Efforts towards a common Date for Easter – a hopeless situation?

Dagmar Heller

This year is the exceptional occasion for Christians to manifest their unity by celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the same day. But this will not happen again until 2025, if the churches continue to follow their traditional way of determining the date of Easter.

It seems like an irony that all churches agree to celebrate Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the March equinox[1], but nevertheless there are usually two different dates for this celebration. The reason for this situation is that since its introduction the Western churches mainly have been using the Gregorian calendar, while most of the Orthodox churches kept the Julian calendar for determining the date of the full moon[2].

This was felt as a problem especially in the 20th century.

In the religious sphere the question developed into a problem within the Orthodox Church, when in 1923 the Greek parliament introduced the Gregorian calendar, which led to a conflict between church and state[3]. A pan-Orthodox congress in May 1923 therefore decided to revise the Julian calendar by adjusting it to greater astronomical accuracy. But in result splits occurred in the Greek church, in the Romanian church and elsewhere. The overall situation today in the Orthodox world is that for the date of Easter all churches use the Julian calendar (with the exception of the Finnish Orthodox Church[4]), while for all the other feasts *some*[5] use the Gregorian calendar.

With the growing mobility of people and a growing interconnectedness of the different nations and countries through trade and business made possible by new means of transport and communication the need for a clearer regulation of the Easter date was felt also in the secular sphere. The irregularity and mobility of the date of Easter each year brought disadvantages especially for financial clearing. Therefore in 1923 the League of Nations proposed to fix Easter on the Sunday following the second Saturday in April, to be implemented on agreement with the churches. Thus the question became an issue for the beginning ecumenical movement, because it was referred to the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work[6]. The outcome of a subsequent inquiry was that most Protestant churches agreed on such a fixed Sunday for the date of Easter, the Ecumenical Patriarch also was open to this proposal (provided that all churches agree), but Rome gave a negative answer. The whole initiative of the (in meantime) UN failed definitively in 1955 with the refusal of the government of the USA to implement a new calendar.

In 1963 the situation among the churches changed in as far as the Roman Catholic Church in an Appendix to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy “Sacrosanctum Concilium” said, that they would agree with either a common mobile date or a fixed date, if all the churches could find a common solution. In another inquiry organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in response to this new position the majority of the Western churches preferred a fixed date, but for the Orthodox Churches it was important to stick to the rule of Nicea.

In 1977 the Roman Catholic Church initiated a concerted action with the WCC , which led to still another inquiry, that had the same result as the previous one. The Orthodox also stated clearly, that a decision on this question could only be taken on a pan-Orthodox level. So they discussed the issue in the course of the ongoing preparations for a pan-Orthodox Council. The second pan-Orthodox preconciliar conference proposed therefore in 1982 in Chambésy a more precise determination of the Easter date according to the rule of Nicea. But they expressed also the fear that a change of calendar would provoke new schisms. Therefore the time for implementing such a change was not felt appropriate.

Among the Oriental Orthodox churches there was more openness to change: In 1971 the Syrian Orthodox Church proposed to fix the date of Easter on the Sunday following the second Saturday in April, and in 1984 it declared its readiness to celebrate Easter on any Sunday of April, provided that all churches agree.

The question was then also brought back to the World Council of Churches. The most prominent initiative was a consultation in 1997 in Aleppo organised by the secretariat of the Commission on Faith & Order on the invitation of the Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim. The consultation proposed to keep the Nicene rule, but to use the exact astronomic data (i.e. neither the Gregorian nor Julian calendar and their respective Easter cycles) on the basis of the geographical meridian of Jerusalem. The proposal was sent to the churches for consideration. The result was that Western churches would agree, but Eastern Orthodox churches found it difficult to implement, because the exact astronomic data would result in a calendar very close to the Gregorian one. The change would therefore be so substantial, that believers would not agree.

At its 9th Assembly in 2006 in Porto Alegre (Brazil) the WCC reiterated that a common date of Easter would be part of the progress toward visible unity, but no new initiative was taken.

Only recently the question came up again, when in 2014 Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Orthodox Church asked Pope Francis to make a new effort for a unified date for Easter and also discussed the matter with the Ecumenical Patriarch. In May 2015 Tawadros mades one step further and proposed to fix Easter on the third Sunday of April. One month later Pope Francis signaled the desire to set a common date for Easter and reiterated that the Roman Catholic Church is open

to a fixed date. He discussed the matter with the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch, who also seemed ready for such a solution. But in reaction a spokesman of the Moscow Patriarchate made clear that the Russian Orthodox Church will not abandon the rule of Nicea and thus not accept a fixed date, but would rather invite Catholics and Protestants to adopt the Julian calendar. In January 2016 the Archbishop of Canterbury expressed that he sees the possibility to agree on a fixed date for Easter in “between five and ten years”[7].

If one analyses this discussion, the situation can be described very roughly as two parties: the Western churches and the Oriental Orthodox churches to go for a date of Easter to be fixed to a specific Sunday in April, the Eastern Orthodox Churches to keep the movable date according to the Nicene rule. This raises the question, whether it will ever be possible to find a common date. In order to make progress in these reflections the whole issue needs to be looked at in more detail. One important point for the Orthodox is a further regulation attributed to the decisions of the Council of Nicea, which says that Easter should not be celebrated together with the Jews. This rule has been interpreted in different ways, and hinders even more an openness to change[8]. But in fact the main problem for the Orthodox seems to be the fear of further splits within the Orthodox Church. This concern needs to be taken seriously.

In an overall conclusion it becomes clear that a shift of the date of Easter to a fixed date (on a Sunday in April) would be a radical change, because during at least 1500 years Easter has always been celebrated on a Sunday with a mobility according to the equinox and the full moon. Such a change would also break with the tradition of showing the historical link of Easter with the Jewish Passover with at the same time a clear distinction of the two feasts. A date which is fixed to a specific Sunday in April would be a pragmatic solution following the modern trend to organise life according to business driven needs. But the discussion also showed that this solution is unlikely to be accepted by all the churches. The only solution - in my opinion - that has a realistic chance to solve the problem, but which has never been considered on an international level, is that all the churches would join the Orthodox reckoning of the Easter date using the Julian calendar. This proposal is not new, it is a solution which is practised on a local level in Egypt and Jordan, where - following an initiative of the Middle East Council of Churches in 1994[9] -, the Western churches decided to follow the Orthodox majority. This solution allows to keep the Nicean rule which presently unites all the Christian churches, and thus to take into consideration the link between Easter and the cycle of nature as well as its symbolic meaning related to the dramatic break of the resurrection into the natural flow of nature.[10] The disadvantage would be though that the astronomic and therefore real equinox and full moon would not be considered, but at least symbolically it would be considered. Since Western churches would accept even to give up the Nicene rule, they could as well – for the sake of unity – give up the idea of following the astronomic accuracy.

1 According to the tradition this is understood as a decision of the Council of Nicea in 325, although there are no original documents from Nicea.

2More details in my article “The Date of Easter – A Church Dividing Issue?”, in: ER 48/1996, 392-400 or in the German, revised version of the same article: ”Das Osterdatum – kirchentrennend?”, in: ÖR 46/1997, 456-466..

3 While in other countries with an Orthodox majority, the believers were used to have two calendars – one for the secular sphere and one for the church life -, in Greece people were used to the fact that the public calendar was identical with the ecclesiastical one.

4 Which follows the Gregorian calendar

5 Mainly the Greek speaking and the Romanian churches.

6 One of the forerunners of the Wold Council of Churches

7 Cf. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/12102278/Easter-date-to-be-fixed-within-next-five-to-10-years.html.

8 The difficulty is an unclarity whether this idea has to be understood in relation to the date of Pesach at the time of Jesus or whether it has to be taken as related to the real existing date of Pesach which is determined today slightly different compared with Jesus’ time.

9Memorandum on a Unified Date for Easter, Vth General Assembly of MECC, 15-21 November 1994, Limassol, Cyprus.

10 Cf. “Towards a Common Date for Easter. World Council of Churches/Middle East Council of Churches Consultation, Aleppo, Syria 1997, par 12 (iii); https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/towards-a-common-date-for-easter/index?searchterm=Date+for+Easter.