



THE PRESENT STATE OF ECUMENISM

O estado atual do ecumenismo

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ABSTRACT: The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation offers an occasion to reflect on the progress of the ecumenical movement, now over 100 years old. If a new atmosphere of respect and cooperation exists between many churches, there are new obstacles to reconciliation in the areas of demographics, institutional concerns, and theology, leading some to speak of a period of stagnation or “ecumenical winter.” The WCC’s convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, is a promising document, but it is seen by many of the “new” churches of the Global South as too Western and Eurocentric. This essay concludes with some suggestions for moving ahead of the present impasse.

KEYWORDS: Ecumenism. WCC Church Text. New Churches. Obstacles to Ecumenism. Neo-Pentecostal Churches.

RESUMO: O 500^º aniversário da Reforma oferece uma ocasião para refletir sobre o progresso do movimento ecumênico, hoje com mais de 100 anos. Se, por um lado, existe uma nova atmosfera de respeito e cooperação entre muitas igrejas, por outro, existem novos obstáculos à reconciliação nas áreas da demografia, dos interesses institucionais e da teologia, levando alguns a falar de um período de estagnação ou “inverno ecumênico”. O texto de convergência do Conselho Mundial de Igrejas (CMI), *A Igreja: para uma visão comum*, é um documento promissor, mas considerado por muitas das “novas” igrejas do Hemisfério Sul como demasiado Ocidental e eurocêntrico. O ensaio conclui com algumas sugestões para sair do impasse atual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ecumenismo. Texto do Conselho Mundial de Igrejas. Novas Igrejas. Obstáculos ao Ecumenismo. Igrejas Neo-Pentecostais.

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Introduction

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther published his 95 Theses that began the Reformation. This year marks the 500th anniversary of that event, to be remembered with numerous ecumenical observances and statements. This past October Pope Francis met with representatives of the Lutheran World Federation in Lund, Sweden, to commemorate that moment in the life of the church. The Council of European Bishops (Catholic) and the Conference of European Churches (Protestant) issued a joint message, celebrating how they have learned to work together, engage in meaningful theological dialogue, and bear witness to Christ's reconciling love in light of the multiple crises facing Europe today. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is reportedly preparing to issue an apology for the violence that followed the Reformation. These are all positive signs.

The anniversary of the Reformation's beginning is certainly an appropriate time to reflect on the present state of ecumenism. What I propose to do here is to offer a kind of snapshot of the ecumenical movement today; charting some of the obstacles hindering progress, and offering some suggestions as to how we might encourage our church to move ahead.

1 Ecumenism since Vatican II

There has been significant progress in the more than fifty years since the Catholic Church joined the ecumenical movement, a movement itself then fifty years old. Post-conciliar dialogues have resulted in a host of agreed statements between churches, including some outstanding documents such as the Council's Degree on Ecumenism (1964), the World Council of Churches *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) text, the Joint Declaration of on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (2000), and the recent WCC statement, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013). Some churches have moved into full communion.

Most importantly, a new atmosphere of friendship and mutual respect exists between most Christian communities today, though there are still some holdouts among more conservative Christians on both sides. In many places Catholics and mainline Protestants look upon each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord and cooperate whenever they can. Concern for the poor and the disadvantaged frequently brings them together in common efforts. Many hear the same biblical readings on Sundays, thanks to the use of a common lectionary, derived ultimately from the 1969 *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, produced by the Roman Catholic Church after the reforms of the

Second Vatican Council. Catholics and Catholic Orthodox relations have also improved, driven in part by Orthodox concerns about an increasing secularism in Europe and the growth of Islam.

And perhaps most surprising are the new, much more positive relations between Catholics and evangelicals, Pentecostals among them. A book by evangelical historian Mark Knoll, an evangelical faculty member at the University of Notre Dame, and Carolyn Nystrom ask, *Is the Reformation Over?* (2005). In the end, they leave open the question posed by the book's title, noting the progress made and expressing the hope that God might do even more. A considerable number of Pentecostals are pursuing graduate studies in Catholic institutions, and some Catholic students are enrolled at more progressive evangelical seminaries. A recent book by Pentecostal scholars reviewing the work of Amos Yong had among the nine Pentecostal contributors five with doctorates from Jesuit Marquette University (VONDEY, Wolfgang; MITTELSTADT, Martin William, 2013).

These more positive relations have already had visible effects. A host of new evangelical scholars are contributing books that call for a return to the Tradition in evangelical theology. I think of the fine studies on tradition and the Bible, challenging biblical interpretation without reference to the historic Tradition of the Church by Baylor University's D. H. Williams, and those of Gordon Conwell's John Jefferson Davis and Regent College's Hans Boersma, both professors at evangelical seminaries, lamenting the devaluing of the Eucharist and the loss of the sacramental and liturgical imagination among evangelicals (WILLIAMS, 2002; *Idem*, 2005; DAVIS, 2010; BOERSMA, 2011; *Idem*, 2009). Another excellent book is Tim Perry's "evangelical assessment" of Pope John Paul's pontificate (2007), with fourteen essays examining his encyclicals and apostolic constitutions. It shows evangelical theologians reading and drawing on John Paul's philosophy and social teaching with remarkable sympathy; they are able to be self-critical without failing to point out where they see major differences still remaining between the two traditions.

Even in Latin America, where Catholic and evangelical relations have historically been less than friendly, there are some signs of tentative steps towards each other, though one of my Pentecostal friends says that the initiative has come largely from the Catholic side. For example, Chilean Pentecostal Juan Sepúlveda was invited to give a plenary address to the bishops of Latin America gathered at the 5th CELAM Conference at Aparecida in 2007. Pope Francis has a long history of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation during his days as the Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires. Still the goal of reconciliation and full communion continues to elude us.

2 *Obstacles to Reconciliation*

For many, the ecumenical movement seems to have stalled, entering into a period of stagnation. Many today speak of an “ecumenical winter,” a lack of progress towards full communion, complicated by new divisions over questions of abortion, sexuality, biomedical issues, and the ordination of women. Cardinal Walter Kasper has spoken of “clear signs of fatigue” (2015, p. 153). Some of the obstacles are demographic, some are institutional, while others are ecclesial or theological.

Demographically, the Reformation churches in the Europe and North America continue to lose members. Michael Kinnamon writes that the diminishing resources of those denominations that were once pillars of the ecumenical movement has taken a toll on ecumenical organizations (2013, p. 11-12). The percentage of adults (18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has decreased by eight percentage points in 2015 from a similar report in 2007.¹ Of even greater concern, the percentage of the religiously unaffiliated, the “nones” (those who answer “none” when asked about their religious affiliation) has increased from 16.1 to 22.8 percent during the same period, while the number of Millennials (aged 18 to 24) has risen to 36 percent; in the United States they are second in size only to evangelical Protestants. San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy sees the diminishing participation of young adults in the life of the church as “the most significant pastoral challenge to the Church in the United States.”² Too many today see institutional Christianity as simply irrelevant.

Mainline Protestant seminaries, with declining enrollments, are experiencing financial difficulties; Andover Newton, the nation’s oldest Protestant seminary, is selling its campus in Newton, Massachusetts and downsizing its faculty and staff. Daniel Alshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, sees this as “a canary in the mineshaft” for 80 percent of America’s mainline Protestant seminaries; their enrollment has fallen by nearly 24 percent since 2005.³ On the west coast in the United States the Graduate Theological Union, an ecumenical theological consortium, is in trouble.

Institutionally, Cardinal Kurt Koch, prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian unity, says that for the churches of the Reformation,

¹ PEW RESEARCH CENTER. *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*. Available in: <<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>>. No access date.

² MCELROY, Robert W. *Embracing the Joy of Love: A Pastoral Message to the People of the Diocese of San Diego*, p. 4. Available in: <http://www.sdcatholic.org/Portals/0/Bishop/Documents/Embracing_the_Joy_of_Love.pdf?>. Access in: 09 Sept. 2016.

³ MACDONALD, G. Jeffrey. Oldest US graduate seminary to close campus. Available in: <<http://religionnews.com/2015/11/13/oldest-u-s-graduate-seminary-to-close-campus-denominations-secularization-andover-theological/#>>. No access date.

the original goal of visible unity in a shared faith, sacraments, and ecclesial ministry “has steadily been abandoned in favor of a postulate of mutual recognition of the various churches as churches, and thus as parts of the one church of Jesus Christ.” At the same time, many of these churches are involved in a new search for denominational identity, which often works against ecumenical engagement.⁴

Some speak of a new ecumenism, based on shared values rather than visible communion. Others seek to redefine the goal of ecumenism. Konrad Raiser saw a “paradigm shift” taking place as early as 1988, away from a focus on visible unity to a shared commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation (1991, p. 79-111). Thomas Oden contrasts the “old ecumenism” of the WCC and the National Council of Churches with an emerging “new ecumenism” which he sees in the early church, a unity already found in Christ and the Spirit.⁵ From his study of Latino Catholic charismatics and Protestant Pentecostals Jesuit Allan Figueroa Deck suggests that a new ecumenism may be emerging, focusing not “on doctrine but rather on the common values, beauty, life, and non-propositional truths expressed in action,” as believers continue to search for God and a transcendent unity (2016, p. 272). But these represent a spiritual ecumenism, not visible unity. With the WCC apparently deemphasizing visible unity while it pursues its commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, Kinnamon asks if the ecumenical movement is in danger of becoming too ideological (2014, p. 20).

Theologically, some continue to argue that the church’s true nature is spiritual, and thus invisible. Ola Tjørhom says that many Protestants misunderstand the Reformers’ view that the “real church” is hidden (*verbor-gen*), concluding that the church is essentially invisible (2004, p. 77). Most Pentecostals emphasize the invisible nature of the church, they maintain its unity is already given in the Spirit (KÄRKKÄINEN, 2002, p. 73; YONG, 2005, p. 180). From these perspectives, an institutional or ecclesial ecumenism is unnecessary. Some of the new churches emerging in the Global South are against the ecumenical movement in principle, as was evident at the WCC’s 10th assembly in Busan, Korea, in 2013, where hundreds were protesting not just the assembly but the ecumenical movement itself.

Another obstacle is liturgical/sacramental. The WCC document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, clearly sees the church as a eucharistic community, but if there is agreement on this in our ecumenical statements, it is

⁴ KOCH, Kurt. *Developments and Challenges in Ecumenism Today*, July 2011. Available in: <<http://www.katolsk.no/tro/tema/ekumenikk/artikler/developments-and-challenges-in-ecumenism-today>>. No access date.

⁵ ODEN, Tom. *The New Ecumenism and Christian Witness to Society*. Available in: <<http://www.ucmpage.org/articles/toden3.html>>. No access date.

yet not at all evident in the life of many of our churches. According to David Fergusson, weekly celebration “is still largely foreign to the worship of most Reformed communities in the world today” (2002, p. 41) and Robert Jenson says that evangelicals “are rarely bothered by questions of eucharistic fellowship—or by sacramental matters generally” (2014, p. 24).

And if this is true in Europe and North America, it is even more the case in the Global South which is where the church is really growing today. In China the majority of Protestants belong to independent churches, characterized by conservative theology and what Allan Anderson cautiously calls “Pentecostal tendencies” (2013, p. 200).⁶ Most emphasize biblical authority, demons and spirits, miraculous “signs and wonders,” and indigenous leadership (YUNG, 2005, p. 43-45). The new churches in Africa are similar, among them the independent, African Instituted Churches (AICs), especially in South Africa, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Pentecostal in various forms, these independent churches seek to give expression to African religious impulses; they are pneumatological in their ecclesiology, communitarian in style, and more comprehensive in their doctrine of salvation (OMENYO, 2000, p. 241). Some Latin American theologians argue that the Neo-Pentecostalism spreading there have little connection to classical Pentecostalism or the historic Protestant tradition; few put emphasis on classical Reformation principles. Milton Acosta speaks of them as a “new form of post, neo-Christianity” based on a convergence of popular Catholic religiosity with popular Protestant religiosity. Arturo Piedra “holds that there is a weak historical connection between Latin American Protestantism and the Protestant tradition, as there is little or no emphasis on *sola gratia*, *sola Scriptura*, or justification by faith alone” (ACOSTA, 2009, p. 40-42).⁷

Most of these new churches in the Global South have little concern for doctrine, confessional differences, or ecclesiology. For the most part they are neither sacramental nor liturgical. Differing strongly from churches in the Enlightenment influenced west, these new churches stress the nearness of the supernatural or the spirit world, including healing of body, mind, soul, spirit, and society, and they are concerned with life issues such as AIDS, violence, and poverty. Many preach the “Prosperity Gospel,” the gospel of health and wealth.

Finally, there is an additional challenge; it seems obvious to me that today at least in the United States there is far more interest in and emphasis on

⁶ Gotthard Oblau says that these Christians do not call themselves Pentecostal, many may be seen as Pentecostal in a broader theological sense; “Pentecostal By Default? Contemporary Christianity in China,” Pentecostal By Default? In: ANDERSON, Allan; TANG, E. (eds.). *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*. Oxford: Regnum, 2005, p 324.

⁷ See: <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/august/11.40.html>>. No access date.

interreligious dialogue. This is true of most of the ecumenical groups I participate in, with the exception of those that are specifically charged with interchurch dialogue. Our colleges and universities have far more interreligious or comparative theology course than courses in ecumenism. This too is due in part to changing demographics. Islam is the fastest growing religion in Canada, and I suspect in Europe as well. According to the Pew Forum, by 2040, Muslims will likely become the second-largest religious group in the United States after Christians.⁸

3 *The WCC Text on the Church*

Nor is there yet agreement on the nature of the church. The recent World Council document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), is a marvelous convergence statement. It sees the church, rooted in the saving activity of the Trinity, as called to visible unity, a theme emphasized throughout the document. Sharing in the life of the Trinity means Christians live in communion with one another (no. 13). Diversity is a gift of God, but the unity and catholicity of the church means that each local church should be in communion with all the other local churches (nos. 30-31).

The text points to a number of ecclesial elements required for full communion in a visibly united church: “communion in the fullness of the apostolic faith; in sacramental life; in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry; in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making; and in common witness and service to the world” (no. 37), though it acknowledges that many differences remain about the number of the sacraments or ordinances, who presides at the Eucharist, how ordained ministry is structured and whether it is restricted to males, the authority of councils, and the role of the Bishop of Rome. Its view of salvation is not narrowly individualistic, but serves God’s plan for the transformation of the world. Most significantly, there is a strong eucharistic orientation to the text which looks forward to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship (Introduction; no. 67).

Clearly the WCC document views the church as a eucharistic community. From its perspective, “church” cannot be reduced theologically to any group of Christians striving to follow the example of Jesus and witness to the reign of God. Unfortunately, the WCC document failed to get a consideration in a plenary session at the WCC 10th Assembly at Busan, as James Loughran has observed (2013, p. 9).

⁸ MANGLA, Ismat Sarah. *How many Muslims live in the United States? Pew Research Center releases new figures*, January 2016. Available in: <<http://www.ibtimes.com/how-many-muslims-live-united-states-pew-research-center-releases-new-figures-2255657>>. No access date.

Good as the WCC document on the church is from a Catholic perspective, most of the new churches of the Global South see it as too western, Eurocentric, and not sufficiently attentive to the experience of their churches. Pentecostal scholar Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., a member of the working group that produced the document, saw those assigned to his working groups as strongly slanted toward the ancient churches with episcopal governance and found that it difficult as a Pentecostal or representative of the Free Church tradition to make any substantive contribution (2015, p. 291-292).

4 How to Move Forward?

So how can we move forward? What practical steps might we take to reengage our church in the ecumenical task to which we are called? Here I can only make some suggestions.

1. There is considerable merit to Paul Murray's concept of "receptive ecumenism," an ecumenism which asks, not what might others traditions learn from us, but what might we learn from them (2008, p. 279-280). The ecumenical movement should lead to an exchange of gifts, not just seeking to teach the other. One thing our western churches might learn is that our often abstract theological language is not the only way to talk about faith. The new churches of the Global South privilege experience and personal testimony. Too often we have forgotten what Pope Paul VI said about witness: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41). Our post-Enlightenment western churches could also learn something about the nearness of God's power from these charismatically structured churches, about the priority of mission, and about the forgiveness of sin that is more than structural.

2. Many young Catholics today are unfamiliar with the protocols of division, and frequently ignore them. Church discipline seems merely a question of rules. If they can't have a garden wedding with a Catholic priest, they turn to non-Catholic pastors, without any sense that they are less Catholic for doing so or that it really matters. Thus for them, ecclesial walls are more porous. Their ecumenism is not theological; it is practical, or perhaps spiritual. Can we help bishops to appreciate this?

Some ecumenists today also advocate a new, pastoral or spiritual form of ecumenism based on shared values, the historic creeds, and a commitment to justice as we have seen. But we cannot simply jettison the progress that has been made in finding common ground in our teachings in the more than sixty years of dialogue since Council ended. Nor should we give up the goal of visible unity. As Geoffrey Wainwright has written, while

institutional unity without a spiritual unity of heart and mind would be a mere façade, “the alternative to visible unity is visible *disunity*, that is a witness against the gospel” (1983, p. 4). And Harding Meyer argues that the ecumenical movement cannot settle for social-ethical responsibility toward the world, giving up the goal of the visible unity of the churches in faith, sacraments, and the ministry” (1999, p. 147-148).

In a challenging book, Peter Leithart argues that American Protestant denominationalism, an alternative to the one church for which Jesus prayed, is collapsing. He envisions a restructuring of global Christianity into what he calls a “Reformational Catholicism,” no longer Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Presbyterian, Reformed, Methodist, or described by any other name. Such a Reformational Catholic Church would be a biblical church, teaching the whole Bible; a sacramental and liturgical church in which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated weekly, with worshippers clapping their hands, swaying to the music, and raising their hands in prayer; and a metropolitan church built from the ground up, with each congregation together with its elders an assembly of a single church, presided over by a single “angel” in each city who together will form an interlocking network of overseers around the world (LEITHART, 2016, p. 26-35). While his vision remains somewhat idealistic, it shows that the search for Christian unity cannot simply abandon the church’s historic tradition, that it needs to bring the unique gifts of the different traditions into a new expression of biblically based, sacramental life.

3. Where will the next generation of ecumenists come from? Many of today’s ecumenists are growing old and grey. I have the impression that seminary formation does not really stress ecumenism, either academically or practically. Would that the emphasis some seminaries are putting into the study of Latin for the sake of celebrating the extraordinary form of the liturgy went into ecumenism. How many young priests are familiar with ecumenical documents such as BEM or the 2000 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification? In the United States ecumenical consortia bring different theological schools together where their students can take courses with students from other traditions. The School of Theology and Ministry at Jesuit Seattle University brings Catholic lay ministers together with students and seminarians from fourteen different Christian denominations. As the late Jesuit Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. said: “When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change.”⁹

4. I’ve mentioned the lack of a eucharistic focus in many Protestant churches today, especially in those new churches in the Global South. Yet the

⁹ *Solidarity Quotes*. Available in: < <http://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/solidarity-quotes.cfm>>. No access date.

Catholic and Orthodox discipline is seen as exclusivist or sectarian by many Protestants. As Leithart points out, Paul's warning about "discerning the body" was concerned not with the theology of the Supper but with factionalism in the church (*Ibid.*, p. 170, 181). Could we encourage moving towards occasional eucharistic hospitality? It is different than intercommunion; the former is personal, occasionally welcoming those non-Catholic Christians who share a eucharistic faith and want to live in communion with us, while intercommunion depends on formal relationships between churches. Occasional eucharistic hospitality might also help some of those from non-liturgical churches to discover the place of the Eucharist in the church's life (RAUSCH, 2013, p. 399-419).

5. Ecumenism always begins with friendship. Thus all the churches need to develop new initiatives on local levels to reach across historical divisions and enter into new relationships. When people from different churches or traditions get to know one another, they no longer remain the "other," but become friends, associates, brothers or sisters in Christ. Where there has been alienation and tension, this will require a change of attitude and a new sense of common commitment to the Gospel. The social mission of the Church offers common ground for addressing together many of the practical problems all our churches face.

Father John Song Yong-min, co-chair of the Theology Committee for the Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches, used the 2017 observance of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation to stress the need for a grass-roots level Christian unity movement. "In our daily lives, we need to meet Christians of different denominations and share our joy as Christians, rather than have theological debates. This real 'dialogue' among us will be the seed of hope for Christian unity."¹⁰ Thus our ecumenical engagement needs to be on multiple levels.

In 2014, a group of German Christians was asked to prepare material for the 2017 celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. They chose the image of a "wall," specifically the Berlin Wall, as a symbol of sin, evil, and division. Father Anthony Currer, who coordinates the Vatican contribution to the week of prayer, remarked that the image of the wall is even more current today, with talk in the U.S. of building a wall along the border with Mexico, the global refugee crisis, and Pope Francis' frequent references to building bridges, not walls. Both the World Council of Church's Faith and Order Commission and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity adopted the German Christians' idea of using prayer to

¹⁰ *Catholics, Protestant scholars in Korea call for ongoing dialogue*, January 2017. Available in: <<http://www.ucanews.com/news/catholic-protestant-scholars-in-korea-call-for-ongoing-dialogue/78116>>. No access date.

bring down walls and the Gospel's call to reconciliation for the January 18-25 octave of prayer for Christian unity.¹¹

Conclusion

Perhaps the most impressive result of the ecumenical movement so far is that the animosity that so often characterized relations between churches has largely disappeared in the years following the Second Vatican Council. Yet regrettably in some parts of the world members of different churches still remain at indifferent if not hostile towards each other; they are unwilling to recognize other Christians as members of the Body of Christ and some engage in an unethical proselytism of those from other churches.

There are also new obstacles to Christian unity, among them new differences in the area of Christian ethics, an increasing secularism that has led to a weakening of many churches and a diminishing of their ecumenical energies, and a temptation to substitute a spiritual ecumenism or cooperation on issues of justice and the integration of creation for visible unity.

These losses in the West, combined with the rapid growth of the “new” churches in the Global South, suggests the need for a “receptive ecumenism” which encourages all the churches to learn from each other. At the same time, all the churches need to develop new initiatives so they might build bridges rather than walls at local levels. All of this suggests the need for a pluriform ecumenism, not just doctrinal, but experiential. Finally, in a world so much in need of the Gospel, let us pray that God will tear down the walls that divide us, so that the world may believe.

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¹¹ WOODEN, Cindy. *Tear down this wall: Ecumenical week focuses on overcoming divisions*, January 2017. Available in: <<http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2017/tear-down-this-wall-ecumenical-week-focuses-on-overcoming-division.cfm>>. No access date.

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