

The future of ecumenism

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Thank you for the chance to reflect seriously about the future for the first time in my new post. We are at a particularly interesting time in the ecumenical journey, and the future is ours to shape. A word first about Churches Together in England. It is what it says on the tin, 'England's Churches Together'. We are the very small agency which exists to encourage and support the churches of England who have committed themselves as pilgrims together on their journey into Christ. Our business is unity, but that unity isn't something that we create or engineer. It is rather a reality to which we bear witness, because unity is always God's gift and the work of the Spirit. That's the end of the commercial for CTE because what matters isn't us, but the reality that happens when England's churches do things together.

So, given that definition, the future of ecumenism is in the hands of England's churches. For the first part of this paper then, I want to think about the environment in which the English churches are working, and consider some of the forces that affect both our mission, and our ecumenical perceptions, and then, in the second half I want ask some questions and pose some challenges about possible ecumenical futures.

Students of management suggest that every organisation exists in three 'environments', the immediate (which it can control), the near (which it can influence) and the far (over which it has no influence). The irony, they argue, is that most managers spend 90% of their time managing the immediate environment, when the most powerful influence on the organisation is the far environment, on which managers spent less than 10% of their time.

That offers a useful framework to consider the work of the churches and Christian agencies. Let's begin, then, where most people don't, with the far environment, and I want to spend a while here, at the expense of the near and immediate. A business would locate those intangibles that create economic cycles of boom and bust, or with unanticipated events like 9/11 which alter unexpectedly and irreversibly the context in which they operate. Happy indeed would have been the banker who predicted and avoided the sub prime crisis. For Christian churches that far environment is also populated by what St Paul called 'the principalities and powers', those forces which determine culture - the way people think and behave, what they believe and what they value.

(a) The far environment

(i) Political and economic forces

Christians are affected by politics and economics, just like everyone else. We are on the verge of a political sea-change, both in America where Barack Obama looks set to win the Presidential race, and domestically where it looks increasingly likely that eleven years of Labour rule are drawing to a close. Economically, ten glorious years of growth have been exchanged for the so-called 'credit crunch'. The far environment is shifting, and the knock on effect on the third sector is already beginning to be felt. There is, for example, less funding money around.

(ii) The intellectual climate

Only someone who was fortunate enough to be completely cocooned from the media could have missed the hype that surrounded the publication of Richard Dawkins' The God delusion and Christopher Hitchens' God is not great. In the last of the Westminster Cathedral lectures given last month, Cardinal Cormac mused,

'As always, the interesting question about atheism is 'what is the theism that is being denied?' Have you ever met anyone who believes what Richard Dawkins doesn't believe in? I usually find that the God that is being rejected by such people is a God I don't believe in either. I simply don't recognise my faith in what is presented by these critics as Christian faith.'¹

The reasons for that are complex, but they have something at least to do with the ways in which Christianity was caught up in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment's legacy is a mixed one. Whilst we can only rejoice in the development of medical science, the centrality of human rights and the development of liberal democracy, we can only weep at the mass destruction of Auschwitz and the methods and reasons for obliterating Hiroshima. For good or ill, those potent yet shadowy realities shape what our society thinks it is reasonable to believe.

Unfortunately although inevitably, Christian theology got caught up in that enthroning of reason and rationality, treating God as a rationally provable hypothesis somehow divorced from both the historical Jesus and any sense of mystery. A God that can be proved is a God that can be disproved, for as Augustine said, 'If you understand,' said Augustine, 'its not God.'

Small wonder then that we don't recognise the God of the new atheists, because he is the God of a mistaken theology, not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Put it another way though, that God of a mistaken theology is the God that our society doesn't believe in,

¹ For the text of the Cardinal's lecture, see <http://www.rcdow.org.uk/lectures>

and those forces shape our far environment. So, part of our task has to be missionary and apologetic – in the technical theological sense of helping our world understand what we are talking about.

More recently in intellectual history, that kind of secularism has been overlaid by a polite, politically correct relativism, which says (in essence) 'if that's what you think is true and it works for you, then it must be true', and that has licensed pick n'mix religion – a few chapters of Zen, mixed with some aromatherapy and a dash of Tarot cards pushes all my buttons, so it must be true because its cool for me. The idea that the great faiths of the world – Christianity, Judaism, Islam – have something to do with truth claims is deeply embarrassing. Those kind of grand narratives are profoundly suspect, not part of the intellectual rules our society prefers to deal in. Post-modernists prefer to laud the local and rejoice in variety. And so ecumenism gets dismissed as an old fashioned modernist grand narrative. Our Lord might well have prayed that they may all be one, but we know he didn't mean it because if they want to believe that Peter is the fourth person of the trinity in Little Piddlecombe, that's cool because it obviously works for them.

(iii) Globalisation

There is, of course, nothing new under the sun. Over a thousand years ago the church created a globalised world, uniting disparate cultures within a common narrative and structure, with Latin as a common medium of communication.

But modern globalisation is a different beast, a child of capitalism and information technology. An example – American doctors can dictate their notes about patients into a mobile phone connected to a computer with a voice card in it. Those files are then transmitted to India overnight, transcribed, and returned to the American hospital's IT system overnight. India in the 90s became the world's back office, and its economy was revolutionised. Economic theorists, theologians and moralists will vary in their assessment of globalisation's benefit or harm, and our churches will also be divided in their assessment of it. What cannot be denied are its effects. Some aspects of culture remain firmly resistant to the globalisers – regional food is one obvious example. Other parts (often connected with youth culture and fast food) have been homogenised. You can eat a McDonalds in Beijing, Moscow and Cape Town; and MTV will assault your ears with the same blend of music (if you are young enough) wherever in the world a satellite will pick it up. Those kind of universal grand narratives are, I note, quite acceptable. Odd, that.

In a globalised world, news is instant, economic interdependence determines the flow and pattern of employment, and migration flows of refugees and economic migrants is having profound effects on the politics of national identity. The church is caught up in these forces. The world church is no longer 'over there' but here, and that is causing a profound change to

church life.

(iv) *The survival of religion*

In 1972, when I was finishing school, I remember some of my friends being gently amused at my interest in theology and religious studies. Most of them were scientists, and they assured me, with the knowing innocence of 18 year olds everywhere, that within twenty years religion would be an antiquarian backwater. How wrong they were. How wrong we all were. We simply did not see how the chemistry of resurgent Islam and globalisation would alter the world's political and religious climate. Religion is big news. There is none bigger. The question of the relationship between the three religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, underlies the most critical questions in world politics – Palestine and the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan – and some of the most important in domestic politics, like multi-culturalism.

(v) *Fundamentalism*

Fundamentalism is in essence a post-Enlightenment retreat from uncertainty into certitude. Clearly the roots of fundamentalism are profoundly different in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Despite the differences though, some scholars argue that they are united by a worldview which anchors life in an authoritative sacred text, and in a community that legitimises their outrage at the scope and speed of secularisation.

We can't control any of that, but we can be aware of it, and develop strategies which take account of those powerful forces that are shaping our society as well as our churches.

b) The near environment

This is where a business would seek to influence policy makers, and construct alliances and partnerships. This is where its pool of potential customers is to be found. The churches are pretty shrewd operators in the near environment, whether it be through lobbying politicians over causes like poverty eradication, or constructing partnerships in community regeneration and social care and cohesion. Given the quite singular and remarkable work that you do in this area, I suspect that your skills at influencing the near environment are pretty good, so I'm not going to dwell on it.

But, I also suspect that you are as challenged and perplexed as the rest of us as you encounter what a business would call its potential customers. Our 'near environment' in terms of potential customers is complex. The flurry of press activity and correspondence surrounding the publication of the latest edition of Religious Trends last month epitomised the

problem. Traditional churchgoing was, once again, down, and the report projected those figures forward to 2050. The Times gleefully picked it up – by 2050 it proclaimed there would be almost three times as many Moslems worshipping on Fridays as Christians on Sundays, a number of denominations would have ceased to be financially viable, and the combined membership (if one can use such a term) of the Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches would have dropped to below 200,000. Almost immediately Benita Hewitt of Christian Research, whose report it was, and Linda Barley of the Church of England's statistics office pointed out that firstly, that like was not being compared to like. Moslem statistics are based on an estimate of annual mosque attendance, whereas the Christian figures were drawn from a headcount on one particular Sunday. Secondly, more significantly, counting Sunday attendance misses the increasing numbers who attend less frequently than once a month, those who choose to attend mid-week, and those who belong to less traditional kinds of church, like Café churches and on line churches.

What is undeniable is that patterns of Christian commitment are changing. A decade or so ago inner city church seemed to be imploding, but now they are vibrant, transformed by migrants who have either transformed traditional historic churches or created their own. There are now more non-white churchgoers in inner city London than white. It has been estimated that 48% of black adults attend church. In the suburbs some congregations struggle and decline; others are vibrant and growing. Similarly, Polish and Portuguese immigration has transformed the decline of Catholicism.

Tear Fund published a survey last year which drew attention to three telling pieces of evidence.² The first was that 15% of the population attend church regularly, if regularly means monthly. The second was that some 6 million people would go to church if they were invited. The third was that although only 15% of the population are 'regular' church attenders, 66% of the population claim that they pray. It is not that people have given up believing in God, although some of them have a fairly scrambled idea of who God might be.

Whether it be interest in the interminable debates about human sexuality or women bishops, the continuing growth of cathedral worship or the expectation that the church will be there in moments of national trauma, the evidence is clear that Christianity is still an important part of the public landscape in Britain. That is good news which opens up scope for engagement and mission.

Now, if my environmental analysis is correct, the implications for our ecumenical future are profound.

² Churchgoing in the UK (Tearfund 2007)

a) unity in the contemporary intellectual climate

Unity is not the flavour of the month, diversity is. Our culture, post-modern, or post-post modern, is sceptical of truth, suspicious of over-arching explanations and thoroughly individualised. It is, of course, vital to the planet's wellbeing that we treasure physical, spiritual and intellectual diversity and respect each other's cultures. Life without a decent chicken biriyani or prawn chow mein would be an impoverished life. Diversity is great.

Ecumenism isn't and shouldn't be anti-diversity, but it does point to a profound Christian belief, and that is that the world's diversity is held in the unity of the Godhead. Our theology tells us that all things come from God, and that all things will return to God, and therefore the world's diversity is the gift of our generous, generous God. We belong to a most fortunate generation. We have seen our planet from space. We know how unique, precarious and fragile it is. And thanks to such pioneering ecologists as James Lovelock, we also know how inter-related it is, an entire organism. Or as chaos theory suggests, the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas. Unity should not be dismissed too lightly, either theologically or scientifically.

Theological unity should not be confused with psychological or cultural uniformity, for the keystone to that unity, Christians believe, Christ, in whom all will eventually be gathered together, 'things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph 1.10). When the ancients talked about 'heaven and earth' they were thinking not so much of physical places as the union of what we would call the physical and the intellectual or spiritual. We need to attend to Paul's language. He isn't talking about Jesus imposing his will on creation, but rather of a 'gathering up' of all things into Christ, which I take to be a holding together of diversity in unity, a reconciling of all things, so that Marxist and monetarist, Bach and Shoenberg, Constable and Hearst, will held in a state of blessing which encompasses the whole human ecology, just as, according to Isaiah, wolf and lamb, leopard and kid will lie down together and the knowledge of the Lord cover the earth as the waters the sea.

And that ministry, of proclaiming that kingdom within, around and beyond them, he gives to his followers, for whom he prayed that they might be one 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe..' (John 17.21). A unity that is rooted in a relationship between human being and the holy and eternal trinity, that spans eternity and time, that reaches beyond death and all the limitations of being human. In that sense, the unity which we seek to articulate and make real as pilgrims together both our goal and the gift that sustains us as journey. And once again, it is not about uniformity, but rather about the very diversity-in-unity which characterises the life of the trinity.

b) ecumenism in a globalised world

The 30 member churches of CTE represent one of the most diverse ecumenical gatherings anywhere in the world. Coptic Orthodox sits alongside black Pentecostal, Congregationalist next to Catholic, Lutheran next to Quaker. That diversity is, of course, a product of patterns of migration and the impact of globalisation over the past fifty years.

The effects are profound. We've already noted the ways in which some immigrant communities and then second and third generation Britons have helped transform the religious landscape of our cities. They have done the same to our churches. John Sentamu is simply the most obvious and honoured example of that process.

A story. A small URC in the north. It was Racial Justice Sunday, and the minister was doing the best she could with the theme. It was difficult because the entire membership was white and as English as you can get. But on this Sunday a Nigerian lady had turned up and was sitting in the back row. This church had been well trained. It knew about welcoming people, and the stewards went out of their way to be friendly and helpful. The minister struggled through the theme, and then came the time for prayers of intercession. 'Let us pray', said the minister, and this lady stood up and prayed, 'Thank you Lord, she prayed, thank you for bringing me to this church and these people...' and more. It wasn't quite the culture they were used to, but as I say they were well-trained, so after the service had ended, they continued to be friendly and welcoming. It turned out that this lady was a nurse in the local hospital. 'I'll be back next Sunday' she said. And she was, with Philippino, Indian, and Malawian colleagues. 'Because this is a church that welcomed me, that made me feel at home.' And suddenly that little church found itself changed in a way it couldn't have predicted or dreamt of, or maybe even wanted. Not monocultural, but multicultural, virtually overnight. The world church on our doorstep.

Those patterns have also changed the ecumenical space and the ecumenical agenda. Classic British ecumenism could have been characterised as 'Protestant talking to Protestant about Protestantism' about an agenda which was essentially about healing the divisions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It remains an important agenda, but it is no longer the only agenda. The presence of Orthodox and Catholic communities within the ecumenical movement reminds us of earlier and deeper divisions, and of the truly global nature of the church, which some of us (not the Army, I note with awe your global impact) have little experience of because we are territorial churches.

The black-led churches, one of the fastest growing parts of the Christian economy, points us to another set of intersecting realities. The first is the reality of racism, and the essential Christian responsibility to combat it and discover what black and white partnership means. The second is that some, like the Church of God of Prophecy, are part of global Pentecostal

churches. The WCC's Global Christian Forum, and the Vatican dialogue with Pentecostals remind us of the vibrant significance of that part of the Christian family.

c) ecumenism in a post-denominational world

Let me say first, I don't like that phrase, but I can't think of a better one to describe the reality. I don't think denominations are about to disappear – if church history teaches us anything, it is that institutions are peculiarly resilient and difficult to kill off.

But, for many people they are increasingly irrelevant. Let me illustrate. I preached at the patronal festival of a united church a few weeks back. A large, exiting congregation – just under 300 – with 26 nationalities represented within it – the only continent not represented was the Antarctic. And such spiritual journeys. People told me that they were 'Catholics', 'Anglicans', 'Pentecostals', 'Baptists – and so the list went on – which was interesting because the title on the noticeboard was 'Methodist-URC'. However we long to police boundaries in our post-modern world, people will gather where they will. At the door I spoke with the church's representative on the local Churches Together group. All the town centre churches were joined in a covenant dating back over 20 years, and that congregation didn't quite know what to do next. And in a sense I'm not surprised, because the whole oikoumene, in the sense of the whole inhabited earth, seemed to be represented in that congregation, and some were anticipating that day when Pentecostal, Protestant and Catholic will be gathered as one in the Lord's presence.

Now, we will differ quite legitimately in our assessment of whether they were right or wrong, whether we think they were responding to the guidance of the Spirit, or defying the Spirit by defying the authority of the church. What we cannot avoid is the reality. It is part of the glorious messiness of being church to-day, and I predict that there will be more of it in the ecumenical future, because the reality of the local and the reality of the universal and theological work in different ways. They can collide sometimes, as they did when an ordinand from an ecumenical parish demanded to know why she could not be ecumenically ordained.

It is time to draw the threads together. We've explored some of the forces that are operating on the churches and the ecumenical movement, and I've tried to peer into my crystal ball.

The ecumenical space is being shared by many more partners, with differing agendas. That is very exciting, and also very demanding. What matters is what we do with the space. Now, I think you might see already that the possibility of all thirty partners sitting around a table deciding how they might become one church in England is an unlikely scenario. That doesn't mean that unity talks will not be part of the scene – they are indeed going on between the Independent Methodists and the Baptist Union of Great Britain. It doesn't mean that individual

partners won't be in dialogue with each other – at present the Methodists and the Anglicans are working through what a covenant relationship means, and the Catholic Church is in theological dialogue with the United Reformed Church.

What I hope it will mean is that lots of different things will happen in the ecumenical space. One form of ecumenism which was rightly widely caricatured in earlier days was ecumenism as merger management. I don't want to go back there, but I do want to point out that all kinds of relationships can and do exist between organisations – formal alliances, networks, shared production, the using of the same supply chains and so on. I very much hope that in these difficult days for the churches, we might actually discover how we can do things for each other, and maximise the use of our resources. The amount of unnecessary duplication which goes on is frightening. Can we learn how to trust each other enough to allow that to happen?

I hope that together we might find ways of addressing the needs of our nation, and ways in which we can speak together that will honour the profoundly different ways in which we are church. And that means that the Protestant conciliar paradigm which lurks in all our minds when we think ecumenical structures needs to be exorcised, and replaced by a new reality which will only grow as we find ways to spend time in encounter, celebration, friendship and trust.