

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs

## *Is Ecumenism all about Grey?*

### *Dynamics and Methods in the Ecumenical Movement*

*It seems that the main divisions of the Church (451, 1054, 1517) follow each other in five hundred year terms. It seems, on the other hand, that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries bring about a move to the opposite direction: a tendency for the unity of the Church. In this century of ecumenism, a widespread consensus appears to ripen, that Jesus Christ wants that all may be one, and that this process is led by the Holy Spirit. The question now is not any more whether to be engaged in the ecumenical movement, but rather how to do it according to the will of God. And the question for those who are taken up by this energising wave remains whether this really is a meaningful purpose to strive for and to dream about, or whether it is all about creating grey from the colours, or from black and white.*

#### THE SCANDAL OF DISUNITY

In the divine feast, the Church is nothing less (and nothing more) than the foretaste of God's purpose to reconcile all things in Jesus Christ. From an eschatological perspective, the Church is a dynamic sign of 'already' and 'not yet'. We are already one, but not yet fully and totally, and not yet in a visible way. Among the many phenomena of human disorder, the silhouette of God's design faintly occurs.

In enlisting the four characteristics of the Church (one, holy, catholic and apostolic), the sin against *catholicity* (universality) is denominationalism, localism and parochialism. *Holiness* requires the conversion of the churches, a diversity creatively integrated and transformed.

The ecumenical movement addresses most of all the forth, the *oneness* of the Church. Historically it has been doing so through three main branches, *Mission* (bringing the good news to all), *Life and Work* (answering to human need), and *Faith and Order* (questions of truth). Let us have a look at the methodology of this third focus: is it creating grey by mixing the colourful opinions into a kind of consensus, or is it about something more elegant and dignified?

#### TRUTH: UNITY AND DIVERSITY

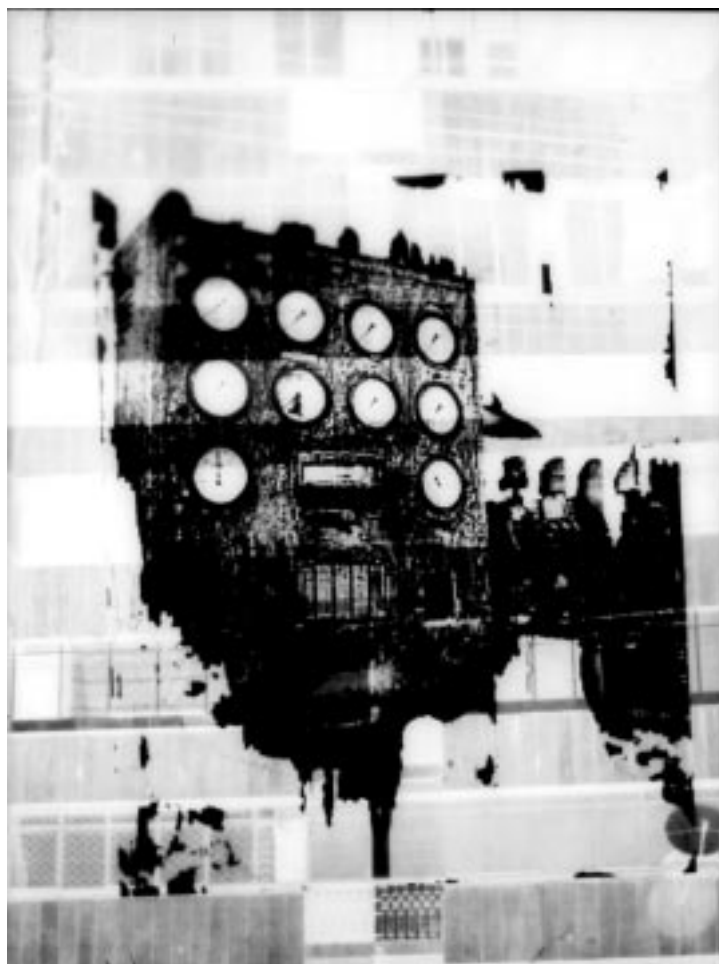
In questions of truth, the first two commandments should guide us: 'you shall have no other gods before me'; 'you shall not make for yourself a graven image'. We, individually and in community, often commit the sin of idolatry in this respect, having other gods than the one God of dialogue and love.

Also, we often make graven images of traditions, usages and culturally conditioned understandings, by universalising our particular experiences and opinions about less than ultimate things. On the

contrary, there is certainly a *hierarchy of truths*, a legitimate variety in the theological expressions of doctrine.

The divine message revealed in the person of Jesus Christ is that the truth understood in a Christian way is not propositional in the first place (it is not about statements), but *relational* (being in a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ) and dialogical (standing in the divine dialogue of the Holy Trinity), understood and lived out in a community, the Church.

The question in case of truth understood as propositional would be: 'how can we build a sufficient *consensus* needed for unity?' The question of truth imagined as dialogical is: 'how can we build sufficient *trust* to live with more difference?' Thus, the ecumenical approach to the Church and also to each other is not about finding the lowest common denominator, compromising the (absolute) truth entrusted to us, but about progressing together towards a fuller understanding of truth, in community.



## EMPTY-HANDED

It is not our claim on the truth which is absolute, but the claim of the truth on us, says Jürgen MOLTSMANN. We do not possess the truth, but the truth possesses us: the radical mentality and attitude is not about trying to grasp it and then about clinging on to it, but the way of *kenosis* or emptying-out, as a state and as a method. The Logos has to become incarnated, Jesus Christ has to be forsaken on the cross, and the grain of events has to die to bring new life. "Under the cross we all stand empty-handed" (Jürgen MOLTSMANN).

Our church mothers and church fathers imparted to us the golden rule of the approach to truth and community: in essentials unity, in others diversity, and in everything love. The matrix of *agreement* and *care* helps us to systematize our commitments and opinions: first, there are the things in which we agree and we care, and this is the basis for our unity.

Secondly, there are the things in which we agree but we do not care, and thirdly, there are the things where we do not agree, but – fortunately – we do not care either. These things are called *adiaphora* in theology, the loci for non-theological, cultural and contextual factors. Finally, there are things where we do not agree, although we do care. This is the area of our ecumenical investigation and action.

## LOVE: DIFFERENT EMPHASES

We are not yet the ones who affirm each other in front of God, but we are called to be the ones who acknowledge each other to be affirmed by God. It is not *philia* which we are called for (a love towards something beautiful and similar), but *agape* (the creative love of the alien and different).

Dreaming about the united Church of the (as near as possible) future is one of the most exciting engagements

a responsible theologian can be occupied with. Some imagine it as a *spiritual harmony*, but the ecumenical movement affirmed that our unity should be visible for the world and for ourselves. Others emphasize that it is the *Gospel* rightly preached and the *sacraments* rightly administered which constitute a basis for feeling ourselves belonging to the same Christian community.

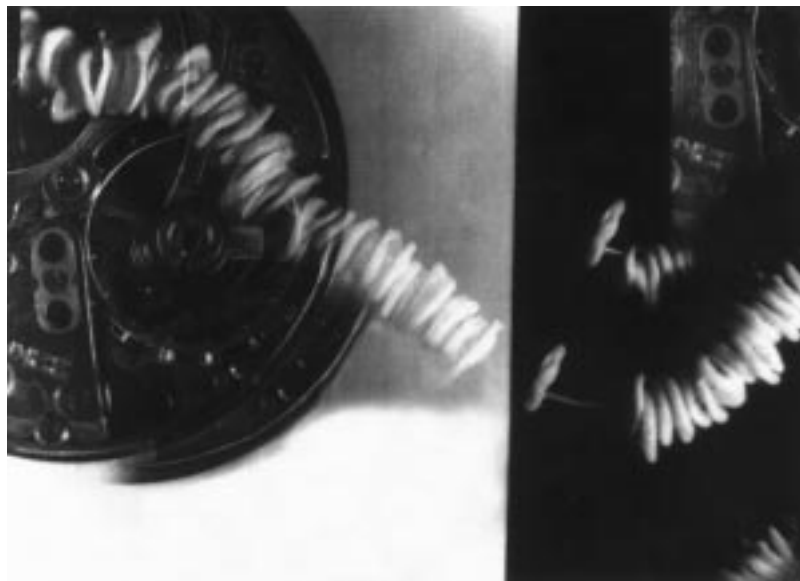
Again others put a stress on the *episcopal structure* of the Church, blossoming in an apostolic succession. Connected to this is the underlined importance of our participation in the *living tradition*. The Life and Work movement witnessed to the slogan: doctrine divides – *service* unites. Another paradigm can be the restoration of the *New Testament Church*.

## MODELS OF COMMUNITY

There are other clarified vectors than these six mentioned. The resultants of their forces point to three main directions: organic unity, conciliar fellowship, and the community of communities. *Organic unity* was the model endorsed by the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1961: "a fully committed fellowship of all God's people in each place, united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages."

The WCC Nairobi Assembly in 1975 further developed this concept, and offered a partly parallel solution: "a *conciliar fellowship* of local churches which are themselves truly united." The united and uniting churches are the pioneers of this model.

The Roman Catholic Church offered the model of the *community of communities* for consideration, where we find a plurality of types of communities. It is important to emphasize that basically everyone in the ecumenical movement thinks about unification in stages, where unity grows before and after each step.



## DIALOGUE: AN ECUMENICAL GRAMMAR

It might sound strange to mention linguistic and stylistic issues in this context, but according to William LAZARETH, a leading Faith and Order theologian, the object of the ecumenical movement is to improve our grammar. The improvement of our grammar is also a process, being unfolded in steps and stages.

An important point of a paradigm shift was when we started to understand and interpret the problems and stumbling blocks as *challenges*. For those happy languages where this expression exists, it means 'a difficult, demanding, stimulating and inspiring task'; or 'an invitation or call to take part in a game'.

Which task can be more inspiring (also for our humour and playfulness) than to take part in the divine and human game of recovering the unity in the body of Christ? The *kairos*, the time proper and apt, is here for that.

Another grammatical development is the penetration of *dialogue* in the theological discourse. In the beginning of the ecumenical movement we thought that dialogue is the means and unity is the goal. Now the recognition is getting more and more acceptance that it is rather the other way around: unity is the means, and dialogue is the goal, the authentic way of existence for the Church, as an icon of the flow of dialogue within the Triune God.

A whole ethics of dialogue is getting its shape during this development. Its cornerstone is the golden rule of dialogue, the *hermeneutics of goodwill*: we should always listen to the best intentions of the others, receive and interpret them at their best.

The most deeply prepared, most widely spread and most thoroughly commented ecumenical document, the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), published in 1982 is a paramount example of a *common new language* appearing in the Church discourse. The maturing of consensus, the inspired shaping of the text and its assisted reception make it the common masterpiece of the branches and denominations of Christianity.

## SPIRITUALITY: SEEKING FOR METAPHORS

We talked about the scandal of disunity, 'truthing in love' and emptying-out, the models and methods of unity. But the longing and working for unity is also a spiritual path, not only a dogmatic or ecclesiological one. We should first meditate on the stigma of division, trying to discern the human disorder and to decipher God's design, and interiorise the *scandal* of disunity. This scandal will lead us on our path in finding our common ways; this scandal will be our engine to reconcile all things in Christ.

Secondly, we should meditate on the incarnation and abandonment of Jesus Christ, all of us standing under the cross empty-handed. As a fruit, this will give us the methodology to engage in dialogue in a *kenotic* way with our co-members of the body of Christ, helping to identify ourselves with them.

The ecumenical adventure, however, is not only about models, paradigms, methods and grammars, but about something more poetic as well: metaphors. Metaphor is a key word in the present-day literary theory, something similar to what we, Christians, understand as icons: win-



dows to the transcendental, to the divine. The third and fourth spiritual step is earmarked by two metaphors.

The *body of Christ* is a Biblical metaphor for the Church, something to meditate on as maybe the most useful circumscription of our community for the ecumenical endeavour. As members of the same body (the only body, in fact), we are intended for mutual nurturing and correction through empathy and compassion.

## THE LIGHT AND THE RAINBOW

Finally, we take the other metaphor from the world of physics, notably from optics. Isaac NEWTON made an experiment with the *light* and two prisms, which can give a possible direction in answering our original question, whether ecumenism is all about grey.

White light is composed of a continuous band of colours (spectrum), which appears in the same pattern as the seven colours of a rainbow. White light becomes the spectrum by refraction as it passes through a prism. Isaac NEWTON let a beam of sunlight pass through a glass prism and observed the white light spectrum. Then he took another identical glass prism and let the white light spectrum (rainbow) pass through it again, and he received the beam of white light again.

In conclusion, the white light contains all the colours of the rainbow, and if at least one is missing, it is impossible to receive the pure white light again. Furthermore, the white as a colour is only visible if it can contain all the colours of the rainbow.

This metaphor of light and rainbow is the fourth one to meditate on in our spiritual path. The foremothers and forefathers of the ecumenical movement made the claim of 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation'. Why should we aim at a lesser goal than the unity of the Church in this generation, to see the radiating light again, not just the rainbow?



### Suggested Literature

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