

## Is the Orthodox Church splitting?

Interview with Christliches Medienmagazin pro from 30.09.2018

**Bartholomew, the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, has initiated the recognition of another independent Orthodox Church in Ukraine. In an interview with pro, Thomas Schirmmacher, Chairman of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, explains the process in Ukraine.**

The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung reported in mid-September that the Orthodox Church was threatened with division. The editors Gerhard Gnauck and Friedrich Schmidt have titled the article "Towards Schism". According to the article, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, is currently paving the way for an independent Ukrainian church. The authors also regard the step as a success for those Ukrainian politicians and church leaders who advocate "the cutting of the cord of the country from Moscow" and thus a Ukrainian nation state.



The first discussion of the Bishop Nik Nedelchev with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; Bishop Thomas Schirmmacher is at right © BQ/Warnecke

**pro: Mr. Schirmmacher, in Ukraine the previously schismatic Orthodox Church is now to be recognized. Why is this also politically significant?**

Thomas Schirmmacher: Basically this can only be understood if one knows the orthodox understanding of "autocephaly". The word comes from Greek and means "self-governing". It means that a church chooses its own head, a patriarch or archbishop, and administers itself. There are currently 14 Orthodox churches that do this. The 14 Patriarchs and Archbishops have an old honour order, headed by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (now Istanbul, ed.). Autocephaly is declared by the Ecumenical Patriarch, but must be recognized by all other autocephalous Orthodox churches. In addition, there are almost a dozen so-called "autonomous" churches, which are subordinate to an autocephalous church but administer themselves.

**It seems there are deep trenches between the churches?**

These have existed for centuries between the Ecumenical Patriarch, who sits in Constantinople, and the Russian Patriarch, who has his seat in Moscow. And also between their churches and camps, which exist even without Ukraine. There are also conflicts over the special question of the nation state of Ukraine. If now the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, promotes the independence of the Ukrainian Church, the rejection of the Russian Patriarch, Kirill, who traditionally has a close relationship with the authorities in Russia, grows. Vladimir Putin might have no interest in a growing nation state of Ukraine, which would be underlined by a recognized Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Therefore the Russian patriarch is also critical of the recognition of this church. The emergence of a Ukrainian Orthodox Church therefore also has a far-reaching political dimension.

### Are the tensions new?

For centuries there have been tensions in the territory of the Russian Orthodox Church of the former Russian Empire when national churches want to become autonomous or autocephalous. The Ukraine is only the latest example, where beside a Russian Orthodox Church promoted by Moscow there is a Ukrainian Orthodox Church with its own patriarch in the country, which the Ukrainian state strongly promotes. Since the fall of Constantinople in 1453 there has been a profound tension, if not division, between – roughly speaking – the Greek Orthodox churches and the Slavic Orthodox churches, such as the Russian or Serbian ones. In the background it also stands that the Ecumenical Patriarch is politically very strongly limited by his seat in Turkey. On the other hand the Russian Orthodox Patriarch had back cover of the Tsars, the Soviets and today Putins and besides represents two thirds of the Orthodox faithful. The tensions run through all areas. Thus the Orthodox churches under the Ecumenical Patriarch were in the process of reaching an agreement with the Pope when the Russian Orthodox Church revoked all previous agreements and ended the process.

### What connects Protestants and Catholics with the Orthodox Church?

The Orthodox churches have the first seven councils in common with the Western churches. The last of these took place in 787 in Nikaia, today Iznik, near today's Istanbul. After that there was an increasing alienation, which culminated in 1054 in the mutual banishment of the head of the other church – the schism between East and West Church. On this occasion the heads of the Orthodox churches had for the last time taken a joint decision almost 1,000 years ago. In 1965, at the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI revoked the condemnation of the Ecumenical Patriarch. Since then the schism of 1054 is in principle regarded as finished, even if most Orthodox churches do not recognize the Catholic Church as "church" – the Protestant churches anyway not. Already in anticipation of this event the preparations for an Orthodox Council began in 1961. Over 50 years of intensive preparation threatened to be destroyed by the absence of four churches, although the patriarchs of all four churches had previously assured their appearance.



Thomas Schirmmacher welcomes Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in front of Geneva Cathedral for the WCC's 70th anniversary service. © BQ/Warnecke

### Can you say anything about Orthodox Christians in Germany?

In Germany we have over 1.2 million members of the Orthodox Church, excluding the so-called Old Oriental churches such as Copts or Syrians. Of these, about 460,000 belong to the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, 300,000 to the Romanian Orthodox Church, 250,000 to the Serbian Orthodox Church and 190,000 to the Russian Orthodox Church. With the Orthodox Bishops' Conference in Germany founded in 2010, to which ten bishops from seven churches belong, the unity – or at least the common ground – of the Orthodox churches in Germany is more advanced than on an international level. The chairman is the Bonn-based Metropolitan Augoustinos, the Greek Orthodox Exarch for Europe. In ecumenical cooperation the problems hardly have an effect, as in the international field in the World Council of Churches the Orthodox churches also in Germany work better together in ecumenical institutions than in direct contact.

**Thank you so much for the interview.**

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