



## **The Society for Ecumenical Studies**

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*A Body in Association with Churches Together in  
England*

[www.ecumenicalstudies.org.uk](http://www.ecumenicalstudies.org.uk)

### **Newsletter August 2010**

#### ***Christian Unity – Will it ever Happen?***

St Thomas More, Room, St Mary's Catholic Church, Draycott  
Terrace,

Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> September 2009, 6-15 pm

- **The Revd David Gamble** President of the Methodist Conference, 2009-10

Preceded by the Annual General Meeting at 5-30 pm.

Followed by refreshments. For catering, please notify attendance to  
Fr Mark Woodruff, 26 Daysbrook Road, LONDON SW2 3TD,  
[ecumenicalstudies@btinternet.com](mailto:ecumenicalstudies@btinternet.com) or 07710 024505

We are most grateful to David Gamble, with all his experience as a Christian leader for us all, and a dedicated and indeed determined ecumenist, being willing to give us his thoughts on where we tread in the future of our ecumenical pathway, not merely together but towards unity. Among titles for the talk he considered:

- Forgotten dreams or misplaced hopes? (From someone who expected to be a minister in a united Church)
- 40 years on and still a Methodist minister
- Where have all the ecumanias gone?
- Christian unity - passing fancy, minority interest, or gospel imperative?

Writing as a Roman Catholic, I know how the cohesive unity of the Church is central to our identity and integrity, and our conception of humanity, the reign of God and the gathering of all the People of God

in the one Body of Christ. The inescapable consequence is our commitment to the unity of Christians, our undivided communion. There is a kind of restlessness in the Catholic Church that, in expressing its belief and confidence in its fullness as the Church (which is none other than its belief and confidence in God and his faithfulness to his People), we are not true to ourselves and the nature of our Church as long as there are Christians with whom we are not in communion and visible unity, and who are not in communion with us. This has been an insistent theme in Catholicism for two centuries, from Johann Adam Möhler, through Cardinal Wiseman, Fr Ignatius Spencer, Leo XIII, Fr Paul Wattson SA, Dom Lambert Beauduin, Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, Cardinal Mercier, Benedict XV, Blessed Maria Sagheddu, Fr Paul Couturier, Cardinals Yves Congar OP and Henri de Lubac SJ, Blessed Pope John XXIII, Cardinal Willebrands and into recent days Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Kasper.

But there is always change and controversy that adapts our bearings. There is evidently a new global triangulation for the Catholic Church's ecumenism – an urgent engagement with the phenomenon of Pentecostalism and a perhaps unexpected affinity with its emergent theological tradition; and the prime objective to recover unity with the Orthodox Church. The new Roman dicastery, the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelisation is a direct response to the Orthodox Church's appeal to partnership with the Catholics, voiced by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, in the “struggle for the soul of Europe”. It is aimed at formerly Christian societies in the states of Europe that have lost their frame of reference in the Christian religion and laid themselves open to secular humanism, an aggressively proselytical religious position that is intent on removing the rumour of God from everyone's hearing. As G.K. Chesterton is believed to have said of this danger, “The trouble when people stop believing in God is not that they believe nothing – they believe anything”.

Locally, too, Catholic-Anglican relations have been tested with the announcement of the intention to establish exceptional structures

within the Catholic Church to receive Anglicans who wish to join it in corporate reunion. Much criticised in some quarters for being “not Catholic”, and in others for being “not ecumenical”, it has also been seen as an imaginative piece of ecclesiology, explicitly opposed to exclusivity and oriented to inclusion and visible communion. I trust that in the long term this is about the way in which the Catholic Church, true to internal dynamic towards unity, as well as to its tradition, provides the means and structures and ecclesiologies that reflect other Christian traditions’ life and experience as we discern where visibly unity may be lying. Bishop Malcolm McMahon of Nottingham recently addressed a mixed audience of Anglican clergy and lay people in Leicester concerned to know about the implications of *Anglicanorum Coetibus* and the imminent Ordinariate. A questioner asked if the Catholic Church now wanted anything else from the Anglican Church. Bishop Malcolm immediately shot back, “Yes – Christian Unity”. My own view is that the Ordinariates will happen; they must therefore be made to happen well and all must act decently. They must serve and be seen to serve in the context of mission and the New Evangelisation. Above all that means they must have a profound ecumenical orientation and you might therefore even say they must happen “catholicly”.

This is a very long way round of saying that the Catholic commitment to unity is integral to it and, as one finds time and again, it is instinctive to the faith of the People of God. The question is “how on earth” as it is in heaven? I for one am very keen to hear what David has to say as his question “Christian Unity – will it ever happen?” is not just a question about ecumenism, but about who and what we are as churches, and indeed the very nature and purpose of the Church we say we believe in because it is the Church that has been given to us by God himself.

### **The Churches’ Debt to Darwin: Acknowledging God’s Entire Creation**

This was the subject of a remarkable day conference in Cambridge in November, addressed by **Professor Simon Conway Morris**, Professor of Evolutionary Palaeobiology, University of Cambridge,

and **Dr Denis Alexander**, Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, St Edmund's College, Cambridge. This marked the end of the Year of Darwin, during which much error was paraded as truth concerning his religious views and the implications for religion (particularly Christianity) of his science. Yet so many leading scientists are thinking and devout Christians. So we are extremely grateful to Fr Maximus Lavriotes for organising this illuminating day. Unfortunately we have not been able to secure Professor Conway Morris' paper, but Dr Alexander's gives a flavour of this generous and searching discussion. It is included in this Newsletter.

### **The Society's Future**

I much regret to tell you that the three officers of the Society have decided to step down at this meeting: Dr Martin Conway as chairman since 2003, Mrs Hilary Martin as Treasurer for the last five years and me as Secretary since 2003.

You may recall that the great debate that was held in St Alban's Abbey in 2003, at which Cardinal Kasper and Archbishop Rowan Williams not only spoke they met for the first time, was intended to be a relaunch of the Society, to popularise and support ecumenical enquiry and practice, as well as to give scholars and official representative of the Churches' ecumenical efforts some network or hinterland of those who were experiencing the "ecumenism of life" or who shared a concern to identify and study those areas where unity is needed and where unity can resolve. We have had some moments for which we can be particularly grateful – the St Albans event itself; the reassertion of the centrality of spiritual ecumenism through work on the Paul Couturier anniversary and the centenary of the Week of Prayer; our assistance with the imaginative launch of the "receptive ecumenism" idea and movement led by our friend and honorary fellow committee member at Durham University; and a string of engaging events and addresses.

These have constantly been thwarted by a lack of financial resources and volunteer time. It is also clear that in origin the Society was formed to provide a ready forum for academic ecumenists,

practitioners, and Church officials to meet with each other and discuss matters of concern and potential. An instance was the London Ecclesiology Forum in the early and mid 1990s. But this has not seemed useful either to scholars or Church leaders for some time; other perhaps more fluid networks have emerged and of course the official Church has a Theology and Unity Group at Churches Together in England which serves our original purpose. Since becoming Secretary I have tried to ensure we could make ourselves useful but, as I do not hold an academic appointment in this field and we do not have a centre on which to consolidate our work, this has been a challenge both for serving our original purposes and our more recent efforts to popularise ecumenical thinking and dialogue. Besides, people do not join things in the way they used to and there are floods of conferences and meetings for already busy people to choose from. Arguably the “ecumenical task” is aided by there being a rich ecology of movements, networks, forums and, as long as they are all in conversation, even the weaker ones are part of the strength of the whole.

When, however, I learned that as of 2009 we have no more than 41 paid members, I felt that there was not much more the Society can do on so unsustainable a basis. The Committee has discussed this – we feel that there remains an urgent need for ecumenical study, but we are also realistic about the Society.

The Annual General Meeting will give us the option to decide on whether we fold with gratitude for a considerable body of achievement, or whether we can discern a different route ahead. Martin and I have been in conversation with the Revd Dr Elizabeth Welsh, former Moderator of the United Reformed Church – also a key note speaker at the St Albans event – and she has met the Committee as we aired our thoughts. She will be with us for our AGM and help us in thinking through our decision about the Society. We are most grateful to her help on which our hearts and our heads are divided.

Regrettably I cannot give priority to the Society and running its programmes in view of such a small membership and with so few economic and practical resources to hand. I have already had to take leave in the first half of this year in order to work on a major conference to launch the new Centre for Eastern Christianity at Heythrop College, marking the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Oriente Lumen* (readers of One in Christ will have seen a report – we also include David Carter’s report to the ESBVM with this Newsletter for your interest). And I have a rising workload in other areas. So I will need to step down. If however the Society decides to wind down, I would be willing to carry on to effect the administration of that process. If the members can find a way towards a renaissance, naturally I would want to help and be involved, but in a capacity other than as Secretary.

I would like to record my personal appreciation to Martin for his leading the Society and to Hilary, not only for her excellent work on the finances but also for her strong support and commitment. It has also been a joy to work with members of the committee past and present – David Carter, Douglas Knight, Paul Avis, Maximus Lavriotes, John Bradley, Alan Rainer, Donald Norwood.

The papers needed for the AGM are included in this Newsletter.

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