Historic Meeting in Albania between Orthodox and Evangelicals to Discuss Mission

James J. Stamoolis and Bradley Nassif

On September 2–6, 2013, the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative Consultation met at the monastery of St. Vlash, Albania, to consider the theme “The Mission of God.” What made this gathering different from previous consultations was that it was hosted by His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, the foremost practitioner of Orthodox mission in the world. It was also different in that it was held in a country where the Orthodox Church has made a remarkable recovery from years of systematic destruction by the Albanian Communist leadership.

In the 1950s and 1960s Archbishop Anastasios restarted Greek missionary work after centuries of the Greek Church being unable to participate in mission. As students of Orthodox mission history will know, the Muslim conquest of the Byzantines brought the once-flourishing Greek Orthodox missionary enterprise to a halt. The torch, which passed to the Slavic peoples, burned with varying degrees of intensity and purity as the Orthodox moved east and eventually into Russian Alaska and Japan.

Significance of the Consultation

For many, this is just history. To be able to witness the resurrection of the Albania Church, however, was not merely a moment in mission history but, for these participants at least, a time of great spiritual blessing. The setting of the conference contributed as much as the content of the papers that were presented to this historic gathering. The planning committee wisely included opportunities both for local evangelicals to participate in the sessions and for attendees to meet with Albanian evangelicals. One such meeting involved transporting the delegates to downtown Tirana to worship together with evangelicals and to hear testi-
monies of their conversions from atheism. Another opportunity for interaction was at a dinner hosted by the archbishop during which both Albanian evangelicals and expatriate missionaries could interact with members of the consultation. As one result of the consultation, evangelicals and Orthodox working in prison ministry gathered for a joint workshop on how better to minister to the inmates. The workshop provided an example of ecumenism, not only as meetings, but also of ministry together.

While there have been numerous consultations and symposia to discuss theological agreements and points of contention, these have generally taken place between denominational families and representatives of the Orthodox Church. Usually discussions on mission between Eastern Orthodox and evangelicals, if they occur at all, take place in the context of rival missionary activity. Therefore, the September consultation in Albania was historic for breaking new ground in ecumenical discussions. It arose out of the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, held in October 2010 in Cape Town, South Africa, and had as its goal “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.” Two years in preparation by a working committee representing both Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox as well as evangelicals, the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative Consultation explored common themes in mission, as well as looking frankly at hard and divisive issues.

The consultation itself was held at the Monastery of St. Vlash, near the ancient city of Durrës, affording opportunities to see the rebirth of the church in a country officially atheist for a quarter century. Beginning in 1967, when all religions were banned and all places of worship were desecrated, churches were either destroyed, turned into warehouses, or used for other secular purposes. At times we needed to remind ourselves that with the exception of a couple of historic monastery churches, none of the church buildings we saw, and particularly the spectacular Cathedral of the Resurrection, existed before 1992. Many of the churches the delegates visited were even more recently constructed. The same is true of various industries that the Orthodox Church has developed to support its ministry, such as a candle-making operation, a factory where all the church furniture is constructed,
and an icon restoration facility where icons, damaged by years of neglect and abuse, are lovingly restored. We also toured a six-floor medical clinic that houses the most up-to-date diagnostic equipment available.

Forty-seven Christian leaders gathered to discuss issues of missionary activity and potential areas of cooperation, as well as to look honestly at misunderstandings and obstacles that separate them. Archbishop Anastasios of Albania and seven other hierarchs of the Orthodox, Coptic, and Syrian Orthodox churches were present. The gathering was unprecedented in having so many Orthodox leaders present, along with key evangelicals from Africa, Asia, Australia, and North America, as well as Eastern and Western Europe.

During the five days of the consultation, the participants shared in Bible studies and discussion groups, and they heard plenary presentations on mission, problem areas between the communions, and theological differences. The participants experienced both evangelical and Orthodox worship. The consultation engaged local leadership from both traditions, Albania Orthodox and evangelical, to further promote dialogue and understanding.

Albania, officially atheistic until 1991, was the ideal venue for the consultation. It served both as a living laboratory for the survival of any faith during Communist persecution and as a living example of the resurrection of Albanian church life. Opportunities were provided for hearing firsthand testimonies from both evangelical and Orthodox believers who, though they grew up as atheists, had found faith in God. Truly there has been a resurrection of the church in Albania, both evangelical and Orthodox. In particular, the participants were able to see the remarkable work of rebuilding that has been accomplished by Archbishop Anastasios and the dedicated team of priests and lay workers under his guidance.

Topics Addressed

Bishop Angelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church, cochair of the consultation, set the tone for the meeting with his opening proclamation, “Christ is risen!” Archbishop Anastasios’s keynote address stressed that an understanding of mission was not something only for theologians. “Every Christian must learn and realize that missionary activity does not constitute a supplement or branch of our ecclesiastical activities but is a fundamental expression of our faith.” This theme animated the entire conference, finding affirmation in the address by Darrell Jackson, from Morling College in Australia. The two addresses articulated a very welcome common confession of the centrality of mission.

Readers acquainted with the problems of territorial exclusiveness claimed by churches in traditionally Orthodox lands will anxiously await publication of the conference papers dealing with this subject. Our anticipation is heightened as we witness the expansion of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the West and the conversion of many Protestants, especially evangelicals, to Orthodoxy. The plenary session that focused on proselytism and canonical territory featured presentations from Leonid Kishkovsky, of the Orthodox Church in America, and Kosta Milkov, an evangelical from Macedonia. Discussion of these difficult questions took place in an atmosphere of listening so as to find mutual understanding.

The papers treating doctrinal issues pertaining to Scripture and tradition, which focused particularly on the concept of salvation as understood by evangelicals and within Orthodoxy, were delivered by the authors of this report, James Stamoolis, an evangelical who has written extensively on the Orthodox Church, and Bradley Nassif, an Orthodox professor of biblical and theological studies at North Park University (Chicago). Both speakers challenged both traditions to live out their theological confessions. Stamoolis admitted that evangelicals suffer from the embarrassment of differing interpretations of Scripture and being divided into numerous denominations, many of which claim to be the pure church. Nassif challenged evangelicals to adopt the mind of the church as expounded in the church fathers. But he also urged his fellow Orthodox to evangelize the nominal members of their own traditions. This admonition tied in with Stamoolis’s point that the essence of evangelicalism was a personal relationship with the living God through faith in the risen Christ.

The consultation also featured case studies of mission from Kenya, India, and Macedonia that demonstrated the impact of the Gospel on culture. These stories of mission were continued in small-group discussions as the participants shared with each other their personal journeys in mission. Participants were moved by the presentation on the current state of Christianity in Egypt by Coptic Bishop Angelos and evangelicals Leslie Doll (Lausanne Movement) and Pastor Ramez Atallah (Egyptian Bible Society). Videos of the destruction of churches and the looting of a Bible Society store were coupled with stories of no retaliation by Christians against the perpetrators of this violence.

Having broken ground for new levels of understanding and friendship between the participants, the conference committee is planning other meetings to continue the dialogue for the sake of greater cooperation between the various communions as they seek to witness to the risen Christ in our troubled world.

Notes

1. See details of the consultation and the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative at www.loimission.net.
3. For example, see the reports of the consultations with the Reformed Churches. They are available in “Theological Consultations between Orthodox and Reformed Churches,” Greek Orthodox Theological Review 43, nos. 1–4 (1998). This volume has the papers from the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Consultations. The memory of Georges Florovsky, an Orthodox pioneer in the ecumenical movement, was honored by a conference in 1993 on the occasion of the centennial of his birth. The papers presented were published as “Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement: A Conference in Honor of Fr. Georges Florovsky,” Greek Orthodox Theological Review 41, nos. 2–3 (1996). Of particular interest is an assessment from the Orthodox point of view of bilateral dialogues. Also useful are studies showing points of convergence between the traditions, such as S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., ed., Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002). Another example of theological dialogue is found in James J. Stamooolis, ed., Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), with comments by Bradley Nassif, Michael Horton, Vladimir Berzonsky, George Hancock-Stefan, and Edward Rommen on whether Eastern Orthodox and evangelicalism are compatible. The format allows for interaction among the authors as they respond to each other’s essays.
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