

## A BOLD INITIATIVE BY MOSCOW\*

After consultations between Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists, which took place on December 23, 1998, and which decided on the formation of an interfaith organization within Russia, the Moscow Patriarchate announced the founding of the “Interfaith Council of Russia,” the goal of which is a “*systematic dialogue and coöperation* between the Orthodox Church of Russia and the three other major religions of this country, namely, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism... [T]his new body, beyond its *efforts to strengthen the ties of the Moscow Patriarchate to the aforementioned three religions*, will, to some extent, be political in nature, since it will function as a pressure group in relation to the Russian government.” One of the first activities of this Council “will be to organize, next November [1999] an interfaith conference, the first of its kind since the collapse of the Soviet Union.”

Orthodox Christians are justified in feeling very uneasy about this development. They have been aware, up until now, of the establishment, in various countries, of so-called “local councils of Churches,” representing “a microcosm of the broader ecumenical movement” and including, as members, all of the Christian confessions, these councils being confederate in character and of three varieties: national, regional, and continental. They constitute “an essential expression of the ecumenical movement” and, within a defined geographical area, “*embody (in however imperfect a form) the divided churches’ calling to be, together, the Church in each place.*” They have become the “normal channels” through which the activities of the World Council of Churches (wcc) are conveyed, interpreted, supported, and implemented at a local level.

In the advance of the interfaith movement, there has been much discussion about the issue of endowing it with an institutional structure by establishing a “World Council of Religions” (wcr)—unless, in the meantime, the wcc should itself turn into such a monstrous organization. Now already, however, a local Orthodox Church is hastening to found the “Interfaith Council of Russia,” paving the way for the wcr, which is something to be expected, given the dynamics of the ecumenical movement: “*If all ‘Christian’ bodies are relative to each other, then all of them together are relative to other ‘religious’ bodies, and ‘Christian’ ecumenism can only end in a syncretic world religion.*”

It is truly most distressing that the Orthodox should heed the “guidelines” put forth by the General Secretary of the wcc, Konrad Raiser, who maintains that “the demand for interreligious encounter and coöperation is *indispensable* for the society of the future.... Christian churches must work with a certain urgency *to overcome their own deep-seated reservations and inhibitions about interreligious dialogue.* This is an area in which ecumenical organizations at a national, regional, and international level *should lead the way.*”

The foregoing report is translated from the Greek original in *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἐνημέρωση*, No. 35 (January-March 2000), pp. 147-148. The material cited in quotation marks is not accompanied by footnotes. Rather, the following references are appended to the text: *Ἐνημέρωση*, 15-1999/1-2, pp. 6-7; *Ἐπίσκεψις*, No. 566 (31 January 1999), p. 9; *Ecumenical News International*, No. 5 (March 18, 1998), p. 23; Basil T. Stavrides and Evan-

gelia A. Barellas, *Ἱστορία τῆς Οἰκουμενικῆς Κινήσεως* [*History of the Ecumenical Movement*] (*Analekta* of the Vlatadon Monastery, No. 47; Thessaloniki: Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, 1996), 3rd ed., pp. 63-64, §7, “Local Councils of Churches”; Frank Short, “National Councils of Churches,” in *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Vol. 2: 1948-1968*, ed. H.E. Fey (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 2nd ed., pp. 93-113; Thomas F. Best, “Councils of Churches: Local, National, Regional,” in the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky, José Miguez Bonino, John Pobee, Tom Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), pp. 231-238; Hieromonk Seraphim Rose (†), *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future* (Platina, CA: St. Herman Brotherhood, 1979), rev. ed.

\* Source: *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (2001), pp. 40-41.