

UNITY IN RECONCILED DIVERSITY- COP OUT OR RAINBOW CHURCH?

This essay traces the development of the ecumenical concept of unity in reconciled diversity from its origins in the 1970's. It looks at ways in which it has subsequently been interpreted, received and critiqued. It makes suggestions as to how the concept might be further refined and tightened up in order to meet such criticism and lead to growth in authentic unity.

Until the early 1970's the generally assumed goal of the Ecumenical Movement was the *organic* unity of all Christians, 'all in each place' as the oft-quoted New Delhi statement of 1961 put it. Often the Church of South India was taken as a paradigm, three denominations letting go of denominationalism in favour of a new unity. The paschal aspects of such a transformation were often extolled. Christians had to die to divisive identities and rise to the new life of the unity willed by Christ for His Church.

From the early 1970's an alternative ecumenical vista appeared on the horizon, that of *unity in reconciled diversity*, a unity of previously divided denominations in mutual acceptance and communion in faith, life and mission, which would not, however, involve the renunciation of denominational traditions but would preserve them. Sometimes, this was envisaged simply as a step on the road to organic unity, sometimes as a longer term development.

The concept was first discussed in the Faith and Order Movement in the mid-1970's in a consultation about bilateral ecumenical dialogues. A Working Paper argued that

'We regard the multiform confessional heritage as being legitimate because the truth of the one faith seeks a great variety of forms in expression in history. We do not forget that these...are also marked by errors that have threatened the unity of the Church...a heritage transposed *adequately into new historical situations*¹ remains legitimate and must be safeguarded...Confessional loyalty and ecumenical commitment are not contradictory, but, paradoxical though it may seem, are one and the same thing'².

This final sentence I can affirm from my own experience. The more I have delved into the treasures of the past of my own Methodist tradition, the more I have become convinced that its potential will only be fulfilled in dialogue with the rest of those who hold to the Great Tradition of the Universal Church, expressed in its trinitarian faith and the historic creeds³.

The Lutherans particularly espoused concept of unity in reconciled diversity. The Lutheran World Federation did a lot of work on it. The Lutherans were influenced by their own Augsburg Confession with its insistence that it was sufficient for the unity of the Church that the Gospel be purely preached and the gospel sacraments be properly administered. Lutheranism itself manifests an extraordinary degree of unity in reconciled diversity with its mixture of state and free churches, episcopally governed and non-episcopal churches, churches that retained more of the medieval mass than did the Book of Common Prayer and churches that are liturgically austere Protestant, yet all united in the fundamental doctrine of the faith.

¹ my italics.

² para 30, cited in Y. Congar, *Diversity and Communion*, ET 1984, pp. 155-6.

³ As I have tried to do in *Love Bade me Welcome-A British Methodist Perspective on the Church* (2002), and in several articles.

There was also considerable Roman Catholic input into the concept. That church has its own form of reconciled diversity in terms of the communion of various eastern churches, each having separate liturgical, canonical, theological and spiritual traditions, with Rome. In the post Vatican II era, Roman Catholic ecumenists such as Yves Congar insisted that Rome should recognise the theological emphases of the eastern churches, Orthodox as well as Catholic, as complementary to and not contradictory of those of the Catholic Church in the West. Congar explored the extent to which it might be possible to receive the Augsburg Confession in a similar way⁴. He examined the concept of reconciled diversity from the Catholic perspective, referring to the 1974 Report cited above. He also cited the related proposal of Cardinal Willebrands that different traditions represented different *typoi* or styles of Christian life, each characterised by a particular theological method and perspective, a characteristic canonical discipline, a tradition of spirituality and devotion and a characteristic liturgical expression, all of which, as Congar commented, ‘should not be abandoned but kept within the community of the one Church’⁵. Since then, John Paul II in *Oriente Lumen* and *Ut Unum Sint*, and his teaching on the ‘exchange of gifts’ has lent a guarded degree of support to the concept.

Some prominent ecumenists were much less enthusiastic about the new concept. Lesslie Newbigin wondered whether it was a matter of cheap grace within an ecumenical context. He wrote that ‘the proposals cost nothing and they achieve what they cost. The Church is the company of those who are under the obligation of love and faithfulness to bring every thought, every activity and every visible form of organisation into subjection to him...this means going the way of the Cross, the way of gain through loss, of life through death’⁶.

A generation later, the authors of that trenchant recall to the ecumenical imperative, *The Princeton Proposal*, were also sceptical. They stressed what they called the ‘new unity in Christ’ transcending all human divisions. They majored on the New Delhi call for the unity of ‘all in each place’. They said.

‘It is easy to lose sight of this fundamental Christian truth. We may rightly celebrate diversity and difference. But diversity is easily conscripted to sinful purposes: and it is not easy to separate the diversity that should be valued from the diversity that must be deplored.. .. The Apostolic message does not affirm diversity for its own sake. It calls men and women of every human origin into a holy community and confers on them a new, shared identity in confession of the crucified and risen Lord. The life of the Church calls for continuous critical sifting and reconstruction of human identity. Elements that constitute our differences must be questioned, judged, reconciled and reconfigured within the unity of the Body of Christ’⁷.

Newbigin and others were rightly pointed to the possibility that the concept might be taken to validate an easy going acceptance of variety without any real spiritual wrestling with truth. However, organic unity has not always delivered as might be hoped, as witness the particularly steep decline of the United Reformed Church since its inception and the loss of missionary élan within the Church of North India⁸.

⁴ Congar, *Diversity*, pp. 145-8.

⁵ Congar, *Diversity*, p. 155.

⁶ *Mid-Stream*, 1984, p.2.

⁷ C.Braaten, and R. Jensen, (eds.) *In One Body through the Cross* (2003), pp. 27-8

⁸ S.B.Joshua, ‘The Future of the Ecumenical Movement: From the Perspective of a Member of a United Church’, in T. Best and G. Gassmann, (eds.) *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia* (1994), pp. 146-152.

A case continues to be made for unity in reconciled diversity. Paul Avis, in his most recent book, argues that that theme of diversity is related to the doctrine of creation, that 'diversity characterises the human response, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to the unfathomable richness and splendour of the Gospel'. He cites Harding Meyer to the effect that, seen in the light of the total catholicity of the Church, diversity and difference are seen no longer as threat to unity but as essential marks of it⁹. This chimes in both with the pre-ecumenical reflection of the Wesleyan, Alfred Barrett¹⁰ and a recent reflection of Rowan Williams. Barrett argued that 'a single Christian church is a puny thing standing all alone, and does not see and feel and know all the gospel, because the eye of the understanding and the heart of others is needed for this purpose.' Williams states that

'Christ is such that no one person can say everything about him. That is why there is a Church at all... I can't say it all and there are things that you must say and things that your tradition must say and do because I can't exhaust it in what I say'.

There is a strong case for unity in reconciled diversity but both the definition of the concept and its reception need to be sharpened up so that it is clear that it does make demands on faithful Christian discipleship and that it is no easy 'cop out'.

Reception continues to be one of the key problems of the Ecumenical Movement, perhaps the key one. In the 1950's George Bell said that it was difficult getting the World Council of Churches into the system of the Church of England, by which he presumably meant both that it was difficult *both* to get the grassroots clergy and people sufficiently well informed and enthusiastic about it *and* to get the decision makers and leaders to give it sufficient attention in their packed agendas. That problem continues in every denomination. Avis asserts,

'When enough people in the churches have been touched by the lived experience of unity and changed by it, the churches also will begin to change. But that *critical mass* (my italics) in the churches needs to be achieved first'¹¹. I would argue that this has yet to happen in *any* of the ecumenically engaged churches, perhaps anywhere outside of a few of the more successful Local Ecumenical Partnerships.

Additionally, the concept of unity in reconciled diversity has been variably and imperfectly interpreted. One may illustrate this from the *Called To Be One* ecclesiological process of Churches Together in England. This was an attempt, in the mid-1990's, to challenge both the member denominations and the intermediate county level bodies for ecumenical co-operation and oversight to reflect upon their understanding of Church and Unity. They were asked to say how they understood and reacted to concepts of organic unity and unity in reconciled diversity. Interestingly, only two churches, both in the reformed tradition, stated without demur a belief in organic unity¹². Roman Catholics and Methodists said they could envisage either destination. The Baptist Union, the Moravians, The Salvation Army and the Friends all explicitly or implicitly ruled out organic unity¹³.

⁹ P.Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology-The Church Made Whole?* (2010), pp. 27-8.

¹⁰ A. Barrett (1808-76), *Pastoral Addresses* (1845), p.371.

¹¹ Avis, *Reshaping*, p. 61.

¹² The United Reformed Church and the Church of Scotland.

¹³ R. Dixon, *The Unity We Seek? Unity in Reconciled Diversity as a model of unity for the contemporary Church*, Wesley College, Bristol, MA thesis (2002), pp. 63-64.

I remember that the Methodist submission recorded three different ways in which the concept was being interpreted within contemporary Methodism. The weakest saw it as involving little, if any more, than the current pattern of good ecumenical practice through LEPs, local 'churches together' groups and so on. Such an interpretation amply justified Newbigin's suspicion. However, there were others, both within Methodism and elsewhere, who realised that it had to mean more if it was to be taken seriously as leading to authentic unity. The Cornish intermediate body made a telling point. They argued that any serious attempt at unity in reconciled diversity would have to involve structures for co-operation and mutual counsel that would, in themselves, constitute a partial form of organic unity¹⁴. The importance of structures for such mutual counsel and co-operation had already been underlined by the LWF in its work. In 1984 it stressed its vision of 'a communion in the common and, at the same time, multiform confession of one and the same apostolic faith. It is a fully committed fellowship, able to make common decisions and act in common'¹⁵.

Such statements imply two points that must be spelt out if the concept is to be and received properly within the churches. They are that unity in reconciled diversity must be legitimate and mutually accountable.

Firstly, legitimate. It is not unity in *any* form of diversity but one that can be clearly discerned as expressing the same essential apostolic tradition, however variably it may be expressed theologically, liturgically and in terms of Christian witness and service. Clearly, by definition, it must be reconcilable. There are clear limits involved, as was pointed out at the fifth world faith and order conference at Santiago in 1993. The key problem is that though all the major ecumenically engaged denominations agree that there are limits to legitimate diversity, they do not agree as to their exact nature. In particular, as recently recorded by Cardinal Kasper in his excellent account of the dialogues concerned, there is a difference between the stricter limits currently prescribed within the Roman Catholic Church and those mandated and tolerated within the Anglican and Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed traditions. Much is agreed on by all five communions, most notably the trinitarian basis of Christian faith, justification by grace through faith, the normativity of the two gospel sacraments of eucharist and baptism and the understanding of Church as Communion. Other points, such as the petrine ministry remain unresolved, while certain detailed aspects of sacramental theology are regarded by Rome as matters for precise definition whilst the others accept the legitimacy of some diversity of opinion on them¹⁶.

Establishing the limits of such legitimate diversity remains a key ecumenical issue. It cannot be dodged. Many of us who believe in the case to be made for unity in legitimate diversity are at one with Newbigin and the authors of the Princeton Proposal in believing that the Universal Church is called to unity in faith, life and mission, involving a total interchangeability of members and ministers, and that to fail to act upon this divine call is sinful.

The second point to make is that such unity must be mutually accountable. Michael Root and Harding Meyer have pointed out that enthusiasm for unity in reconciled diversity waxed with the ecumenical rise of the theology of Church as Communion. Being in communion implies, as Paul stated so long ago, serious responsibilities, a willingness both to receive and give at the deepest level.

¹⁴ D. Carter, 'Where Are We Ecclesologically?', *One in Christ* (1999), pp. 228-242.

¹⁵ LWF Report 19, p. 175 (1985).

¹⁶ W. Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits, Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (2009).

All our present separate denominations face serious internal strains and issues of accountability which they find difficult to deal with satisfactorily. One need only mention sexuality in this context. Existing agreements on full or partial communion also raise such questions. Within the context of the Porvoo Communion, the Church of England and some of its Lutheran partners are uneasy about the Church of Sweden's blessing of same sex unions. The English Anglican-Methodist Covenant contains the provision that the two churches shall 'take account of each others' concerns, especially in areas that affect our relationship as churches'¹⁷.

From present experience, if nothing else, it becomes abundantly clear that unity in reconciled diversity *must* involve effective channels of regular consultation between the traditions involved so that they may resolve difficult issues together and avoid the possibility of fresh schism over new issues. Additionally, they need to be pro-active in encouraging mutual learning, especially at the local level. The current Anglican-Methodist Covenant in England suffers both from very patchy local development¹⁸ and from far too small an instrument to guide it. The Joint Implementation Committee does its best to monitor developments but it is a small body of a few people who have other heavy commitments. It needs, at the very least, far more support from district and diocesan ecumenical committees and time given to it at local synods. Clearly, it is not getting this everywhere if 76% of the responses to a questionnaire in Bristol, a city with a very fair proportion of LEPs, indicate that the Covenant has, after six years, made no difference¹⁹. Within the *Community of Protestant Churches in Europe*, a community of over 100 Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist and United churches, there is uncertainty as to how much mutual accountability there should be to accompany the table and pulpit fellowship established by it²⁰. That this should be the case indicates that in practical terms the Community is falling short of true unity reconciled diversity as I understand it.

Three more points need to be added. First, that in the reconciliation of traditions, each communion concerned owes it to its ecumenical partners to purge itself of distortions resulting from earlier polemics and ill-will. In 1987 the Groupe des Dombes made the extremely useful distinction between *confessionality*, standing for the positive enrichment that a communion could bring to the oikoumene and *confessionalism* with its hardening of identity vis a vis other traditions and its refusal to see its primary loyalty as being to Christ and the Universal Church rather than to its own past. The Methodist ecclesiological declaration of 1999 made the related point that great discernment was needed 'in order to distinguish between those features of Methodist history and tradition which should be cherished and handed on to the wider Church, and those that need to be abandoned, or adapted, because they no longer contribute creatively to contemporary Christian life'²¹.

Each tradition must also seek positively for those things that it should be learning as complementarily enriching insights from its partners. The recent stress upon Receptive Ecumenism and the need to learn practically as well as spiritually from the good practice of other churches has brought this aspect into prominence. 2006 saw by happy coincidence both the big Durham Conference on Receptive Ecumenism and the publication of the ground-breaking eighth report of the International Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue in which both communions stated not only their continuing desire to challenge each other in truth and love

¹⁷ *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant*, (2001), p. 61.

¹⁸ Bishop Christopher Cocksworth and Prof. Peter Howdle in *Church Times*, 19 Feb. 2010.

¹⁹ Figures based on a report by Rev. Nick Williams on the state of current ecumenical co-operation in Bristol.

²⁰ I owe this comment to Keith Jenkins, formerly of the CPCE Church and Society Commission.

²¹ *Called To Love and Praise*, para 4.2.14.

but also their desire *to be challenged* by the life and witness of the other in terms of what they ought to receive. The Methodists, for example, stated that ‘greater awareness of the communion of saints and the Church’s continuity in time, the sacramental use of material things as sacramental ministry to the sick and dying are also ecclesial elements and endowments that Methodists might profitably receive from Roman Catholics’²².

The stage of maturity reached in this dialogue is memorably encapsulated as follows.

‘The time has now come for us to return to the concrete reality of one another, to look one another in the eye, and with love and esteem to acknowledge what we see to be truly of Christ and the Gospel, and thereby of the Church in one another’²³.

Nick Williams particularly affirms the potential in receptive ecumenism, asserting that it introduces a new dimension in which all churches ‘can gain and not lose’ and ‘be confident in their part in the greater Christian faith’. This is an appropriate point at which to mention that unity in reconciled diversity may be a way of reassuring numerically weaker partners that they are not simply going to be swallowed up by larger churches. Williams records a respondent in his survey as saying of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, ‘Methodists fear a take-over, Anglicans assume it’ and this despite the assurance that the Covenant will involve ‘harvesting the riches of both traditions’²⁴. Avis cites the Fetter Lane agreement between the even smaller Moravian Church and the Church of England, arguing that it ‘contains a vision of visible unity that would not involve a loss of identity on the part of either partner. It stresses that the distinctive ethos of both traditions should be nurtured and shared within visible unity in a number of key areas’ and that it ‘claims that this approach to community with diversity has considerable ecumenical significance and could provide a model for a more inclusive united Church in England’²⁵.

Next, we note that an important element of trust for the future is also involved in this. Our traditions are not unchanging. For example, neither the Church of England nor British Methodism are now, in the context of the Covenant, where they were in 1955 when the first Anglican-Methodist Conversations began. There must be sensitivity to the changes and trust in each other, in each other’s willingness to go on learning, each other’s preparedness to have their own tradition enriched by the other. There must be trust in the ultimate faithfulness of God to lead us along a path towards a fulfilled catholicity, the exact nature of which we cannot possibly yet discern. The words of John have an ecumenical ecclesiological application, ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as He is’²⁶. The author of Ephesians relates our unity in the faith specifically to our attainment of human maturity, ‘to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’²⁷.

Lastly, but certainly not leastly, it must be accepted that the whole process of living in reconciled diversity will be a profoundly demanding one ascetically. As Paul Avis stresses ‘it demands the art of listening empathetically and discerning what is dear to one’s ecumenical partner’. Our understanding of our partners ‘has to be worked for by hard study combined

²² *The Grace Given You in Christ*, (2006), para 111.

²³ *Grace*, para 97.

²⁴ Williams, *Report*, para 8.2.8.

²⁵ Avis, *Reshaping*, pp. 31-2.

²⁶ 1 John 3.2.

²⁷ Eph. 4.13.

with demanding spiritual discipline. We are talking about a process of education of the heart as well as of the head, an enlargement of the imagination, a purification of the intention and all in all a conversion to the Christ who indwells the other²⁸.

I hope it is now clear that unity in reconciled diversity is not a ‘cop out’. Both organic unity and unity in reconciled diversity make serious demands on those involved. Both involve a degree of giving up, of letting go of past prejudices, of willingness to learn from others. Both, without proper ascesis, can disappoint. Neither delivers *ex opere operato* through fiat of church governing bodies. Both have to be lived out in the grace and power of the Spirit *responsively* and *continuously*. The latter, arguably, delivers a richer and fuller catholicity.

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²⁸ Avis, *Reshaping*, p. 69.