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## **Whether and How Ecumenism, Anti-Ecumenism, and Conservative Ecumenism Are Politically or Theologically Motivated: A View from the United States**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22394/2311-3448-2019-6-1-20-43>

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*This article discusses the phenomena of ecumenism, anti-ecumenism, and conservative ecumenism. The author sets two goals. The first is to identify the theological foundations of ecumenism and anti-ecumenism, and also to analyze conservative ecumenism in this research perspective. The second is to identify the political component of these phenomena. The author analyzes and criticizes the concept of “ecumenical consciousness” proposed by Andrey Shishkov. He gives his own definition of ecumenism, which includes the hope for the restoration of Christian unity as a fundamental component. From the point of view of the author, conservative ecumenism can be called ecumenism only if it contains an element associated with the quest for unity.*

**Keywords:** anti-ecumenism, Christian unity, conservative Christian alliances, conservative ecumenism, ecumenism, theology.

### **I. Introduction**

A PERENNIAL way to discredit a theological opponent’s perspective is to say it has been determined by extrinsic, political factors. Each of the three phenomena to be explored here — ecumenism, anti-ecumenism, and the more recently emergent “conservative ecumenism” — has been so described by its critics. Perhaps most familiar to those with knowledge of Orthodoxy is the accusation of political expediency leveled against Orthodox ecumenism, a charge with centuries-old antecedents. But in an interesting twist, the anti-ecumenists who level it have come to be accused, themselves, of being motivated by politics, albeit of a very different flavor. Unlike either ecumenism or anti-ecumenism, “conservative ecumenism” — in which long-separated Christian bodies, whatever their ongoing theo-

logical differences, cooperate to defend values they see as imperiled in secular society — never has purported *not* to make politics a priority.

Yet what I will claim about ecumenism and anti-ecumenism is also true of conservative ecumenism. This is that while none of the three movements has always been free of political determinants, neither can any of them be simply dismissed as mere politics dressed up in theological garb. Each has something to say for itself theologically. This does not mean, of course, that the content of what each expresses theologically is of the same value. In the analysis that follows, I will argue that there is a clear theological right and wrong in the long-standing dispute between Orthodox ecumenism and anti-ecumenism. (It is ecumenism that is right, anti-ecumenism wrong.) As for “conservative ecumenism,” it is theologically warranted to the extent that (1) it holds the “conservative” label loosely and (2) it is open to Orthodox ecumenism properly defined.

## **II. Orthodox ecumenism’s sometime intermingling with politics; its essential theological significance**

For most of the 20th century, the countries where Western Christianity was dominant were more prosperous and powerful than those with majority-Orthodox populations. If leading Orthodox theologians wished to mingle with the well-educated and well-heeled of this world, they would not fare well identifying Catholics and others as heretics. Farther back in history, the need for financial or even military support from the West put pressure on Orthodox leaders to accept union on less than equal terms, as at Lyons (1274) and Florence (1449). As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann lamented: “The question of the unity of the churches was long confused by falsehood and calculations and poisoned by nonecclesiastical and base motives” (Schmemmann 1963, 254).

In the 18th century, a more affirming posture toward the non-Orthodox was associated in Orthodox consciousness with theological laxity or compromise. When Ecumenical Patriarch Cyril V vehemently denounced Latin baptism,<sup>1</sup> defenders of his decree were tasked with explaining why in earlier centuries Latin baptism had been accepted by the Orthodox, as when Latin converts to Orthodoxy had been chrismated rather than (re)baptized. According to a novel theory Cyril’s de-

1. The decree of Cyril V in 1755 was titled “A Definition of the Holy Church of Christ Defending the Holy Baptism Given from God, and Spitting upon the Baptisms of the Heretics Which Are Otherwise Administered.”

fenders put forward, that earlier more positive approach to Latin sacraments had been only a function of *economia*, that is, a relaxation of the theological norm. As Nikodemos the Hagiorite put it, the strict rule of (re)baptism had not been applied because “it was not good, given the utter weakness of our nation, to further excite the fury of the Papacy.”<sup>2</sup> The Orthodox had only given the appearance of accepting Latin baptism for political reasons.

At the dawn of the ecumenical movement the important but flawed encyclical issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere” (1920) gave skeptics of ecumenism fresh grounds for thinking the movement too bound up with political concerns and categories. When the encyclical called for “a league (fellowship) between the churches” on the model of the newly formed League of Nations, its praise of the latter was unreserved (“Encyclinal” 1997, 12). When it sweepingly identified all divided denominations together as “the Christian body,” and “the whole body of the Church” (“Encyclical” 1997, 12, 13) the encyclical betrayed an imprecise and rather weak ecclesiology.

Yet neither these shortcomings of the 1920 encyclical, nor the political pressures under which earlier union attempts were undertaken, should be taken to mean that somehow ecumenism has always been nothing but politics. Orthodox tradition has also known situations of schism and doctrinal divergence where unity was restored successfully, with integrity. Examples include the Formula of Reunion of 433, or the ends of the Acacian (484–519) or Arsenite (1261–1310) schisms. An ongoing task of Orthodox ecumenism is to give such examples of principled restoration of unity greater prominence in popular accounts of Orthodox tradition.

Before turning to a consideration of the politics of anti-ecumenism, a brief definition of ecumenism may be ventured, to provide a baseline by which to distinguish between ecumenism and anti-ecumenism theologically, going forward. Ecumenism may be defined as activity — whether of prayer, reflection, interpretation, encounter, dialogue, or otherwise — undertaken in the hope (but not the presumption) of an eventual restoration of full, authentic unity between one’s own communion and another, not by the submission of the other tradition to one’s own but by reconciliation of the differences that have caused or now perpetuate the separation. In this definition, ecumenism does not presuppose an equivalency between or among divided churches; it

2. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Pedalion*, 57, quoted by Metallinos 1994, 90–91.

does hold that there is some meaningful reality of church, even if imperfect and incomplete, outside one's own communion.

### **III. Orthodox anti-ecumenism's political element; its essential theological significance**

Being politically incorrect for truth's sake is often considered the hallmark of Orthodox anti-ecumenists. They are unafraid, for example, to call Protestants and Roman Catholics heretics, something they say the truth calls for. It might therefore seem counterintuitive to propose that their own positions could be shaped by political factors, but this is the thesis advanced by George Demacopoulos in his article "Traditional Orthodoxy' as a Postcolonial Movement," in which he speaks of "the ambivalence of Eastern Christianity's dependence on/resistance to the Western other" (Demacopoulos 2017, 477). Inasmuch as Orthodoxy has long been anxious to distance itself from Latin Christianity by drawing clear lines of demarcation and expurgating borrowed elements, this is best understood, Demacopoulos argues, in terms of an ongoing relationship of dependency he likens to the predicament of having been colonized. If ecumenism is prone to a politics of accommodation, anti-ecumenism is prone to a politics of separation — a kind of identity politics.

Demacopoulos traces the provenance of one of the most significant producers of anti-ecumenical literature in the United States, the Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, to communities in Greece whose identities were forged in the 1930s when they separated from the canonical Church of Greece in an act of resistance to the adoption of the "new" calendar, which they considered a capitulation to Western dominance.

The phenomenon of *resistance* has a largely positive valence in Orthodoxy; it is typically associated with theological rigor, as in the case of Mark of Ephesus. Orthodox tradition has known many other moments, however, in which resistance would have to be viewed as negative, either cast in political terms, or, if in theological ones, as sheer recalcitrance — whether when groups at the margins of the Byzantine empire did not accept the imperially enforced theologies of Ephesus (431) or Chalcedon (451), or in the case of the Bogomils or Old Believers and other sectarian groups. In all these cases, from the canonical Orthodox point of view, resistance was a mistake. It was resistance to catholicity and only imagined itself to be resistance to heterodoxy.

Is Orthodox resistance to the West different? Mainstream and influential mid-20th-century Orthodox writers both in Greece (Pho-tios Kontoglou) and among Russian émigrés in Europe (Leonid Ous-pensky) were active in inveighing against Western styles in art and commending the importance of reviving traditional Orthodox forms (Demacopoulos 2017, 485–86). This obviously can be interpreted in positive or negative ways. Positively, one could see it as a return to au-thentic particularity, in line with the principle of enculturation in mod-ern ecclesiology; negatively, one could ask whether increasingly since the schism began Orthodox theological purity had not come to be sub-tly transmuted into a function of the categories of (Greek/Byzantine) East and (Latin) West, with purity now overidentified with the former. Georges Florovsky’s insistence that Eastern theology free itself from its “Babylonian captivity” to Latin scholasticism may be considered an example of the mode in question.<sup>3</sup> According to Paul Gavrilyuk, “Flo-rovsky’s persistent conflation of the criterion of truth with the crite-ri- on of identity has bedeviled Orthodox theology ever since” (Gavrily-uk 2013, 269).

It may fairly be asked whether (theological) truth or (political) identity lay behind Cyril V’s renunciation of Latin baptism. A later de-fender of Cyril’s decree, Konstantinos Oikonomos (1780–1857), in-vo-ked an idea of “evangelical *economia*” to explain the Church’s earli-er practice of not requiring (re)baptism of Latin converts lest it deter them.<sup>4</sup> Another writer, Neophytos, invoked the very opposite logic to say why — whatever was done before — (re)baptism was now strictly required: heretics’ incentive for entering the Orthodox Church would otherwise be undermined. He declares that baptism in heresy is “not capable of providing remission of sins,” but does not leave it at that. He then lingers, or doubles back, on his own assertion to make a de-duction of surprising logic. “For if it does provide [remission of sins], then they join the Church for no reason, and the heretics who do not join hear this.”<sup>5</sup> Neophytos’s argument here appears to be one of evan-gelical *akribeia*: the strict rejection of all baptism except Orthodox baptism will serve the evangelical purpose of bringing people into the

3. In fact Florovsky’s critique is best understood as an effort to overcome one narrow form of Latin theology that many of his Catholic contemporaries were also seeking to transcend, insofar as it had closed itself off from vital contact with Eastern patristic sources.
4. *The Extant Ecclesiastical Writings of Constantine Presbyter and Oikonomos of the Oikonomoi*, published by Soph. C. of the Oikonomoi, vol. 1 (Athens, 1862), 475, quoted in Metallinos 1994, 92.
5. Neophytos, 147, as quoted by Metallinos 1994, 39n41.

one true (Orthodox) Church. Neophytos does not start from the idea, as a theological premise, that baptism is real only in Orthodoxy; instead he derives the conclusion that it must be real only there from the premise that converts will *enter* Orthodoxy only if that is the case.

But what if behind these crisscrossing lines of argument there lay something else that might better make sense of Cyril V's and his followers' insistence on a return to the allegedly normative practice of (re)baptizing converts? The conclusion drawn by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware is that when the patriarch issued the formal rejection of Latin baptism, it was not so much to bring Roman Catholics into Orthodoxy, as it was to keep Orthodox people from going over to Rome.

Cyril was . . . anxious at all costs to curtail Roman Catholic influence in his Patriarchate and to prevent further infiltration by the Latins. . . . Surely prospective converts would reflect more carefully before seceding to Rome, if it were forcibly emphasized that the Orthodox Catholic Church was the sole treasury of valid sacraments. (Ware 1964, 79–80)

We may call what Ware describes here, “political *akribeia*.” The hard-line position is taken as self-protection against Western imperialism and proselytism.

Ware is careful to note that Cyril V's stance on Latin baptism was supported by significant theological argumentation, most fully developed by Eustratios Argenti.<sup>6</sup> Ware writes: “Certainly Cyril had practical motives for condemning Latin Baptism, but his action was not merely a piece of religious opportunism, for he could also defend it on serious theological grounds” (Ware 1964, 80).

This is an important point to highlight in regard to the proto-anti-ecumenical theology of the 18th and 19th centuries — and to the anti-ecumenical theology of today: whatever its non-theological influences or historical contexts, it can nevertheless be defended (and must be engaged) on “serious theological grounds.”

The pivotal theological claim of Orthodox anti-ecumenism is encapsulated in the following statement from the New Martyr Hilariion (Troitsky), a writer highly regarded by other anti-ecumenists: “If the grace-giving Baptism of the Holy Spirit is permitted outside the Church, then it is completely impossible to preserve the unity of the Church” (Troitsky 1975, 39).

6. E. Argenti, *Manual on Baptism*, 6–7, quoted by Ware 1964, 90.

For Orthodox anti-ecumenism, the Church's unity depends on an all-or-nothing divide between Church and non-Church. For Orthodox ecumenism, by contrast, a paradoxical *ecclesia extra ecclesiam* may account for the anomaly of schism as a temporary phenomenon. In my paper's concluding section I will further delineate the crucial difference between these two systems of thought.

#### **IV. “Conservative Ecumenism” as political alliance; its possible theological basis**

Unlike ecumenism or anti-ecumenism, “conservative ecumenism” does not purport to eschew politics; rather it is openly and unabashedly oriented toward political developments, which it seeks not only to evaluate but to shape and redirect. At the same time and without contradiction, this movement is perhaps more adamant than either of the other two (ecumenism and anti-ecumenism) in the claim that it is not beholden to the powerful of this world, but uncompromising in its witness to the gospel, however unpopular.

It would not be difficult in the dramatically new North American political climate that erupted in 2016 to show that the credibility of such a claim by the religious right — and thus also of Orthodox “conservative ecumenists” who identify with many of its aims — has received a severe blow, as though it had not been diminished enough already. But it would run counter to my purpose to single out conservative Christianity whether for censure in this regard, or praise in some other, since I consider it to be essentially cut of the same cloth as liberal Christianity — which we normally think of as its opposite — in how it understands itself in relation to politics. Both, in their public outspokenness, proceed as if a glaring and fundamental feature of today's geopolitical landscape were not there, namely the coexistence of *two*, competing, quasi-imperial ideologies, each of which can be reasonably identified with the inheritance of Christian tradition in some important respects, but perceived as betraying it (whether by outright abandonment or deceptive profanation) in other important respects.

When an Orthodox Christian rhetorically turns today toward the political powers and prophetically calls them out — implicitly or explicitly warning fellow Orthodox against ecclesial accommodation to such powers — there are two directions in which he or she might face. In one direction, he or she may turn and face the Babylon of the post-secular religious nationalism of traditionally Orthodox countries, in the Russian mold. We have come to expect to hear such prophetic de-

nunciation of this Babylon of authoritarian, state-sponsored religious nationalism (with its suspicion or denigration of human rights as an imperialist tool of Western individualism, and so on) from Orthodox academic theology, often in ecumenically open and regular contact with Catholic and other non-Orthodox Christians whether in the United States or other areas of the Orthodox “diaspora.”<sup>7</sup>

In another direction, the Orthodox Christian today who calls out the powers may turn to face the Babylon of liberal secularism — long identified more fully than elsewhere with post-Christian Europe, but understood increasingly in the Obama era as emanating from the federal government of the United States, as well as from the more enduring strongholds of Hollywood and academia. We have come to expect to hear the alarm sounded against *this* post-Christian secular Babylon from self-identified conservatives, ranging from such prominent religious leaders in traditionally Orthodox countries as Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk to American evangelical converts to Orthodoxy like Rod Dreher. Their demonstrated interest in cooperating with non-Orthodox Christian conservative individuals or ecclesial bodies to combat secularism in Europe and North America has led Andrey Shishkov to consider them as part of a global movement of “conservative ecumenism” (Shishkov 2017, 58–85) the concept and phenomenon to be explored here.

But I wanted first to offer this basic framework within which to see conservative and liberal Christianity’s *kinship* — in how their critical attentiveness and responsiveness to matters sociopolitical is, in each case, unidirectional. Liberal Orthodox academic theology today astutely perceives and publicly denounces threats to ecclesial and human freedom posed by post-secular religious nationalism. Orthodox conservative or “traditionalist” theology astutely perceives and publicly denounces threats to such freedom posed by post-Christian secularism. Each subgroup meanwhile sees in the Babylon it is *not* denounc-

7. If we were to name it so as to be paired with Shishkov’s “conservative ecumenism,” this contemporary movement, however comparatively small it may be and whatever impact its voice may or may not have within global Orthodoxy, might be called “liberal ecumenism,” although this would not be in reference to any actual program having to do with church division and unity but with, strictly speaking, sociopolitical concerns springing from certain shared Christian principles — shared between these Orthodox academic theologians and their fellow Christians of other traditions. Although this Orthodox “liberal ecumenist” movement — not of days gone by, as if it had been superseded by the rise in Orthodoxy of “conservative ecumenism,” but contemporary and of new vintage — will be mentioned very little in the remainder of this paper, it is important to note it here as something that exists in parallel to “conservative ecumenism” and that has much in common with it.

ing an ally — only minimally (if at all) problematic — in the noble effort to bring the world a little farther away from the brink of perdition and closer to the kingdom. It is in this respect that I see conservative and liberal Christianity as alike.

Their kinship as I have described it has coherent meaning only if we do indeed live in a world simultaneously characterized by post-Christian liberal secularism and post-secular religious nationalism. Only in that case does denunciation of just one raise the question of accommodation to the other. In other treatments of these two phenomena their relation to one another is generally presented not as synchronic but as chronological, with the post-secular world in which conservative ecumenism is waxing the successor to an earlier, post-Christian world in which the ecumenical movement, represented by the World Council of Churches, came to reflect an increasingly liberal and progressive political agenda in the latter years of the 20th century. Shishkov's presentation tends toward this diachronic or chronological approach,<sup>8</sup> and while I do not wish to deny the rationale for it altogether, I would like to augment the synchronic element, which also appears at times in his presentation, but with considerably less emphasis.

In light of what has just been said the following analysis, while building on Shishkov's category of conservative ecumenism, proposes a modification in how the latter is to be understood. My proposed modification in our understanding of conservative ecumenism pertains to its relation to ecumenism (what Shishkov calls "classical ecumenism") as well as to anti-ecumenism. The relationship between or among ecumenism, anti-ecumenism, and conservative ecumenism looks different depending, above all, on how *ecumenism* is defined in the first place.

In Shishkov's own working definition of ecumenism, there is a certain fluidity with respect to one point, whose significance I will try to shed light on from a couple of different angles. Rather far along in his

8. Although he acknowledges the ongoing existence today of liberal ecumenism — and thus a certain simultaneity of the two — as is evident where he envisions a "competition of ecumenisms" (Shishkov 2017, 79) between the old-school WCC-oriented (what he calls here "classical") mode and the newer, conservative mode of Orthodox ecumenism, nevertheless liberal ecumenism is evidently gray and fading in the picture he presents of it. Indeed he says of it that at the rate things are going it stands at much risk of "suffering a defeat" at the hands of conservative ecumenism "in the competitive fight for Eastern Orthodoxy" (80).

article, in accounting for his view that the trans-confessional anti-secular strategic alliances he calls “conservative ecumenism” are rightly given the name of ecumenism, and not something else, Shishkov writes: “As with classical ecumenists, conservative ecumenists are also the bearers of an ecumenical consciousness. They share such ‘ecumenical values’ as the recognition of the commonality of Christians, a refusal to proselytize, and a refusal to use the language of ‘heresies and schisms’” (Shishkov 2017, 81). At an earlier point in his article, speaking in this case specifically of those Orthodox Christians involved in the (classical) ecumenical movement, Shishkov makes the same reference to “bearers of an ecumenical consciousness,” but with an important difference. In this rendering, they are said to be such in that they “acknowledge the commonality of Christians *and the necessity for union*, reject proselytism, and refuse to employ the language of ‘heresies and schisms’” (Shishkov 2017, 67).<sup>9</sup>

The discrepancy between the two descriptions of what it means to have an “ecumenical consciousness” is significant. In the one case, applied to classical ecumenism, concern for actual union among divided churches is constitutive. In the other, where it is said why both classical ecumenism and conservative ecumenism should be rightly identified as ecumenism, concern for union is not included as a constitutive element. Elsewhere Shishkov indeed addresses this discrepancy between the two ways of defining ecumenism, but he does so only indirectly, when he takes up the question of whether Orthodox anti-ecumenists are rightly so designated. He writes: “Some Orthodox anti-ecumenists specifically attack classical ecumenism for its unifying objective and its liberalism, while loyally responding to interconfessional cooperation [i.e., conservative ecumenism] in defense of ‘traditional values’” (Shishkov 2017, 82). Shishkov’s conclusion is that Orthodox anti-ecumenists of this type “only conditionally qualify as anti-ecumenists” (Shishkov 2017, 82).

However, Shishkov’s notion that so-called anti-ecumenists might actually be considered in the category of ecumenists in some sense, after all, is tenable only if one defines (I would say redefines) ecumenism as Shishkov does: by making the “unifying objective” non-constitutive of ecumenism. If the unifying objective — what George Lindbeck called “unitive ecumenism” (Lindbeck 1989, 70) — is centrally defin-

9. Emphasis added. Shishkov again will associate classical ecumenism with unitive ecumenism when he discusses an aspect of the Havana Agreed Statement jointly signed by Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis; Shishkov 2017, 24.

ing of ecumenism (as it is according to the definition I proposed near the end of section 1 above) then no one who opposes it can be considered an ecumenist. An ecumenist is someone whose hope for the restoration of full unity (with another communion, seen as still ecclesial in some important sense) makes working toward it an imperative.<sup>10</sup> An anti-ecumenist is someone who cannot hope for such restoration, because he sees no meaningful ecclesial reality outside his own communion. In that case unitive ecumenical efforts could only bring, if anything at all, concession and capitulation to falsehood.

Those, then, whom Shishkov says “only conditionally qualify as anti-ecumenists” — conditionally rather than fully insofar as “their recognition of conservative ecumenism makes them bearers of an ecumenical consciousness” (Shishkov 2017, 82), as he goes on to put it — would, on the contrary, be thoroughgoing anti-ecumenists according to the definition of ecumenism that entails an inherent openness to the possibility of union with one or more other communions. In that case, the differentiating line would run not where Shishkov draws it, with, on one side, all those who accept *either* “classical ecumenism” (with its unitive dimension) *or* conservative ecumenism (without a unitive dimension), and, on the other side, “only those who reject the possibility of any contact with those of other faith traditions,” these isolationists alone counting as “the genuine anti-ecumenists” (Shishkov 2017, 82).

Instead, the differentiating line would run through the middle of the group that Shishkov calls “conservative ecumenists.” Only those from within this group who continue to affirm “classical ecumenism” in principle<sup>11</sup> — specifically, with its “unitive” dimension — would properly fall on the “ecumenist” side of the differentiating line. Those from within this same group who in principle oppose “classical ecumenism” — again, specifically in terms of its unitive dimension — would properly fall on the “anti-ecumenist” side of the line. This redrawn

10. In this respect, the “unitive” character that I am saying is indispensable to the basic idea of ecumenism does not entail, precisely, the acknowledgment of the “necessity for union” as Shishkov phrases it; that is to presume too much about the achievability of union (and indeed its rightness vis-à-vis any particular ecumenical dialogue partner). Many classical ecumenists, especially Orthodox or Catholic, generally have seen *working for union* with another church, out of a hope rooted in the recognition in that church’s retention of at least certain key ecclesial elements in common, as the necessity. Whether union itself comes of the ecumenical effort or should come of it — depending on how the dialogue goes — is another question.

11. Strong criticism of certain, even many, concrete instances of the work of “unitive ecumenism” may still be possible in someone who does not oppose such work in principle.

map of the interrelations among ecumenists, anti-ecumenists, and so-called conservative ecumenists raises two interrelated questions.

First, is it even possible to find Orthodox who are proponents of old-school unitive ecumenism — to find them, for example, among the signatories to the socially conservative Manhattan Declaration (2009), or among those committed to European Catholic-Orthodox collaboration to combat secularism and moral relativism? Can conservative ecumenist and unitive ecumenist convictions coexist within one and the same person? The clear answer to this is yes.

Shishkov sees an early example of conservative ecumenism in the Hartford Appeal of 1975, which was initiated by the future founder and editor of *First Things*, John Richard Neuhaus (then a Lutheran pastor and later a Catholic priest), and to which Fr. Alexander Schmemmann was a signatory, among others. Schmemmann was also “a ‘classical ecumenist’ with nearly thirty years of service in events held by the WCC and its affiliated institutions (beginning in 1948)” (Shishkov 2017, 72). Schmemmann was a (proto-)conservative ecumenist with a keen interest in matters of church division and unity. Shishkov also discusses the joint declaration of Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis in Havana, Cuba in February 2016, noting that while “the conservative agenda occupies a significant portion” of the text, the “‘classical’ ecumenical formula of church unity also exists within the declaration” (Shishkov 2017, 79).

Yet in order to maintain his categorizations, Shishkov is prone to see instances where (as he defines them) conservative and classical ecumenism coexist in the same person or document almost as anomalies — or as he puts it, “hybrid forms of ecumenism” (Shishkov 2017, 79). I instead want to suggest that there is nothing about classical and conservative ecumenism that needs be at odds with each other, and that when classical ecumenism is rejected by “conservative ecumenists” as Shishkov defines them — which is not always the case — it is because, *in that case*, the “conservative ecumenists” really are not ecumenists at all.

But this leads to the second and related question raised by my alternate mapping: what precisely is meant by “classical ecumenism”? Here Shishkov’s way of treating the subject ties classical ecumenism almost entirely to the historically evolving institution of the World Council of Churches. Another approach might instead tether classical ecumenism’s definition to certain principles that from the beginning of Orthodoxy’s participation in the movement have consistently informed its understanding of what ecumenical engagement proper-

ly is.<sup>12</sup> Drawing in part on the work of Peter Lodberg, Shishkov aptly traces a shift in WCC-based ecumenism away from its “initial universalistic ecumenical ideal” (Shishkov 2017, 84) whereby various traditions sought to overcome their particularism to a “pluralistic approach” whose emphasis on diversity, regional as well as racial and sexual, meant that “the initial and main objective established by the ecumenical movement — the union of Churches — has gradually begun to recede into the background or to disappear altogether” (Shishkov 2017, 69–70). But while the union of churches has indeed receded as a focus of the WCC, it has not receded from the world of ecumenical activity altogether. This (as I see it) essential component of classical ecumenism, the unitive component, migrated from the WCC to various bilateral dialogues in the latter decades of the 20th century and those of the early 21st. Shishkov notes the withdrawal of the local Orthodox churches of Bulgaria and Georgia from the WCC in the late 1990s (Shishkov 2017, 68), but these same churches have continued their participation in the international Catholic-Orthodox dialogue. This is not to say that pressure on them to also withdraw from that ongoing forum of classical ecumenism could not continue to build to a crisis point; it is only to suggest that the precise reasons for withdrawal in that case would be different. Opposition to WCC involvement over the past two or three decades has come from Orthodox social conservatives, some of whom retain a commitment to unitive ecumenism, as well as from anti-ecumenists, who by (my) definition do not. Orthodox opposition to bilateral Catholic-Orthodox dialogue has come only from anti-ecumenists.

If the nexus of questions concerning church division/unity, with which the ecumenical movement was itself robustly concerned from the 1927 World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne and for decades thereafter,<sup>13</sup> has always been at the heart of classical ecumenism for the Orthodox, then Orthodoxy’s growing qualms about WCC participation over the past thirty years should be understood in light

12. One can discern a consistent thread running through not only the works of Florovsky and other important theologians (Schmemmann, Zizioulas and others), but also certain Orthodox statements clarifying or qualifying its participation in the WCC, such as the September 1991 statement issued by the inter-Orthodox Consultation in the wake of the Canberra Assembly. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/member-churches/special-commission-on-participation-of-orthodox-churches/sub-committee-ii-style-ethos-of-our-life-together/inter-orthodox-consultation-after-the-canberra-assembly>.

13. See, for example, the Toronto Statement, “The Church, the Churches, and the World Council of Churches” 1950, and the document “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” 1982.

of the WCC's own movement away from classical ecumenism in this foundational sense, and not necessarily as a decline in Orthodox commitment to classical ecumenism per se. I believe the latter is best understood not in terms of evolving WCC institutional ecumenism but in the theologically meaningful way that Orthodoxy has always consistently cared about ecumenism. If we do understand classical ecumenism in this sense, then in important respects, and in spite of anti-ecumenists' influence (well shown by Shishkov 2017, 80) on the final form of the relevant conciliar document, Orthodoxy's commitment to classical ecumenism was in fact reaffirmed at the Council of Crete. This is a point of no small consequence.<sup>14</sup>

Having now clarified the question of what classical ecumenism was and still is for the Orthodox,<sup>15</sup> I can return to the first question and see with more clarity why it made sense to answer it, as I did, by saying that not all so-called conservative ecumenists reject classical ecumenism. For a variety of reasons having to do with its liberal trajectory, conservative ecumenists have come to oppose the WCC almost uniformly, but not the bilateral dialogues, for example, with the Catholic Church, where classical ecumenism carries on. Many conservative ecumenists still espouse this classical ecumenism. Those who do

14. Has it really been definitely re-affirmed? The correct interpretation of the relevant document of the 2016 Council of Crete continues to be debated. Shishkov is correct to point out the significance of the change in the expressed purpose of Orthodox participation in the WCC. Whereas in the preconciliar draft it was said to be for the purpose of "contributing to the witness of truth and [the] promotion of unity," in the final version of the official conciliar document it is instead said to be for the purpose of "contributing . . . to the advancement of peaceful coexistence and cooperation in the major socio-political challenges" (Shishkov 2017, 80, with reference to the relevant texts issued before and after the Council). This shift from a unitive to a non-unitive focus would be far more concerning if it described Orthodox ecumenical engagement altogether. Insofar as it applies more specifically to Orthodox WCC participation, it seems to reflect the movement of the WCC itself away from unitive concerns and toward sociopolitical ones. However, there is little doubt that the conciliar text "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World" leaves much about the precise nature of Orthodox ecumenism unspecified and undeveloped.
15. No claim is being made here, of course, of resolving this question at its most vexing ecclesiological point of inner tension — rather, only of resolving that classical ecumenism for the Orthodox must be, in some shape or other, "unitive ecumenism," and must not be hitched to the direction in which the institution of the WCC has gone over time. Where Shishkov, himself venturing into the ecclesiological core of the question, writes that from the Orthodox point of view, "the union of churches must be understood as reunion with the Orthodox Church" (Shishkov 2017, 66–67), this seems to me to reflect one and not the only way of interpreting Orthodoxy's ecclesial self-understanding in the condition of each and every Christian division.

not are not, as I would see it, actually conservative *ecumenists*, but anti-ecumenists.

Shishkov's three criteria for qualifying even these Orthodox "conservative ecumenists" who oppose unitive ecumenism as ecumenists are somewhat thin and ambiguous theologically. What are Shishkov's three criteria? One is a refusal to proselytize. But while this sometimes bears real ecclesiological significance, by no means does it always. In the Balamand Statement (1993) of the Joint International Commission mentioned earlier, refusal to proselytize is indeed connected with recognition of the other confession's sacramental reality. But in a great many instances, Orthodox objection to proselytism has had a self-protective character, on the one hand arising from concerns over Roman Catholic (and Eastern Catholic) encroachment on traditionally Orthodox territory (as was the case with the Balamand Statement itself), but on the other hand never actually committing itself (as Balamand did) to that *mutual* ecclesial recognition that ought logically to be entailed or implied in a principled rejection of proselytism. The message of the authors of the letter from Mount Athos quoted above is a case in point. It clearly and directly condemned Uniate/Eastern Catholic proselytizing of "suffering Orthodox," but it insisted that Orthodoxy's negative stance on Latin baptism had been "not for purposes of proselytism but in order to protect the flock." Although perhaps at first glance this could appear to imply a reciprocal renunciation of proselytism, it actually does not. Nowhere in the letter is there an assertion or even an implication that Catholic ecclesial life has spiritual and possibly salvific value, which is the only basis on which a refusal to proselytize makes any Christian sense. In the overall context of their letter, it is evident that what is renounced is not proselytism as evangelism (of those lacking the true faith, that is, Catholics, by those possessing it, that is the Orthodox) but proselytism as imperialism (by which the weak and "suffering," in other words the Orthodox, are preyed upon by the temporally powerful, the Catholics). By contrast, a rejection of proselytism that has unambiguous ecumenical meaning and not just self-protective political meaning would have to manifest itself in an affirmation of the other tradition's ecclesial significance.

Acknowledgment of the commonality of Christians and avoidance of the terms heretic and schismatic are Shishkov's two other criteria. It is true that each of the two was part and parcel of the advent of 20th-century classical ecumenism, in contrast to the denunciations and hostilities of the past. But over the years it has become possible for these respectful modes of interaction among separated Christians to be de-

tached from an underlying commitment to unitive ecumenism. The willingness to acknowledge commonality across confessional lines certainly can and normally should have ecumenical significance but it can also be subtly circumscribed in such a way that it excludes all hope of ever bridging certain theological differences, in which case its properly ecumenical significance is negligible. So too when the name of Christian rather than heretic is used of non-Orthodox, this can mean quite different things. When a non-Orthodox individual is called a Christian it could (and again arguably should, on the basis of the ancient adage “one Christian, no Christian”) also entail some kind of recognition of the Christian character of the individual’s faith community, but that logic is often absent where Orthodox admit the existence of Christians of other traditions. Writing for a North American archdiocesan magazine, Fr. John Oliver is typical of many anti-ecumenical Orthodox in his willingness to include non-Orthodox among “all who follow Christ” — and indeed even to name their charitable institutions “Christian” — while committing himself not at all to an ecclesial recognition of any non-Orthodox community that would give rise to a positive appraisal of ecumenism (classically understood, that is, in Lindbeck’s “unitive” sense) (Oliver 2018, 18).<sup>16</sup>

In the end, to include conservative Orthodox involvement in non-unitive forms of inter-confessional cooperation under the umbrella of ecumenism, even if some or many of the Orthodox participants concerned are directly opposed to unitive ecumenism, effects a shift in focus and meaning from the theological to the sociopolitical plane. The prospects are then radically diminished for ecumenism’s being seen in terms other than what Shishkov calls “the global ‘culture wars’” and for its being able to serve to bolster spaces of authentic Christian freedom that can constructively cut across the entrenched positions from which

16. Drawing a distinction between being “ecumenical” (which he affirms) and espousing “ecumenism” (which he does not), Fr. John Oliver says, “One is being ecumenical . . . by bumping elbows with anyone else — wherever he resides in the numberless religious and non-religious neighborhoods outside the visible boundaries of the Church — to feed the hungry, nurse the sick, clothe the bereft, serve the poor, visit the imprisoned, which are part of the basic mission of the Church. *St. Thomas* in Nashville, *Baptist* in Knoxville, *Methodist* in Memphis, *St. John’s and Mary* in Chattanooga — all these Christian hospitals in Tennessee from theologically-conflicting confessions are yet joined ecumenically in the singular task of caring for the sick. Such ministry, yes. Conjoined in charity, please. Dialogue and dinner with our various neighbors, certainly. Raising a mug of beer or cup of tea to cheerfully toast a mutual agreement not to condemn or kill each other or bust up each other’s property, absolutely. Beyond that, though? Ecumenism is different. . . . To be *ecumenical* stands as the high calling of all who follow Christ; *ecumenism* may be the most dangerous of all heresies.”

the culture wars are waged. When Shishkov writes of “the ideological polarization of the two ecumenisms along liberal and conservative lines” (Shishkov 2017, 82) it may be observed that his non-theological definitions of (1) classical ecumenism (loosed from unitive ecumenism and instead tied strictly to the WCC’s increasingly liberal trajectory) and (2) conservative ecumenism (also unmoored from unitive ecumenism) make this binary perspective all but inescapable. Ideological polarization then becomes all there is to see. We know, of course, how entrenched this polarization appears to be within and among the churches. But it is not everything, not even empirically. Where the theological leaven at ecumenism’s core has not been removed, more surprising coalitions and combinations of reconciling views remain possible, and prove far more resistant to being co-opted by either of the two great Babylons of our time, the beast of post-Christian secular liberalism or that of post-secular religious nationalism.

Finally, however, a word about conservative ecumenism should be added that may appear to upend everything that has just been said. It may appear that I have presented conservative ecumenism as always necessarily non-theological in its non-unitive dimension, that is, in its concern specifically with things sociopolitical. But it would be a mistake to see it that way. That is, here again there is a question. Where conservative ecumenism takes up issues at the forefront of the culture wars, whether having to do with abortion, same-sex marriage, or religious liberty, it *could* be doing this in only an ideological way. Often the emphasis on “values” rather than doctrine and on Christian “civilization” rather than actual Christianity signals that a set of ideological concerns have been split off from the root of Christian faith and have indeed supplanted it. However, activity of the Church or her members that aims at influencing public opinion or policy, including by means of cooperation with other Christian groups that may share the Church’s perspective on a given policy or legislative proposal, can also be a genuinely theological outgrowth of faith. What Shishkov calls conservative ecumenism is indeed not, then, inherently or always “bad ecumenism” as Chris Stroop contends (Stroop 2016); I would concur here with Shishkov that such an opinion is “too judgmental and does not adequately assess this phenomenon.”<sup>17</sup> It *can* be bad ecumenism — bad if it understands the *conservative basis* of its ecumenical

17. Shishkov 2017, 73n28. Conservative ecumenism, as a manifestation of a basic Christian concern for the temporal sphere, may be seen as being in continuity with the Life and Work movement, even though the latter is more often associated with progressive forms of ecumenism.

coalition-building in a reified way as having to be always and everywhere at odds with progressive forms of ecumenical coalition-building, rather than open at least sometimes to the latter's concerns, based on a shared foundation of Christian principles.<sup>18</sup> It can also be, for all intents and purposes, "no ecumenism" — if it is decoupled from unitive ecumenism.<sup>19</sup>

But it can also be good ecumenism; and let me conclude this section by suggesting by way of brief summary how Orthodox conservative ecumenism at its best may be understood, roughly on the model of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, whom Shishkov has presented as a sort of proto-"conservative ecumenist." In its right balance and orientation it remains, in the first place, deeply interested in the question of church division and unity that has always been at the center of classical ecumenism. It does not arise as if from the ashes of such unitive ecumenism, but out of a legitimate perception of a growing one-sidedness (from the late 1960s onward) in the WCC-based and liberal-Protestant-dominated ecumenism that came to be less and less alert to a variety of dangers having to do with secularism and relativism. In this regard, what it rejects is not the WCC's engagement with the struggles of humanity in the contemporary world; on the contrary, conservative ecumenism at its best is profoundly interested in church-society relations and not at all sectarian. It intends rather to supplement what it sees as a growing lacuna in progressive Christianity's important, but overly narrow, focus on social justice and human rights, a lacuna having to do above all with a vision of the transcendent, of what Schmemmann called the "upper story," without which democratic liber-

18. Similarly, "liberal ecumenism" would be bad ecumenism if always opposed to any and all of the concerns of conservative ecumenism. Shishkov is correct in this regard when he writes (2017, 82), "If classical ecumenism [which for Shishkov means liberal-progressive, WCC-based ecumenism] still aspires to be inclusive and universal, its proponents will be forced to seek ways to incorporate the issue of 'traditional values' into its agenda. This, however, will require that both sides be prepared to conduct a responsible dialogue and to hear each other's arguments. Today, it is difficult to say whether the World Council of Churches will become a 'parliament' of sorts, wherein the entire ideological spectrum would be represented, or whether it will continue to occupy a liberal niche."

19. For in that case, the character of its interest in other Christian groups is finally the same as its interest in *any* groups with which it finds common cause on sociopolitical matters. About the World Russian People's Council (WRPC), which he describes as "an example of a Russian conservative ecumenical initiative," Shishkov writes (2017, 78) that it "proposes not merely an ecumenical project, but rather a super-ecumenical conservative project that goes beyond cooperation between Christians toward interreligious cooperation." My point is that cooperation and ecumenism properly speaking must be distinguished.

alism continually runs the risk of mistaking negative for positive freedom, subjective for objective truth — in short, the risk of imposing an illiberal liberalism as the *de facto* civic religion.

But Schmemmann was no promoter of conservatism *per se* and no stranger to the dangers of “soil and blood” nationalism, which he discerned to be an animating element in the thought of Solzhenitsyn, for example. One can infer from Schmemmann’s profound appreciation for the personal and religious liberties afforded by American democracy that he would be at the forefront of those Christians — including many self-identified conservative ones — sounding the alarm today over the threats to these liberties posed by the strong circulating currents of authoritarian nationalism unleashed in the United States. The “conservative ecumenism” of his participation in the Hartford Appeal was conducted in a catholic spirit attuned to the signs of the times rather than a sectarian, ideological spirit wedded to conservative ecumenism for its own sake. Perhaps it is even more necessary now than it was in his time to be careful not to imagine conservative ecumenism as something more deeply stable than it is — careful lest we reinforce already strong tendencies either to idolize or demonize it by “ontologizing” it in this way (together with a similarly ontologized liberal ecumenism, only inversely).

Effective critique of “conservative ecumenism” cannot be on the grounds that it happens to be what we are today calling “conservative” — unless, of course, it itself has internalized this identity so deeply that it imagines itself obligated to oppose everything we happen today to call “liberal.” Effective critique must rather be on the grounds that it has given up on unitive ecumenism, in which case, it is rightly to be named anti-ecumenical.

## **V. A key theological difference between Orthodox ecumenists and anti-ecumenists**

Orthodox anti-ecumenists work hard to specify those things they believe are found only in the Orthodox Church. Few today deny the possibility of salvation elsewhere; nor do they contest that God’s spirit is somehow everywhere. But according to Fr. Peter Heers, we must distinguish between the “creative, sustaining, and providential energies of God,” in which all humanity participates, including schismatics and heretics, and “the purifying, illuminating, and deifying energies of God,” in which only those in the one and undivided Church participate (Heers 2015, 171–72). Heers elsewhere speaks of grace operating

on a person externally versus internally (Heers 2015, 178). After baptism, the Holy Spirit “works to form Christ within,” but before baptism “the activity of the Holy Spirit is restricted to drawing the soul towards Christ” (Heers 2015, 177). Against the idea that Christ may be formed within a baptized non-Orthodox Christian, Heers writes that the “‘one Spirit’ that dwells in and constantly builds up the ‘one Body’ (Eph. 4:4) cannot be at work creating ‘incomplete communion’” (Heers 2015, 179). Heers admits that “God, of course, can save whomever He pleases” (Heers 2015, 173n363), but for Heers the one way God cannot do this is by *forming* non-Orthodox people (including baptized Roman Catholics) into Christ, because according to Heers’s ecclesiological system, “the Holy Spirit is restricted.”<sup>20</sup>

But Heers makes a further point: “Without these distinctions regarding the divine energies of the Holy Spirit, participation in the life of the Church in order to receive the grace that heals and saves would be pointless” (Heers 2015, 172). Here we have an echo of the logic of Neophytos when he spoke of Latin baptism in the 18th century: “For if [Latin baptism] does provide [remission of sins], then they [who] join the [Orthodox] Church [do so] for no reason.”<sup>21</sup> For Heers as well, it is as if the Church holds so little intrinsic appeal that only if “the grace that heals and saves” is available nowhere else would one ever join it. He writes disapprovingly (though accurately): “If the Holy Spirit is accepted to be active — purifying and illuminating those outside the [Orthodox] Church through various ‘ecclesiastical elements,’ the first among which is Baptism — it follows that ‘ecclesiality,’ the possession of the character or nature of the Church, must also be conceded” (Heers 2015, 158). And this cannot be done because for Orthodox anti-ecumenical theology, it would necessitate a contradiction in the doctrine of the oneness of the Church.

This is the central point on which Orthodox ecumenical theology differs from the anti-ecumenical theology represented in the writings of Heers. The disagreement is not just about *whether* the Holy Spirit can work outside the Orthodox Church — and can do so not just universally and providentially, but ecclesially, to “form Christ” in those baptized elsewhere. It is true that Orthodox ecumenical theology gives an affirmative answer to this question and Orthodox anti-ecumenical theology gives a negative answer. But more important than just how they differently answer the question is the reason why. Orthodox anti-

20. See the longer quotation from which this is extracted, just above (Heers 2015, 177).

21. See above, note 5.

ecumenical theology states that the answer must be no because otherwise — if the Holy Spirit can “form Christ” in those baptized outside the Orthodox Church — it must be “completely impossible to preserve” the oneness of the Church in that case. By contrast, Orthodox ecumenical theology believes that both as a doctrine and as an existential reality, the oneness of the Church still can be preserved even if one affirms that Christ may be formed through the Holy Spirit in those baptized in a communion such as Roman Catholicism that has been separated from the Orthodox Church.

In fact, anti-ecumenists themselves unwittingly undercut their own position on this point. Acknowledging that the Greek Church did not always use the term heretics to describe Latin Christians even after the separation, Patrick Barnes writes:

Whatever reticence the Church may have had regarding the Latins in the first two centuries following the Great Schism can also be viewed as patient hope for their full return. . . . Nor can one responsibly state that the Roman church ceased overnight to be a repository of ecclesial Grace. Rather, it became spiritually ill, the disease of heresy spread, and the great branch of the West was finally detached from the rest of the Body, a reality which the Saints and various Synods since that time attest. This process may have lasted for decades — or even centuries — after the Great Schism. (Barnes 1999, 19)

Here Barnes himself effectively grants that the baptism that yields “a real, metaphysical, ontological change”<sup>22</sup> did — at least for some period of years — continue to be performed in the separated Roman Catholic Church.

Anti-ecumenism’s distinct theological commitment, then, is to something else, namely to the belief that over time, *grace must inevitably and only decline, further and further*, in the communion separated from the Orthodox Church. Orthodox ecumenical theology disagrees. If grace can be diminished in separation, with one deviation giving rise to another, Orthodox ecumenism also leaves open the possibility that grace might also be increased and renewed — not least, by fresh contact with and receptivity to the Eastern Christian tradition. With respect to the Great Schism in particular, the Orthodox anti-ecumenist sees the church of Rome as “finally detached” — this finality be-

22. The phrase is from Saint Diadochus quoted by Telepneff, 77–78 (quoted in turn by Barnes 1999, 36).

ing, so they insist, a “reality which the Saints and various Synods since that time attest” (Barnes 1999, 19). But the ecumenist does not see any of this attestation as adding up to an authoritative resolution of the Orthodox Church as a whole that would rise to the level of dogma.

## VI. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that neither Orthodox ecumenism, nor Orthodox anti-ecumenism, nor even Orthodox conservative ecumenism can be dismissed by reducing them to strictly political movements. Whatever elements of politics have been and may continue to be intertwined with each — and it is certainly important to consider their political dimensions and motivations both historically and today — nevertheless each makes claims that must also be engaged theologically. This is not to say that the claims of each are equal to one another in theological cogency. The claims of Orthodox anti-ecumenism, I have tried to show, finally are not internally consistent and do not stand up against the contrary claims of Orthodox ecumenism. The latter rightly leaves open a possibility prematurely closed off by anti-ecumenists, namely the possibility that one or another Christian communion separated from Orthodoxy might, even in its ongoing formal separation, be in a process of recovering whatever it may have lost due to the separation, rather than only and inevitably losing more and more of the gifts of God with which it once had been graced.

The case of what Andrey Shishkov calls “conservative ecumenism” was treated at considerably more length than the other two movements within Orthodoxy, in part because conservative ecumenism is a more recent phenomenon on the Orthodox scene and therefore calls for an especially close and careful analysis in order to relate it properly to the others. The lengthy treatment was also due to the need I felt to respond to Shishkov’s particular way of framing this movement. Here I wished to develop three points in some tension with Shishkov’s perspective. First, I sought to retain within any overall definition of ecumenism, as *an essentially theological enterprise* — which, I argue, is how the Orthodox have always chiefly engaged in the ecumenical movement — the element of unitive ecumenism, which Shishkov is too ready in my view to decouple from ecumenism’s core meaning. Second, I looked to clarify that the “classical ecumenism” that itself prioritized unitive ecumenism and that characterized the World Council of Churches (WCC) at its inception has continued to live on elsewhere — in particular, in bilateral ecumenical dialogues, such as that between Catholics and Orthodox —

even as it has been increasingly marginalized within the WCC. I further argued that the withdrawal of some local Orthodox Churches from the WCC in the late 1990s — but not from the international Catholic-Orthodox dialogue — is to be understood as a reaction against a certain narrowly liberal sociopolitical trajectory of the WCC rather than as a rejection of “classical ecumenism” with its specifically unitive element, as Shishkov’s presentation seems to suggest. Finally, I offered the suggestion that far from being a mere matter of hair-splitting semantics, the adjustments I have recommended in how we define ecumenism, always with its theological significance at the core, such that there can be neither a genuine “conservative ecumenism” nor a true “classical ecumenism” without the unitive element still at the center, can be helpful in resisting the impulse to feed already strong tendencies toward sociopolitical polarization within the Church.

Perhaps, then, prophetic denunciation of religious nationalism will not only come from the safe haven of secular liberalism, nor denunciation of secular liberalism only from the safe haven of religious nationalism, but both may be criticized by a Church at home in neither the one nor the other, and therefore free to speak according to criteria uniquely given to her.

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