

DIALOGUE: UNI-DIRECTIONAL OR MULTI-DIRECTIONAL?

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It is obvious to any reader of ecumenical literature that bi-lateral dialogue has become a feature of the life of most Churches in the past 30 years. It is also clear that the aims of dialogues differ from one another. Here are some brief definitions of aim, taken from various reports:

1. develop a climate of mutual understanding . . . (RC/Pentecostal)
2. set in motion a conversation and encounter . . . (Baptist/Reformed)
3. recommend ways to improve mutual knowledge, respect and co-operation between our churches. (Baptist/Lutheran)
4. restoration of full communion . . . (Orthodox/Roman Catholic)
5. full unity and communion. (Eastern Orthodox/Oriental Orthodox) (1)

It is probably true that all dialogues begin with an attempt to create better understanding between the partners (2) especially where there has been little communication between the partner Churches for generations or maybe centuries. Some dialogues are content with this process, perhaps adding a second aim of seeking points of agreement in faith, church order and missionary purpose. Other dialogues, such as the fourth and fifth mentioned above, go much further and seek a full unity, however the word “full” may be defined.

One could say that these aims are on a continuum from “now” (a situation of separation) to the “goal”, which is unity. All are heading in the same general direction, hence “uni-directional” in the title of this address. It seems to me however that we need to develop our concept of unity in several ways and to re-conceptualise the process of getting there. Let me illustrate this with three examples.

First, as well as moving FORWARD to unity we should be moving BACKWARD to unity, i.e. to a greater appropriation of the biblical and patristic faith. No longer can we say that some Churches live by Scripture “only” while others don't. Nor can we say that learning from the Church fathers is the province of some traditions and not others. All of us are in process of appropriating “the faith once delivered to the saints”. (3) Some dialogues have described this as “koinonia in time”, e.g. a Methodist/Roman Catholic document. (4) As we all play the role of disciples – of learners – we are better able to learn from one another. As the late Prof. George Yule often used to say, in dialogue we “together seek the fullness of the Faith”.

A second example is placing dialogue in the wider context of the search for human unity. Just as Churches have, in past centuries, hurled anathemas at each other, so national leaders this past week have hurled threats of violence and death at each other. The disunity of the Church is not entirely divorced from divisions of culture, ideology, language and ethnicity. It has often been remarked that when the ecumenical movement identified racism as a widespread and pernicious disease, the history of ecumenism took a new turn. In a similar way dialogues need to look outward to our common calling to witness to a divided world even as they address bi-lateral (and sometimes technical) issues of theology and church history. In Australia the increasing gap between the richest in society and the poor in society cannot be

ignored. The words of the Hebrew prophet ring in our ears: “. . . they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way.” (5)

A third example is that unity is in essence an eschatological vision. Dialogue and ecumenism will not create the unity we seek. It is when all things are summed up in Christ that we shall behold that unity which is God’s will for us and for the whole creation. The source of this vision is in the life of the Holy Trinity, which is a life of distinct persons bound together in perfect unity. And this unity is not a static thing: it is a constant reaching out to embrace the whole creation. As Joachim Drumm has said: our communion with each other “is modelled on the communion of the triune God and based on participation in the divine life; this communion is brought to perfection and made possible in a special way in Jesus Christ, and in his Church is realised by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (6) When we apply this by analogy to the Church, we see that unity does not abolish diversity but holds together the variety of humanity and the geographical and cultural distinctness of Churches around the world. As Cardinal Kasper puts it: “Just as in the Trinity . . . the one divine nature exists only in the relationship between the Father, Son and Spirit, the same holds true by analogy for the one Church, that it exists only in and through the local churches. . . . From this ‘communio’ the Church is therefore an image of the Trinity. Diversity in unity and unity in diversity would be a better expression of the Trinitarian understanding of unity than a monolithic model of unity.” (7) I shall return to this point about diversity toward the end of my remarks.

What I am urging is that we regard the process of dialogue as an element in the work of God by which all things in heaven and earth (8) are brought to fulfilment in the life of the Spirit. Far from diminishing the importance of ecclesiology, this Trinitarian, biblical, patristic, ethical and eschatological approach heightens the role of the Church as an instrument of the divine purpose to reconcile all things in Christ. (9) According to the reports of dialogues which I have read, ecclesiology has emerged more and more as a central topic. In 1990 an international survey said: “. . . almost all bi-lateral dialogues in the last ten years have moved towards work on ecclesiology. What is remarkable is the degree of convergence in the way they speak about both the nature and purpose of the Church.” (10) As this concentration on ecclesiology has developed, it is the concept of *koinonia* or *communio* which has come to the fore. The major Faith and Order world conference at Santiago de Compostela in 1993 was another sign that this concept is a rich one for the further development of ecumenical ecclesiology and of Christian unity. Paul-Werner Scheele is almost euphoric when he comments: “With a view to divided Christianity, this word is a key to understanding the situation and a signal of the beginning of complete unity.” (11) At the Eighth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues held in France under the auspices of the World Council of Churches in 2001, this was the basis of a major presentation by Matthias Turk of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In an earlier WCC report the following elements were listed under the heading of *koinonia*.

1. Confession of faith in word and life.
2. Baptism which entails a calling to bear witness in the world.
3. Eucharist into which the needs of the world are brought.
4. Ordained ministry which serves the community and strengthens it for the work of service.
5. Sharing of goods both spiritual and material, and structural bonds of communion which enable a common witness and response to the needs of the world. (12)

The ecumenical situation today is such that very few dialogue partners would deny that all or most of these elements are part of the meaning of *koinonia* and need to be addressed in dialogue. The exceptions would be the Salvation Army, Quakers, Seventh Day Adventists and perhaps Pentecostals. The difficulty we face – which has been present for some years, if not decades – is that not all Churches place the same weight on the various elements. For example, in the paper of Turk which I mentioned, a large portion is devoted to the search for agreement on ordained ministry. A presentation by a Reformed theologian, on the other hand, would more likely concentrate on agreement in essentials of faith in the sense of spelling out the significance of biblical and credal faith.

Time will not permit me to explore further how the elements of *koinonia* interact and form part of the ecumenical agenda, but I would pause to comment that we do already have aspects of *koinonia* in the relations between our Churches. Rather than existing in separation, we do meet, we do pray together, we do explore our unity in Christ, we do engage in mission together in thousands of localities around the world, and we do recognise each other – although not completely as yet – as members of the one Body of Christ. As Turk comments: “*Communio* makes it possible to put into practice what is already possible, instead of forcing us to demand ecumenically what still lies a long way off.” (13)

When I say we have already reached, in some ways, the longed-for *koinonia* in Christ, I do not mean we have reached the goal. We cannot rest on our laurels. For some people, the achievement of what is called “reconciled diversity” is enough. I am not one of them. The phrase is not specific as to what diversity means, in what ways it is desirable, or what its legitimate limits might be. There is no question that we need to be reconciled to God and to each other, but we should not rest content with a diversity which allows important matters of doctrine, of church order or of mission to remain unresolved. It is for this reason, I believe, that Archbishop Stylianos, who chairs with me the Greek Orthodox/Uniting Church dialogue in Australia, is strenuous in his critique of the idea of “reconciled diversity”. Matthias Turk suggests that the phrase “reconciled diversity within unity” would be a better phrase (14) and I would agree with that. The goal of unity is something that is not just optional for the Churches: it is a command from the Lord. Although many dialogues are at the stage that we might describe as the “hard slog”, we cannot give up because of that. As the World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela said, “there is no turning back, either from the goal of visible unity or from the one ecumenical movement.” (15)

There are various reasons why the task of dialogue seems to get harder. We could each make our own list of reasons. One reason is that dialogues often deal with the less complicated issues first, and reach ready agreement on these. But the harder issues such as ordained ministry, authority in the Church and so on must be faced. Another reason is that dialogue alone cannot “solve” the problems of separation between Churches. Generations or centuries of separation mean that church life has developed in very different ways and the process of reconciling is more complicated than many people in the 1960s and 1970s believed. I am referring to what is often called the process of “reception”. Receiving of reports and agreed statements by Church commissions, synods and so on is only PART of the process of reception. For Churches to come together in unity the points of agreement must be received by members of the Churches and put into practice locally as well as in districts, nations and regions. As I say, this process is proving more difficult than most of us anticipated. As a word of encouragement, let me remind you that union discussions between Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians in Australia began just after World War I and it took until 1977

for union to be achieved. But it happened! The report from the 2001 conference at Annecy-le-Vieux described some of the difficulties of reception in this way:

“One of the challenges facing dialogue participants and their sponsoring Churches or communions is how to help the wider constituency to journey with them. All too often . . . members of the church at large receive the final product of the dialogue, the final statement, with little accompanying help with the background, new language, exchange of ideas and changed perspectives that have enabled the progress leading to agreement.” (16)

This is an issue where the collective wisdom of this gathering may help us all. Reception is one of the “directions” which I would include in my “multi-directional” concept of dialogue. It is not only a tactical or procedural question but a spiritual and theological challenge.

Another direction, which I haven’t time to develop in detail, is the need for networking and cross-fertilising of dialogue groups. We saw this yesterday in the suburbs of Melbourne where a meeting of several dialogue groups, Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting came together to deal with issues which concerned them all. This networking is not simply on one level – say, a nation. There is a need for international, regional, national and local dialogue groups to refer to each other. At Annecy-le-Vieux we spent a good deal of time on this matter, but some problems had been identified years earlier at a similar conference in 1990. They expressed it in this way:

“In some dialogues, because of the ecclesiology of the partners, the goal of unity and its implementation is seen primarily on the universal level.” (The Roman Catholic Church comes to mind – my insertion) “Other dialogues see their goal in enabling steps toward unity on national or regional level, while some among them emphasise at the same time the necessity of preserving a degree of inner coherence in the ecumenical relationships of their respective world communions.” (17)

A concrete example is the agreement that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has with the Episcopal Church concerning ministry. This agreement has been seen as threatened by emerging agreements which Lutheran Churches are developing with Churches which do not have bishops. Another example, a hypothetical one this time, would be if the Uniting Church in Australia were to agree to a statement on the eucharist which was seen to be incompatible with statements made by a dialogue involving the World Methodist Council (of which the UCA is a member).

I pass these issues over to you to think about, and I close with a plea for the development of a new generation of theologians, pastors and lay people who will take up the work of dialogue. Some of us have been at the job for a long time and must soon hand it on to younger people. The final paragraph of the report from Annecy-le-Vieux put it this way:

“We are moving away from the time when there were many who pioneered or grew up with the dialogues. Such experience and expertise is less common today. The communions and Churches may wish to explore ways to raise up new generations of ecumenical theologians, and induct a new generation into the ecumenical movement.” (18)

The practice of the Australian dialogue between the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Uniting Church is one approach to this. At each meeting of our annual dialogue we are joined by two theological students from St Andrew’s Orthodox Theological Seminary and two

students from United Theological College. Some of them, we hope, will catch a vision of Christian unity and will commit themselves to the work of dialogue. There is much that remains to be done.

ENDNOTES

- (1) *Fifth Forum on Bilateral Conversations: Report*, Faith and Order Paper no.156, WCC Publications, 1991, p 45. The forum was held in Budapest, Hungary, 18-22 October 1990. This volume is referred to below as Budapest 1990.
 - (2) Budapest 1990, p 51.
 - (3) Jude 3.
 - (4) Budapest 1990, p 46.
 - (5) Amos 2: 7.
 - (6) Quoted by Matthias Turk in his paper “Communio as Unity: a key concept of ecumenical dialogue”, *Eighth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues: The implications of regional bilateral agreements for the international dialogues of Christian World Communions*, Faith and Order Paper no. 190, WCC Publications, 2002, p 14. This forum was held at John XXIII Centre, Annecy-le-Vieux, France 14-19 May 2001. This volume is referred to below as Annecy 2001.
 - (7) Quoted by Turk, Annecy 2001, p 16.
 - (8) Cf. Colossians 1: 20.
 - (9) Cf. II Corinthians 5: 19.
 - (10) Budapest 1990, p 45.
 - (11) Quoted by Turk, Annecy 2001, p 14.
 - (12) Budapest 1990, p 48.
 - (13) Annecy 2001, p 18.
 - (14) Annecy 2001, p 21.
 - (15) Quoted by Turk, Annecy 2001, p 18.
 - (16) The report from Annecy 2001, p 62.
 - (17) Budapest 1990, p 51.
 - (18) The report from Annecy 2001, p 65.
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