



FACE . . .

Dialogue or Bureaucratic Iron Cage? The Future of Ecumenism

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THE CONTEMPORARY ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT, WITH ITS MOST COMPREHENSIVE institutional expression in the World Council of Churches, has its origins in the western missionary enterprise of the nineteenth century. It actually traces its origins to the famous Edinburgh Conference of 1910, although the World Council of Churches (WCC) was not formed until 1948 when this movement joined two others: the Faith and Order Movement (dealing with the theology and church order issues) and the Life and Work Movement (dealing with questions of church and society). From their inception, all three movements were dominated by theological and regional suspicions. Not only did their Anglo-American and European members differ theologically—the former had a more optimistic anthropology than the latter—but they also came out of differing political and economic contexts. Britain was still the largest imperial power; America was rising as a technological and industrial leader. Both countries manifested a vigor not shared by their European counterparts.

But the shape of these debates was radically altered in 1948, when three factors contributed to the emergence of such institutional bodies as the WCC and the United Nations: (1) the shattering of a shared belief in human rationality and progress; (2) the beginning of the so-called cold war; and (3) the rise of independent nations in Africa and Asia with the end of the colonial period. What emerged was a radically altered situation. If Anglo-Americans and Europeans had differed along theological lines, they had nonetheless presupposed political concepts that were, in reality, secularized theological concepts. With new participants from non-Christian societies, this presumption had to be questioned; new ways had to be found for discussing how Christians might live in truly religiously and socially pluralistic societies. This challenge came to a head in the 1966 Geneva Church and Society Conference when the ecumenical movement explicitly called for a shift in

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TO FACE

Living from the Table: The Future of Ecumenism

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THE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE OF NORTHERN NIGERIA WAS FOUNDED IN 1989. LUTHERAN, Baptist, Brethren, Reformed, Evangelical United Brethren, and Anglicans united in the common task of leadership development. I had the privilege of being part of that wonderful experiment. The life of the seminary is united around the apostolic faith and shared communion. Jesus Christ's invitation to new life, shared within the unconditional grace offered around the Lord's table, is presupposed as the context within which theology is discussed and lived. Communion in Christ stands at the beginning rather than at the end of theological dialogue.

All ecumenical experiences are rooted in the biblical vision of reconciliation. The Bible begins and ends with prophetic visions of communion between God and the human community. Life is intended to be a God-woven tapestry in which creative and compassionate relationships are the powerful strands that hold human life together and enable humanity to participate creatively in cosmic "gardening" and community building.

Between the primal vision of Genesis and the culminating eschatological vision of Revelation there is the story of torn relationships and the story of God's healing and reconciling work. Finally, through Jesus, God mends the tattered cosmic tapestry. Relationships of compassion and creative responsibility are rewoven into the divine design. The wounded are healed, the crippled walk, lepers are cleansed, the marginalized are placed center stage, the lost embraced, and sinners forgiven. This reconciled and healed community is invited to eat and drink at Jesus' table. The apostles, called and sent to continue Jesus' healing and reconciling work, are invited to share a last meal with their master. Even though they do not understand Jesus and will all desert, deny, or betray Jesus, they are all offered Jesus' unconditional grace poured out for them. They are all promised the final vic-

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its agenda away from the west to the reality of new Asian and African states. Since that time, the battle for the soul of the ecumenical movement has been difficult. The WCC has almost exclusively been in a survivalist mode, no longer on the cutting edge or serving as a guide for its member churches.

Given this situation, the following elements are critical if the ecumenical movement is to lead in the next century. First, we can no longer do theology from any other starting point than that of the global community. We can no longer presuppose that one perspective can dominate how theological method and content are to be defined; we can no longer presuppose that only one taken-for-granted hermeneutic operates as dogma and doctrine for all and that any different approach is heresy. Further, we must challenge the contention that theologies that differ from western theologies are either syncretistic or too materialist in focus. If, indeed, Christian communities take different forms in different times and places, then we must recognize that the theologies that accompany them must also take new paths. This means that we must develop new ways of theologizing. Instead of basing our theologies on scientific models—based on a community of disinterested investigators that control for option and bias—we must root our theologies in a self-correcting process of learning and action, processes that are located in concrete social structures and real human communities engaged in the search for the anamnesis of incarnation. In this new mode, the criterion of verifiability must be practical—empirical validation through praxis in the concreteness of the world, not repetition under conditions of uncontaminated academic space. We have no other alternative but to make these changes if theology is truly to respond to the realities of the shrinkage of space, the ending of religious and cultural isolation, and the growing awareness of the need for building bridges.

In other words, theology must become thoroughly dialogical; it must recognize the growing need for participatory polity and the inherent necessity of bringing about some common vision of the good from divergent positions, classes, and ideologies. It is only through such dialogue that we can have a genuine recognition of plurality in human existence. Indeed, such dialogue displaces the Cartesian ego-logically determined philosophies and theologies and overcomes the liberal philosophy of the isolated subject. Rather, it forces us to change our perceptions of the other. This other can no longer be considered as someone exclusive of—and apart from—the I of a given ideology, religion, class, or race. Rather, this other is now someone who, precisely because she emerges on one's horizon, does generate mutual interdependence. Her world and its underpinnings are now no longer "barbaric" but have equal importance to one's own.

What this entails is a new sense of reverence for what is alien or different. It demands that we cease viewing difference as something strange, as something to be vilified. It is only by means of such a dialogical valuing of the other that the ecumenical movement can avoid falling prey to political maneuvering and what Max Weber called the bureaucratic reduction of a dream into an "iron cage." ⊕

tory of God to be celebrated in a culminating eschatological banquet. There are powerful implications for ecumenism in this biblical vision.

First, this vision shouts, “All is rooted in grace!” The Lord’s table proclaims that reality. No one deserves to be there. No one fully comprehends, and no one’s discipleship qualifies them for a place at the table. The nature of that original meal marked by sheer grace cannot be replaced by more limited contemporary models, although the church continually attempts to do so. The history of the institutional church is the history of ecclesiastical authorities limiting access to a table of unconditional grace. Circumcision, recognition of episcopal/imperial/papal authority, theological definition, or moral/ethnic qualification are among the criteria. The vision of the Cosmic Crucified’s table proclaims that all such criteria are manifestations of the ecclesial family’s inability to accept our acceptance as sheer gift. Thankfully, there are signs that Christ’s vision is capturing the imagination of a multitude of Christians who no longer will be bound by limitations of the past. I anticipate and hope that institutional churches will be willing to accept their responsibility for the preaching and teaching of the faith within particular theological traditions while accepting the gift of unity within the unconditional grace that is celebrated around the Lord’s table.

Second, the vision of reconciliation is a vision of the transformation of all of life. It cannot be envisioned as the “structural readjustment” of ecclesial relationships. The vision draws our focus away from domestic debates to the tragedy of human brokenness and pain. The church exists to be an instrument of God’s healing and weaving within the torn tapestry of cosmic reality. The triviality of our ecclesial struggles within a world that is literally being ripped into shreds by the evil of human hate and irresponsibility is challenged by this cosmic vision. I am convinced that Jesus pleads with us, “Would you please get a life!” I believe and hope that the twenty-first-century church will be empowered by this new life, which will enable our church to be part of God’s transforming reality of the Spirit. If not, God has made it very clear that God can sweep aside our proper structures and once again use shepherds, fishermen, tax-collectors, and revolutionary dreamers to do God’s work. How else do we understand pietists, Pentecostals, and third-world liberationists?

Third, the twenty-first century will increasingly be marked by the recognition that the word incarnate in Jesus is loose in the world beyond the boundaries of the Christian church. The divine logos, both incarnate and hidden within history, is actively involved in restoring the cosmic tapestry. Jesus, the incarnate word, inspired the Hindu Ghandi whose life transformed the Indian subcontinent. The Spirit of God as hidden word speaks through a Buddhist Tibetan monk who recently stated that the most difficult experience of years of imprisonment had been that he nearly lost the capacity to have compassion for his jailers. Jesus’ invitation list for the culminating cosmic banquet will, I believe, astound those who continue to limit Jesus’ gracious invitation to the table of God’s cosmic reconciliation. ⊕