

The ecumenical landscape

A Presentation made by Revd Dr David Cornick, General Secretary, to the Enabling Group of Churches Together in England 18th September 2010, during the visit of Pope Benedict 16th to Britain.

We meet over the weekend of a significant event in which we have all been involved. I hope that last night we were able to reflect informally together on the significance of what we experienced.

I hope that we of all people are aware of the wider ecumenical context in which this visit is happening. It looks back to 1982 when Pope John-Paul II paid a pastoral visit to Britain, and that remarkable moment when he and Archbishop Runcie knelt in prayer, and that in its turn reflected that historic moment in 1966 when Pope Paul VI took off the Episcopal ring which had been given to him by the people of Milan and gave it to Michael Ramsay who wore it until the day he died. It is now in Lambeth Palace and is worn by Archbishops of Canterbury when they visit the Vatican. And behind all of that lies the patient work of countless ecumenists working in the background on the relationship between the two communions. There is a long history behind this weekend stretching back through Vatican II to the 1920s and further.

And that is important, because the neuralgic relationship between England and Rome has been a defining factor in English nationhood and English spirituality since Henry VIII engineered the break with Rome in 1532. So neuralgic has that been that it has taken the best part of half a millennium for one of his successors as Defender of the Faith to welcome a Pope officially, albeit in Presbyterian Edinburgh. This is a significant national moment.

Pope Benedict is here to beatify Cardinal Newman. Despite the attempts of some distinguished theologians to claim that Newman was an ecumenist, he was not. When he was an Anglican he wrote some singularly unecumenical words about dissenters, and when he was Catholic he wrote disparagingly of the established church. You don't have to be an ecumenist to be on the road to sainthood, but you do have to be a passionate seeker of the love of Christ, and Newman was certainly that, as well as a spiritual writer of some of the sublimest prayers and prose ever written in English. Newman became a Catholic because he was convinced that it was the true church. So his prayer for unity was:

‘...break down the walls of separation which divide one party and denomination of Christians from another. Teach all men that the see of St. Peter, the Holy Church of Rome, is the foundation, centre, and instrument of unity. Open their hearts to the long-forgotten truth that our Holy Father, the Pope, is your Vicar and Representative; so that as there is but one holy company in heaven above, so likewise there may be one communion, confessing and glorifying your holy name here below.’

We no longer express our longings for unity in that kind of way, but let Newman’s honesty remind us that one of the realities that underlies our ecumenical pilgrimage is that we start from different places. Those of us who are Protestants are formed by an ecumenical heritage which is about meeting together in council. It is commonly, if wrongly, dated from the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, the centenary of which we are celebrating this year. As the Protestant churches gathered in council did their theology, they perceived the unity of the church to have been given once for all in Christ, and concluded that it had been masked by the divisions of history, so the ecumenical task was to make that given unity visible. (New Delhi 1961).

The Catholic Church joined the ecumenical pilgrimage with enthusiasm over a decade after that definition of unity was given by the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC. It has a different understanding of ecumenism. It seeks to restore the unity of the church which it understands to have been characteristic of the life of the church of the early centuries. There is a tension in the ecumenical quest between those who seek to make unity visible and those who seek to restore it. The first is a model, as New Delhi explained it, of the death and resurrection of certain forms of church life into something more Christ like. That was the kind of theology that underlay, for example, the formation of the URC. It is a profoundly Protestant view, and it was not shared by the Orthodox at the New Delhi Assembly. For them it was not a matter of adjustment, but of restoring a unity which had been broken. The Orthodox self understanding was given voice in their response to the New Delhi document - ‘The Orthodox Church is not a confession, one of many, one among the many. For the Orthodox, the Orthodox Church is just the Church.’ Vatican II, its reception, and the documents promulgated since then give voice to a similar theology. The church ‘subsists in’ the catholic church.

Now that we have reached a point in our national history when the Pope can pay a state visit, we need to be equally clear-headed about the future of our ecumenical relations. Pope Benedict is visiting a very different England to the one in which Cardinal Newman ministered. In 1890 the Free Churches were a power in the land, numerically almost equally

poised with the Church of England, Catholicism was still an exotic minority, peopled by recusant English gentry and the Irish poor, Pentecostalism had not been invented, and the country was emphatically Christian although even then there were more people who did not attend church on Sunday than those who did.

Now no more than about 15% of the population attend church regularly, if regularly is described as 'monthly' and there are probably more Catholics than Anglicans attending on any given Sunday (depending on which survey you consult). The Free Church are statistically insignificant, continuing a gentle decline which has been going on for about a century. The most striking change from Newman's day is, of course, that the world church is now on Shepherd's Bush High St. As our own membership bears powerful witness, the nations have come with their churches, and are flourishing. But, and its an important but, the growth of those churches is largely within their own communities. And the mission to England demands that together we try and de-code this convoluted, complex society of ours which as the Bishop of London has said '...is secular, religious and Christian all at the same time.' And we need to do that because as TEAR Fund's research shows, 34% of the nation is unchurched, and that percentage is set to grow as the number of those with some memory of church (31%) declines as it ages and dies. A veritable chorus of voices reminds us that we are on the cusp of transformation from Christendom to post-Christendom, from maintenance to mission.

I don't want to disparage those voices because I am learning so much from them about our society and the nature of mission. I do though, want us to pause and reflect and point to two tensions which are pulling at the contours of the ecumenical space at the moment.

Pope Benedict's visit underlines the importance of the Roman Catholic Church, not just in church attendance, but in its widest cultural and intellectual presence, as one of the shaping forces of English society. Cardinal Newman would have been delighted, and astonished in equal measure. I believe that is not reflected in the ways in which we do ecumenism because the history of English ecumenism is still largely determined by Protestant models which (just) predate Vatican II and certainly pre-date Swanwick 1987. By historical accident, the dominant models of local ecumenical co-operation are pan Protestant – single-congregation LEPs, joint churches of varying kinds with principally Protestant partners; and we regularly repeat mantras like 'Doctrine divides, service unites' (that is the theology that undergirds Hope 08 and other popular enterprises) without appreciating that actually service divides when it gets to the point of formulating political, economic and moral stances. As Cardinal Kasper pointed out to the WCC in 2005, secular political choices can be highly

theologically divisive. Mission language is an allied instance. For Orthodox and Catholic members there are serious ecclesiological questions raised about what a 'fresh expression' of church might be.

So, the first tension is between our Protestant and Catholic languages and perceptions, and the ecumenical question is how can we listen more acutely to each other in the ecumenical space. And as my job is about articulating those things, I raise the question because my Catholic friends are probably too polite to do so.

According to *Theos*, most British people welcome Pope Benedict's social teaching. Not least on economics and social research. That allows me to explore another tension in our ecumenical landscape. That is the tension between differing Christian world-views. I believe we need to do a good deal of patient work here, because there are complex things going on, and they cut across denominations, not only between them. The faultline which exposes these different worldviews runs through the role of women, gender issues and human sexuality. What should concern us ecumenically is not that Christians have different understandings of those matters. Christians also have different understandings of the role of economics, the nature of the sacraments, and beginning and end of life issues. What matters ecumenically is that we reach beyond the divisive issue to begin to understand how the worldviews that lead us to those conclusions are formed. In other words, we need to apply the same principles of listening and respectful dialogue which have done so much to heal our past misunderstandings.

There is a genuine theological complexity here because the components of these divisions include not just Scripture and tradition, but reactions to the Enlightenment, science, modernity and post-modernity. And it can never be as simple as saying that conservatives hold to the eternal deposit of faith whilst liberals are swayed by the latest fashion because conservatism is as much a reaction to post-Enlightenment thought as liberalism. At the heart of it, I suspect, are different theologies of God's relationship to the world.

There was a flurry of excitement in the American religious press over the summer when the author Anne Rice (of *Interview with a vampire* fame) renounced the church. About ten years before she had been converted from deep pessimism to a Christ centred universe and dedicated her literary gifts in his service. But on July 30th she wrote on her blog, 'To-day I quit being a Christian....Its simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputacious and deservedly infamous group. For ten years I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.' She later elaborated, saying that her

commitment to Christ was absolute, but 'In the name of Christ I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian.'

And if I tell you that she was a Catholic, I hope that simply underlines the complexity of the multiple worldviews that prevail amongst the churches. You don't need a particularly sophisticated ecumenical seismograph to detect that there is an underlying weakness in the church surface here that it would be worth examining in the hope that we might find ways of reducing the tension and maintaining the unity of the body. Nor do you need a doctorate in missiology to realise the implications of Anne Rice's views for mission in the west.

I raise that question because my liberal friends are probably too polite to do so, and because the tone of CTE, as indeed of English Christianity, is increasingly conservative, and that voice is in danger of being ignored. The modern ecumenical movement has been, and is, about discovering Christ in the other, discovering that Christ is in places we never expected or imagined. No one, said St Paul, can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit' (I Cor 12:3). It is predicated on a generosity of each to the other in Christian love, a refusal to deny the reality of discipleship in another's practise, provided they accept Jesus as Lord in the fellowship of the trinity.

That generosity has been, I believe, a significant factor in bringing about the symbolic healing of our nation after nearly half a millennium of persecution, suspicion, fear and hatred which we have been part of this weekend. It is, I believe, desperately needed not only within the church, but in English society and in the global village. I pray that together, in obedience to Christ, and empowered by the Spirit, we will have the courage to keep that light burning.