

AECA at 150

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This article was published in KOINONIA,
The Journal of the Anglican and Eastern Churches Association,
New Series, No.63, Ascensiontide 2014, pp.8-14.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, The Tractarian (or “High Church”) party of the Church of England came into increasing prominence and positions of influence within that church. As it did so, it employed particular “narratives of identity” to present itself as a sister church to Orthodox Churches. As such, these narratives influenced the Church of England’s involvement with all Orthodox Churches. What was important to the Church of England during this time was to take the characteristics considered to be essential to an accurate description of the Church, and to present them as having been present from the Church’s origin. The sense of continuity and identity thereby invoked was used by the Church of England to describe its own history in ways that were designed to present itself as a church possessing historical and ecclesiological authenticity.¹

The search for ecclesial authenticity and recognition was the principal motivating factor of those involved in this work. There were many factors within the Church of England that were changing its character, and at the same time, propelling it towards closer relations with the Eastern Orthodox Churches. These factors included the growth of Tractarianism and the influence of the High Church party within the Church of England, the significance of Royal and Prime Ministerial preferment of clergy from this section of the Church of England, the effect of the Papal Bull *Apostolicae Curae*, the growth of religious communities for men and women and their deployment in the mission field, and growth in knowledge of the Syriac tradition leading to a Syriac and Eastern policy from the Church of England. At the same time, these developments were bitterly contested within the Church of England, and did not command universal acceptance. However, there was one ‘core characteristic’ of the Church of

¹ In this scheme of things, the Tractarians used the term ‘apostolic succession’ to describe their claim to unbroken continuity with pre-Reformation England. The term *Ecclesia Anglicana* was also often used by them in the same way.

England that was unchallenged by any of the competing groups within it. This characteristic was Establishment – the church of the nation, whose supreme earthly authority was an anointed Monarch.

The Tractarian party of the Church of England was therefore employing narratives about that church, which were both designed to create new identities and simultaneously to be seen as rooted in historical reality. In the case of the Church of England during this period, it was most keen to use its theological publications, as well as hymnody and liturgy, to demonstrate that it was a historic church, with a claim to legitimacy equal to any Orthodox Church. In this way it fulfilled what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur termed the search for mutual recognition.

Achieving closer relations with eastern churches had been placed more into the day-to-day life of the Church of England by the existence of two societies dedicated to this aim. The Eastern Churches Association had been founded in 1864

“...to inform the British public as to the state and position of the Eastern Christians, to make known the doctrines and principles of the Anglican Church to the Christians in the East, and to take advantage of all opportunities for intercommunion with the Orthodox Church and friendly intercourse with the other ancient Churches of the East, and to assist as far as possible the Bishops of the Orthodox Church in their efforts to promote the spiritual welfare and the education of their flocks.”²

The growth in interest in closer relations with eastern churches was given further impetus in 1906 with the creation of the Anglican and Eastern Orthodox Churches Union, “in order by practical effort to promote mutual sympathy, understanding and intercourse, and to promote and encourage actions furthering Reunion.”³ The nuance in the terminology of the two Associations is important, and reflects the growth in self-confidence during the period of those who sought formal relations of intercommunion between the Church of England and the Orthodox Churches.

Drawing on this greater knowledge of the Orthodox Churches within the Church of England, and utilizing the existence of one of the monastic orders for men, the Society of St John the

² Anglican and Eastern Churches Association Archives, deposited in Lambeth Palace Library, January 2008. These papers do not yet have a detailed classification.

³ Anglican and Eastern Churches Association Archives, deposited in Lambeth Palace Library, January 2008.

Evangelist, the Anglican and Eastern-Orthodox Churches Union sponsored the lectures of Frederick William Puller, SSJE, in St Petersburg in 1913. The lectures, *The Continuity of the Church of England Before and after its Reformation in the Sixteenth Century, With Some account of its Present Condition*, were published later that year, and gave impetus to this cause.⁴ Puller referred explicitly to the revival of religious life for men and women in the Church of England under the influence of the Oxford movement and Tractarians when he was presenting the Church of England in a series of lectures in St Petersburg.

“For three hundred years, the monastic life in all its forms was stamped out of the church of England, not by any action of the Church, but by the sacrilegious act of a tyrannous King. But one of the results of the Oxford movement was to give back to our Church that dedicated life of chastity, poverty, and obedience, of which she had been so wickedly robbed.”⁵

The difference between this school of thought and theology, and those who believed that closer relations between Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox were neither achievable nor desirable was also to be played out at successive Lambeth Conferences. Both societies were to continue their independent existence until 1914 when they were amalgamated into one society, the Anglican and Eastern Churches Association, whose aim was

“to unite members of the Anglican and Eastern Orthodox Churches for the object of promoting mutual knowledge, sympathy and intercourse between the Churches, praying and working for re-union, and encouraging the study of Eastern Christendom.”⁶

The work of these two Societies is well illustrated by a publication, first published for the Eastern Churches Association in 1895, and re-issued in 1917 for the Anglican and Eastern Churches Association. *Russia and the English Church* recounted the exchanges of correspondence between William Palmer and Alexei Khomiakov in the 1840s.⁷ This correspondence had articulated the Tractarian branch theory of the Church for the benefit of an Orthodox reader. It had fallen from public memory, and was felt to be sufficiently important that it should be re-introduced to a wider readership. The work of the two societies dedicated

⁴ See F. W. Puller, *The Continuity of the Church of England Before and after its Reformation in the Sixteenth Century, With Some account of its Present Condition* (London: Longmans, 1913).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

⁶ Anglican and Eastern Churches Association Archives, deposited in Lambeth Palace Library, January 2008.

⁷ W. J. Birkbeck, ed., *Russia and the English Church, 1844-1894* (London: Anglican and Eastern Churches Association, 1917).

to closer relations between Anglicans and Orthodox had done much in this period to popularise the work amongst the general public. This growing interest in closer relations, whether of formal inter-communion, or of simple ecumenical friendship, had now moved out of the specialist realm of the Tractarians who had a particular interest in relations with eastern churches to illustrate their own theological agenda, and into the realm of the general public. Simultaneously, within this wider context, there was a growth in the knowledge of Syriac language and culture, and an interest in pursuing closer relations with the Syriac Churches, Syrian Orthodoxy included.

This year of 2014, therefore, sees two important commemorations for the AECA – the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Eastern Churches Association, and the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Anglican & Eastern Churches Association in 1914, on the brink of the outbreak of the First World War. The AECA has continued to do its work faithfully throughout this period in promoting closer relations between Anglican and Orthodox Christians. On a personal note, I am proud to have served as its Chairman since 2001. Relations between our two families of churches have never been more important than they now are. Like all families, there are occasional disagreements - mainly about secondary church order questions, but the fact that we are rooted in the historic creeds and apostolic identities unites us in a continuing way, and for that we thank God. The details of the picture are changing all the time. The past 18 months have been a good illustration of this. In this short period, we have seen a new Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Justin Welby, a new Coptic Pope of Alexandria, H.H. Pope Tawadros, a new Ethiopian Patriarch H.H. Abuna Matthias, and a new Syrian Orthodox Patriarch, H.H. Patriarch Aphram II Karim. I was privileged to represent AECA at the very moving funeral of HH Patriarch Zakka of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Beirut. Behind the scenes, the AECA has continued to promote closer relations between our church leaders, and a small sign of this was received with favourable mention of the AECA from His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew when the Archbishop of Canterbury visited Constantinople/Istanbul earlier this year.

This article has given some historical context to our work, but we are not an antiquarian or backward looking association.⁸ The AECA Executive Committee now has a majority of young members, both Anglican and Orthodox, and has a growing and significant presence in the

⁸ Much of the historical research included in this paper has been published in my *Narratives of Identity: The Syrian Orthodox Church and the Church of England, 1895-1914* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013)

electronic media, especially on Facebook and Twitter. Anglicans and Orthodox continue to work together in tackling many of the sharpest contemporary issues which face us all, amongst them a creeping secular fundamentalism in western societies and liberal democracies, the threat from political Islam and expansionist Zionism in the Middle East - leading to the current exodus of Christians from that region, and the challenge of adapting our faith to new realities while remaining true to the “faith once received.” An entirely different situation pertains now from that of 1864, as Orthodox Churches all have large Diasporas outside their historic homelands (especially in the UK) and the Anglican Communion is now a global phenomenon, with the largest number of Anglicans now in Nigeria. Globally, all of us face the growing challenges of the increasing divide between rich and poor, and the consequential degradation of the environment and de-humanising labour conditions brought about by economic globalisation. Our Communion continue to meet formally through the Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue and the recently re-activated Anglican-Oriental Orthodox Commission. This Commission will next meet in Cairo in October, hosted by the Coptic Orthodox Church, and amidst the tension between proponents of different visions of society in Egypt. Equally importantly, an increasing daily involvement in pastoral cooperation characterises our churches at the local level. Pilgrimage has been and is one of the significant activities of the AECA and this year has seen the launch of a new venture, Holy Britannia, designed to bring Russian Orthodox Christians to the holy places of the British Isles.⁹ I believe it true to say that our relations have never been better or closer.

So in this year of 2014 we are marking, and will mark and celebrate this achievement in several ways. Earlier in the year, we launched a very successful project for ordinands and students of theology to commission a piece of theological writing marking the 1,700th commemoration of the Emperor Constantine’s Edict of Milan, with the winning student, Dr Catherine Reid, going to an Orthodox Convent in Minsk, Belarus. In October, we hold our 150th anniversary celebration dinner at Lambeth Palace in the presence of our Anglican and Orthodox Presidents, the Bishop of London and His Eminence the Archbishop of Thyatira, and the annual Constantinople Lecture will be given in November at St Mellitus College in London, and will be given by Fr John Behr, the Dean of St Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Academy in New York. The title of Fr John’s Lecture is "Take Back Death! Christian Witness in the Twenty-First Century", underlining Metropolitan John of Pergamon’s assertion that the primary

⁹ See the Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/pilgrimagehollybritannia>

question for all the churches in the twenty-first century will be “What is the Human Person?” This theme of Christian anthropology shaped and framed the most recent meeting of the Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue in Novi Sad, Serbia in 2013. Anglicans and Orthodox can respond to that question with Irenaeus’s statement that the glory of God is the human person *fully alive*. As we celebrate 150 years of Partnership in the Gospel between Anglicans and Orthodox, and look ahead to the future, the words of John the Evangelist will carry us forward “Behold, I make all things new.” Laus Deo!