

Unity to the Greater Glory of God. Promising Paradigms in Current Ecumenism¹

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Rather than lamenting a crisis of the Ecumenical movement the author suggests that the reader look at promising paradigms that become apparent within the present changes and challenges of World Christianity. He identifies six promising trends, as Christians of different traditions recognize partners in common witness beyond their own church traditions (1), evangelical and Pentecostal churches rise in significance (2), ecumenism becomes increasingly shaped by biographical experience and personal encounter (3), a spiritual ecumenism for the witness in the world emerges (4), the reality of martyrdom deepens the sense of Christian unity (5) and the search for the truth of the Gospel is not given up (6). In their overlapping and sometimes contradictory evidence these paradigms prove Ecumenism to be alive and, therefore, changing its face.

Keywords: *ecumenism; future; evangelicalism; Pentecostalism; witness; martyrdom; truth*

Introduction

It has become more or less common to speak of a crisis of the Ecumenical movement, at least to argue that the movement has seen better days and acted in a more effective and promising way in the past. The current state is, as it were, measured by a point somewhere back in history and people's laments rise. Is there an "Ice age" in the Ecumenical movement? Whatever one may think about this, I am not going to join the lamentations, nor do I intend to take a look into the rear-view mirror. I prefer to look ahead, by following the trajectories of a number of developments that can be realized today. I take it for granted while doing this that the Ecumenical movement needs to be seen in its current plurality. There is no one single movement, but a variety of movements pointing to and working towards the unity of the Church already given in Jesus Christ, and these movements can be discerned in various shapes and on different levels.

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In what is to follow I would like to present six trajectories which, I think, indicate which way Ecumenism as a whole is very likely to go. In my prognosis I am drawing out lines that have their starting points in observations of the present and that I expect to become stronger rather than weaker in the future. I do not claim any supernatural, prophetic capacity for looking into the future, but simply try to make sense of what currently is going on in the Ecumenical movement. Let me be quick to confess openly my “western” background specifically belonging to a Free Church (Methodist) tradition in Germany, a position that both shapes and limits the way I look at the world. What can be expected is, therefore, not a comprehensive explanation of complex and in parts contradictory developments, but solely to give a modest interpretation of perceptions I have come to make as a participant in the work of Ecumenical Theology.

My perceptions and interpretations fluctuate between the level of lived Ecumenism as the practice of church groups and individuals on the one hand and the level of theoretically reflected ecumenism as a theological discipline on the other. The tensions lying in this approach are intended and needful, for the act of perception/reflection cannot be separated from the lived participation in and commitment to the unity of the body of Christ into which every cognitive effort needs to be employed.

1. Ecumenism in the context of conflicting basic paradigms

The contemporary ecumenical movement does not live and work in a vacuum, but in the specific historical reality of the body of Christ being broken up into uncountable numbers of churches and denominations. The seamless gown of the crucified Lord (cf. Jo 19, 23) has been cut into more than 41,000 patches.² Hearing this number we should resist the initial impulse to ask for the empirical methods that allow us to number such a globally multifaceted phenomenon as churches, because that really is not my point here. The number in its sheer magnitude simply serves to cause the disquiet, or even dismay in view of the fact that the unity of the body of Christ is hidden before a world to which Christ has called us to testify to his saving power (cf. Jo 17, 21). We are not talking here about larger churches, be they nationally or confessionally organized, but about an increasing number of churches that continue to subdivide into further “patches” that make it harder to acknowledge the reality of a unity given in Christ.

² The number is taken from Kirsteen Kim, Andrew Anderson (eds.), *Edinburgh 2010. Mission Today and Tomorrow*, Oxford 2011, p. 193. The source indicated there is the “World Christian Database”, Brill Online 2010.

In the highly secularized West we tend to forget that the centuries which preceded the period of de-Christianization since the Enlightenment were not a “Golden past” in terms of church unity. Confessional differences in central Europe, for example, were not simply, perhaps not even mainly a theoretical matter to be debated by theologians, but a reality that deeply affected people’s lives. There were schools separated along confessional lines; one would not give their children in marriage to a spouse from a different confessional tradition, etc. Beyond that there existed a strong loyalty of the churches to the state in the territory in which they were based, a nationally orientated attitude that was, as needs to be said, widely shared even by the transnationally organized Free Churches, especially in times of war.³ It was a painful learning process for most churches to overcome national prejudices and denominational isolation in order to live the freedom to which Christ has set us free (Gal 5,1). Even today, particularly in geographical areas of tensions and strife, churches are still facing the temptation to function as promoters of national interests rather than witnesses to the truth of the Gospel.

The convergence of the churches by overcoming the barriers that had separated them and searching together for common ground has made enormous progress in the 20th century. However, it should not be forgotten, that this progress is, at least in part, the fruit springing of a tree that has its historical roots in major 19th century ecumenical enterprises like the Young Men’s Christian Association (founded 1844), the Evangelical Alliance (founded 1846)⁴ and, somewhat later, the World Student Christian Federation (established in 1895). Driven by the aspiration to live out the vital spiritual unity granted by God’s Spirit, Christians from across the world witnessed to the power of the Spirit to permeate church borders, even while they were not abrogated, and to enable Christians from various church backgrounds to jointly commit themselves to the service of God’s Kingdom. While taking the energy displayed in these unity movements seriously we cannot overlook the cataclysmic dynamic that has also been exerting itself through the pressure of secularization within the northern hemisphere.⁵ In spite of attempts

³ For my own Methodist tradition a wavering attitude between patriotism and pacifism is shown in: Christoph Raedel, “Zwischen Patriotismus und Pazifismus. Krieg und Frieden in der Perspektive methodistischer Kirchen”, in: *Freikirchen-Forschung* 24 (2015), p. 119-153.

⁴ See: Karl Heinz Voigt, *Die Evangelische Allianz als Ökumenische Bewegung. Freikirchliche Erfahrungen im 19. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 1990; Philip D. Jordan, *The Evangelical Alliance for the United States of America, 1847 – 1900. Ecumenism, Identity, and the Religion of the Republic*, New York 1982.

⁵ I am aware of the scholarly discussion evolving around the thesis of secularization. See: Detlef Pollack, *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies*, London 2011; idem, *Säkularisierung*

to make secularization a virtue it seems to be undeniable that one factor drawing churches closer together has been the receding public influence of Christianity in the West and the numerical decline in church attendance that accelerated in the second half of the 20th century.

But still: Being under pressure from the context of the society in which the church lives and feeling the impact that has on one's own constituency may serve as a motivation for churches to come together. This cannot, however, substitute for a vision that attracts churches and energizes them in their efforts to live out more visibly the unity given in Christ. There can be no doubt: Churches in the West are undergoing significant processes of change and development: a waning influence of churches as institutions that have predominantly shaped western civilization and, accompanied by the challenge to address the Gospel within an increasingly pluralistic society.⁶ In my view there are good reasons to put pluralisation even before secularization as the major development that gives our western societies its shape. Taking the importance of pluralisation for granted I would like to suggest that the future of ecumenism will no longer be primarily imprinted by *confessional* differences, but rather by differences of *mentalities*, or basic paradigms that organize themselves on the sublevel of camps and caucuses, action groups and ad hoc movements. Let us take a closer look at what is going on here.

In postmodern societies where religious certainty is constantly challenged by the way identities are being constructed as something flexible and indeterminate when it comes to matters of final truth, the fault lines in the realities of church life are changing. Even though the confessional conflicting lines between the historic church traditions continue to exist and to exercise influence by way of constructing identities, the deeper and more painful battle lines now seem to run not so much *between* the churches but *right through* the respective churches. In the conflicts that make these lines visible there are "basic paradigms" at work that, in the end, are incommensurate with each other. These are the pre-modern, the modern, and the postmodern basic paradigm.⁷ These paradigms can be seen as three ways to understand the world, the self and the reason for these two to exist at all. They are simultaneously present not just in contemporary societies but also in most churches. In a sociological perspective these paradigms cannot be deduced

- *ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland*, Tübingen ²2012.

⁶ One of the important contributions to the discussion of this challenge in the ecumenical realm remains Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids 1989.

⁷ See: Heinzpeter Hempelmann, *Prämodern – Modern – Postmodern. Warum ticken Menschen so unterschiedlich? Basismentalitäten und ihre Bedeutung für Mission, Gemeindearbeit und Kirchenleitung*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2013.

from or ordered along a progressive line, they are simply there and articulate themselves in a distinctive way, for example when the question of the attainability of truth is being discussed. The pre-modern paradigm maintains the unity and self-evidence of truth. A community of believers may have to argue reasonably for what is the truth, the basic attitude is, however, one of simple obedience to what has been realized as truth. The modern paradigm maintains the unity of truth, but questions its self-evidence. Truth is something humans need to strive for, with history being the infinite process of searching for what can be discerned as truth, a process that stands open to correction and defies any claim to have arrived at a final indisputable truth. The postmodern paradigm, finally, expects a plurality of truths and is content to accept all individuals having their own truth, a perception that, it is said, makes any striving for matters of truth useless and void.

This distinction between three basic paradigms is, of course, rough and cannot do justice to the complex interactions and overlapping concerns that make it much harder to identify these paradigms in practice rather than theory. Neither life nor the collective attitudes that shape and help to understand it are contained in neatly ordered boxes. My point here is to argue that the challenges that have already begun to affect the ecumenical movement are less the inherited doctrinal differences we have learned to moderate and in many ways to reconcile (be it the doctrine of justification between Lutherans and Roman Catholics or be it Christological concerns between the Western and Oriental churches), but increasingly the more profound tensions in the way of living and interacting with others between those people or groups of people attracted to these respective basic paradigms. Indeed, new churches spring up that feel committed to *one* of these paradigms, but a residual effect, particularly in the West, seems to be the simultaneous presence of all three paradigms within the existing churches, resulting in the formation of informal groups and fluid networks that show primary interest in shaping the spiritual formation and ethical guidance of the church rather than in institutional reforms. Many of the tensions revolve less around academic concepts but around the very practical questions of how the church should live and witness as a harbinger of God's coming Kingdom within a pluralist society, to what extent the church may participate in the affairs of the wider society and to what extent it needs to prophetically distance itself from it.

What is happening here is no small matter, because the way Christians relate to each other is being significantly reconfigured. We are simultaneously witnessing processes of convergence and divergence, the common denominator of both movements being the weakening of the ties of attraction to a particular church. "To construct a religious identity", writes

Reinhard Hempelmann, “someone’s affiliation to a certain milieu [cf. our paradigms above] is often more important than membership in a distinctive church”.⁸ In practice that means that an increasing estrangement between members of the same church or denomination brings at the same time a closer relationship between people of different church traditions.⁹ The result is the emergence of an inter-confessional oriented ecumenism not of churches, but of adherents to a particular basic paradigm to understand the world, the Bible and one’s self. Whoever takes a closer look at such controversial issues like the obligation of the Gospel to nonviolent resistance or the acceptance of homosexual couples in the church will easily encounter the reality of these sometimes surprising convergences as well as divergences between Christians, that cannot be explained by inherited confessional commitments (e.g. in terms of the view of papal authority), but needs to be interpreted along the lines of paradigmatic approaches to the question of how the Bible and the tradition of the church are authoritative in shaping a community’s habits and lifestyle.

In the context of the ecumenical dialogs there is still the lingering impression that the respective churches can address each other as homogenous communities when they talk to each other. That may be true in the sense that these churches relate in a (historically) distinctive way to certain confessions or, in the case of non-confessional churches, principal convictions. However, the major Christian traditions, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal, all share a global extension and display, to varying degrees, an internal plurality that makes it hard to address them as unified bodies, let alone as a unified whole, while churches seek to stem the tide of fragmentation and dissolution that seems to strike, at least in the eyes of some participants, at the root of Christian unity.

The ecumenical movement needs to reflect on the appropriateness of its dialog instruments. It needs to ask: Who is actually sitting at the table representing exactly whom? Which paradigm is at work as we move toward

⁸ Reinhard Hempelmann, “Koalition der Missionare? Annäherungen zwischen Evangelikalen und Katholiken”, in: *Herder-Korrespondenz* 66 (2012), p. 93.

⁹ As early as 1939 Dietrich Bonhoeffer during a visit to the US observed, though without speaking of basic paradigms: “The doctrinal differences are often more significant within denominations (e.g., Baptists, Presbyterians) than among the different denominations”, Essay about Protestantism in the United States, in: Victoria J. Barnett (ed.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 15: Theological Education Underground 1937-1940*, Minneapolis 2014, p. 442. Bonhoeffer, interestingly, explains this as a consequence of the self-perception of the Protestant churches in America as denominations, as branches of the one tree, by which, in Bonhoeffer’s view, no church can in fact confess the fullness of truth, except in fellowship with – an unlimited number of? – other denominations.

understanding and reconciliation and what does that mean for a church that incorporates several basic paradigms, although to different degrees at its various levels of administration and church life? What does one do with the fact that in certain respects members of different churches are drawn together while, at the same time, estranging themselves from other members of their own church family? These questions need to be theologically and methodologically considered because not to tackle them does not diminish the impact of these developments, but simply ignores them.

2. The growing influence of Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity

The developments that have been sketched so far raise the questions for movements that are inter-confessional in their character. Here we need to talk particularly of the evangelical and the Pentecostal/Charismatic Christian groups that have grown significantly over the course of the 20th century, particularly in the countries of the southern hemisphere.¹⁰ In an ecumenical perspective this has first and foremost two consequences. On the one hand, we are talking here about ecumenical movements insofar as these evangelical groups have had an impact that has gone widely beyond established church borders and has inspired Christians of various church traditions. This holds true even where renewal movements were led to establish new denominations (as in the case of Pentecostalism). The spirituality of charismatic empowerment began to bring together Christians of a similar spiritual nature, something that can be studied especially well looking at the Charismatic movements that sprang up within the western churches in the 1960's.¹¹ The longing for experiences of the Holy Spirit led to a number of revivals within various churches, causing at the same time conflicts within these churches. On the other hand, many churches that originated in these evangelical movements do not, and do not want to, belong to the World Council of Churches. To the extent to which these churches grow, the WCC becomes increasingly less representative even for the portion including the Protestant churches. The implementation of consultations in the context of the Global Christian Forum is therefore a logical and necessary step towards making contact and probing ways of collaboration with and among these churches.¹²

¹⁰ See: Allan Heaton Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism. Global Charismatic Christianity*, 2nd ed. Cambridge 2013.

¹¹ See: Peter Zimmerling, *Die charismatischen Bewegungen. Theologie - Spiritualität - Anstöße zum Gespräch*, Göttingen 2001; Tom Smail et al., *Charismatic Renewal. The Search for a Theology*, London 1993.

¹² See: www.globalchristianforum.org. The most recent statement was published under the title: *Our Unfolding Journey with Jesus Christ. Reflections on the Global Christian Forum*

Due to the inner plurality and fluidity of church structures in these movements that are rooted in revivals, the question of who may represent and speak for them in an ecumenical context remains a challenge. Moreover, we may note within these movements continuing differences between groups that are more receptive and others that are more hostile toward the ecumenical movement as an organized whole.

A second question in this context is how the churches of the West are to shape their relationships with the growing evangelical churches in the southern hemisphere. The paradigmatic conflicts mentioned above become even more apparent here. One would think that the theology of loving your neighbour, the ethos of mercy that finds expression in developmental aid services by the northern church should generate sheer gratitude. Instead we witness a collision of contradicting attitudes and convictions as churches in the South say: "You are calling the gospel into question while we keep committed to the truth of the gospel, and therefore, we do not need you to help us." If the modern Western mentality is further accompanied by an attitude of dominion and superiority, this contributes to strengthening aversions against western "imperial" approaches in the southern churches and widens the gap that already exists.¹³

3. Ecumenism as a space for biographical Experience and Encounter

With many people today the experience of ecumenism is woven into the texture of their biographies. An increasing number of Christians change their church affiliation during the course of their life. They know congregations of a particular denomination not just from the description of others, but from first-hand experience, maybe even active participation. The decrease in the stability of church membership shows its impact not just when someone leaves a church after a conflict, but already when people move from one place to another and start looking for a new local church. In doing this they do not necessarily search for a local church of the denomination they have belonged to before, but may feel attracted to a certain way of doing church irrespective of the congregation's denominational affiliation or the lack of it (non-denominational churches seem to be on the rise in all parts of the "Christian" world). Many aspects of this search are pre-cognitive and hard to describe in purely theological terms. One may rather refer to the "microclimate" or the "spirit" of this church, that makes it attractive or

Experience 2013.

¹³ See: Philipp Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity. Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Oxford 2006.

unappealing to people. It seems, however, that this phenomenon is mainly characteristic of the Protestant churches and cannot be properly described with the term conversion.

Let me refer to this way of an ecumenical journey as a “*set-out-change*” insofar as people here set out for a new church context, integrating into their new church environment experiences and influences received before without any significant break in their life’s narrative. From this “*set-out-change*” I would like to distinguish the “*break-out-change*”.¹⁴ This kind of change is usually marked by a more or less radical break with the past and a conscious turning away from everything by which the person has been influenced before. This experience of change is usually read along the matrix of “bleak past and bright future”. For example, converts speak of their out-break that led them out of the “house of prohibitions” into freedom, out of confinement into an open land, out of isolation to acceptance of oneself and others. It is obvious that “*set-out-changes*” can be an ecumenical gain, while “*break-out-changes*” tend to put a strain on the relationship between the churches involved. “*Set-out-changes*” are, in a sense, a way of ecumenical learning by doing. “*Break-out-changes*”, rather, are likely to make relationships more complicated, partly due to the fact that the narrative of change is told very differently by the convert on the one hand and the members of the church he has left on the other. But even the “*set-out-changes*” present an ecumenical risk. We noticed that the process of identifying with a new church results very much from experiencing what a church feels like, whether it does or does not fit one’s expectations. To the extent to which these criteria move to the forefront, it becomes less relevant whether a church really follows the risen Lord Jesus Christ testified to in the Bible and present in the Holy Spirit. But it is this and no other question that seems to be the theologically central criterion when it comes to discerning a church as a truly Christian fellowship.

It is usually the second category of the “*break-out-change*” that deserves to be called a conversion. Often, though not always, these changes take place as passages between churches of a rather different ecclesial kind. We tend to apply the term conversion not to people moving from one evangelical church to another irrespective of the denomination, but rather to a move from, say, the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil to a Pentecostal church, from an evangelical denomination in the United States to an Eastern

¹⁴ The initial impulse to distinguish two types of church changes I owe to Sarah Wilson of the Institute of Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg. The terminology chosen here, though, is my own.

orthodox church, or someone converting from Roman Catholicism to one of the German Protestant churches. Usually in these cases the biographical cut goes significantly deeper, and the term conversion is used appropriately. However, conversion continues to be a taboo within the ecumenical discussion and needs, therefore, to be discussed very sensitively.¹⁵ A point that deserves further consideration is the question: Is there a way to read conversion from one church to another as a phenomenon that is not necessarily *alienating*, but rather *connecting* churches?

In this context I want to bring to our attention marriages involving spouses from ecclesiological different churches. In Germany, we used to call these marriages “*konfessionsverschiedene*” (confession-splitting) couples, while today we prefer to call them “*konfessionsverbindende*” (confession-joining) couples. Such neologisms sometimes seem a strained attempt to be politically correct, which might practically mean that the term is more suggestive than descriptive (for example, it doesn’t solve the problem of couples wherein only one partner being a Roman Catholic, not being able to take part in the Eucharist together). At the same time, I think the term is valuable and reminds us of the fact that marriage partners from different church traditions open up towards each other a shared space where their practical, even though only partial, participation in the life of the spouse’s church becomes possible.

Going beyond marriage and taking into view the wider texture of family relations and friendship at the beginning of the 21st century, it should not be unusual to have in one’s personal environment members of different churches and to connect the name of a certain church with a face familiar to you. In my expectation the ecumenical importance of learning by experience and encounter is going to increase and may even reach global dimensions, at least where people take their opportunities to meet Christians in other countries they visit, be it on holidays or on business.

The dimension of personal encounter, we should not forget, also has a bearing on the bilateral ecumenical dialogues and multilateral consultations. Their success is usually measured by the results presented to the public in, for example, a joint declaration and the visible reception of these results in the respective churches. That is certainly not fully wrong and, as a matter of fact, is often an exercise in humility for the ecumenicist but leaves aside the value of personal encounters that are typical for the setting of such dialogues and the meetings involved. The value – or better: the fruit – of such encounters

¹⁵ See: Athanasios Basdekis et al. (eds.), *Kirchenwechsel - ein Tabuthema der Ökumene? Probleme und Perspektiven*, Frankfurt am Main 2004.

and contacts cannot normally be calculated in a quantifiable way. But they are of the highest sustaining importance for ecumenical relations. If, for example, the Roman Catholic/Pentecostal dialogue contributed to the spread of a charismatic renewal movement within the Roman Catholic Church, from the fact that Heribert Mühlen was receptive to charismatic experiences and subsequently became a leading theologian of the Catholic/Charismatic renewal,¹⁶ we're just watching the tip of an iceberg of what may be going on when people (and the Spirit) meet. Once more: personal encounters and the mutual confidence growing from them remain a crucial part of ecumenical relation-building.

4. A Spiritual Ecumenism for the Witness in the World

At which level do personal encounters in an ecumenical context receive their primary shape? In my opinion, this is the area of spirituality that means the level of spiritual life and fellowship. The term *spiritual* in this context does not mean “inwardly-invisible” in opposition to “outwardly-visible.” Christian spirituality here means the embodied practice of faith as rooted in receptivity to the revealed triune God and his work, directed at hope and active in love. It includes, among other things, the hearing and studying of the Word of God as well as singing and praying together. Theological reflection may also become spiritual practice, but nevertheless, theology is not to be identified with spirituality since there is theology *of* spirituality, reflecting upon the latter.

Echoing the constitution *Unitatis Redintegratio* of the Second Vatican Council Cardinal Walter Kasper describes “the conversion of the heart and the holiness of lives [...] together with public and private petitions for the unity of the Christians as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement”.¹⁷ Hence, the heart of the ecumenical movement is an experience of conversion and the longing to lead a life to the honour of God. The Christian renewal movements, among which the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements are growing most rapidly, stand for a way of faith that emphasizes the everyday practice of faith, the visible and embodied discipleship. I believe that the future of ecumenism will be vitalized particularly from a unity of faith lived and celebrated together. In such an understanding of ecumenism, the existing differences between the churches are being recognized, but placed into

¹⁶ See: Heribert Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist in der Trinität, bei der Inkarnation und im Gnadenbund*, 5. Aufl. Münster 1988.

¹⁷ Walter Kardinal Kasper, *Wegweiser Ökumene und Spiritualität*, Freiburg i.Br. 2007, p. 12 (transl. CR).

the context of a unity of basic convictions. These convictions strengthen and enliven the Christian faith whatever specific shape it may take: they ground the life of faith in the gift of God's love and empower believers to witness to the hope that is in Jesus amidst a world marked by indifference, intolerance, and injustice. Kasper speaks of the spiritual ecumenism that regards it as crucial "to secure, to keep awake and alive the common foundations: the faith in the one God and the one Lord, Jesus Christ, the work of the one Holy Spirit, and the hope for life eternal. Without this foundation all ecumenical movements hang in the air. Without them our joint witness in the world becomes unfounded".¹⁸

Part of this shared spirituality is the witness of faith to others, since faith is a gift received in order to be shared with others. Lesslie Newbigin very appropriately argues that "[t]here can be no true ecumenical movement except that which is missionary through and through, for there can be no true doctrine of the Church which is not held, so to say, in the tension of urgent obedience between the Saviour and the world He came to save".¹⁹ This witness has several dimensions that are traditionally unfolded as "martyria – diakonia – koinonia – leiturgia." Walter Klaiber, in full accordance with Newbigin's emphases on the missionary task of the ecumenical movement, describes these four dimensions of the missionary witness in this way:

1. "The personal promise of the gospel to individuals, addressing and carrying their inmost being;
2. The shape of the church-life and especially the worship services, as spaces embodying grace, in which people may experience God's presence and the power of his love;
3. The outreach into our society to make clear that for us justice, peace, and freedom as signatures of God's saving acts do not simply have importance for the inner life of an individual, but are also creative and critical realities for the life of the community".²⁰

There are two points related to witnessing one's faith that I would like to explicate a little further. First, the witness for the Christian faith has to take as a model God's condescendence in Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5-11) and, therefore, needs to distance itself from all forms of witness that include force or manipulation. The joint witness to the triune God therefore has to main-

¹⁸ Idem, "Wo sind die Brücken?", in: *DIE ZEIT* 13. September 2012, p. 58.

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*, New York 1954, p. 10.

²⁰ Walter Klaiber, "Hintergrund und Ziele des ACK-Konsultationsprozesses", in: *Aufbruch zu einer missionarischen Ökumene. Ein Verständigungsprozeß über die gemeinsame Aufgabe der Mission und Evangelisation in Deutschland*, ed. by EMW, ACK und missio, Hamburg 1999, p. 115-134, here p. 125.

tain the tension between humility and boldness. David Bosch poignantly and pointedly articulates this necessity when he writes:

“We know only in part, but we do know and we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure salespersons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord”.²¹

Second, the witness to the Christian faith necessarily rests on the biblical testimony in light of the tradition that does not substitute or set aside the biblical witness, but serves as an interpretive lens for the reading of the scriptures. At the same time, Scripture is read and interpreted in the specific context of a global world, in which faith is supposed to prove itself as saving and true. The witness of faith constantly oscillates between scriptures as the *foundational* context on the one hand, and the specific society as the *explicitive* context on the other – both are needed to make sense of the Christian faith in a changing world. Therefore we need to consider the implications of the faith with respect to the standards of global justice, the preservation of Creation, and the promotion of peace. How could the renewal of the heart be limited to the conversion of an individual? The impact of this renewal is meant to go beyond the individual and will find ways to express the love filling into the believer’s heart by the Holy Spirit. And yet the churches should, wherever they raise their voices to address critical questions of society, not simply repeat what has already been said by other agents in society. They need to express the distinctive stimulus that flows forth from the ground on which the church is built, that is: Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God and Saviour of the World. In statements by Christian churches pertaining to contemporary questions in society, the part of the text that unfolds the biblical and theological reasoning needs to be drafted with particular care. For it will be this part that reveals how questions in society and a Christian response are related to the witness of the Bible and the reflections of Christian theology and ethics, while the non-theological sections of such a statement – from genetically modified grain to human trafficking – are usually based to a significant extent on insights from other sciences with regard to which theologians and church leaders are themselves only students.

5. The Ecumenism of Martyrs

As we saw, the witness of faith is comprised of dimensions of both word and deed, and is thus a way to *act* in this world in one way or the

²¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll 1991, p. 489.

other. However, the 20th century up to the present reveals before our very eyes that the reality of witnessing may include *action* as well as *passion* (in the sense of suffering). The most extreme form of passion is to suffer death. Martyrdom in its stricter sense means to be persecuted and killed for the sake of one's faith. The fact that on a global scale it is mostly Christians who are being persecuted for their faith receives increasing attention in the realm of politics, though surprisingly little attention in ecumenical theological reflection.²² This is quite surprising since it is the martyrs who do not separate the churches anymore but connect them.²³ In the wake of this recognition Pope John Paul II could write in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* that an imperfect but real communion between the churches is "already perfect in what we all consider the highest point of the life of grace, *martyria* unto death, the truest communion possible with Christ who shed his Blood, and by that sacrifice brings near those who once were far off".²⁴ Hence, remembering the martyrs is an exercise of proclaiming the unity of the community of all saints that we long for however our life may find its end.

Jürgen Moltmann has reflected on the concept of martyrdom in a Christological perspective.²⁵ He draws out a number of developments, two of which I would like to pick up here. First, Moltmann points out that the reality of martyrdom has changed since the time of the Ancient Church. He writes: "In the age of «religious freedom», persecution on the grounds of a person's confession of faith is diminishing. What has now come to the fore is persecution because of the uncompromising obedience of faith".²⁶ Convictions as long as they remain confined to the private area or do not leave the context of the church are more likely to enjoy tolerance or recognition than acts in which convictions find a public expression or address the dangers to the wellbeing of society. Not so much statements of faith in themselves (like: "Jesus is the Lord") but obedience to this statement resulting in certain public acts (or the refusal of certain acts) may lead into martyrdom. This can range from the display of Christian symbols or personal witness up to the

²² See: Thomas Schirmacher (ed.), *Jahrbuch zur Verfolgung und Diskriminierung von Christen heute*, Bonn 2013. A journalist's perspective is: John L. Allen, *The Global War on Christians. Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*, New York 2013.

²³ See: Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Holy Spirit, Witness, and Martyrdom", in: *The Spirit in the New Millennium*. The Duquesne University Annual Holy Spirit Lecture and Colloquium, July 7-8, 2005 (2006), p. 3-30.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), § 84.

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ. Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, London 1990, p. 196.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

questioning of the powers that be over someone's commitment to act on the basis of faith.

As a second difference between Ancient and contemporary times, Moltmann identifies the fact that martyrdom in the Ancient Church was the personal martyrdom of a Christian individual in public, while today whole groups of people suffer mostly an anonymous martyrdom. We may think here of persecutions of Christians, for example, in the Indian state of Orissa, whose names we usually don't get to know and whom we become aware of only as a group. To remember these martyrs becomes somewhat more difficult because churches standing in solidarity with their brothers and sisters cannot mention them by name in their prayers. But still, petitioning God for them recognizes the promise that their names are written in the book of life (Rev 3,5). Remembering the martyrs is, therefore, a way to join in God's remembering them.

The suffering of Christians in the past and present leads us to the question: what makes them hold on to their faith in situations of life threatening danger? The answer to this question cannot be found in the area of controversial theology, but leads rather in the very heart of the spiritual ecumenism mentioned above. It is the reality and the work of the triune God who in Jesus Christ becomes the brother of the Christians who are being persecuted and deprived of their rights, and who stands by them in the power of the Holy Spirit. The fate of the martyr is closely linked to the act of witnessing and confessing (as the word "martyr" indicates). One can only die confidently for something that is worth living for, though for the Christian faith this something is a someone: Jesus Christ, God's revelation in history.

The uniting element in contemporary martyrdom is the fact that these Christians do not suffer and die as Roman Catholics, Lutherans, or Pentecostals, but as *Christians* (who belong to a specific church). But still: martyrdom in its ultimate sense is not a necessary element of the Christian faith. It should not be desired, but accepted when unavoidable without compromising the faith of the Church. Not to be misunderstood: I do not dream of a future that is marked by blood and suffering. And yet, the ecumenism of the future will be increasingly called to lament persecution and to care for the persecuted. The point here is, that to suffer martyrdom is not to be seen as the desired end of this earthly life, but as the alternative to killing others. What matters is to recognize, even in practical terms, that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it. Accepting this premise, martyrs place themselves into an eschatological horizon, in so far as they, as Moltmann says, "anticipate in their own bodies the sufferings of the

end-time, which come upon the whole creation; and dying they witness to the creation that is new”.²⁷

6. Ecumenism living out the Truth and glorifying God

To put your life at risk, to be prepared under certain circumstances to even offer it as a martyr for the witness of Jesus Christ, only makes sense if there is an ultimate value that it is worth living for. This ultimate value is the truth on which the Christian faith rests and to which it witnesses following an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ, God revealed as personal truth. We are coming full circle now to our first point. In the basic paradigms I mentioned there we find specific ways of approaching the truth of the matter, i.e. God in the personal unity of truth and charity. Whenever the question of truth is at stake, nothing less than the question of God is at stake. We are not getting lost in philosophical quibbles, but consider a question of life and death. The witness to the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and present in His Spirit must not be emptied of the unique and universal truth claim on which the witness rests and to which it refers. Nowadays what is questioned fundamentally is the human ability to perceive truth at all. To deny this ability outright is to rob humans of their dignity as the sole creature that was made capable of being a responsible being, i.e. able to respond to God’s call. I therefore agree with Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI who regards it as of supreme importance “that we don’t lose the concept of truth, in spite of the menaces and perils that it doubtless carries with it. It has to remain as a central category. As a demand on us that doesn’t give us rights but requires, on the contrary, our humility and our obedience and can lead us to the common path”.²⁸

To maintain human truth, perception does not need to deny that horrible things contrary to biblical revelation have been argued for on Christian, even biblical, grounds: religious force and violence, belligerent conquest and colonial exploitation, suppression of women, and the superiority of the white race. All this has heavily discredited Christian truth claims. As a consequence then, the unity Christ has promised and that we long for cannot be achieved without repentance – not understood as a single act in which we confess and repent of the sins of the parents (though that may be a healing act), but as an ever renewed willingness to be freed from error, blindness, and the bias to utilize the Gospel for purposes in-

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

²⁸ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth. Christianity and the Catholic Church at the End of the Millennium*. An Interview with Peter Seewald, San Francisco 1997, p. 67.

compatible with the tenor of Scripture and the enlightening presence of the Spirit of God.

The act of witnessing to the truth that gives life cannot, therefore, be separated from the content of this witness. For whenever ecumenical texts confess Jesus Christ, and speak of the triune God and proclaim the hope of a life to come, we need to be clear about the extent to which the semantic actually correlates with a real unity. There is some seductive force in the use of theological terms that are laden with a history of meanings and that may be understood according to personal preferences. This brings me to a talk Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave in 1932 at the International Youth Peace Conference. There he said with the clarity so characteristic of him:

“The churches that are members of the World Alliance do not have a common recognition of truth but are instead most deeply torn asunder on this very point. When they say Christ or gospel, each of them means something very different. At present this is our most pressing problem in ecumenical work. We can speak only as the church that proclaims the truth of the gospel. But the truth is torn asunder. And that makes our word powerless, even mendacious. But even more terrible than this is the fact that we ignore this lightheartedly. One must not play with the truth, or it will destroy us.”²⁹

For us today, it is easy to deconstruct such sentences on epistemological grounds. For, we may ask, is a point of view from which the disunity of truth can be diagnosed actually accessible to the human mind? Wouldn't that be an epistemological “God's-eye-view” which humans can never attain? And what exactly is this “truth of the gospel” Bonhoeffer refers to over against the pieces of a truth torn apart by the churches? Isn't it the desire of all Christians to know this very truth? We could find a number of ways to escape the claim of such a text by academically trained dialectical reasoning. Another, more appropriate, way would be to hear Bonhoeffer's words as a prophetic call that intended to wake us up. Isn't it true that, in struggling to recognize the truth of the gospel in a changing world, we have become exhausted? Don't we often think of someone who announces: “There is no unity without truth!” as an intruder disturbing the peace we have found in simply accepting the tensions between conflicting truth claims? And have we seriously and honestly asked ourselves – wherever we may stand – why our witness is often so powerless in our world?

²⁹ Victoria J. Barnett et al. (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 11: Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work 1931-1932*, Minneapolis 2012, p. 369.

The way of knowing the truth does not lead to an ecumenism that is content to figure out the least common denominator of the various, sometimes conflicting, convictions always with an eye on what people today would be ready to accept as the truth of the gospel. It rather leads, rightly understood, to an ecumenism of the future that may be understood as an “Ecumenism competitive for the glorification of God”.³⁰ The unity we are called to strive for is – to quote Newbigin once more – not “any kind of unity, but [...] that unity which is God’s creation through the lifting up of Jesus Christ upon the Cross and through the continuing work of his Spirit”.³¹ The ecumenical movement only has a future as a gathering of “eccentric people”, i.e. as a fellowship of churches and believers whose centre is outside themselves in the truth, life and calling of the triune God. That doesn’t make them unworldly, but allows them to accept their mission into this world, which to save is God’s declared will.

³⁰ Robert Spaemann, “Nachwort”, in: Dominik Klenk (ed.), *Lieber Bruder Benedikt in Rom! Ein evangelischer Brief an den Papst*, München 2011, p. 151.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, London 1963, p. 17.