice. Later became head of the Greek academy in Milan. For the negotiations between Lutheran and Catholic theologians in Regensburg in 1541, he wrote a paper on the Orthodox understanding of Eucharist. This shows that he was very familiar with the religious questions during the time of reformation. He was saddened by the separation between the Lutheran and Catholic churches and therefore he wrote a letter to Melanchthon in 1543 as a try to reconcile the two parties, as the political situation in Europe was very serious. There was nobody who was able to stop the advance of the Ottoman empire. In 1526 Suleiman the Magnificent had reached Vienna. Eparchos was worried about the Turks as well as the European disagreement. Therefore he did not regard it as the time to argue about religious questions. He was afraid that the forces to fight the Ottomans would be weakened by the separation of churches and the split into Lutheran and Catholic countries. Melanchthon however had a different opinion, for him religious matters had priority over politics. Some years earlier Melanchthon had stated:

“It is argued about the most important things: about the remission of sins, about the consolation of conscience, about the proper worship and about the sincere invocation of God.”

For him the religious question was existential. His colleague Joachim Camerarius was in charge of replying to Eparchos. Melanchthon’s message was that truth was more important than unity.

The second contact with Orthodoxy was more sensational. In the 1550’s a dubious person came to the small German country of Mansfeld. He was born in Rhodes and had fled the Ottoman occupation. Jakobus Heraklides Despota first went to Mansfeld and then to Wittenberg. There he became acquainted with the theologians, particularly with Melanchthon. He familiarised himself with the theology of the reformation. In 1561 he got the opportunity to sovereign Moldavia. He ruled the country for three years until he was killed by the people, because he had introduced the reformation in Moldavia. So Heraklides was one of the first Orthodox christians who joined the reformation. These two examples show personal contacts between Lutheranism and Orthodoxy.

In 1559 an Orthodox deacon by the name of Demetrios Mysos from Serbia visited Wittenberg. He was sent to Germany by the Ecumenical Patriarch Joasaph II. His mission was to gather more information about the reformation in Germany. Melanchthon received Demetrios kindly and explained the Lutheran doctrine and worship to him. From the 20th of May to the end of September, Demetrios stayed in Melanchthon’s house. During that time they talked about the situation of Orthodoxy, the Orthodox faith and the Church Fathers. Demetrios was impressed by Melanchthon, who then sent Demetrios to the Patriarch with a letter that emphasized the fundamental similarities between the Lutheran and the Orthodox church. The reaction to this letter in Constantinople is not documented. Due to the order given by the Ecumenical Patriarch, the contacts now became more official.

The first person to provide a deeper understanding of Orthodoxy was David Chyträus (1530-1600). He was born in 1530 as the son of a Protestant minister and he studied Theology at the University of Tübingen. His teacher was Joachim Camerarius, one of Melanchthon’s friends. In 1551 he went to Rostock, a university-town in Northern Germany. He worked there as a theology professor for 50 years. After a journey through Austro-Hungary in 1569, he reported on the situation of the Orthodox Churches. This was the first well-founded Protestant publication about denominational matters of Orthodoxy.

In 1573 the place of meeting chanced to be the Bosporus. David Ungnad was sent to Constantinople as a diplomat by the German emperor Maximilian II. He was accompanied by the Lutheran minister Stephan Gerlach (1546-1612). The Tübingen University’s Faculty of

---

3 Philipp Melanchthon, Werke in Auswahl 5, Gütersloh 1965, 33: „Rerum controversia est et quidam maximarum: De remissione peccatorum, de consolatione conscientiarum certi nihil tenere potest, sed in universum cultu atque invocatione Dei vera existere nulla potest.“

4 Cf. Benz, Wittenberg, 17.

5 Cf. Martin H. Jung, Philipp Melanchthon und seine Zeit, Göttingen 2010, 134

6 Cf. Benz, Wittenberg, 63.

7 Cf. Benz, Wittenberg, 71.


Theology requested him to hand over a Greek version of the main document of the Lutheran Faith, the Confessio Augustana, to the Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremias II. The Augsburg Confession was written by Melanchthon in 1530 as a summary of the Lutheran faith.\(^{11}\) It was signed by the lords who followed the Reformation and was handed over to the German emperor Charles V. Paul Dölsch and Melanchthon had translated the Confession some years prior. Jeremias was an outstanding theologian and had been the Ecumenical Patriarch for 22 years. Gerlach reported the handing over:

„He (the Patriarch) read it immediately in my presence with great pleasure and gave it to the elders and monks, who were there, to read. Then the Patriarch read out five chapters to be examined in a loud voice. [...] He even promised, after an exact examination of the confessio, to write his opinion down [...] But I (the Patriarch) suspect that there will be very many doubts or differences.”\(^{12}\)

Jeremias and his counsellor Theodosios Zygomalas answered with a tract. They listed all accordances and disparities regarding the doctrine. The Patriarch invited the German theologians to join the Orthodox church.\(^{13}\) Those findings were later confirmed in the correspondence between 1573 and 1581 between the Faculty of Theology in Tübingen and Jeremias II.\(^{14}\) Jeremias broke contact, because he thought that there were no further concordances in doctrine and worship.\(^{15}\)

In the 17th century, the Ecumenical Patriarch Kyrillos Lukaris was one of the more interesting characters. His work was very controversial, because he wrote a „Confessio fidei“\(^{16}\) in 1626. It was his personal confession of faith. In 1570 he was born as the son of a priest in Crete. After his studies in Venice and Padua he went on a mission to Poland. From 1601 to 1620 he was the Patriarch of Alexandria. With some interruption, Kyrillos was Ecumenical Patriarch form 1620 to 1638, when he was murdered. The „Confessio fidei“ started with a confession to the-Trinitarian God. In the chapter on the Holy Bible he pointed out the priority of scripture over tradition. Christ is the only high priest and mediator, who rules the church. He made a distinction between the invisible and the visible church. And finally he mentioned the doctrine of the double predestination. This is why we can say that the Kyrillos’ confessions are Calvinist.\(^{17}\) He was influenced by Calvinist theologians. After his martyrdom, his confessions was strongly debated. Calvinist theologians supported the words of the Patriarch. The Orthodoxy finally condemned Kyrillos at the Synod of Jassy in 1642. But the statements of Kyrillos produced some new formulations of the Orthodox doctrines. For example the Moldavian theologian Petrus Mogila wrote his „Confessio Orthodoxa“ in 1639. This book became very popular in the 18th and 19th century.\(^{18}\) Dositheos who worked as

---

16 Cf. Cyrillus Lucaris, Confessio Fidei, Genf 1629.
17 Cf. Bryner, Die orthodoxe Kirche, 68.
18 Cf. Bryner, Die orthodoxe Kirche, 71.
Patriarch of Jerusalem published his „Confessio Orthodoxa“ in 1676. In this book the Eucharist became the central doctrine in Orthodox dogmatics. The quarrel about Kyrillos’ confessions was abandoned at this point.

During the 16th and 17th century there are a few more contacts between Orthodoxy and the churches of reformation. Only one time it came to negotiations, when from 1573 on, the Lutheran theologians of the University of Tübingen corresponded with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The results of all these contacts were not very promising. The aim of unifying Christianity was not achievable. The understanding of the Christian faith was too different in many important doctrines and the liturgy. But all those contacts produced an awareness of the other. The churches of reformation learnt about the life and traditional thinking of the Orthodoxy and therefore rediscovered the traditions of eastern Christianity. In Constantinople there was a genuine interest in the theological discussions in Europe. They discovered the essence of the reformation’s doctrine. This was an important step towards today’s ecumenical negotiations. That’s why those contacts can be regarded an early form of ecumenical dialogue, because the partners in this dialogue were equal. It is also true for those contacts that by meeting with the other, we discover more about ourselves.

\[^{19}\text{Cf. Dositheos of Jesusalem, Synodus Bethlehemita adversus Calvinistos haereticos [...]}, Paris 1676.\]