

## Important Orthodox Church gathering difficulties



New wars and ancient feuds. Long-standing rivalries between Moscow and Constantinople – compounded by disagreements over the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria – threaten to derail the most important Orthodox Church gathering of modern times

The venerable church of Hagia Irene in Constantinople was the venue in AD 381 for the momentous meeting of the Second Ecumenical Council, which helped cement the foundations of the early Church, underpinning what became known as the Nicene Creed and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Thus, when it was announced that a pan-Orthodox Council would take place within those same hallowed walls, some observers were quick to draw parallels, ranking the meeting at Pentecost this year as equally momentous for modern Orthodoxy.

While the proposed event could not be described as an ecumenical council proper, because of the absence of Rome, it was thought likely that Orthodox-Catholic ecumenical relations would be high on the agenda. But, for reasons both internal – concerning relations among the Orthodox Churches – and external – concerning the impact of international developments – the event is now in the balance.

The Orthodox Church is made up of 14 self-governing (autocephalous) jurisdictions, with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople under Patriarch Bartholomew taking canonical and traditional precedence, but the Patriarchate of Moscow wielding most power because of its numbers. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) claims 165 million of the world's 250 million Orthodox Christians. Also included in the Orthodox sphere are a handful of “autonomous” Churches, which are recognised by one or more autocephalous churches, one of which would be their “mother” church.

Some of the divisions within Orthodoxy are encapsulated by disputes among the 14 autocephalous churches over who can be accepted as an autonomous church. Particularly neuralgic is the position of

the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (UOC-MP), which is recognised by Moscow but not by Constantinople.

The difficulties in Ukraine are in a sense a microcosm of the more global Orthodox dilemmas. According to Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev of Volokolamsk, the head of Russian Orthodox External Relations and its most vocal spokesman, Kiev is the “cradle of Russian Orthodoxy and its original centre because it is the place from which Eastern Christianity began to spread”.

However, two more Orthodox Churches arose in Ukraine as a result of the political upheavals during the collapse of the Soviet Union. They are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). Both Churches splintered from the Russian Orthodox at different times and neither is officially recognised by the Orthodox world. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and was seen to lend its support to anti-government rebels in the east, the various Churches were obliged to take up a position with regard to the actions of President Vladimir Putin.

For the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill the priority was to keep the UOC-MP as part of the ROC. Of the ROC's 30,000 parishes, 12,000 are in the UOC-MP. If Kirill lost these, his claim to de facto leadership of the Orthodox world would receive a fatal blow. If Ukraine's three Orthodox Churches united – and discussions have taken place between the two that are separated from Moscow, while the UOC-MP is feeling particularly vulnerable because of broad Ukrainian hostility to Moscow – this would be a disaster for Kirill.

Only Patriarch Bartholomew has the right to recognise the legitimacy of these Churches, or any merger. He will want the pan-Orthodox Council to succeed – that is, to reach agreements, no matter how generalised – so, as chairman, he will keep Ukraine off the agenda. But he could well manoeuvre himself into a position to challenge the Russians in the longer term on the basis of his dealings with Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

The Russians appear already to have a sense of this. There have been stiff negotiations over who takes part in the council and how items on the agenda are approved. The Russians have insisted that all council decisions would require consensus – so giving the right of veto to each Church. This reduces the likelihood that agreement will be reached on burning issues, particularly on intra-Orthodox and ecumenical relations. Just before Christmas, a committee of primates from Moscow and Constantinople who were drafting the rules of the council broke up in disagreement.

If the implications of Russia's intervention in Ukraine can be papered over, those of its intervention in Syria on 30 September last year most certainly cannot. In one sense, the Russians ought to be able to use this to their advantage. Western interventions in the Middle East have proved a disaster for its Christian population. In 2003 Iraq's Christians numbered 1.5 million, just over 6 per cent of the population. They now number under 300,000, a figure shrinking every year by between 60,000 and 100,000, according to Aid to the Church in Need, either through exile or as victims of Islamic State (IS) genocide.

Similarly, the Western-backed removal of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya has left the population at the mercy of marauding Islamists. When Putin asks whether the West, with this record, has the right to

remove the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad as it did Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi, he obviously has a point.

Putin may or may not be the saviour of Christians in the Middle East, but he is certainly the only credible candidate. Unlike Western leaders, he speaks explicitly and forcefully about defending Christianity, and while Russian Orthodox leaders are keen to deny they are singing from the same hymn sheet as the president, they are resolute in calling attention to what is obviously persecution of a terrible magnitude. This means that the global Orthodox Church could present itself, if only it could find one voice, as the foremost defender of Christianity.

That is a big “if”, however, and gets bigger all the time. Military and political tensions, with Russia, Assad and Iran on one side in the Syrian conflict, Turkey, the US, Saudi Arabia and Britain on the other, IS the enemy of all but surviving partly because it has friends as well as enemies in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and with all these alliances shifting and blurring from one week to the next, it is impossible to predict where intra-Orthodox relations will be by Pentecost.

After the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey on 24 November, senior Russian Orthodox clerics said the pan-Orthodox Council would have to move to Moscow. Then, last weekend, Saudi Arabia executed 47 people for terrorism offences – mostly in the same manner as IS, by beheading – including the prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a vocal supporter of anti-government protests in the kingdom’s oil-rich and majority-Shia Eastern Province in 2011.

The sheikh had close links with Shia-dominated Iran, and the Saudi embassy in Tehran was set on fire. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of Russian ally Iran, threatened “divine revenge”. Russia, for its part, has offered to “mediate” between Tehran and Riyadh.

When this week IS released a video showing their terrorists executing five men they called spies, Prime Minister David Cameron said the video was an act of desperation because IS were losing ground. Also losing ground thanks to the Russian intervention are the Saudi-backed, Islamic fundamentalist, anti-Assad groups, and the Saudi executions may equally have been acts of desperation. Riyadh’s hatred of Assad cannot be overestimated. Putin’s reversal of their hopes for his overthrow may well have caused them to act without calculating the consequences of their actions.

The world has moved quickly, downhill, in the past six months. In June last year Hilarion was talking about a possible meeting between Pope Francis and Kirill, perhaps in Vienna. He also suggested, however, that current relations between Russia and the West were pointing in a direction that could lead to a Third World War.

When he returned to Rome to meet Francis on 21 October, he was more tight-lipped. So too was the Holy See which, notably, in its statement after the meeting made no condemnation of the Russian intervention in Syria that began three weeks earlier.

Whether the pan-Orthodox Council will take place, and where it will take place and what it can achieve if it does take place, is impossible to surmise. All that can be said, from the vantage point of the beginning of 2016, is that it is at the mercy of traditional intra-Orthodox rivalries on the one side and a toxic international situation on the other.

James Roberts - The Tablet