

PERAET 2021

International Scientific Conference «PERISHABLE AND ETERNAL: Mythologies and Social Technologies of Digital Civilization-2021»

**RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND MALANKARA
ORTHODOX CHURCH: NEW PERSPECTIVES OF DIALOGUE?**

Daniil E. Krapchunov (a), Elena V. Maximova (b)*

*Corresponding author

(a) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University (NovSU), Veliky Novgorod, Russian Federation,
krapchunovd@mail.ru,

(b) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University (NovSU), Veliky Novgorod, Russian Federation,
novsu.maximova@mail.ru

Abstract

Starting from 1990-s, the relationships between Russian and Indian Orthodox Christian churches, having had their development in 60-70-s, were renewed in XXI century on a new basis of global reality. The document of the Synodal theological Commission of Russian Orthodox Church in 1994 indicates the significant strides in solving Christological problems between Indian and Russian churches, and at the same time it is not considered as a final document, enough for reestablishment of undamaged communication between Orthodox Church and Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) churches. Today Russian Orthodox scholars state that, as Soviet-Indian contacts had a different ground, now the dialogue is postponed. From the other side, in India Orthodoxy experiences all the problems of religious minority, the hardest of which is persecution. The dialogue between Russian and Indian churches could help to solve this problem, because dogmatic differences has never been a major hindrance for Indian Malankara church. Malankara Orthodox Church is unique historical case of having adopted and getting adjusted to such opposite systems as Nestorianism, Portugal Catholicism and Syrian Monophysitism influences. The special phenomenon of Malankara church is hardly known among Russian clergy. Meanwhile, it could be a ready bridgehead for Russian Church to support Orthodoxy in Asia. The research is showing sharp problems of ecumenical process in the global world.

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Keywords: Dialogue, Malankara Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church



1. Introduction

The history of Malankara church is itself the evidence of constant attempt to find a brotherhood in other strong Orthodox churches that could offer a protection, which is also conditioned by a political agenda. On the need of avoiding Portugal pressure Malankara church appealed to Syrian Orthodox Church in 1665 about patronage.

In India Orthodoxy experiences all the problems of religious minority, the hardest of which is persecution. Today the actuality of persecution, in connection with the rising activity of Hindu extremist organizations, such as The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), The Vishva Hindu Parishad, and RSS, which create anti-conversion legislation, ect., has only increased. Currently, five Indian states: Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh, – have anti-conversion laws, which are directed against “forcible conversion”. But what is “forcible conversion” and how it can be revealed in real life of religious minorities?

The problem of “forcible conversion” is in vocabulary of the public and clergy talk in India, and it has a certain historical reasons. In the legislative history of India conversion has always been a suspicious term, to which, surprisingly, neither religious majorities no minorities were never favorably disposed. Conversion, especially in Goa state with its recent colonial history, is associated with foreign invasion, of Spanish, English, Holland and Portuguese mission. For a common priest of the Catholic or the Orthodox churches it is hard to divide “forcible conversion” from “conversion”. The latest is almost similar to preaching. But as the law prohibits preaching among other religious confessions, propagating of any kind is hindered.

For Christian minorities the mistrust to conversion is added by the fear of radical Hindu attacks (Mondal, 2019). The problematic consequence for Christian minority is that this question is directly connected with the missionary work, which has always been an integral part of Christian *modus vivendi*. While the Catholic missionary work usually doesn't imply any resistance to Hindu organizations because of the “great name” of Catholic Church (according to Catholic explanation), for Malankara Orthodox Church as an absolute minority the outer mission and even preaching sometimes means the real trouble, such as throwing stones at the house of the priest after converting a Hindu into Christianity.

2. Problem Statement

This research is implemented in theoretical and empirical-practical ways. The first phase was implemented theoretically through studying the approaches, methods, methodologies used by such scholars of the field as Casanova (1994), Tamcke and Marten (2006), Horujy (2020), Konev (2020), Koodapuzha (1998), Kakkanatt (1996), Radhakrishnan (2007), Kalaitzidis et al. (2014), Raj (2002), Strenski (2020), Fedotova (2018), Krapchunov (2017), and many others. As for the topic of religious pluralism, our special attention was not payed to this conception in general, but to the aspect of forming attitude to ecumenical dialogue. We suggest analytical comparison of Russian and Indian forms of interpretation of ecumenism and its comprehension by the society. It is also very important to study how people perceive the concept of ecumenism in general and religious pluralism as a possible constituting part of it.

3. Research Questions

- To get more knowledge on the research of ecumenical process;
- To study different approaches to ecumenism in india, in russia and in germany and to use the theoretical framework to understand the relationships between russian and malankara churches;
- To learn more about the principles of understanding cultural and theological peculiarities of orthodox christianity in india;
- To reveal the effective experience of interpretation of ecumenism as dialogue in international science.

4. Purpose of the Study

We have a lot of material from field researches and empirical observations of everyday life of Indian Orthodox communities since 2008, and have long ago made Christian churches of India a subject of our constant attention. We are having the aim to elaborate our field material through a modern and applicable theoretical approach. The purpose of our study is to analyze the possible hindrances in establishing Russian-Indian Orthodox connections and to reveal the discursive field of dialogue.

5. Research Methods

To research this area, we have to face the religious reality today. We use “lived religion” methodology, which is “radical empirical approach” (Ivan Strenski) in sociology of religion based on Max Weber’s Verstehen method and Durkheim’s philosophy (Strenski, 2020).

The research is based on the qualitative methodology which includes the following components: review of specialized books, studies, articles, reports and electronic resources in different languages, media resources (press conferences, articles, etc.), in-depth interviews conducted with the representatives of Malankara and Russian Orthodox churches, focus groups, observations at the worships.

The analysis made in the proposed research is based on several sources of information.

a) Review of specialized books, studies, articles, report and electronic resources. The books examined will tackle the problem of ecumenism in Western countries, especially the evaluation of the perspectives of dialogue with Oriental churches. The books and articles on the positive and negative attitude to ecumenism in the historical development of Indian and Russian thought. Review of books and articles on the subject of comparing dominating concepts of ecumenism in the West, in India and in Russia (Kalaitzidis et al., 2014; Kumar & D’Souza, 2016; Radhakrishnan, 2007; Shoemaker & Edmonds, 2016).

b) Review of primary material is also quite important for this research. The legal acts, international conventions, international agreements and the amendments in the Law, as well as any legal document related to the ecumenical relations with Indian churches, and also concerning problems of anti-conversion law in India have been well studied and analyzed.

c) In-depth interviews:

- with clergy and laymen in parishes of Malankara Orthodox Church, especially in Brahmavar (Goan) Orthodox Church, in Chandrapur (Maharashtra), Panjim and Vasko da Gama (Goa);
- with Russian Orthodox communities represented there and in Delhi, consisted of Indian and Russian members;
- with Russian missionaries in Russia and in India;
- with representatives of Orthodox clergy in Russia and Church administration, responsible for Indian mission (Mark, archbishop of Egorievsk, Lev, archbishop of Novgorod, etc).

During and after the reasearch we organized several discussions on the topic with the inclusion of specialists from theology, religious studies, sociology, psychology.

For the purpose of facilitating the methodological approach, as well as research tools, an inquiry has been conducted among the scientists and specialists through different professional organizations (such as the Department of external Church relations of Russian Orthodox Church, Russian State Christian Academy, Moscow Institute of St. Apostle Andrey, etc), which the researchers are affiliated to.

The following data collection methods are chosen to use during the research:

- In-depth interviews (respondent groups), by-chance selection
 - Expert interviews (experts from different spheres)
 - Content-analysis of Russian Orthodox anti-ecumenical media and internet resources and societies, publications and their correspondence to the official position of Russian Orthodox Church
- Desk review (Laws, Orders or Decisions somehow connected with the research topic).

6. Findings

In the contemporary world and in Russia as well there is a growing interest towards ecumenism, though this phenomenon is interpreted in a different ways. There are a number of scholars, and some of them are very famous scientists (T. Goricheva), who think that ecumenism is another side of secularisation process, making Russian Church a wellcome-for-everyone formation of contradictive notions, where anyone can live “spiritual life” without any effort. Anti-ecumenical position, with different arguments, is also common to fundamentalist Orthodox organizations, such as St. Thomas brotherhood, missionary in India (www.orthodoxy-sa.org), or The missionary society named after the monk Serapion Kozheozersky (deacon G. Maximov), missionary in China, making activity against ecumenism, who are reproaching Russian Orthodox Church for the absence of interest to proselytizing, for signing in 1986 Chambesy agreement, and for the document about the basic principles of Russian Church attitude to other Christian churches, adopted at the bishops' Council in 2000. These missionary societies review the mentioned events as neglecting Orthodox truth, and instead they propose their own system of values and firm statements that sometimes in public are taken for official position of the Russian Church, while the Church itself may not share these views, like about impossibility of salvation for the non-baptized, or even for not-Orthodox Christians. As a consequence of their views, these organizations are very active in outer missionary work, creating quite new Orthodox communities out of followers of Hinduism and other religions in India.

Anti-ecumenical position may also be caused by some historical events. Since 90-s, in Russia we observe activation of confessional component of national identity. As declarative belonging to religion on

official level took a status of social norm, Russian national identity in mass-media is strongly referred not to Orthodoxy in general, but to Russian Orthodoxy. According to sociological surveys and analysis (www.wciom.ru, www.fom.ru) the “religious revival” of 90-s in Russia was connected with the urge to find something stable and permanent, which was found in Russian Orthodox tradition, connected with the state and having staunch value system. At the same time being “Orthodox” for a contemporary Russian doesn’t entail participating even in minimum religious practices (90% of respondents said they do not attend the church even monthly).

The analysis of expert interviews of the following categories of people: clergymen, parishioners and administrative, politician and mass media leaders in Veliky Novgorod in 2020 shows that the mood of religious self-sufficiency is a part of general Russian identity construction, while ecumenism is understood as unnecessary or even harmful and dangerous thing, equal to heresy. “Religious pluralism” is mostly understood as total unification not only of Christianity, but of all world religions, - the project, which actually more correctly corresponds to the notion “superecumenism”, though here it appears as synonym to “ecumenism”, which in this case has the meaning of union but not of dialogue.

This is only the manifestation that Russia still lives in situation of monoculturalism, with the absence of religious pluralistic tradition. This atmosphere of religious-national isolation may even look artificial and strange if we remember that Russia has never been mono-religious and mono-national country. Even before the era of multinational USSR, the biggest mosque in Europe, in St-Petersburg, was built on the personal funds of the tsar Nicholas II.

The general possible reason of hostility of public anti-ecumenist opinion is the antiquated understanding that ecumenism is based on dogmatic unity, - unity which can be only right or wrong. Most of the layman respondents who affirm righteousness of Russian Orthodox teaching are not familiar neither with Credo nor with the works of the Church fathers. And of course the dogmatic differences with Catholicism or Oriental churches they couldn’t explain. The interpretation of ecumenism as dogmatic unity, for example, makes ineffective negotiations with such Orthodox communities as Indian Malankara Church, because their members are often not aware of dogmatics after the Council of Chalcedon.

The claims for the national uniqueness based on theological ignorance mean that pluralism as well as ecumenism is absent on mental and methodological levels (Pigalev, 2020). Creating an adequate and effective for Russian culture model of interrelation of ecumenism and pluralism could be promoted by borrowing theological and social experience of the West and by comparing concepts of ecumenism in Germany, in Russia and in India.

We intent to clarify the efficiency of dividing doctrine discrepancy from lived religion situation, for finding more similarities than contradictions between worships. Some empirical observations pointed me to this direction. For example, attitude to the archbishop in Russia considerably exceeds the attitude to the Pope among Catholics in the West, although there’s no any document supporting the “veneration” of any archbishop in Russia and practical sacralization of clergymen in popular piety, granting them signs of sanctity. Likewise there are some historical examples, showing how the compelling differences (if they are at all) may be overcome with entering the culture, like India, and discovering the social roots and traditions of the Church. In 1898 V. Bolotov was successful in joining the Orthodox Church Syro-Chaldean Nestorians to Russian Orthodox Church, because he was deep inside their world view and

linguistic peculiarities. Besides, during the ecumenical activity of Russian Orthodox Church in 1970-s a lot of Russian-Indian encounters were made because of good relationships between the church leaders. I plan to make deeper analysis of how the cultural and personal aspects could be included into the core of understanding ecumenical process. It would be a good clue to the research methodology as well as practical progress.

7. Conclusion

Malankara Goan Orthodox Church is a very special phenomenon, being not only a religious minority among other religions, but inside Christianity itself, considering the Liberation of Goa from Portugal took place only in 1964 and the fact that all Goan Orthodox priests believe that there were no Orthodox churches in Goa before 1990-es because the Catholic church didn't give permission to build it.

From the standpoint of Malankara Goan priests, the collaboration with Catholic or Eastern Orthodox confessions could be helpful for the mission, but the necessity of missionary work is in the past. Two presently existing Orthodox churches in Goa, St.Mary Orthodox Church in Ribandar (Panaji) and Kerala Vasco da Gama Church, with its two rather gated communities, mostly consisted of Kerala newcomers, with services in Malayalam language, don't show any signs of its life, neither in advertisement of events (the way the Catholic Church does), nor in public actions, nor in communication with Russian Orthodox community, but stay in their social and spiritual self-sufficiency. Still the closeness of Maharashtra state where incidents of persecution are well known not only to Indian, but even for Russian missionaries, suggests that calmness and peacefulness of Goa state is fragile and minorities don't want to take any chances.

The Goan Church produces a special kind of religious identity, containing a strong identification with the native culture even while practicing the Christian faith. The Bishop Alvares Mar Julius, the founder of the Church, is even sometimes mentioned as the Christian developer of national-oriented "Swadeshi ideology". This historical analysis may help to understand the reluctant and indifferent position of Goan Orthodox Church towards the dialogue with Russian Orthodox Church, though the alliance could strengthen Malankara Church in general. Still, not having so far any vivid menace of coercion, together with realizing themselves as a unique and authentic Indian tradition, the Goan Church leads a closed religious life (Barbato, 2020; Patel, 2020; Tamcke & Marten, 2006; Velassery & Patra, 2019).

Meantime for the Russian Church these connections could also be fruitful. Some problems of Russian Orthodox missionary are also evident, as Russian brotherhoods have to fulfill their duty in circumstances of hard religious anti-conversion legislation of India and constant menace of Hindu radicals attacks. In this threat of extremism the Russian Church could be a mediator of connecting Indian Church with Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Besides, not only for Indian religious organizations but for all the country historically relationships with Russia have always been approved by population and deemed to be desirable, natural and friendly (Patel, 2020). The permission given by Malankara church to Russian Orthodox Church about using Malankara temples for Russian Orthodox worships has already been very useful for Russian people, who live in India more or less permanently, and the opening of parish Russian

Church in Delhi in 2006 was in many ways the result of multiple requests of Russian communities to Moscow Patriarchy.

What seems to be the real obstacle to the dialogue is the lack of ecumenical understanding of religious pluralism, as well as identifying religion with nationality, what is peculiar both to Indian and Russian churches. The special phenomenon of Malankara church is hardly known among Russian clergy. Meanwhile, it could be a ready bridgehead for Russian Church to support Orthodoxy in Asia.

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