Lutherans and Orthodox in Finland: Ecumenical Dialogue and Cooperation between two Established Churches

Matti Repo

Matti Repo has been the Lutheran Bishop of Tampere in Finland since 2008.

Lutheran and Orthodox Churches in their Relation to the State

I am carrying on Orthodox *panagia*, an eastern parallel to the western pectoral cross as a symbol of Episcopal ministry. The word *panagia* refers to the All Holy Mother, the God-bearer Virgin Mary. She is depicted in the centerpiece of the *panagia*. I received this *panagia* as a gift from Metropolitan Ambrosius, Orthodox Bishop of Helsinki. He was present at my consecration two years ago and gave it to me as a sign of fellowship and spiritual unity, although there is yet no mutual recognition of ministries between the Lutherans and the Orthodox. This *panagia* is nevertheless a sign of the wish of both churches to proceed on the way towards full unity with joint celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The wish is also articulated in the ecumenical strategy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, adopted in 2009. The strategy *Our Church: a Community in Search of Unity* puts emphasis on the visible unity of the Church as the goal for the ecumenical activities of the Church, and on the consensus in the fundamental truths of faith as a means in achieving sacramental unity. The little strategy booklet exemplifies this wish on its cover, showing the Lutheran and Orthodox churches that stand side by side in Helsinki.

In Finland, the Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church have a warm and friendly relation. In general, there is an overall uncomplicated ecumenical atmosphere in the country, although the Lutheran Church is a big majority with almost 80 per cent of the total population and some 4.3 million members; the Orthodox Church as the second-largest church has approximately 60,000 members.

The two churches have a rather similar position in relation to the state. For historical reasons, one might call them State Churches; however, this is not an accurate term today. The Republic of Finland does not confess any faith. The state is neutral, but it nevertheless grants to the Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church a more solid ground in the legislation than to other Christian churches or denominations or any other religion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church is mentioned in the Constitution of Finland, not as the Church of the State, but among the bodies that have their own legislation. Both the Lutheran Church Law and Law on the Orthodox Church are confirmed by the Parliament, but only the churches themselves can make any changes to their canons. In the Law on Religious Freedom, renewed in 2003, these two churches are set in a different group from all other 'registered religious communities', as the terminology goes.

A Common National History

Lutherans and Orthodox have a common history in Finland. Finland is located on the border of eastern and western European culture. There can be traced a slight distinction between eastern and western ways of expressions and actions, a cultural border that runs throughout the country. However, this is not very obvious today, because of the post-Second World War socio-economic development and migration inside the country, but the distinction has contributed very much in the sphere of ecclesial relations throughout the centuries.

Particularly in the east, the Lutheran and Orthodox Finns have been living side by side for generations. Unlike in many other European countries, there has not been an ethnic borderline drawn between them. We have not experienced such tensions as those known from the area of former Yugoslavia. There have nevertheless been difficult times too. When the Kingdom of Sweden expanded to the east in the early seventeenth century, the Orthodox people of the eastern province of Karelia were forced to convert to Lutheranism. Many of the Orthodox families fled to Russia to keep their faith, but this incident has not become a memory that would need healing today.

A few years ago, we celebrated ecumenically the 850th anniversary of Christianity in Finland. The year was counted from the arrival of St Henrik, the first bishop of Turku in 1155. St Henrik is a figure of western Catholic Christianity, who contributed in binding Finland to western European culture and to the realm of Sweden, but he was by no means is the first person to introduce Christianity in Finland. The Christian faith had arrived already by the turn of the first millennium in both its western and eastern forms, as we can tell from the central vocabulary of Christianity. Words like *Raamattu* (Bible), *risti* (cross) and *pappi* (priest) have their roots in the Russian or Slavonic languages.

From Swedish to Russian Rule

St Henrik's mission consisted of organising the church and its congregations, as far as we can tell anything sure about him. According to tradition, St Henrik was an Englishman who came to Finland together with St Erik, the King of Sweden. His person can only vaguely be discerned from the legend: historians deny that he was a canonised saint; some deny that he was ever consecrated as a bishop; and some deny that he ever existed at all. In the tradition of the church, however, St Henrik is a venerated martyr.

The present Archbishop of Turku is the 54th successor of St Henrik in the very same episcopal see. The Evangelical Lutheran Church does not consider itself to have been established in the Reformation. On the contrary, it believes itself to be the same church that has been in Finland ever since the Middle Ages. It has preserved its apostolic faith and episcopal order as well as its canon for sacramental and liturgical worship throughout the centuries, including the turmoil of mid-sixteenth century. In the words of the Augsburg

Confession, it believes that 'one holy Church is to continue forever' (Art. VII). The Lutherans are convinced they represent the Catholic Church, which underwent certain necessary reforms.
In the Reformation, the Church was bound to the state and submitted to the crown of Sweden. In 1809, Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, as a result of an agreement between Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I that had led to a war between Russia and Sweden (1808-09). The Tsar declared that all the old Swedish laws were to remain effective – including the Church Law, according to which the King was also the head of the Church. The Orthodox Tsar was thus to rule over his Lutheran subjects. This anomaly initiated a process that led the Lutheran Church of Finland to gain broader independence from the state than was possible for its sister province in the old motherland, Sweden.

Orthodox Christianity and Russian Impact on Finland

The time of the Autonomy was fairly good for the overall development in Finland. Russian rule paved the way to independence; without it, Finland might have become a neglected eastern province of Sweden. The good Tsars took good care of the needs of the Lutherans too (the bad Tsars were a different story). For example, the beautiful cathedral in Helsinki was built with the money collected from salt customs, granted by the Orthodox Tsar. In the nineteenth century several Orthodox churches were built in many other cities to serve the Orthodox Christians, be they Finns or Russians. Many of the Russians were soldiers or government civil servants.

Being connected with the Russian Empire for 100 years strengthened the Orthodox presence in the western parts of Finland as well; but at the same time it also strengthened a prejudice against the Orthodox Church. In the 1880s and 1890s Finland experienced a short period of Russification. Regrettably this period shortly before the Russian Revolution contributed to a negative attitude not only towards Russians but also towards the Orthodox Church. It was not easy for an average Finn to discern between Orthodox Christianity and Russian culture. The church buildings, being located in towns of military bases and not far from barracks, were easily considered symbols of occupation. In the eyes of many, the Orthodox faith looked like an extension of a Pan-Slavic ideology and the Orthodox Church an outstretched arm of the Tsar’s imperialist policy.

Finland’s position in the two World Wars, fighting its own three wars, first to gain and then to maintain independence in the narrow political space between Germany and Russia (or the Soviet Union), was not very helpful in creating an atmosphere of trust and respect towards the minority Orthodox. The Orthodox Church was largely considered the 'Church of the Russkies' until as late as the 1960s.

It is not easy to tell whether the good relations between the Lutherans and the Orthodox of today are a result of a determinate dialogue or whether they have developed as a natural part of developments which have taken place more from secular than religious motives. After the Second World War the Orthodox

faith became better known among the wider public in the west, as a result of the evacuation of Karelians into other parts of Finland from the areas that were annexed to the Soviet Union.

From Coexistence to Ecumenical Dialogue

A theological dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church was initiated in Turku in 1970. A parallel dialogue with the Finnish Orthodox Church was opened later in 1989. Both dialogues are still continuing and the delegations meet regularly. The latest dialogue with the Russians took place in St Petersburg in 2008; the main topics were *Freedom as Gift and Responsibility* and *Human Rights and Christian Upbringing*, and the latest dialogue with the Finnish Orthodox Church was in 2009, on the topics of *Religious Language* and *Encountering the Contemporary*. Both dialogues have always included two topics, one from the field of dogmatics and another one from social ethics. The papers have subsequently been translated into English and published in a series of documents from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Unfortunately, however, the translated material has been delayed and the latest dialogue reports have not yet appeared in English.

The dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church has been a bit more theologically ambitious than the one with the Finnish Orthodox Church. Every meeting has taken at least one week, and the delegations have been large and highly representative. However, the subjects for the dialogue with the Finnish Orthodox have also included substantial theological topics. On the other hand, the latter dialogue has served the purpose of sharing insights in practical challenges of pastoral concern. It has dealt with issues like *Marriage between Orthodox and Lutherans* (1990), *Unemployment and Human Dignity* (1996), *The Diaconal Role of the Church in Society* (2001) and *Domestic Violence* (2007). This dialogue has brought together two established churches which are in the same societal context. It has mostly been concerned with the issues of Finnish church life, with some theological reflection. However, one could expect that the national dialogue will contribute more to the theology in the future, since today Lutheran and Orthodox theologians are in a close cooperation especially in the eastern part of the country. In the University of Joensuu, a Faculty of Theology was opened in 2002. Although not officially an ecumenical faculty, it nevertheless offers study programmes according to the western and eastern traditions. As both the main traditions of Christianity are present, the students have an extraordinary possibility for ecumenical learning and sharing. The initiative to establish this faculty came from the two churches but the funding comes from the government. The Orthodox Church has its priests' seminary also in Joensuu; the Orthodox students aiming at priesthood start at the university and complete their studies in the seminary. (The University of Joensuu has undergone a merger with the University of Kuopio, and the Faculty of Theology is now a Department of Theology.)

State-Related Cooperation

Two weeks ago I had the privilege to bless a chapel for ecumenical use in a military base. As a matter of fact, it was not a chapel, nor a sanctuary in a

strict sense, but an assembly hall converted into church use with a removable altar and an icon. Together with the commanding officer and the national military bishop and an Orthodox archpriest, we prayed side by side God's blessings for the hall and for all those who attend it (it is my hope that the blessing will involve also those soldiers who come to the hall when it is used as a movie theatre). After my sermon and words of blessing, the Orthodox priest sprinkled the Christ Pantokrator with holy water. May he look graciously upon those who come before his eyes.

This was but one example of Lutheran-Orthodox cooperation in state premises. None of us clerics were standing on our own ground, but we could all rely on the fact that the state sees it as important for its citizens that their spiritual needs are taken care of. Other state-related services include ecumenical worship on Independence Day (6 December) and on the opening day of the working season of Parliament; both take place in the Lutheran Cathedral in Helsinki. These services are presided over by a Lutheran minister, but Orthodox, Catholic and Free Church representatives are involved. They read Scripture readings and intercessions.

Intra-Orthodox Tensions?

Before moving on to discuss issues related to Estonia, I have to make reference to a question characteristic of Orthodox Churches in general. It is not always clear to what level the Orthodox Churches find themselves in communion with each other. Theologically (dogmatically and liturgically), there should be no doubt about communion, *koinonia,* because of a common understanding of the Christian faith and the authority of the Canons of the Ecumenical Councils. But since many of the Orthodox Churches are national or even ethnic Churches, tensions resulting from overlapping jurisdictions seem to prevent them from sacramental unity in a joint eucharist.

There seems to be a difference in the practical understanding of church unity, for example compared to the understanding made possible between Lutherans and Anglicans in the Porvoo Declaration. Both concepts of unity emphasise doctrinal consensus, a reconciled historical episcopate and joint sacramental life. But whereas the Porvoo Churches move towards common structures for common witness and service boldly across cultural and linguistic borders, the Orthodox Churches seem to get bound by ethnic and canonical borders that prevent them from moving closer. This will prove rather challenging as the world changes and international contacts and migration emerge and cooperation will be needed more than before.

After the Revolution in Russia, the Orthodox Church of Finland declared itself autocephalous under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. This was also agreed by the Russian Orthodox Church. Later, the Finnish Orthodox Church also adopted the practice of celebrating Easter at the same time as the Evangelical Lutheran Church and other churches deriving their theology from the western Catholic heritage. This move has not been greeted with enthusiasm by the rest of the Orthodox world, but it has not caused any

problems either. The problems are more related to ethnic heritage than doctrine and liturgy.
Although the Finnish Orthodox Church offers the liturgy in Church Slavonic and other services in Russian, the Russian immigrants tend to organise themselves into communities with own services in own locales, presided over by own priests loyal to their own hierarchy. The same phenomenon is known in several other countries. Moscow supports Russian citizens by sending clergy abroad; the Churches of the Reformation do this too, but whereas Lutherans from abroad usually merge with the domestic Lutherans, the Orthodox seem to keep to their own ethnic and canonical Churches. It seems characteristic of Orthodox Churches in general that canonical and jurisdictional tensions reflect ethnic and cultural differences. For example, there are more Orthodox Christians in Sweden than in Finland, but they belong to more than a dozen separate ethnic Churches with different languages and a number of bishops in Stockholm. There is no 'Orthodox Church in its Swedish expression'.

A Short Excursion to Estonia

I was also asked to say a something on the situation in Estonia. In the following, I shall mostly rely on the recent collection of essays by Finnish scholars, *Kirkot ja uskonnot itäisessä Euroopassa* (*Churches and Religions in Eastern Europe*) (edited by Maija Turunen, Helsinki, Edita, 2010).

After regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 the government declared the Estonian Orthodox Church autonomous from Moscow and made it thus the lawful heir of confiscated church buildings that were to be returned. This was opposed by the Russian-speaking part of the Church that wished to remain under the Moscow Patriarchate. The dispute was hot in the 1990s, but it is still echoed in the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church withdrew from the work of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) in 2008. The CEC received the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church into its membership, but when it came time to vote on the Russian-speaking Orthodox Church in Estonia, the delegates left the meeting before the vote took place.

According to several surveys, Estonia is perhaps the most secularised country in Europe. This, however, mostly applies to the Estonian-speaking people. The Russians in Estonia seem more religious. Before the Second World War the country was predominantly Lutheran, with up to 70 per cent of citizens being members of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church. The atheist regime managed to damage the continuity of spiritual life in the public as well as in the private sphere. Perhaps nowhere else in the former Soviet Union did the eradication of religion succeed so well as in Estonia.

Immediately after the collapse of Soviet Union and the re-independence of Estonia, crowds of ethnic Estonians came to the Evangelical Lutheran Church to look for a sense of freedom and belonging to western European culture, by means of receiving Christian education and becoming confirmed. However, the honeymoon lasted only for some years. The young people and adults who came to the Church did not stay as paying members. In 1990 the Evangelical

Lutheran Church had 175,000 members; by 2008 it had approximately 162,000 members, 12 per cent of the population. One has to bear in mind that all churches are minority churches in Estonia, including the Russian Orthodox Church, which is said to have more members than the Lutheran, but this estimate may be a result of a different rating of membership. The Russian Church counts people with Russian background potentially Orthodox.

Of all Eastern European countries Estonia nevertheless gives the lowest rates in the number of those who consider religion important, or who report having received a religious upbringing, or who count themselves as religious people. Since the Soviet era there has been an increase in those who consider themselves atheists, from 3 to 6 per cent, whereas in Russia there was a drastic fall from 35 to 4 per cent between 1990 and 2000. In 2000, 40 per cent of Estonians reported they believed in God, but the question was very vague and the concepts of god vary. For example, according to the same survey, there are more people who believe in reincarnation than in heaven or hell. Together with the Czech Republic, Estonia shows the lowest figures for church membership, for attendance at services, for baptisms and other indicators of spiritual life, including private prayer. They are the most secularised post-socialist countries. This is also reflected in legislation: in Estonia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has not gained back the position in society it had before the Second World War. Instead, the Church is counted amongst other religious bodies, with no special rights. The late Archbishop Jaan Kiivit commented on the situation a few years ago, prophesying that Estonia is at the end of a process of development that the rest of the European states will supposedly follow in their legislation. According to him, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has reached the status which all other state churches or folk churches will eventually be given.

There are arguably several reasons for these rapid negative developments. One of them is the history of the Lutheran Church in Estonia. Ever since the Reformation, the Lutheran Church was led and governed by Germans living in the Baltic area. The Estonian Church never became a folk church to the same degree as in same measure as the Churches in Sweden and Finland. The average Estonian had no 'ownership' in his or her national church. By the end of the Second World War the Germans had left the country, and the Soviet regime started limiting the freedom of the Church. Christian education and work among children and young people were forbidden. It was even forbidden to celebrate Christmas and other annual feasts of a religious character. People were encouraged to inform on their neighbours if they saw candles burning in their windows.

After re-independence, the Church was not prepared for the new situation. The challenges were enormous; the people needed to gain back their national identity after Soviet occupation and Russification, but the Church only could attempt to continue from the point where it had been in the 1930s, as a result of lack of resources.

Another interesting point is that unlike the Orthodox the Lutherans have emphasised the individual and intellectual dimensions of Christianity and thus

became vulnerable to atheistic propaganda, whereas the Orthodox Church could rely on its strong liturgical identity.

Churches and Religions in Post-Secular Europe

For the Lutheran and Orthodox Churches in Finland, European development is of crucial interest. Until today the churches have been granted a favourable position in society by the state. But as time elapses and the Lutheran Church loses its members as result of secularisation, what will its place in society become? Will the state continue its support for Christianity in general? On the other hand, Europe seems to be entering a post-secular era. The constitution of the EU does not echo the ideals of secularisation, as secularisation was represented in the French and Russian Revolutions. Instead of limiting religions to the private sphere, a post-secular society protects different religions and grants them a space in the public sphere. This development might involve a positive attitude to faith in general, although it might well result in weakening the position of the church.