

Theological criteria of recognition and non-recognition from a Lutheran perspective

Risto Saarinen

The story of the German term *Anerkennung* is a short story that begins with Fichte and Hegel and is continued until today in the footsteps of Hegel. However, if we consider the intellectual history of the term recognition as it is expressed through the Latin verbs *agnosco* and *recognosco* and their English equivalents acknowledge and recognize, this history is much longer. This long history is essential for the theological and ecumenical process of recognition, as I show in my new book in detail.¹

I

In this book I make a distinction between three phases of the intellectual and theological history of the concept of recognition. The first phase covers the period from the New Testament to the Middle Ages. During this period, expressions like “recognition of the truth” and “recognition of God” (*agnitio veritatis*, *agnitio Dei*) are often used in the context of conversion. With this connection, the change and transformation of the recognizing subject become emphasized. Also the recognized object can change its status, for instance, when the process of legal adoption was called “recognition of the child” (*agnitio filii*). However, it is the change of the recognizing subject that is highlighted during this first historical period or phase.

The second phase from the medieval period to the Enlightenment is captured with the phrase “promise of self-preservation”. In the feudal recognition ceremony between the lord and his servants, the servants are promised a use of land, food and protection. The lord is also a beneficiary, as he receives hands for labor and military service. The vocabulary of favors, benefits, promises, protection and self-preservation is also prominent in the religious texts of this period. Both the recognizing subject and the recognized object undergo a status change in this mutual bond of recognition.

After the Enlightenment, the act of recognition is predominantly understood as a performative that changes the status of the recognized object. Hegel is still to some extent an adherent of the earlier period. When later Hegelians start to speak about mutual recognition, they mean, however, a composition of two acts which both aim at changing the status of its object. The legal and diplomatic acts of recognition are normally understood in this manner, that is, as the status change of the recognized object. When Schleiermacher says in §109 of his *Glaubenslehre* that God recognizes human beings in the act of justification, he already participates in this third phase of our history.

In the following, I use the distinction between three historical phases to undertake a systematic investigation of the following questions. Is it possible and legitimate today, to go back to the language of the first phase of the early Christianity? Can we still nowadays understand the act of ecumenical recognition as an expression of conversion or, maybe, promise? I am advocating the thesis that we can and should do this even today. In other

¹ For the following, see Risto Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion*, Oxford 2016. I have treated the German terminology in Risto Saarinen, Johann Joachim Spalding und die Anfänge des theologischen Anerkennungsbegriffs, in: *ZThK* 112 (2015), 429-448.

words, a theological and ecumenical recognition does not only concern the object of this act but also the transformation of the subject who recognizes others.

Let us keep in mind that the so-called mutual recognition has a slightly different meaning from that which I am advocating. I can recognize your baptism and you can recognize mine, but in this mutual act the subject is not transforming itself by means of the act. De facto I may become transformed through this mutual recognition, but not through my being the subject but simply because we are both objects of the act performed by the other. My proposal says something slightly different, namely, that the very act of recognition already changes and transforms its subject, the one who recognizes. This is the most ancient paradigm of recognition in Christianity.

II

Why should the first historical phase, that is, the understanding of recognition as conversion, be again our model? The brief reply is that ecumenism through conversion is a classical ecumenical paradigm to which our *Societas* already devoted an entire conference fourteen years ago in Salisbury.² I will, however, give a longer answer and a new argument in favor of this classical paradigm. I will do it with the help of Paul Ricoeur's ecumenical thinking, as it has been recently investigated by Beate Bengard.³

The French Protestant philosopher Ricoeur was interested in ecumenism through his entire career but did not participate in any official dialogues. Instead he displayed sympathy with the French Taizé movement and organized already in 1968 an ecumenical intercommunion service between Protestants and Catholics. Bengard pays attention to a late lecture of Ricoeur, in which the French Protestant philosopher deals with the Lutheran – Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, discussing its ecumenical method. Bengard publishes the German text of the lecture and offers an extensive commentary, in which she connects Ricoeur's thoughts on ecumenism with his general hermeneutics.⁴

According to Ricoeur, the achieved consensus in the doctrine of justification is foundational and necessary for serious ecumenical work. In spite of this praise, he also thinks that the ecumenical potential of the *Joint Declaration* remains inevitably rather limited. This is because Ricoeur thinks that a faith conviction cannot be reduced to a set of objective doctrine in the usual manner of ecumenical documents. In reality, however, the identity of the churches is a narrative identity which emerges in historical processes and remains connected to the perspective of the subject undergoing these processes. A seemingly objective set of doctrines reduces this dynamic, narrative perspective to isolated sentences.⁵

For Ricoeur, the act of personal and communal faith is oriented to the so-called constellations of meaning, which together constitute the perspective of the one who trusts or has faith. Ricoeur compares such constellations to an act of conversion:

² *Bekehrung und Identität: Ökumene als Spannung zwischen Fremdem und Vertrautem* (Beiheft zur *Ökumenischen Rundschau* 73), Frankfurt 2003.

³ Beate Bengard, *Rezeption und Anerkennung: die ökumenische Hermeneutik von Paul Ricoeur im Spiegel aktueller Dialogprozesse in Frankreich*, Göttingen 2015.

⁴ Bengard, *Rezeption und Anerkennung*, 107-190, 329-335.

⁵ Bengard, *Rezeption und Anerkennung*, 329-334 (here the German version of Ricoeur's lecture).

When Paul Claudel, for instance, converts to Catholicism on a Christmas eve, leaning on a pillar of the Cathedrale Notre-Dame in Paris, he does not confess a certain number of sentences from the collection of the articles of faith. Instead, he adheres to the organic whole, having an instinct of its spiritual coherence. He turns himself, so to say, to the Catholicism of his times as a whole, displaying a boldness in faith and trust towards a tradition which is identified by the proper name of a person. The title, the authority and the radiance of this person is regarded as salvific. This is precisely what I mean with the provisory term constellation of meaning. In this manner, the more or less edified doctrinal formulations of great Christian confessions offer themselves to be appropriated in thought and in heart.⁶

For Ricoeur, the decisive ecumenical event is the interpersonal encounter of the faithful. The objective doctrines and texts are important in their capacity to witness to this foundational event. They tell about the friendship and hospitality, the primary sources of the event of approaching one another. Ricoeur relates skeptically to theoretical concepts of unity, as his hermeneutics proceeds from the alterity of the other and the plurality of identities and perspectives. In this manner, the person of the faithful has primary relevance. The abstract texts and conceptions of unity cannot and should not ignore the foundationally personal character of all human beings.⁷

Following these premises, Ricoeur is also skeptical towards the so-called global ethics project of Hans Küng. According to Ricoeur, we cannot speak abstractly about the common ethical doctrines different religions, as each religious conviction understands these teachings within the framework of its own constellation of meaning. Normative texts are not the real issue, but the persons who adhere to these constellations of meaning in a perspectival manner.⁸

Ricoeur's position has some similarities with the Life-and-Work wing of the ecumenical movement which sometimes relates critically to theoretical doctrinal dialogue. On the other hand, Ricoeur does not want to proclaim pragmatism or an anti-intellectual stance. On the contrary; as the leading philosopher of the late 20th century Ricoeur aims at showing that the personal being of all faithful and the narrative identity of faith communities cannot be reduced to isolated doctrinal statements.

III

In my following ecumenical reflections I adopt Ricoeur's insight of ecumenism as an understanding of the constellations of meaning to which the faithful person attaches himself or herself. An attachment to the constellations of meaning is similar to conversion, as these events do not only concern the object or the other but they change and transform myself through the attachment. In this manner, when I recognize others I am also transformed myself. Let me show first that such an insight has, maybe contrary to Ricoeur's view of ecumenism, played a role in the doctrinal talks between Catholics and Lutherans. I now come back to the theory of recognition.

⁶ Bengard, *Rezeption und Anerkennung*, 331-332, quoting Ricoeur. See also *ibid.* pp. 109-110.

⁷ Bengard, *Rezeption und Anerkennung*, 315-328.

⁸ Bengard, *Rezeption und Anerkennung*, 138-144.

In philosophy, the theory of recognition became prominent during the 1990s.⁹ Ecumenists have, however, reflected on this concept extensively already during the 1970s. The point of departure for this reflection was given through a German Catholic proposal of an official recognition of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* in 1980. Among Catholic theologians, Heinrich Fries and Vinzenz Pfnür published theological papers in support of this proposal. The project was further supported, at least to some extent, by prominent theologians like Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger. However, the Catholic church did not finally move to adopt this proposal.¹⁰

One reason frequently given as to why the project failed was that the concept of recognition was not sufficiently elaborated. Others argued that the Catholic understanding of this concept was different from the Lutheran one. While Catholics need an extensive agreement of doctrine as basis of an act of recognition, Lutherans allegedly employ this act for bridging the gap of remaining alterity and plurality. In my new book I present a new analysis and interpretation of this discussion of the 1970s. To put it briefly, I think that Paul Ricoeur is in many ways, though not completely, right in his critical evaluation of doctrinal ecumenism. Let me try to explain this in some detail.

The early ecumenical movement adopted the concept of recognition from the international law. A legal recognition of another state does not reduce the alterity between the states but consolidates it. In similar manner, a Faith and Order discussion paper from 1937 formulates as follows:

To speak of ‘mutual recognition’ is to enter the area of inter-church fellowships. As in the case of civil governments ‘recognition’ is a condition of further relationships, so it is with the Churches. Mutual recognition may be partial or complete. It does not necessarily involve any co-operative action or Corporate Union, though it may be a prerequisite of both.¹¹

A similar legal use of recognition can be found in the so-called *Toronto Declaration* (1950) of the World Council of Churches. According to this declaration, the member churches need not regard other members “as Churches in the true and full sense of the word”. They need, however, recognize Jesus as Lord. In addition, they need to “recognize in other Churches elements of the true Church . . . this mutual recognition obliges them to enter into a serious conversation with each other in the hope that these elements of truth will lead to the recognition of the full truth”.¹²

In this manner, the minimal criterion of membership in the WCC consists in the recognition of a third party, that is, Jesus as Lord, or the true Church. In addition, some mutual recognition of the true elements of other members. However, the recognizing subject need not change its own habits. Generally speaking, the model of legal recognition proceeds from the idea of attaching a certain status to the objects of recognition, not from any transformation of the recognizing subject.

⁹ Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion*, 5-20.

¹⁰ Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion*, 176-182. For the following, see also Peter Gauly, *Katholisches Ja zum Augsburger Bekenntnis?*, Freiburg 1980 and Gerard Kelly, *Recognition: Advancing Ecumenical Thinking*, Frankfurt 1996.

¹¹ *Meanings of Unity*, 18 (Edinburgh 1937 Faith and Order Preparatory Report), quoted from Kelly, *Recognition*, 49-50.

¹² *Toronto Declaration*, quoted from *Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement 1927-1963*, ed. Lukas Vischer, St. Louis 1963, 171-175.

Such legal uses of recognition are typical in my so-called third phase in the history of recognition. The status change of the recognized object is the exemplary form of this phase. Now, the Catholic process of recognizing the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* differs significantly from this typical model. Especially Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger emphasize that recognition is an interpersonal act which has a deep spiritual dimension. Lutheran dialogue partners, for instance, Harding Meyer, adopt this view of interpersonality and spirituality.¹³ The precise theological content of these views remains, however, somewhat vague.

When we are aware of the long history of recognition, however, we can see that the Second Vatican Council readopts the old Latin concept of *agnosco, agnitio*. In the *Decree on Ecumenism* this concept is employed seven times, often in quite significant places. The *Decree* says of non-Catholics that “all who have been justified by faith in baptism are members of Christ’s body, and have a right to be called Christians, and so are deservedly recognized (*agnoscuntur*) as sisters and brothers in the Lord.” It further states of such other Christians that “Catholics must gladly acknowledge (*agnosco*) and esteem the truly Christian endowments which derive from our common heritage ... It is right and salutary to recognize (*agnosco*) the riches of Christ and the virtuous deeds in the lives of others.”¹⁴

In this almost Ricoeurian manner, the *Decree on Ecumenism* highlights the interpersonal nature of recognition. The Latin word *agnosco* has also a certain emphasis on the subject; for this reason, the act of recognition emphasizes the attitude and openness of Catholics in their recognition of others. This openness is also visible when the *Decree* says that Catholics “must recognize (*agnoscendum est*) the admirable way in which they [the theological traditions of the eastern churches] have their roots in holy scripture”.¹⁵ Such acts of recognition do not concern merely the legal status of their object but they witness to the interpersonal procedure in which the recognizing subject declares its own openness and new perspective.

This interpersonal use is also typical for the first steps of papal ecumenism in the 1960s. Pope Paul VI considers in his talk to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul 1967 that charity can aid us “to recognize the sameness of faith underlying the differences of vocabulary”. The primates of East and West should seek communion “by mutual recognition of each other and mutual respect for each other as pastors of that part of the flock of Christ which is entrusted to them”.¹⁶ In this words we can hear the interpersonal character and spiritual nature of recognition. It primarily concerns the speaker’s own openness, not the status change of the object.

¹³ Walter Kasper, Was bedeutet das: Katholische Anerkennung der Confessio Augustana?, in: Katholische Anerkennung des Augsburgischen Bekenntnisses?, ed. Harding Meyer, Frankfurt 1977; Joseph Ratzinger, Anmerkungen zur Frage einer Anerkennung der Confessio Augustana durch die katholische Kirche, MThZ 29 (1978), 225-237; Harding Meyer, Anerkennung – ein ökumenischer Schlüsselbegriff, in ders. Versöhnte Verschiedenheit, Frankfurt 1998, 120-136.

¹⁴ Unitatis redintegratio, 3-4, 9-10.

¹⁵ Unitatis redintegratio, 16-17.

¹⁶ Doing the Truth in Charity, ed. T. F. Stransky & J. B. Sheerin, New York 1982, 183-185.

With the help of our long history of recognition we may thus conclude that the Second Vatican Council highlights again the old insight of *agnitio* as the openness and transformation of the recognizing subject. In the German discussion regarding the recognition of the *Augsburg Confession*, the contributions of Kasper and Ratzinger likewise focus on this interpersonal and subject-oriented meaning of recognition. In this manner, the Catholic-Lutheran doctrinal ecumenism comes closer to the dynamic perspective of one's own trust as advocated by Paul Ricoeur. The tradition of *agnosco* is thus fairly close to the ideas of conversion and perspectival constellation of meaning.

It needs to be added, however, that the spiritual openness of the recognizing subject is only one step in the elaborate process of recognition outlined by Ratzinger, Kasper and Heinrich Fries. In addition to this openness, they also require considerable theological convergence which should be clearly formulated. In this manner, the ecumenical dialogue is also very much concerned with the theological position of the *Augsburg Confession* as compared to those of the Catholic church. Let us elaborate also this side somewhat closer.

IV

In an important essay of 1973, Heinrich Fries attempts to define the theological concept of recognition. For him, the process of recognition assumes the alterity of the other. This alterity can, however, be considered as positive opportunity. Together with alterity, the process needs a common ground between the parties. This common ground can overcome the problems resulting from alterity. While recognition primarily occurs between persons, these persons represent positions and doctrines. For this reason, there is a partial and non-reducible overlapping between persons and impersonal matters as objects of recognition. The recognizing subject must be aware that she is recognizing persons and non-personal positions at the same time.¹⁷

Such ecumenical situation of recognition means, so Fries, a unity in legitimate diversity. Due to the common ground we can speak of unity which is capable of transforming the alterity so that it is legitimate. The process of recognition does not abolish alterity but transforms it to a legitimate state. The process does not, however, merely justify the status quo, but it transforms both parties through the act of recognition. Finally, it is the common ground that makes the ecumenical recognition possible.

This conception of Fries is similar to the later Lutheran conception of a "unity is reconciled diversity". It also resembles the so-called "differentiated consensus", a method employed in the Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* of 1998. In a differentiated consensus, both parties approve a common doctrinal text. In addition, both parties attach to this text a confessional addition or commentary which highlights the distinctive positions of each party. However, this commentary also explains how these positions are compatible with the common ground shared by both parties.

We saw that Paul Ricoeur was not quite satisfied with the ecumenical procedure of *Joint Declaration*, as he considered it to consist overwhelmingly of objective statements of doctrine. The perspectival constellation of meaning, resulting inevitably from the alterity, is in some sense preserved as the so-called differentiation of agreement. It is, however, secondary in the sense that the moving force of the ecumenical unity is rather given by the

¹⁷ For the following, see Heinrich Fries, *Was heisst Anerkennung der kirchlichen Ämter?*, SdZ 98 (1973), 507-515

common ground expressed as text. In the light of Ricoeur's narrative identity, it would be more adequate if the perspectival openness of the subject would be considered as the primary force of ecumenism, as is allegedly the case with the French Taizé movement admired by Ricoeur.

Given our discussion on the three phases of recognition, we could defend the *Joint Declaration*, arguing that it is nevertheless a late achievement of that Catholic ecumenism which started in Vatican II and emphasizes one's own openness and readiness to spiritual renewal. While this aspect may remain secondary in the method of differentiated consensus, the method at least assumes the lasting alterity and perspectival approach to doctrine. The Catholic approach further admits that we are not merely dealing with the status change of the objects recognized but need also a personal transformation in the ecumenical process.

At the same time, Ricoeur is nevertheless right in holding that the ideas of personal conversion and perspectival constellation of meaning remain secondary in today's doctrinal ecumenism. The Lutheran – Roman Catholic dialogue, for instance, spends most of its effort in the refinement of complicated historical and systematic doctrinal talks. In such talks, both parties develop a rationalized account of their confessional convictions. This account remains oriented to the objects of faith and does not employ its personal and spiritual treasures.

Obviously, Ricoeur is not claiming that today's ecumenists are not spiritual or pious enough. Such conclusion would be as false and absurd as the reverse conclusions claiming that Ricoeur has no understanding for the intellectual work of doctrinal theologians or that he would be an anti-intellectual romantic or relativist. On the contrary, a Ricoeurian view takes extremely seriously the perspectival nature of faith and ecclesial life and wants to explain it as adequately as possible.

As an ecumenist, I would like to propose two different ways which may lead closer to the nature of faith as explained by Ricoeur. Let me call them the secure way and the ambitious way. The *secure way* means simply a division of labor between ecumenical experts on the one hand and church leaders on the other. The experts can analyze theological issues and make different proposals. They also need to say that ecumenical work is not merely theological mathematics but it is fundamentally concerned with the concrete recognition of others in their alterity. Therefore, the fundamental issue is interpersonal and spiritual and it finally belongs to the domain of church leaders.

In this division of labor the church leaders trust the expertise of professional ecumenists. At the same time, the leaders must also make their own proposals and take initiatives, sometimes even unexpected ones. Because the recognition of others is an interpersonal, spiritual and existential issue, the spiritual leaders need to use their own social capital and spiritual discernment. Sometimes the experts may even say that something means a new turn in the policy of the church, but this should not prevent the church leaders to take creative steps of interpersonal recognition.

The *ambitious way* gives the ecumenical experts an additional task, namely, the elaboration of subjective and interpersonal matters so that their dynamics can be better understood. Such a task may look similar to Ricoeur's hermeneutical procedures. In addition to their theological competence, the experts would need to have competence in social sciences, psychology and philosophy. As a discipline, such ecumenical theology might belong to pastoral theology rather than to systematic theology.

It may be that none of us is really competent to proceed on such ambitious way, simply because we do not have the intellectual capacity of Paul Ricoeur. As a theoretical option, however, I do think that it is possible to understand the group dynamics of Christian churches

in their evaluation of alterity much better than we do today. Such understanding would give us better information about the so-called constellations of meaning available in our communal and individual faith convictions.

In sum, the most important theological criterion in our recognition of others is our own openness and readiness to change. Only such people who can practice metanoia with regard to themselves are capable of recognizing other people and become recognized by them. This insight is no modern invention but it is the core content of the biblical Greek expression *epignosis tes aletheias* as well as its Latin equivalents *agnitio veritatis* and *agnitio Dei*.¹⁸In Lutheran theology, our trust in God is the source of our own openness.

¹⁸ Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion*, offers a detailed history of these concepts and expressions in theological texts.