

Synodal Democracy and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

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The Oriental Orthodox Churches

The Oriental Orthodox Churches of Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Indian traditions have been variously called by outsiders – depending on authors and contexts – as Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Ancient Oriental, Lesser Eastern or Churches of Three Ecumenical Councils.¹ It was in the context of the World Council of Churches in the 20th century that they began to be called *Oriental* Orthodox in order to distinguish them from the *Eastern* Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine liturgical tradition that accept seven councils as Ecumenical. The Oriental Orthodox conventionally acknowledge only three councils, namely, Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431) as Ecumenical. In light of the 20th-century theological dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox family, however, they may recognize the Council of Chalcedon and the rest on the basis of “the Orthodox interpretation” of those councils, though not as Ecumenical Councils as such.² Although these Oriental Churches never convened a common council after Ephesus in 431 AD, they remained in the same apostolic faith in Christ and sacramental communion among them. So, some theologians have raised the question whether an Ecumenical Council is essential at all for the maintenance of the Orthodox faith and Eucharistic communion. The heads of these ancient autocephalous Churches met on a historically unique occasion in Addis Ababa in 1965 when they were convened by the then Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.

1 Paulos Gregorios, William H. Lazareth and Nikos A. Nissiotis (eds.), *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite?* (Geneva: WWC, 1981), ix–xii; On the six “Oriental Orthodox Churches,” see also R.G. Roberson, *The Eastern Christian Churches: A Brief Survey* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 2016).

2 The four unofficial conversations between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox families took place in a series: Aarhus 1964, Bristol 1967, Geneva 1970 and Addis Ababa 1971.

The Dialogue

The unofficial dialogue between the Eastern and the Oriental churches started in 1964 under the auspices of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC through the joint initiative of Prof. Nikos Nissiotis, then director of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, and Father Paul Verghese (later Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios of New Delhi from the Malankara Orthodox Church), then Associate General Secretary of the WCC. This dialogue was taken up at the official level from 1985 onwards, in meetings that took place in Chambésy, Geneva and Amba Bishoy Monastery of the Coptic Church in Egypt. Both the unofficial and official dialogues resolved the 1500-year-old Christological dispute and came to the formal conclusion that both families of churches held the same apostolic faith, though linguistic, terminological and cultural issues in the 5th century exacerbated the Christological issue that had divided them.³ In a meeting in Chambésy, Geneva, follow-up steps were suggested by the joint commission in order to bring the two families to full Eucharistic communion. There was a follow-up meeting of a core committee held in Athens as recently as 2014.⁴

The unity in faith of the Oriental Orthodox Churches is underscored by their great diversity in terms of culture, race, language and liturgy. Unlike in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, which are held together by the common Byzantine liturgical tradition, the Oriental Orthodox churches have no common Eucharistic liturgical order that they can celebrate together. They are primarily African and Asian churches, (provided the “Middle East” of European colonial geography is more appropriately called West Asia), and their spiritual sensibility and liturgical-theological ethos are very close to the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and, of course, doubly removed from the Western Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions.

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- 3 K.M. George, “Oriental Orthodox-Orthodox Dialogue,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. N. Lossky *et al.*, (WCC: Geneva, 1994); “Agreed Statements between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches (June 1989 & September 1990),” Orthodox School of Theology Trinity College University of Toronto, <https://www.trinityorthodox.ca/sites/default/files/Agreed%20Statements-Orthodox-Oriental%20Orthodox%20Dialogue-1989-1990.pdf>; Ciprian Toroczkai, “Eastern Orthodox Churches and Oriental Orthodox Churches in Dialogue: Reception, Disagreement and Convergence,” *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 8, no. 2 (2016): 253–70; Christine Chaillot, ed., *The Dialogue Between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches* (Volos: Volos Academy Publications, 2016).
- 4 The meeting was convened by the co-chairmen, Metropolitan Emmanuel of France and Metropolitan Bishop of Damietta, Egypt. The present author participated in the meeting as a member of the pastoral-liturgical sub-commission of the Joint Commission.

*The Synodal Democratic Perspective*⁵

The principle of democracy is central to the governance of these churches. But there are some qualitative differences between what we call parliamentary democracy and the democracy practiced in the churches. In the latter case, biblical ideas such as the “Body of Christ” and the “People of God” redefine the body politic of the *demos* into the royal priesthood of all believers. In the political system of modern democratic nations, the decisive voters are simply adult citizens who elect the office-bearers to govern them at various levels.

The synodal system in its broad theological sense of *synodos*, i.e., “walking together,” or “taking the same road” in mutual love and understanding, goes beyond the principles of adult franchise and majority rule in our modern political domain. In the church, there is no age factor for membership. All baptized children and all believing men and women are members of the Body of Christ, irrespective of their age. Together, they constitute the *Laos tou Theou*, the people of God and are a worshipping community, praising the Triune God together with their departed faithful, the heavenly hosts and the whole creation, visible and invisible. All clerical orders such as deacons, presbyters, bishops and patriarchs are in this “household of God” and not above it.

It is sometimes said in some of our Oriental churches, particularly in legal contexts, that the church is both episcopal and congregational (democratic) at the same time. But the election of bishops and the head of the Church in some of our churches is done directly by the people or people’s representatives. So, the distinction between the episcopal and congregational in this context is not as neat and stable as imagined by some. They are so closely intertwined that the ordained ministry has no theological validity outside the community of the *People of God* who elect and consecrate them. Without the constant approval of the believing body of the church that declares their ministers *axios* (worthy) in the liturgical context, the ordained clergy may also run the risk of being qualified as *anaxios* (unworthy). This crucial reference to the Body of Christ, the People of God, should be maintained throughout the life of the elected and ordained clergy.

The Synodal Structure Exemplified

To explain the synodal democracy practiced in the Oriental Orthodox Churches, we need to see the broader context of the synodal system in our churches as well as some aspects of political democracy in our contemporary

⁵ Kondothra M. George, “Ecclesiology in the Orthodox Tradition,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. G. Mannion and L.S. Mudge (New York: Routledge, 2008), 155–69.

society. As it is too risky and unfair to make sweeping statements on a vast culturally and liturgically diverse family such as the Oriental Orthodox Churches, I shall limit myself to my own Indian Church's practice as a case in point.

Let me say at the very beginning that I take the word synod in its etymological sense of "taking the same road" or "walking together" (*syn+hodos*) because it provides a beautiful and tangible image to anyone in any cultural setting. I do not wish here to go into the technical meaning the word *synod* has acquired in several churches, where it is a formal assembly of bishops to transact official agenda. But in my ancient apostolic Malankara Orthodox Church in India today, whenever we use the word synod for the meeting of bishops, we qualify it with the adjective "episcopal" because, in our earlier tradition, a synod meant a representative assembly of the whole church – lay people and priests together with the bishops. This assembly is still the highest decision-making body. Since the number of elected lay representatives from parishes is proportional to the number of parish members, the majority in the assembly are laypeople. They meet every five years, elect the regular governing bodies, and when necessary, elect the bishops and the Catholicos, and make necessary amendments in the constitution of the Malankara church. Every member whether layperson, priest or bishop has only one vote.

Unlike in earlier ages when authority structures were very clear in church and society, our present world lives in conditions of confusion and uncertainty. On the one hand, liberal democracies emphasize individual freedom whereas theocratic societies and dictatorial regimes with fascist tendencies place great restrictions on individual freedom on the other. These tendencies exist side by side in our contemporary world. Secularism and irreligion coexist with religious fundamentalist tendencies. It is in between such extremities that the members of the church are seeking counsel and guidance.

We may identify at least a few christological, pneumatological, and trinitarian principles that underlie the practice of synodical democracy in the Church.

The Pneumatological/Inspirational Dimension

The first Christian community arising from the Pentecost experience of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem as described in the Acts of the Apostles relied on the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The early Christians' mode of life as the Spirit-inspired Christian fellowship set the model for the later Church. Examples of this are the election of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:12–26), the election of "seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom" to minister as deacons (Acts 6:1–15) and the very first meeting of the synod of the Church. In the Synod of Jerusalem, "the Apostles and elders, with the whole Church, decided ..." (Acts 15:22) on crucial issues like circumcision, food taboos, etc. The celebrated phrase "it seemed good to the Holy

Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28) became the fundamental principle of synodality in the Church. The experience of a genuine *sisbro* (sister-brother) feeling in Christ and the consultative mode of church governance guided by the Holy Spirit constitute the synodical character of the Church. The way of life of the early church was synodical at its best. Whether it was a matter of election to a responsible position or urgent ethical and legal issues affecting the community, there was a great effort to promote consensus among the members of the church and dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Christological-Anthropological Dimension

The New Testament view of the fullness of the human person and of the human community is expressed in the image of Christ as the head of the Church which is the body of Christ. The person of Christ dynamically unites the divine and the human, redeems humanity to his own fullness in the process of theosis. As the body of Christ, the Church stands for the human community and, by extension, all created reality that can experience God's salvation in Christ. The person and the world at large as envisaged here are to be participants in God's compassionate love and the salvific process. Therefore, an appropriate christological approach to anthropology and cosmology has to be derived from the image of the Church as the Body of Christ. When the apostle Paul envisages the individuals and the whole Church growing into the full measure of the stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13) he means that humanity and all creation can aspire to grow into the infinite dimension of the Word incarnate. This is a never-ending process of ascent, as in the ever-continuing *anabasis* of Moses climbing the holy mountain of Sinai to experience the presence of God in thick darkness, a biblical image so dear to the Cappadocian Fathers and several others. We can also take other biblical images like the banquet of the Kingdom, in which people from East and West, from North and South take part. Here we get a glimpse of synodical democracy in its broadest sense. Thus, synodality is an expression of the ultimate *koinonia* in and through Christ.

The Trinitarian-Holistic Dimension

The *perichoretic* unity in Trinity has always helped the Orthodox tradition to conceive its ecclesial structures in proper perspective.⁶ Here is a source of authority that negates all false hierarchies and worldly human goals. Since

⁶ *Perichoresis*, translated into Latin as *circumincession*, is a patristic metaphor borrowed from choreography to allude to the infinitely dynamic interpenetrative movement between the persons (*hypostases*) of the Trinity.

there is no hierarchy in the Trinity in the sense of our human logic of order and number, as taught to us by fathers like St Basil of Caesarea and St Gregory the Theologian, a genuine reflection of divine *perichoresis* in the Church would help us envisage a new world order in radically different ways. Jesus very clearly draws a contrast between the mode of authority as exercised by rulers in this world and the mode of authority exercised by his followers. “You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them” (Matthew 20:25). He is emphatic when he says to the disciples: “It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you, must be your servant [...] just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25–28). This is radically subversive in the sense that He turns our sense of hierarchy and the order of our perceived reality upside down. The values of the kingdom of God are clearly distinguished from the norms of the order of the world. Jesus literally exemplified this when he washed the feet of his own disciples.

Democratic Governance in the Church

Long before parliamentary democracy became an acceptable mode of governance in modern states, the Church led the way in practicing its fundamental principles. Modern Western democracy, whose origin is traditionally attributed to ancient Greek city states, probably took over some of these Christian elements. For example, in the British democratic system followed by the former British colonies, the bureaucrats are called *civil servants* or servants of the people. A *minister* in government is literally one who serves or a servant. Paradoxically, the kind of privileges and position enjoyed by the top bureaucrats and ministers may not have anything to do with the life of a servant or the committed service of anyone who is inspired by the message of Christ.

Democracy loses its quality and power whenever the process of consultation and consensus is weakened. In big democracies like India elections are the decisive expression of the will of the people and the convergence of public opinion. In small communities there may be chances of direct debate and the effort to reach consensus. But elections, however well they are conducted, do not fully represent public opinion in all its different shades. There is also the danger that they can be manipulated by big business and political power brokers. Parliamentary democracy, as in my country, projects a secular state in its constitution. Therefore, even if all the citizens of a country follow some religion or other, the secular state and its governance are supposed to distance

themselves from favoring any religion or promoting the doctrines of one religion. In other words, a democratic system is not required to have any reference to a transcendent reality.

An Indian Buddhist Ruler

The classical tradition of India includes the history of a great ruler called Ashoka (ca. 268–239 BCE) who became the emperor of a large part of India some 500 years before Constantine became the emperor of Rome. He accepted the Buddhist way of life and became a conscientious follower of the Buddha who had lived 300 years before him. Like Constantine who accepted the Christian faith and became its defender some 300 years after the incarnate life of Jesus Christ, Ashoka became the defender of Buddhism and sent out missionaries to Asian countries and as far as the Mediterranean coast. Unlike Constantine, Ashoka laid down all his weapons as a Buddhist after witnessing a bloody war with a neighboring kingdom, became a great pacifist, embraced the great Indian principle of *Ahimsa* or non-violence, and erected pillars and rock edicts throughout India urging people to practice compassion to all creatures, care for the common good, and toleration and harmony among the various competing religions.

Ashoka's period illustrated "what the ruler and the ruled owed to one another," as phrased in a recent article by Rajeev Bhargava, a political theorist in Delhi.⁷ The Indian word for emperor is *chakravarti*, a Sanskrit word that means "one who turns the wheel." The *chakra* or wheel is that of *dharma* (*dhamma* in Pali), that is, the law inspired by morality. Buddha turned the wheel of dharma in the religious, philosophical and ethical spheres. You can still see a wheel in the state emblem of India, adapted from an extant stone sculpture with Ashoka's edicts that was erected in Sarnath in 250 BCE, (near the city of Benares), where Buddha preached his first sermon. Bhargava says that the turning of the wheel is a radical restructuring of the world in accordance with a politico-moral vision. The king initiates political and administrative measures inspired by public morality with the goal of justice, peace and prosperity for his subjects. The conquest of other kingdoms is to occur not by physical force but by the moral appeal of dharma. The Pillar Edict 7 shows that compliance with dharma must arise largely from *nijjihattiya* (persuasion), not only from *niyama* (legislation). The people have to internalize dharma because

⁷ *The Hindu*, 4 March 2018.

it is good, not merely because the ruler so commands. Pillar Edict 6 speaks about the welfare and happiness of all living beings in this world and hereafter in heaven. The Buddha sent the missionaries on a totally peaceful mission, whose principle was the welfare and happiness of all people (*bahujanahitaya, bahujanasukhaya*).

The king or ruler is not above dharma but is subject to the collective moral order that all people have to follow. He is not just a ruler, but the leader, teacher, father, healer and moral exemplar. These principles practiced by the emperor Ashoka are relevant in modern democracy and its ideals of justice, tolerance, freedom, equality and civic friendship. “The *Chakravarti* tradition remains a valuable resource for our democratic republic” (Bhargava).

The Social Media

The second decade of the 21st century was marked by the pervasive use and influence of social media – Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter and Instagram, in addition to hundreds of TV channels and traditional print media. Since, given that this phenomenon is totally new, we are now completely taken up with it, we are unable to make a thorough judgment from within. In a political democratic system, the role played by the social media is still being hotly debated.

- There are positive and negative elements. Some of the positive aspects are:
- unlike print media and TV channels, social media provide instant opportunities to debate or respond to an issue
 - the participation of the people in a debate on common political and social interest can be maximized, provided all people can make use of the social media and there is complete connectivity
 - all social hierarchies are abolished, and everyone irrespective of one’s position, age, religion, gender, nationality, location and profession can take part and voice their opinion in any issue.
 - a literally global discussion on any subject is possible since the net is literally worldwide
 - voters can interact directly with their elected representatives to bring their issues to parliament or the constitutional assembly
 - people can challenge their political leaders individually and collectively without fear of physical suppression or retaliation
 - mass movements for social and political change that once required a bloody political revolution can be organised on the Internet in a possibly non-violent manner.

These are some of the very important positive features that underscore social media. In a way, they were embedded as fundamental principles in the notion of democracy from the very beginning in ancient Greece to contemporary India.

The negative elements are now clear to all users of social media:

- generating and spreading fake news continue to haunt democratic governments in many countries; this is particularly venomous in times of election.
- the enormous waste of words and images wantonly thrown up on the Net through social media does not edify society nor promote democracy in a creative way; it undermines many of humanity's venerable principles
- human freedom in a democratic system that goes along with responsibility, care for the other and concern for the common good is increasingly abused on social media without any controls
- the evil forces of jealousy and vengeance can jeopardise great educational and social causes
- the concept of post-truth itself arises mainly from the negative use of social media in relativizing factual truth and erasing all ethical norms in favour of political or financial gain.

Tanmoy Chakraborty, then product manager at Facebook, discusses the effect of social media on democracy.⁸ He frankly admits that social media, which was heralded as the technology of liberation during the time of the Arab Spring, can damage even a well-functioning democracy. He laments that Facebook, originally designed to connect friends and family, is now being used in unforeseen ways with societal repercussions that were never anticipated because unprecedented numbers of people channel their political energy through this medium. The use of social media as an information weapon for cyberwar, as a forum for hate speech, hoaxes, misinformation and disruption of social causes increasingly offsets its positive features. The phenomenon social scientists call “confirmation bias” is corrupting the value of social media since its users are drawn to information that strengthens their preferred narratives, and they reject information that undermines those narratives.

8 “Hard Questions: What Effect Does Social Media Have on *Democracy?*”, 22 January 2018, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/01/effect-social-media-democracy/>.

Conclusion

It is interesting that we are still confronting, in a highly sophisticated technological way, the old dichotomy of good and evil. In the cyber world, any good that is created will instantly have its evil counterpart. Such is the ambiguity of human creativity: every good and useful software will have to face an equally or even more powerful and disruptive malware.

Now why did we speak about synodality in the Christian Church along with democracy in the secular world and the role of social media? Principles like people's participation, consultation and consensus are conceived sacramentally and safeguarded liturgically and canonically in the Body of Christ, while in secular democracy they have no transcendent reference. We used to say that the people, the body politic, are the ultimate authority in a parliamentary democracy. Now with the emergence of the Internet and the social media this authentic principle is taken to crazy extremes by many where there is no reference to any authority or care for the common good. While the Church and the democratic state have built-in structures that can moderate the extremes of lawlessness or misuse of freedom, it is hardly possible in the present condition of social media.

Well versed in classical Greek philosophy and literature, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the Theologian, called the corpus of that vast knowledge "bastard letters" in the 4th century because their *logos* did not connect to the Logos of God the Creator and Redeemer of all that is. He wanted to take up the mission of leading those letters to their authentic source. We can probably use the same attribute that great and erudite theologian himself used to qualify the mind-boggling technological advances in the digital information universe. Now, this places a very significant responsibility on the Church as the Body of Christ, which is the community of the Holy Spirit. The Church constantly calls in faith and hope and love on the perfecting Spirit of God to provide authentic meaning and direction to the infinite potential of human creativity. The Church's own in-house practice of the apostolic tradition of synodal democracy and the style of life and governance that it implies can set new standards for the secular world and all human aspirations for the Common Good.