

Society for Ecumenical Studies

Marks and Processes of Unity in Christ for the World-Wide Church in an Age of Unity-In-Diversity

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One

Please excuse **an unwieldy title** ; but its elements point to tensions and dilemmas that cannot be avoided. 'Unity' can only be a 'unity-in-diversity', indeed a 'unity that positively enhances and enriches the diversities God has gifted his people with'. The search for the proper unity in Christ must always be as much (I will conclude: even more) a matter of following appropriate processes than of identifying the appropriate marks. And, most important, the goal of unity in Christ cannot but be a 'world-wide' matter, in no way sidelining or excluding any sector of those human beings who are called by God the Holy Spirit to share in it.

Two

Let's start from **a classic memory**: William Temple referring in his Enthronement Sermon of 1942 (published in *The Church Looks Forward* London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1944, pp.1-7) to 'the great new fact of our era'. The actual process, the argument, of his sermon puts this striking phrase in a dynamic framework. It has six stages:

- a) 'The secular movement of the world is.... towards more intense and fiercer competition, conflict and war between larger and larger concentrations of power' - does it sound familiar ?

- b) So what should be the response of the Church, to 'return to the catacombs, preserving the Gospel in its purity (...) until it again confronts the world as the one coherent fellowship which can alone give stability and peace' ? No, for there is 'another side to the picture'.

- c) 'As though in preparation for such a time as this, God has been building up a Christian fellowship which now extends into almost every nation, and binds citizens of them all together in true unity and mutual love.'

- d) 'No human agency has planned this. (...) Almost incidentally the great world fellowship has arisen; it is the great new fact of our era; it makes itself apparent from time to time in World Conferences such as (...) Stockholm, Lausanne, Jerusalem, Oxford, Edinburgh, Madras and Amsterdam.'

- e) 'The New Testament bids us hope for a City of God whose gates are ever open (...) We may not hope for the Kingdom of God in its completeness here, but we are to pray for its coming and to live even now as its citizens. And here we find ourselves actually belonging to a fellowship which is an earthly counterpart of the City of God, though many of us are hardly aware of it ...'

- f) 'The City of God again stands before us with gates wide open so that citizens of all nations may enter, but also so that its own citizens may ride forth to the conquest of the nations, following their Captain as He goes forth to judge and to make war.'

Spoken by a hugely respected new Archbishop at a low point in the fortunes of the Allies in the middle of the world war, that argument must have been

powerful indeed. It articulates what then was and remains the fundamental gift and calling of the ecumenical movement - the promise and challenge of 'unity of all things' under Christ, of the Church as no more than first-fruits of a new humanity yet which is called precisely to suffer and struggle for that new humanity which God will in His good time bring about.

Three

What has happened in the 55 years since that sermon to follow through this 'great new fact' ?

There have been important institutional developments, with the founding of both the UNO and the WCC. Yet, after 50 years we are primarily aware of considerable disillusionment with both of these, let alone other world-level institutions. At least in the West, few people seem to expect much from them. From the South attention is constantly drawn to the refusal of the rich - nations or churches - to pay for what it costs to make such institutions genuinely and lastingly effective.

Also among the churches we have seen the rise of the 'World Confessional Families', in part a natural and useful growth to enable national churches to play a world-level role, in part stimulated by the new initiatives of the Roman Catholic world body since Vatican II. How much deep change have they produced in the richer and more powerful churches ? Duchrow's still unanswered book about the Lutheran World Federation (*Conflict over the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1981, pp.444) constitutes a strong argument that they in effect serve to keep the poorer and newer churches under the control of the older and richer.

Over the same period one can point to a number of spiritual signs of people learning to live as 'world citizens' rather than be limited by a single nation or church.

- a) Christian Aid, for instance, along with other 'world development' organisations, while all too easily sucked into the 'lady bountiful' mode,

has undoubtedly served to open up the question of priorities; recent debates around the World Bank/IMF (see Michael Taylor's *Jesus and the International Financial Institutions*, Selly Oak Colleges Occasional Paper no.17) and the Jubilee 2000 campaign are welcome signs of this beginning to find a political and economic bite.

- b) South Africa has been perhaps the nearest we have seen to a 'success story' in bringing long-term international pressure to bear on an intolerable situation. Desmond Tutu's counter-witness in face of the judgment 'apartheid is too strong for a divided Church' (at the Santiago de Compostela Faith & Order Conference of 1993: *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, ed. Best & Gassmann, Geneva: WCC, 1994, p.96ff.) deserves to ring out for many years yet, as do the teachings of Walter Wink's profound and momentous trilogy on the 'powers' of this world (*Naming the Powers, Unmasking the Powers and Engaging the Powers*: all Fortress Press).

- c) In respect of actual achievements of church unity, we all know how slow and disappointing the story of these years has proved to be. It is not as clearly seen how difficult Faith & Order work has found it to embrace and involve the newer and 'younger' churches of the South, despite the pioneering of the Church of South India. I suspect the bi-laterals have an even sorrier record in this respect.

Two highlights to set against this have been the sentence enunciated by the Montreal 1993 Faith & Order Conference:

'the truth that the more the Tradition is expressed in the varying terms of particular cultures, the more will its universal character be fully revealed.' (*Fourth World Conference on Faith & Order*, edd. Rodger and Vischer, London: SCM Press 1964, p.59)

and the report *On Intercultural Hermeneutics* from a WCC consultation held in Jerusalem in December 1995 (*International Review of Mission*, Vol LXXXV,

No. 337, April 1996, pp.241-252), which is centred on the complementarity and interaction between - pardon the jargon ! - contextuality and catholicity.

Four

Two major attempts have been made within the fellowship of the WCC to grasp the significance of the phenomenon of Christianity becoming in practice, not just in aspiration, a world-wide faith.

The first was the series of 15 book-length studies, all made by persons with a combination of theological and sociological skills, of particular churches and their vitality in relation to their specific mission situations. Several of these books have become classics, widely known for a breadth and sensitivity in tracing the key features of a total situation: Chr. Lalive's *Haven of the Masses* (in English translation) on the Pentecostals of Chile; Robert Lee's *Stranger in the Land* on Japan; John Taylor's *The Growth of the Church in Buganda*, the first in the series; and perhaps also the little remarked *Urban Churches in Britain - A Question of Relevance*, about the suburban churches of 'Brookton' (a district of Birmingham not a million miles from Selly Oak and Northfield) by the soon-to-become Prime Minister of Ghana, Kofi Busia.

The 'conclusions' - hardly the right word - of this extensive work were drawn by a small group of five, including John V. Taylor, in the WCC Research Pamphlet No. 17 *Can Churches Be Compared ?*. edited by Steven Mackie (Geneva: WCC, 1970, pp.101). They point out that such findings as they can record were i) incredibly hard to discover; ii) difficult to articulate; and ii) even harder to grasp ! I have written at some length about the four 'theses' they offer in both 'Helping the Ecumenical Movement to Move On' in *Pentecost, Mission and Ecumenism - Essays in Intercultural Theology*, ed. by Jan Jongeneel and others as a Festschrift for Prof. Walter Hollenweger, and 'A Universal Faith in 1001 Contexts' in the *International Review of Mission* Vol.LXXXIV, nos. 332/333, Jan/April 1995, pp.133-148. So I simply quote the authors' own warning that these conclusions

'might lead, if taken seriously, to a profound re-thinking of the nature and mission of the Church.' (p.87)

and repeat my own fear that they never have been (taken seriously), and so haven't (led to much profound re-thinking, not least in respect of the goal of unity) - **yet**. Here remains an increasingly urgent, if still difficult, task.

Five

The second attempt to discern and grasp the significance of the whole range of phenomena has been the far-flung, even pretty inchoate '*Gospel and Cultures*' study launched by the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in preparation for what became their major Conference of the 1990s in November 1996 at Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, with the title: Called to One Hope - The Gospel amidst Diverse Cultures'.

On this theme the WCC cannot but play second fiddle, in regard to publications, to the immensely impressive efforts of Roman Catholic missiologists on what they term the 'inculturation' of the Gospel and of the Christian life in all the cultures of our world. To quote simply the names of writers such as Aloysius Pieris, Amaloorpavadoss, Louis Luzbetak, Patrick Kalilombe, Aylward Shorter and Robert Schreiter is to indicate something of the depth and range of this research. How much effect it has yet been able to have at the level of the world institutions of their Church is another question - not up to us to judge ! The WCC, so far, has not much more than conferences to show for its efforts.

In fact, the Salvador Conference has been the first to be wholly and deliberately devoted to this area of question. It has proved at least as hard as any other to sum up in a phrase or a specific discovery. My own summary judgment is that it will deserve to be remembered not so much for what anyone said, still less for what the conference wrote (though the 'Message', largely drafted by Bishop Tom Butler, is not half bad as a record of key points), but for the quality of the experience it enabled. Can it prove possible to share that experience effectively and widely around the churches ? A

difficult question for the WCC since the beginning; why has it become even more difficult than before in the West (I hope it is true to say that Christians of the South do much better than we in this regard) since about 1970 ?

I pick out three features that struck me as vital:

- a) The composition of the Salvador Conference was even more **diverse and unusual** than any earlier. The Orthodox participants, for instance, included several from such countries as Ghana, Indonesia and Alaska ! Still more, a preparatory meeting had been convened immediately before the main conference, gathering Christians from among the 'indigenous peoples' of all six continents, greatly affirming them in their deeply felt campaigns to demand back the lands and cultures that have been stolen from them over these last 500 years by the European invaders.

This mix of people became triply important because the Conference was effectively set up in a way that enabled and encouraged us all to listen to one another, in an equal mutuality. I will gladly witness that even to such an old hand at WCC conferences as I am this one struck me as a 'first' in that no one group or type of Christians either themselves felt the need, or were felt by others, to claim a 'superiority' of some sort in the total constellation we composed.

- b) One direct reflection and consequence of that was that, again possibly more than any other I have known, this conference was one that knew and witnessed that the Christian life can only be lived with **a priority to 'repentance'** - not as a gloomy, but as a joyfully liberating and renewing calling. The WCC has been accustomed for some years to experiencing strong challenges from the women; we had plenty of those. This time there was an even stronger set of challenges from the 'indigenous', including the Afro-Brazilians whose guests in the city of Salvador we were.

The outstanding memory of the conference, in the hearts of all those whose accounts of it I have read, as in my own, was the early morning service at the slave dock through which some 6 million African slaves had passed over 350 years: a service in which, led by Africans, we could both acknowledge the sin of the world, ourselves and our churches included, and rejoice with the Afro-Brazilians that God had enabled them to overcome and play host to the world in this conference. Just as no part of the world claimed any superiority, so it was un-necessary for any one part of the world to feel more sinful, let alone more repentant than any other !

- c) The third feature, theologically surely the exact follow-through of both the earlier, was that this conference, again more than any other I have known (though the previous World Mission Conference, at San Antonio, Texas, in 1989 comes a close second) proved to be centred in and summed up by **its corporate worship**. I have mentioned the service at the slave dock. The morning services every other day, each a whole in itself with no necessary connection to the one before or after, yet which added up to a marvellous series, were undoubtedly the element which most deserves to be remembered and treasured by the churches of the world - though it is of course maddeningly difficult to communicate their effect in writing. (I have tried, briefly, to do so in an article 'A Quantum Leap in Truth and Joy - Worship in and for the World' to be published in *The Way of Renewal* ed. Michael Mitton, probably in the autumn of 1998.)

I draw the strong conclusion, not for the first time, but with all the more emphasis, that when Christians come together in council, at the world level as much as more locally, the main thing they can do together is to worship together - but not as a formality, nor as a decoration but as the life-giving basis for the sharing, the listening, the mutual questioning, and the deciding.

Why did the worship at Salvador seem so very different to what goes on on Sunday mornings in one's local church ? Because **it mattered**. Because it was **unpredictable** . Because it was so evidently grounded in the **universality** of the faith, not in the faith of any one group or type. Because **God** could speak to us, in and through what had been arranged - as God no doubt can on more ordinary 'Sunday mornings', despite our efforts to drown Him out !

From one point of view I have to admit that none of this is totally new; many of the same pointers have been discernable in earlier and other sorts of experience; some are long familiar from books like Vincent Donovan's *Christianity Rediscovered* or Lesslie Newbigin's *The Open Secret*. But how often have they been reflected in our practice ?

Six

And so: for the further pursuit of the process of uniting in Christ, I have risked summing up where these efforts of the WCC seem to be leading us in **six theses**. As some of you may know, I first wrote these in the article preparing for Salvador in the *IRM*; slightly to my surprise, the Salvador conference seemed rather definitely to confirm their main thrust, though I have amended them in detail.

- a) **Christians must begin by affirming, rejoicing in and thus encouraging each local Christian community, indeed each fellow-Christian, in their being and becoming whatever the Holy Spirit is holding open for them in their unique and specific situation. Yet this acceptance of 'diversity' as constitutive is never to be confused with the 'division' by which one group of Christians may refuse fellowship with others.**

This is to affirm a 'bottom-up' approach to the nature of the church, with the emphasis put on what each group of Christians, however humble, can contribute, rather on the need to control. As a counterpart of that, each local church must learn to

know/feel its responsibility for the work of the Church universal. Its partnerships need to be such as to encourage it to fulfil the part in that whole which falls uniquely to it, and to emphasis above all the leading of the Holy Spirit, as that which both constitutes and enables a church to be God's church rather than ours.

- b) **Because the Christian life is always a matter of the totality of human life, not of a supposedly 'religious part' of life, so what the Holy Spirit may be holding open for a church or a person will always have to do with their interaction with the total, worldly culture and situation, not just with internal matters to do with the institution of the church and its ways, let alone with what the world may call their 'religion'.**

Is it not the distinctive sin of Christians in the West to be far too church-centred in what we do as Christians ? An individualising and fragmenting culture divides up life into several isolated bits, with anything to do with faith or church consigned to the 'religious' bit, that is not expected to have any relevance (Busia's key word for us) to the rest of life. This is where it can be crucial for a church to live in partnerships with 'other', hopefully very different, Christians who can both encourage and question. Such partnerships will be as vital in worship as in a synod or reasonably local council where decisions can be reached by considering the perspectives both of the local people and of the wider church.

- c) **Especially for any called to be leaders or teachers in a church one key gift and skill will be a 'double awareness': of the immediate 'here and now' of their own church, and of the 'universal horizons and experience' of the whole church, across the centuries and the continents.**

This is presumably the central aim of the 'theological education' in which most of us in the SES are engaged. But am I alone in having seldom heard it articulated in this way ? And how do we draw the appropriate distinction between a 'leadership' that responds to and enables others, and a 'professionalism' which excludes and depreciates others ? This thesis points me, as does so much else, to long for a huge upsurge of appropriate adult theological education as a constitutive mark of a uniting church.

- d) **The test of apostolic integrity for any one cell within the universal body of Christ cannot lie primarily in faithfulness to any one or more specific 'things' but in the quality of the relationships that determine the life and witness of that cell taken as a whole. The Holy Spirit, now as in the Acts of the Apostles, is the 'go-between God', no less in conciliarity than in evangelism.**

How can this be articulated in our regular worship ? The discipline of welcoming guests deserves the most careful attention, as does the process by which people report back from synods, as from significant experiences during the week. The 'Intercultural Hermeneutics' report I mention at the end of section 3. above has important points to make on its pp. 247-9.

- e) **The key to the nature and structures of the Church (at every level: local, regional and world-wide) is therefore a 'conciliar pattern' in which all its parts can meet on equal footing to come to common decisions under the leading of the Holy Spirit.**

How can each local and regional 'Christians Together' body come to feel themselves as empowered in this way ? What role do the ordained ministers of all the churches need to play for that to be so ? The best study I have come across on the whole matter of 'conciliarity' remains the West German paper

'Councils, Conciliarity and a Genuinely Ecumenical Council'
published in English in *Study Encounter* (Geneva: WCC, 1974,
Vol X No. 2, SE/57).

- f) **Essential to such a pattern of conciliarity will be a spirituality that has room alike for the disciplines of sharing at depth with others and the parallel disciplines of effective self-critique.**

What experience do any of us in the SES have of 'teaching' this within theological education ? I hear essentially the same message in a paragraph of the 'Intercultural Hermeneutics' report: 'When such intercultural communication is achieved, the original speakers discover new and previously unrealized aspects of their message. The original listeners also gain a new awareness of their own world. Both are enriched by the experience of opening to the world of the other, but both are also challenged. The truth of the communication, therefore, is not to be judged only by the speaker who originated the message. It is both parties, in intense and ongoing dialogue, who come to discover together the truth which is greater than either of their original conceptions.' (p.248)

Seven

By way of conclusion, I cannot do better than use a paragraph of Lesslie Newbigin's, both as memorial to him (he died, for those who may have missed it, on January 30th 1998) and as a pointer to our distinctive explorations in the SFES:

The Christ of faith is seen very differently from different cultural perspectives. (...) These different perceptions are never to be absolutized but have always to be subject to correction within the believing, worshiping, serving and witnessing fellowship of churches. But - and here is the essential point - I have argued that this ecumenical fellowship is distorted by its dependence

almost entirely upon one set of cultural models, namely those of the Western world. Consequently the necessary ecumenical correction is not applied to the theology that arises within this culture. Its practitioners find it hard to recognize that the 'modern scientific view of history' is only one among a number of possible ways of looking at history. They find it difficult to recognize the culturally conditioned nature of their fundamental presuppositions. They are therefore tempted to absolutize these presuppositions and to relativize the traditional testimony about Jesus. It is the urgent need of the hour that the ecumenical fellowship of churches should become so released from its present dependence on one set of cultural forms that it can provide the place wherein we are able to do theology in the only way it can be properly done - by learning with increasing clarity to confess the one Lord Jesus Christ as alone having absolute authority and therefore to recognize the relativity of all the cultural forms within which we try to say who he is. (*The Open Secret*, 1978, pp.179/80)