

Interview with Hans-August Lücker: the reservations of the Greek Orthodox Church concerning Greece's accession to the European Communities (Bonn, 15 May 2006)

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[Hans-August Lücker] Anyway, Karamanlis came back and we'd got to the point where he wanted Greece to join. And then the Orthodox Church came out openly against accession, with public statements against the Government — not against Karamanlis personally, but he was the Head of Government and he suffered as a result. Europe, the Church claimed, was a heathen, a neo-heathen place, and Greece's accession would mean the end not only of the Greek Orthodox faith but of Greek culture too. For those reasons Greece could not join.

Then Karamanlis said 'Look, you're the Chairman of a Christian grouping, you know what their thinking is ...' And I said 'yes'. He then said 'Can you help me overcome this opposition from the Church?' I said 'Well, this is the Orthodox Church — they aren't so keen to talk to us, to Catholics, but I will try.' And I was on very good terms with Metropolitan Augustine here in Germany. He was responsible for looking after Greeks living and working in Germany. He was responsible for their pastoral care, Metropolitan Augustine of Crete. A fine man, and I got on well with him. So I went to Augustine and said 'Look, there are a few problems, can you help me?' He replied 'Of course I'll help you, we can do that!' And then with the help of some of his friends he organised a conference in Athens. Karamanlis's representative was there, Rallis, he was there in person, the Prime Minister, two or three ministers and state secretaries, Varvitsiotis was there ... And all of them backed Karamanlis, all of them wanted to persuade the Church to abandon its opposition to accession.

So off I go with a five-man delegation, and I had the head of the Institute of Eastern Churches — it's in Regensburg — with me. I had persuaded him to come, because he spoke Greek as well as German, and that was very important to me because my Greek wasn't all that great any more.

So off we go to Athens. And we arrive at the meeting. Well, there we find the Chief Secretary to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, and he wants a private chat with Mr Lücker before the meeting. It lasted nearly two hours, from one to half-past two or three o'clock. And he had come because the Ecumenical Patriarch had insisted that it was he and not the Patriarch of Athens who had the final say on this. It was a bit like the difference between the pope and an archbishop. And when we talked this Patriarch naturally gave me a good grilling, but I had nothing to hide and I gave him honest answers. And at the end he said to me 'Mr Lücker, you have convinced me. I think we should say yes.'

Then the conference got under way, in an underground monastery dating back to Turkish times. The Abbot was present: someone right out of an oil painting — I'd gladly see him hanging on the wall there — and a man of the world. Right from the start, he was on my side against his own Patriarch. Anyway, he talked for three hours, from three o'clock to six or half-past six. To some extent I was being interrogated, because they wanted information from me, and it was a good thing that I knew my stuff on matters of theology and faith and was able to give them chapter and verse. Anyway, the verdict in the end was good: 'We'll have another think about it; we can see there are good reasons in favour of going into Europe. Can we meet again in two or three weeks' time to reach a final decision?' 'Of course, I'll come back three weeks from now.'

Then came the invitation, not to Athens this time but to the Greek Orthodox Church's most holy place on the island of Patmos. Patmos is Greece's holy island, and the Orthodox equivalent of the Vatican is based there. The supreme spiritual decision-making power resides in Patmos, opposite the island of Delos. You can almost shake hands across the water. Delos was the island of Apollo, and Patmos the island of Christianity. You can swim from one to the other. And Patmos is a very tranquil and very beautiful island, not yet overrun by tourism.

Off to Patmos, then. What a business it was getting there! By plane to Athens first, from Athens to Samos by boat and then on foot and by donkey up into the mountains, because our destination was high up. And then we haggled: from eleven o'clock to four in the afternoon. But it was friendly, and there was no doubt about it. The outcome was 'All right, we withdraw our opposition.'

We celebrated. And as I was taking my leave, the Supreme Patriarch said to me ‘Mr Lücker, I have a favour to ask of you if I may. I have heard you are on pretty good terms with Karamanlis.’ And I replied ‘Well, yes, but he is the Head of Government and I’m just a Member of Parliament.’ ‘Yes, yes’, he said, ‘but you get on well.’ He added ‘I’ve a big favour to ask: until a few years ago we were allowed to use the title “Holy Island of Patmos”, but the Socialist Government took that away from us. Could you ask Karamanlis to give us the title back?’ I told him ‘It will be done, you can be sure of it.’ He looked at me and said ‘But you haven’t asked him yet.’ And I said ‘He does as I ask, and I will ask him, and then it will be done.’ Two weeks later he received a big official document from Karamanlis. They were once again the ‘Holy Island of Patmos’ and remain so today. That marked the end of the Church’s opposition, clearing the way for Greece to become a Member State in 1981. A happy outcome.