

## Society For Ecumenical Studies

# The Ecumenical Movement As A Way Of Healing Memory

With Special Reference To The European Scene

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I

Our starting point is history. For our attitude to history, and the importance we do - or do not - attach to it, underlies the way we see both ecumenism and reconciliation. Claude Gruson, the French Protestant theologian has written of two kinds of memory - memory souvenir and memory History. (1) The first - as the word souvenir implies - is like that whole array of objects that all of us bring back from our visits to Blackpool, or Brighton, or the Costa Brava. They are reminders of happy and - mostly but not always - sunny days. They may be on a shelf, or in a glass case; or they may be packed away in an attic. Perhaps some of them are a bit kitsch; but don't let's be hoity-toity about them: they represent something important in our lives. But they are not living: their home is the glass case.

Memory history on the other hand, is not for the glass case. It is dynamic, alive, and subject to change and reinterpretation. Some parts are about happy and sunny things: others are full of suffering, anger, pain and conflict. According to how we see and interpret them, they may have power over events in the present and the future. History, therefore is a continuum in which we are ourselves involved. The way we feel about the present to some extent depends on which view of history we choose.

With the end of the Cold War, and with the Millennium on the horizon, there is a wide variety of new, even startling, ideas about history circulating at the moment. Some see the demise of the nation state as we have known it, and with this a resurgence of the power of the great civilizations of the world leading to new styles of conflict (2): while there is also the theory that with the end of the communist régimes and the popularity of capitalist systems, we have reached the "end of history." (3)

None of this - even that which is most bizarre - is irrelevant to our theme: for the churches are a part of the historical process and have their role to play within it, their own ministry - pastoral as well as prophetic - to fulfil. More serious than any of these ideas, however, is the general apathy and ignorance about history altogether which is common today. I hear that the history faculty in many universities is not a popular school: and history teaching posts at the theological colleges are far less popular than, for example, New Testament teaching posts. This is in itself fine; but while it obviously represents interest in the time of the Lord and the present day, does it hint at a lack of interest in what evolved in between? Is it memory souvenir than memory history? I hope not.

But this disinclination to study history not only loaves the field open for those more bizarre interpretations which we have noted above: it also coincides with a period when its importance is growing. For in the second half of this century, we have seen more drastic changes than during probably the four previous centuries. Although this is particularly true of Europe, it is in no way limited to this continent. In our own continent and in the world, history is certainly not in a glass case: it is happening all around us.

These changes are clustered around two apparently contrary forces – the force to integrate and the force to disintegrate. Both these movements were huge, radical and largely unforeseen. Although they could be dated - say 1948 (The Congress of Europe at The Hague) for the first and 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) for the second - both are also, like thunderstorms, still reverberating in today's world. While the first is a movement, originating as it did straight after the latest of many wars between European nations, to reverse the course of history, the second, with the throwing off of the cloak of tyranny over so many diverse nations, has been described as the “Rebirth of History.” (4) We have not yet adjusted our instruments to this new landscape.

To turn from this brief résumé of contemporary European history to the story of the churches, serves again to underline their close connection, it is clear that the churches made a significant – perhaps an essential – contribution to the revolutions of 1989; the Protestants in the DDR and the Catholics in Poland are only the most obvious of many examples. And although the churches did not identify themselves with the post-war movement to integrate the previously warring nations, there was a similarity of mood between the European and the Ecumenical movements. And it is striking that the Congress of Europe took place in The Hague in May 1948 and the World Council of Churches was inaugurated in Amsterdam in August 1948 – a few months and a few miles from each other.

In terms of the theme of this paper, however, it may be more useful to recall that when William Temple made his oft-quoted remark about the ecumenical movement as “the great new fact of our ear ..... the ground of hope for the coming days,” it was at his enthronement sermon at Canterbury in 1942 – six years earlier than the gatherings at The Hague and Amsterdam and, moreover,

when a ferocious war was raging in Europe. But is it possible that the movement to mend the churches' separations of which Temple himself had been an architect in the pre-war period had already begun to work its chemistry? To be precise, is it fanciful – could it be significant - that friendships between Christians in, for example, Britain, Germany, France, America, could have affected the kind of peace settlement that was to follow World War II? Certainly 1919 was very different.

As for the World Council of Churches' own ecumenical work, it was from an early stage set in a human and secular context: and this has often been criticized. "Leave the secular subjects alone," say the critics. "Get on with your proper job - bringing the churches together." but this is to misunderstand both ecumenism and the world around, to separate the church from the history of which it is a part. There may well have been many mistakes in the corridors of Geneva: but it has surely been right to claim that the search for the unity of the churches can only be understood if it is seen as something more than theological convergences, important as these are: the heart of its meaning is the oneness of the new humanity in Christ. And you cannot grasp that vision without taking very seriously all those awkward, thorny, untidy factors of culture and tribe and nationality and history. Unity has involved the reconciling of memory.

The story of the churches' search for unity in Europe during the last fifteen years has provided us with variations on this theme, albeit the projects were not initiated by the World Council. The assemblies at Basle in 1989, and at Graz in 1997, expressed a dynamic which held together the sacred and the political in a remarkable way. The Basle theme was "Peace, Justice & the Integrity (or Stewardship) of Creation". Its date - June 1989 - made it almost a curtain raiser for the openings to the east which were to follow. The Graz Assembly took Reconciliation as its theme – not as a human achievement but as gift of God, and source of new life. In 1997 when the assembly took place,

the need for this gift was painfully evident in both Church and world. These two gatherings were of unique significance. It was the first time since the Great Schism that all the churches had convened together any such gatherings. And both of them were enormous.

There were of course other ecumenical events in Europe at this time, including the Leuenberg conversations. But for the purposes of this paper we shall consider the three series of conversations in which my own church has been involved and in one of which I was myself privileged to take part. They were between churches in different countries and the first was the Meissen Agreement. They were all in a very different style, and on a very different scale and with a very different purpose from Basle and Graz. But like them they broke new ground.

It was in 1983 at the time of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther that the conversations were set up Church of England and the federation of Lutheran, United and Reformed churches in Germany known as the EKD. We should note this involved not two but three churches; and not two but three countries - England, West Germany and East Germany. Although the EKD provided a bridge between the two communities during the whole of the Cold War period, it was fairly fragile: and when the talks opened, there were still six years to pass before the opening to the east and the establishment of a single EKD in fact as well as in theory. Therefore we have to see that from the start what came to be known as the Meissen Agreement had an element of mending broken communities, of healing memory. By the time that the conversations were concluded in 1990, the two Germanies and the two German churches had become one. But the process had started in what was East Germany - actually in Erfurt - and it is significant that when the time came to find a name for the agreement, it was a town in the former DDR which was chosen.

When the accord came to be finally celebrated, services were held in England and Germany. My own memory of this provides another example of the healing process. When the service took place in Westminster Abbey, the procession entering the church halted at the west door and stood there while we all prayed beside the tomb of the Unknown Warrior; thus in a striking and imaginative way we were reminded of the two wars in which our countries had engaged; and the ceremonies of ecumenical commitment were set in a moment of reconciliation.

The conversations with the churches of the Scandinavian and Baltic countries which followed very soon after the Meissen dialogue had reported and later led to the Porvoo report, had no direct reference to reconciling past conflicts: but it did of course bring into the accord those who had been for many years not only living under a communist regime but actually a part of Soviet Union: thus there was an inescapable political and secular perspective to the talks. In this case the theological agreements were able to advance a little further than had been possible with Meissen: and there was also the added enrichment that the Church of England was joined by the other churches of Britain and Ireland.

This last factor also obtains in the case of the conversations with the Lutheran & Reformed Churches of France, which have concluded their work but have yet to report. In this case there were no fewer than eight participating churches.

From this side of the channel every participating church had a different relationship with the state - the Church of England, established; the Church in Wales, disestablished – the Scottish Episcopal Church which has been disestablished since 1689, and the Church of Ireland, which, although it sounds established

is not; and, moreover, spans a frontier between two countries – and very sensitive frontier at that.

On the French side, there were four churches - the Lutheran and the Reformed churches of France, and of Alsace and Lorraine. This again brings church state relations into the picture. For, while the Napoleonic Concordat of 1804 still governs relations between the churches and the secular authorities in Alsace and Lorraine, the separation of church and state is much more complete in the rest of France. These factors may not have figured high on the agenda of the talks: but, as with Meissen and Porvoo, they were in the background and inevitably affected our ecclesiology.

In the French conversations, there was another little twist - and sharp one - to this question of church/state relations. The agreement which we hope will soon be ratified between our churches, will need a name, like Meissen or Porvoo. The place of our five meetings took place was Versailles - a famous name for an ecumenical agreement. But one thing is certain. It will not be called by that name. For to the French Versailles spells Louis XIV, the persecutor of the Protestants by his revocation of the Edict of Nantes, their charter of religious freedom. Another reminder of the potency of history.

## II

In the second section of this paper, I want to draw out certain common features of the ecumenical scene in Europe in the last 15 years - some from the two great assemblies and more from the three dialogues which we may call the Meissen family. And then I want to raise one or two questions about what next.

The assemblies and the “Meissen” projects both affirm the linkage between the quest for Christian Unity and the secular or worldly issues, but in quite different ways. Basle and Graz take themes in which church unity and the unity of the natural order and/or human family are indissolubly tied together - ecumenism,

the stewardship of creation, the Irish or Bosnian scene, for example, and gathers them into their overarching themes – peace, justice, or reconciliation. In the case of the Meissen projects, this is more implied than spelt out. The purpose is to examine a common theological base, building on certain shared texts such as Council statements or the Leuenberg Agreement, and so to move into a closer and evolving partnership. But you cannot examine at a deep level theological beliefs, and ministerial and liturgical practices, in a small number of churches in a small number of particular countries without taking into account their total relationships, their parallel or discordant histories. It is because they are small and focused that you cannot escape the contexts – social, cultural, historical.

There is in the Meissen formula a built-in commitment to continue to grow together in ministry, mission, social witness etc.; and the setting up of monitoring committees is an integral part of the agreements. So the agreement itself is a kind of overture for a deepening partnership.

Two points however must be added here: first that, while this will be surely concerned with church affairs, it is to be hoped that it will go well beyond them. When William Temple spoke of the “great new fact of our time”, he meant something more than church relations: he spoke of the human scene. Most of the countries of the Meissen “family” are either members or applicants for membership of the European Union, a fact which gives the partner churches an area of common responsibility in the public domain. Their ministry here is strengthened by the theological accords.

Secondly there is a danger of a limited approach. It is of course clear that foundation for the accords is the hard theological base worked out between members of certain confessions - Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed. But all these churches have strong working partnerships with their neighbours on their own home ground. The follow-up process of all these agreements will of course major on the specific partners: but it is bound also to bring in the “people next door”, who in many cases are already working with that church. Thus



the countries as well as the churches will be involved. And the ripples will spread.

But the total vision is wider still. It has often been stated in all the “Meissen” dialogues that this is only one part of the whole ecumenical enterprise, i.e. the quest for full visible unity.

If the Church, then, finds, in her quest for a rediscovered unity, that she is inevitably having to attend to history both and present, so sometimes it can happen that history can, in its turn, recall the churches to their proper task and help them see it in a new way. The phrase “non-theological factor” has often been used as if everything other than theology was a tiresome digression from the really important theological work. But, we are now learning - and I believe it is underlined by our recent European experience - that the non-theological helps to cause disunity, to keep us apart, and therefore, being part of the problem, must be part of the solution.

It was a Jesuit priest – Fr Tom Corbishley - who used to say that he was in favour of the Common Market because he hoped it would help heal the wounds of the Reformation. (Anyone who knew him knew this was not said with a triumphalist Roman Catholic meaning.) And the changing face of Europe, to which we referred at the start of this paper, can in its turn teach us that diversity as well as unity must be the aim of any policy which can really satisfy, and that the continent needs all its varied traditions and insights for its fullness. Or, as the Pope has said, Europe needs its two lungs. Divergence as well as convergence must be the plan: this has lessons for ecumenists. Would that this had been in the minds of the churches, when in 1991 they met to regain their balance after being mind-blown by the recent revolutions, to consult as to their policy for a new Europe - Protestants first in Budapest and Catholics at the end of the year in Rome. The first set out some wise insights about plurality and respect for minorities; the latter included in their communiqué some

great statements about universality and tradition and structures of authority. They were complementary and mutually enriching. Both were needed. But they appeared like alternatives. The authentic ecumenical note was struck more by the meeting at Santiago di Compostela called the next year by the CEC and the CCEE - the same bodies which convened Basel and Graz.

Life would be simpler if memory could be kept in a glass case. But it would not be real life. The ecumenical movement is made not less but more spiritual, not less but more demanding, by virtue of its engagement with history, with the secular as well as the religious. I conclude with three voices which bear witness to this truth. Václav Havel has spoken aptly about the need for painful changes within ourselves, if we would build “with our brief cases bulging with papers” a better Europe. A similar point was made powerfully at Graz by Sister Rosina Hannaway of the Columbanus Community of Belfast, who spoke of the way we “internalise” frontiers, barriers, and boundaries - in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. In her “groping for an answer” she can turn only to the Cross which breaks down the “dividing wall.” And Mark Santer, in “The Reconciliation of Memories” (5) writes movingly of Christians who wish to make of their past “a source not of division but of reconciliation. The process,” he says, “must begin and end with attention to God.”

## **Final Questions**

1. First about the “Meissen formula”. The recipe is simple: specific; limited; but recognizing its part in the wider ecumenism; involving two or more countries; with theologies close enough to explore further; but not identical, nor expecting to be so at once; ready for a long term partnership, despite (or could it be, in some cases, even because of?) differences; with good personal relations at different levels, especially among

the leaders; above all, motivation. Can this be adapted for wider use?

The major fault line among churches at the moment is east/west. Is it beyond the bounds of possibility to use the Meissen formula to help to chip away a bit at this? Perhaps it would be fanciful to see a Meissen dialogue between a church of the west (not necessarily the Church of England) and the Russian Patriarchate. But why not with the Finnish Orthodox? Why not respond to the remarks of the Catholicos of the Armenian Church, calling for a partnership of mutual respect, not the invasion of evangelists, from other churches.

Is it not worth trying to deepen *à la* Meissen some of the links between the Roman Catholic Church in some countries and non-catholic neighbours? In Scandinavia? In Spain and in Belgium ?

It was not easy to find the finance for the Meissen projects. These proposals would be more expensive. But if it is right to do, it will be possible to find the money.

2. So much for the church scene. What about the world around? Are there in this troubled world ways of reconciling memories and applying the healing of the Gospel to situations that seem hopeless? It does of course happen more than anyone knows, or should know: for it often depends for its efficacy upon secrecy. But the question is fair - should not the mainstream churches be as involved as the Quakers or the MRA? Do we see the healing of history as high on our agenda as we should? Recent books (6) have raised the question in a positive way.

## Notes

1. Claude Gruson, from Preparatory Papers for the Roehampton Conference, "Christians & the Common Market", 1974.
2. Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations & the Remaking of World Order", Simon & Schuster, 1996
3. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History".
4. Misha Glennie, "The Rebirth of History", Penguin Books, 1990
5. "Their Lord & Ours", ed. Mark Santer, SPCK, 1982.
6. "The Forgiveness Factor", Michael Henderson, Grosvenor, 1996.  
"Religion - the Forgotten Element in Statecraft", ed. Douglas Johnstone & Cynthia Sampson, OUP, 1995.