

## THE LUTHERAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT.

Lutherans have played an increasingly significant role in the Ecumenical Movement. Whilst many up till the 1960's held back from it, as indeed some very conservative Lutheran churches still do, other Lutherans were enthusiastically involved from early on in the twentieth century. A prime example is Archbishop Nathan Soderblom of Uppsala (1866-1931), who played key roles both in the Life and Work Movement, which addressed social issues and in the theological Faith and Order Movement and practice and those that were strongly Protestant.

Many widespread features of Lutheranism that have allowed Lutherans to make a very special contribution to the search for Christian unity. There is, in particular, a degree of flexibility on matters of church order and ceremonial that stands in contrast both to that of the Churches of 'catholic' order, i.e. RC, Orthodox and Anglican and also to that of some other Protestant churches. There is, of course, one point on which all Lutherans would be most insistent, that nothing must jeopardise the article by which, as they say, the Church stands or falls, that of God's free grace for undeserving sinners. However, modern theological developments have made it possible for all the major western theologically engaged communions, to satisfy Lutherans on that particular point. From that springs the very large number of agreements, all involving mutual recognition and many also allowing for free interchange of ministry that Lutheran churches have made with others, especially with Anglican, Reformed and Methodist churches

The churches of the Lutheran World Federation have a particularly enviable record of success in terms of dialogue and resulting agreements. One could argue that Lutherans have made greater progress in terms of accords involving mutual recognition and communion than any other major Christian denomination. Some of the dialogues and agreements have been specific to particular churches or groups of churches. This is especially the case in Lutheran-Anglican accords, such as the dialogues and full communion agreements in Northern Europe and North America. Some individual Lutheran churches have been particularly active, the prime example being the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, which has made full communion agreements with Reformed churches, with the Episcopal Church, with Moravians and, most recently, with the United Methodist Church in the USA.

Another signal Lutheran success has been in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. Anglicans and Methodists have also had dialogues with the Catholic Church, ongoing since 1967, but only the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue has resulted in an agreement solemnly ratified by both the Vatican and the churches of the LWF in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999, a document which the late Pope John Paul II called to be included in the catechetical material of both communions. Moreover, it was a document gladly assented to and received by the Methodists in 2004, though still under consideration for possible adoption by the Reformed churches.

Lutheran investment as it were in dialogue has been particularly rich. In 1963 the Lutheran Ecumenical Institute was set up in Strasbourg, with a staff of at least four highly qualified ecumenical theologians drawn from across the Lutheran world. The LWF has both facilitated and monitored dialogues, whilst also promoting Lutheran internal reflection on ecclesiological and other developments of ecumenical import. Thus, in 1997, subsequent to its renewed self-description as a communion rather than simply a federation, of churches, it issued its statement *The Church as Communion*, backed by an impressive array of papers.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has been involved in what is frequently hailed as the most impressive of the many national bilateral ecumenical dialogues that have taken place alongside any international ones. That is the American Lutheran-Catholic dialogue which has now produced a dozen meaty reports, often taking a pioneering approach to difficult questions such as the 1992 report on *The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary*, the first report anywhere to study, in depth, the issues raised by the marian theology and spirituality of the Roman Catholic Church.

In terms of the long term rapprochement of communions, it may be argued that the greatest progress has been made between Lutherans and Anglicans. They have gone furthest down the road towards a possible joint communion. Another striking success has been in terms of reception allied to rediscovery of ecumenically significant parts of the Lutheran heritage. I am thinking of the way in which Lutherans have both been inspired by the recovery of an ecclesiology of communion by others and by the way in which they have delved into previously largely forgotten aspects of their own tradition. Thus, in the context of another very fruitful national dialogue, that between Finnish Lutheran Orthodox, there has been the recovery of a Lutheran doctrine of sanctification. This will be important not just for the future of that particular dialogue but also for work with Catholics and Methodists, both of whom have strong doctrines of Christian holiness.

I would not wish, however, to pretend that all is lovely in the garden of Lutheran ecumenism. There are still problems of reception, as in all other communions, at the local level. Bill Rusch as the leading American ecumenical theologian, has pointed to these in his home context. Lutherans have the same tendency as all the rest of us to be concerned with more parochial matters and to ignore, or at least forget about, the wider picture, something which is not just true of layfolk and clergy at the coal face, but, all too disturbingly, is also often true of those in denominational hierarchies who should know better.

As in all the major western communions, the sheer breadth of modern Lutheranism had made both for opportunity and for tension. These were particularly evident in the USA at the time at which negotiations for the Lutheran-Episcopal Concordat, providing for full communion, were under way. There was then a clash between those elements in ELCA that were quite content with the prospect of entering into the historic episcopate and those that were most uneasy that it would somehow undermine the purity of their reliance on 'faith alone'. The Word Alone group, which took that stance succeeded in temporarily halting the progress towards the final agreement. Both sides could find resources within the overall Lutheran tradition to back up their respective stances. Those favouring the historic episcopate could point to the fact that Luther never denounced episcopacy per se, nor, at least early on, even the papacy, which, to begin with, he had said he would happily embrace if the Pope were to accept the Gospel. On the other hand, the Word Alone group could stress the slogan sola fide, 'by faith alone' and argued that insisting on any one form of church government contradicted the sole sufficiency of agreement in the word and sacraments

These points introduce us to the relevant question of Lutheran diversity. Luther was a complex and highly creative theologian and his position shifted and evolved over the thirty years in which he was at the centre of controversy in his native Germany. Not surprisingly, Lutherans themselves have differed over the exact interpretation of some of his doctrinal views and even more over the subsequent attempts to codify them, particularly in the *Formula of Concord* of 1577. Since then Lutheranism has, in turn, been subject first to the influence of

a form of scholasticism which sought to further explicate and rigidly codify its teaching, then to a prolonged period of pietism and reaction in favour or privileging religious experience over strict dogma. Next came the widespread influence of liberal Protestantism and finally, particularly strongly since the 1960's, the influences of the Ecumenical Movement.

The result of these developments has been to polarise Lutherans into two camps. The major one, represented by the churches in communion with the Lutheran World Federation, and representing an estimated 73 million members globally, consists of those churches which have come to terms with modern biblical and historical scholarship and are happy to be influenced by the theology and spirituality of other confessions provided the Lutheran stress on the central doctrine of justification by the free grace of God is maintained. The smaller group are the so called confessional Lutheran churches, mostly in membership with the International Lutheran Council, a body of churches with a total of 4-5 million members. These churches insist on a literal interpretation of Scripture and a very strict interpretation of the confessional documents of the sixteenth century. They reject all unionism, as they call it, not just with churches of other Christian confessions, but even with LWF Lutherans, whom they see as having betrayed the full integrity of Luther's teaching which they regard as the sole authentic interpretation of the Gospel. They grant that they should pray and work for the union of all true believers. They grant that some of these are to be found in heterodox churches which, strictly speaking, they ought to leave. Their ecumenical position closely resembles that of Roman Catholics before Vatican II, a call to all other Christians to recognise and accept confessional Lutheranism in what they see as its only true integrity.

Within the mainstream Lutheran LWF churches, there are, of course, differences of emphasis, paralleling in many ways the similar degree of pluralism that is now characteristic of all the major western confessions. These reflect both internal history and external influences and dialogue partners. Scandinavian and Baltic Lutheranism have, in general, retained more of the catholic tradition, including diocesan episcopacy. Their similarities with the Church of England have made them privileged partners for the Anglicans, who first began to take a serious interest in them in the late nineteenth century. German Lutheranism, besieged and threatened as it was until 1648, has tended to have a more combative relationship with Roman Catholicism, and, until the nineteenth century with their rivals of the Reformed tradition, also present on their patch in parts of Germany. American Lutheranism has reflected diverse German and Scandinavian immigrant influences, some of which have been very conservative, hence the predominant strength with in the ILC of the 2.6 million Missouri Synod Church

Visually, to an English observer, a Scandinavian eucharist looks like a relatively high Anglican one, whereas in Germany, partly through Reformed influence and particularly in 'united' churches, the communion service looks more like a free church one.

This leads me to mention one key element in Lutheran flexibility, the stress, dating back to Luther himself, that church ceremonies did not need to be alike everywhere. Only that which was actually contrary to Scripture needed to be excised. Other ceremonies, if edifying, could be preserved. This principle contrasted with that of the Reformed and the English Puritans who wanted to remove anything that reminded them of 'popery' or, indeed, was not specifically authorised as such in Scripture.

Central to all Lutheran ecumenism and dialogue is Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession, the standard Lutheran statement of faith by which all Lutherans stand. This states that it is sufficient (in frequently quoted Latin *satis est*) for unity that the Gospel be purely preached

and the sacraments rightly administered. These granted, aspects of church organisation, government and liturgy may vary, as indeed has been the case internally within Lutheranism across history. Thus there are Lutheran churches governed by bishops, though normally in association with synods. There are Lutheran churches with a Presbyterian synodical style of government and there are also Lutheran churches, such as the American *Association of Free Lutheran Congregations* and the *American Association of Free Lutheran Churches* (this latter also a strict 'confessional' church) that are independent congregationalist in ecclesiology, believing that this conclusion can be clearly drawn from Luther's own teaching.

Lutherans believe that there is no clear form of church order ordained in Scripture to which churches must ever, thereafter, adhere. Any form which can deliver authentic preaching of the Gospel and ensure the administration of the two Gospel sacraments suffices. It is interesting that this has been the historic stress even in the Swedish and Finnish churches, both of which have episcopacy within the historic succession. Key points were made in the reply of the Swedish bishops to the Lambeth Appeal of the Anglican bishops in 1920 which proposed the Scriptures, the historic creeds, the two gospel sacraments and the historic episcopate as the four pillars for future Christian unity.

The Swedish bishops asserted that no particular form of church organisation was prescribed *iure divino*. Christ had not given a priori rules but had left the Church free to follow the guidance of the Spirit. The Swedish church could not recognise any essential difference between any pattern of two or three orders into which, for purely human convenience, the ministry had been later divided. The only criterion for assessing the value of any form of Christian ministry was its 'fitness to become a pure vessel for supernatural contents'. Nevertheless, the Swedish Church did value its particular heritage.

Probably, though they did not say so specifically, the Swedish bishops already valued the opening towards the Anglicans that their episcopal succession enabled. To an extent, as we shall see later, their successors were to shift their emphasis by the 1990's.

Lutherans do, however, generally agree that the ministry of the word and sacraments is of divine institution and necessary since it is through the word and the sacraments that the grace of God come to the believer. Some have been insistent that there is only one ministry of word and sacrament. Others, particularly in dialogue with Anglicans, have come to accept that that ministry may exist in a two or even threefold form. The ELCA has accepted this in its Concordat with the Episcopal Church in USA. Equally, however, it has entered into full communion agreements with three Presbyterian churches and the United Methodist Church accepting that their varying forms of ministry also deliver the Word and the sacraments.

There is no doubt, however, that within the last thirty years, more Lutherans have come to wrestle with the witness of the majority of Christendom that sees the emergence of the historic episcopate as normative and guided by the Spirit. More and more have come to acknowledge the value of the episcopal succession as a sign of fidelity to the heritage of the apostles. Some, however, particularly in Germany, continue to resist its actual adoption, arguing that, as far as churches of the Reformation are concerned, it is a legitimate canonical requirement for those who wish to make it so, but not one to be inflicted on others. There is also, as Anglicans like John Arnold admit, an important psychological barrier for German Lutherans with their memories of prince-bishops from the Middle Ages and the political and religious corruption and skulduggery associated with many of them. An additional point is

that, in many parts of Germany, Lutherans are in united churches with Christians in the Reformed tradition, who are, in general, markedly more wary of episcopacy than Lutherans.