

**Reclaiming the Great Tradition**  
**Evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox in**  
**Dialogue**

**Edited by**

**James S. Cutsinger**

**InterVarsity Press**

# **Contents**

## **1 Ecumenical *Jihad***

**Peter Kreeft**

**Reasserting Boundaries: A Response to Peter Kreeft**

**Theodore Pulcini**

## **2 A New Thing: Ecumenism at the Threshold of the Third Millennium**

**Richard John Neuhaus**

**A (Somewhat) Protestant Response to Richard John Neuhaus**

**S. M. Hutchens**

## **3 Proclamation and Preservation: The Necessity and Temptations of Church Traditions**

**Harold O. J. Brown**

**A Response to Harold O. J. Brown**

**Father Andrew (Isaac Melton)**

## **4 Father, Glorify Thy Name!**

**Patrick Henry Reardon**

**Trinitarian Theology and the Quest for Ecumenical Orthodoxy: A Response to Patrick Henry Reardon**

**William J. Abraham**

## **5 The Trinity: Heart of Our Life**

**Kallistos Ware**

**A Catholic Response to Kallistos Ware**

**Robert Fastiggi**

**6 On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism, and Incarnational Ontology**

**J. I. Packer**

**An Eastern Orthodox Response to J. I. Packer**

**Bradley Nassif**

**Epilogue: Theology *Pro Ecclesia*—Evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox**

**Carl E. Braaten**

## **Introduction: Finding the Center**

*James S. Cutsinger*

Early in the spring of 1994, representatives of Rose Hill College and the Fellowship of Saint James considered the possibility of sponsoring an ecumenical conference for traditional Christians. It seemed an excellent marriage. Rose Hill is a new Christian college where the classical pursuit of liberal education, based on the study of great books, is closely tied to the liturgical worship and Patristic worldview of the Orthodox tradition. The Fellowship of Saint James, publisher of *Touchstone: A Journal of Ecumenical Orthodoxy*, is an association of Christians from a variety of traditions who are dedicated to upholding the faith and practice of the historic church.

Gathering on the campus of Rose Hill College and at other sites in the beautiful town of Aiken, South Carolina, invited speakers and respondents joined nearly two hundred pastors and laity from every part of the country for five days of discussion and prayer (May 16-20, 1995). The papers collected in this volume include the six plenary addresses and six of the responses presented in small group discussions.

The aim was to do something new. Ecumenical gatherings are hardly unique in our day, but they too often have been excuses for dismantling the faith, as if tolerance and moral platitudes were more important than truth. Conferences of conservative Christians are certainly common too, though these have usually been along denominational lines or for the sake of addressing specific ethical issues.

Here the plan was to try something different: to test whether an ecumenical orthodoxy, solidly based on the classic Christian faith as expressed in the Scriptures and ecumenical councils, could become the foundation for a unified and transformative witness to the present age. Is it possible, we asked ourselves, for those who are deeply committed to differing theological perspectives to help each other in defending and communicating their common faith? And if so, then how? How can Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox Christians talk to each other so as together to speak with Christ's mind to the modern world? This is a problem for every generation of Christians, for every world is a "modern" world, with the spirit of each parading itself as the end of all wisdom. And yet there seems to be a growing consensus that some larger, perhaps

more definitive, crisis is at hand, and that it is therefore time for serious Christians to join forces for a common task.

When we first conceived of this gathering, our hope was to attract the interest of serious Christian scholars who, precisely because of the tenacity with which they hold to their differing views, would ordinarily be diffident about attending such meetings. The words *ecumenical* and *traditional* were to be seen in a certain sense as in tension, concern for the former having so often gone hand in hand with a neglect of the latter. In fact someone suggested early in the planning that our slogan should be “Let all the antiecumenical forces of the Christian world unite!” A few such forces, not surprisingly, turned down our invitation to participate.

We had what might seem a rather odd idea: if only each of us could be brought to confess with utter candor why precisely he is Orthodox and not Catholic or Protestant, or Protestant and not Catholic or Orthodox, or Catholic and not Orthodox or Protestant, these outwardly divergent confessions, far better than any list of agreements drafted by a task force or a committee, might together point to the very heart of our faith. Father Richard John Neuhaus captured the spirit of our thinking in the opening address when he observed that in many cases “our unity in the truth is more evident in our quarreling about the truth than in our settling for something less than the truth.”

The recipe for what we had in mind was well put in the 1940s by a man who put many things well, a writer to whom several of the conferees readily admitted their debt. In describing “an agreed, or common, or central, or ‘mere’ Christianity,” C. S. Lewis, in the preface to his book by that name, puts forward a most important ecumenical principle. Lewis writes, “It is at her center, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine. And this suggests,” he continues, “that at the center of each there is something, or a Someone, who against all divergences of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice.”<sup>1</sup> As usual Lewis’s words are deceptively simple—so simple that one may not see at first how profound and perhaps controversial they are. What he suggests is something running against the grain of what might otherwise have been expected: that the truest Christian ecumenism is most likely to come from those who on the surface most

---

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), p. viii.

strongly disagree.

The great mistake of the many liberal varieties of ecumenical dialogue has been to think that we come closest to each other along our edges. If this were true, it would follow that at those points where friction occurs the solution is to smooth over the rough places in our relationships with other believers by ignoring or forgoing what leads to conflict. Peace is the treasured goal of such dialogue—not, however, “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7), but the contrived and artificial peace that we have been warned “the world giveth” (John 14:27). Traditional Christians are only too familiar with this sort of thinking, and they know how far it can go in blithely abandoning even the most essential of Christian truths. English theologian John Hick provides a well-known and especially egregious example. Since Muslims and Jews are inevitably scandalized by the traditional claim that Christ is God, Christians (as Hick sees it) are obliged out of charity to reject that claim themselves, admitting to the world that it was a misunderstanding and a myth.

Such an approach is worlds apart from the ecumenism we meant to stress at the conference. A traditionalist ecumenism must at the very least refuse to compromise the integrity of the Christian tradition, even if this refusal means paradoxically that our unity will be ‘more evident in our quarrelling about the truth than in our settling for something less than the truth.’ But how are we to understand this unity? How is the traditional Christian to make sense of Lewis's claim that we are closest to each other at our centers?

Suppose we picture the Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox traditions as three distinct geometrical figures. Several configurations would be possible. Some will prefer to envision these figures as lying in three parallel and therefore never-intersecting planes, and as having assorted sizes and shapes representing various degrees of perfection and comprehensiveness. One's own tradition would doubtless be seen as the largest figure, perhaps circular in shape, with competing communions being more or less irregular departures from that norm. Other Christians, more optimistic about the prospects of ecumenical unity, may imagine the three figures as existing instead on a single plane, where real contact becomes possible. Certain of these hopeful ecumenists may picture the shapes as divided by distances of varying sizes, while others may see them as already contiguous or perhaps even overlapping.

The problem with all these representations, however, is that they end up depicting the relationships between our several traditions in a strictly superficial or peripheral way, as if the possibility of union were a function solely of external proximity and contact, whether between planes or between discrete figures in the same plane. But this is to repeat the common liberal error. It is to understand ecumenism in merely political and planimetric categories.

Lewis, I believe, is suggesting a different model. He is saying that our ecumenism must be both three-dimensional and centripetal. Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism are to be envisioned as three figures, but with each of them equally circular. (You are still free to make them different sizes if you wish!) Furthermore, all of these circles are understood as inscribed inside a single sphere where, to take account of their differences, they are deployed at right angles to each other. Some Christians may choose to say that the sphere symbolizes the invisible church. But if calling it the church is going too far, as it will be for those who believe theirs is the only true Christian communion, then let us say that the sphere is Lewis's "mere Christianity", a common body of doctrine and morals. It is what J. I. Packer calls in his paper (as in the title of the present volume) the "great tradition". More important than the precise meaning of the sphere as such, however, this alternative way of picturing things provides a clear indication of where we ought to be headed in search of real unity. Though existing on three distinct planes, each with its own well-known attitudes and emphases, our differing traditions (if Lewis is right) nevertheless share a common center, which is Christ himself.

Not everyone will be pleased with this model. While it is obvious that a desire for unity should animate all who call themselves Christians, and that we should all be happy for anything that might help to encourage its pursuit, it is hard not to feel a certain measure of sympathy for those traditionalists who out of prayerful choice did not join us at the conference. Father Neuhaus pointed out that Protestant "evangelicalism has tended to approach all things bearing the name 'ecumenical' with an attitude ranging from robust skepticism to impassioned hostility," and there are numerous examples of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox with the same reservations.

These reservations must be fully respected. I sympathize with those of my own church who believe that ecumenism, at least in its usual forms, comes into "screaming

conflict with Orthodox Tradition and Orthodox Consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> And yet it seems to me that Lewis’s insight can still be a most valuable one for us all, including even the most exclusive and antiecumenical of Christian traditionalists. If “it is at her center, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other”, then there cannot fail to be gaps between our several peripheries, and it is only natural that we should find differences, even hostilities and mutual anathematizations, between serious Christians whenever and wherever they encounter each other along their outlying frontiers. The person who is struggling to love God with his entire heart, soul, and mind, who is intent on following the shortest path to the center, simply does not have the time (whatever the other issues might be) to consider other paths than his own. And when he is forced to, when the presence of other paths can no longer be ignored, often the only way to keep them from interfering with his focus on Christ is to reject them as errors. As Peter Kreeft points out, the only alternative in such a case is indifference, and indifference means spiritual death.

It is with good reason that we put blinders on a horse if we mean for it to plow a straight row. Geometrical models may be nice in theory, but in practice each of us is obliged for salvation’s sake to follow a specific path, and this means sticking to a given plane. Ecumenical conferees have the leisure to ponder which of the Christian circles is biggest, or at precisely how many degrees their respective planes may diverge from each other, or whether it might be possible to rotate these several circles around the axes of their diameters until their circumferences coincide. But it is important to realize, even as we embark upon these ecumenical reflections, that when it comes to the actual spiritual life, global thinking can be dangerous. Practically speaking we must all be flat-earthers, and we need to be careful that our busyness around the *oikoumene*—the ecumenical household—does not distract us, like Martha, from the “one thing . . . needful” (Luke 10:42).

This does not mean that we have to give up hoping for and looking for unity. I do not wish to conclude this introduction on a skeptical note or to take anything away from the contributions that follow. If Lewis is right, however, it does mean that, like Mary, we should be constantly mindful of the One in whom alone, if at all, we ourselves can be

---

<sup>2</sup> “Today’s Ecumenism and the ‘Still, Small Voice,’” *Orthodox America*, May-June 1994, p. 12.

one. Bishop Kallistos Ware has occasion to refer to the prayer of our Lord “that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us” (John 17:21). Taking just that little preposition *in* on its own is quite enough to confirm Lewis’s point and my own earlier critique of the liberals. Where should we expect to find unity? Certainly not on the surface or along the edges, but at the heart. On the inside, not the outside—an inside, moreover, of a very particular kind. Christ makes it clear that the interiority of real Christian union is not the same as the inwardness of pious feeling or tolerant sentiment. True unity will come instead only in the interior of God himself and to the measure that we are drawn into his Trinitarian life.

Not in the rewording of doctrines, nor in the modification of devotional styles, nor in the reports of committees, nor even in the pages of this book should we expect to find unanimity between our several communions. Our desire for true unity, if it is sincere, will instead be expressed in our daily prayers and ascetic disciplines, in our continuing life in the sacraments and in our weak attempts to grow up to the full stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13). For it is by these means alone that we may be drawn by grace ever more inward toward the center: a center, God willing, that will turn out to be at once our own and our neighbor’s.