

# ECUMENICAL COMMUNICATION

By JOHN COVENTRY

**T**Hese reflections are limited to christians in dialogue. There is, of course, a wider ecumenism, involving dialogue of christians with other religions and with the world: it raises a variety of issues, some of which are dealt with elsewhere in these pages.

## *Differences of language*

It is a commonplace to observe that christian communities that have lived separately for centuries no longer understand each other's language. Common words can suggest a greater unity than in fact exists; different language can disguise unity and suggest divergences that do not really exist. A catholic entering the ecumenical scene, hearing its talk and reading its literature, will at first be bewildered. He understands the words but not the sentences. He will conclude that this is a protestant and unfamiliar language. And in this he will partly be right, in so far as the ecumenical movement is still largely a protestant scene only occasionally tinged by orthodox approaches. But he will come to realise that a good deal of the language is a sort of 'Geneva english', an amalgam which is really nobody's language, somewhat like those rather contrived United Prayer Services, which are not the way that any of us normally prays. He will probably assume that catholics and orthodox will understand each other better; and then he will discover that the orthodox find catholics and protestants far more like each other than either is like themselves.

Are our supposed differences, then, very largely a matter of differing cultural backgrounds? If we talk to each other, and make the effort to understand each other's languages, shall we find that our differences largely evaporate? To a very large extent the answer must unquestionably be, Yes. This has been the experience of every sustained inter-church dialogue. One has only to read, for instance, the four booklets published by the catholic-lutheran dialogue in America, to see the thing happening before one's eyes: the initial air

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

of strangeness, of defensiveness, of groping for contact, leads progressively to a surge forward of blended voices that have learnt to appreciate the need for each other's balancing emphases: 'either-or' progressively gives way to 'both-and'. It was the writer's experience in a series of discussions purposely conducted over some two years between the most unlikely partners, roman catholics and evangelicals. One learns from others some of the implications of one's own theology. The overpowering sense of the sheer futility of our divisions that emerges from such an experience is impossible to convey.

But, even so, it is not as simple as that. Verbal language is only one sort of language, and it does not exist in isolation from other forms of human expression. Art, music, dancing, sculpture are languages. Worship and liturgy, with all their components, including silence, are languages. Feeding the starving is a language, as is avoiding alcohol. And human languages are never simply the expression of a meaning already possessed; they are also the discovery of meaning, the creation of meaning. So, first of all, a verbal language expresses and interprets a much fuller human (in this case christian) experience. And christian communities do not differ from each other simply in vocabulary: christian traditions, christian styles of life, are unquestionably different. And, secondly, though verbal language is not the only form of human expression, it is an extremely central and powerful one: it not only reflects human experience, it plays a great part in modifying and re-directing that experience. The different christian insistences and emphases that might have blended (that might yet blend) to make a mutually acceptable though pluriform way of life, and a correspondingly pluriform theology, have in fact produced separate traditions. How, then, is one to know when what is different is acceptable and when it threatens?

### *Disagreement in faith*

An older understanding of faith regarded it as concerned primarily with doctrinal statements, some of them authoritatively defined. There was in that case a simple test of agreement or disagreement in faith, namely acceptance or rejection of such propositions. This is probably still the assumption of most catholics, for whom it seems axiomatic that protestants differ from them in faith, because they do not accept some of their doctrines.

This understanding of faith as simply or basically an intellectual assent to doctrines has gone hand in hand with certain philosophical

assumptions. Underlying many centuries of christian polemics and anathemas there has been a roughly common philosophy of the relation of things-thought-language. It could in brief be called a 'camera' notion of the functioning of human thought and language: the mind could form clear mental pictures of reality, and these could be exactly stated in defined terms; hence if you rejected my propositions, you must be rejecting my experience of reality.

Today we have come to understand more about the complexities of language and of theological language in particular. In recognizing different cultural backgrounds, we realize that there are different wholes of experience, giving rise to great varieties of expression, and at the same time often charging the same words with different meanings. We find, for instance, that we have mistakenly supposed that St Paul meant just what we do by terms such as 'flesh' or 'body' or 'soul' or 'spirit'. Thus we are prepared to admit different expressions of the same reality as legitimate and complementary. We admit a plurality of philosophies or thought-patterns, so that the same word will have different associations according to the pattern into which it fits. In language about the mysteries of God we further recognize that all human forms of expression must be inadequate and partial, however true, except the Word made flesh. Finally, we recognize that all human language about the mysteries of faith is historically and culturally conditioned, and cannot retain a timeless sense: an obvious example would be the word 'person' as applied to Christ. All these considerations add great complexity to ecumenical dialogue, and present many reasons for hesitating to conclude that a difference in doctrine (a difference in accepted language) necessarily demonstrates a difference in faith. But, as if these complications were not enough, there is also something deeper and more elusive.

Faith is basically in Christ. It is a personal relationship. I believe (indeed, revelation only actually takes place), when I recognize God addressing me in Christ. The risen Christ addresses and encounters me, not directly, but in his Church in which he dwells and acts by the gift of his Spirit. Assent to the Church's doctrine can only be given within the living framework of this experience. It is more than an intellectual assent to statements; it is a sharing in the community's experience.

In what sense, then, or to what extent, do we disagree *in faith* with other committed christians? Their faith, too, is in Christ. They come to know and to recognize him within and because of, not in

spite of, their own christian communities. His Spirit dwells and operates in their churches, in their traditions. So the fundamental fact of ecumenical endeavour is that we are trying to give the fullest expression to a unity that already exists, not trying to create unity out of nothing. The Body of Christ on earth exists only in (partly) separated churches. But we are not basically baptized and incorporated into churches, but into the one and indivisible Body of Christ. Unity is deeper than divisions, agreement than disagreements. On the doctrinal plane this can be seen in the 'hierarchy of truths' to which the council drew attention: we are already united in the more central or fundamental truths; it is the more peripheral or derivative truths that divide.

But that is still not all. Faith, we have reflected, is a surrender of the whole man to God, not simply of the intellect.<sup>1</sup> Hence at its roots faith is not distinguishable from charity. To be united in love is to be united in faith. (And, we may reflect, vice versa: how united in faith are we with members of our own church? Is assent to the same doctrines enough?). Hence a serious challenge is put to the churches by those groups of christians, belonging to different churches, who are together committed to the relief of suffering, of deprivation, of starvation. 'We *are* united in faith', they say; '*this* is what christianity is about'. The implication is that christianity is not 'about' wranglings over doctrine; that service unites while theology divides.

So, in the middle of ecumenical conversation, in the middle of theology's effort to unite, the question 'How do you know when you agree or disagree in faith?' is seen to be very much more complex than it at first appeared to be. All seem to agree that credal statement and consent play an essential role, even if union can never be solely a matter of credal consent, and even if the precise role of this consent is difficult to define. There are many conversations going on between churches in the world today, not simply in the form of 'dialogue', but as professed and formal negotiations for unity. Such conversations have already reached their goal in north India. Others are in varying stages from early beginnings to near completion. Anglican-methodist negotiations are a case in point. As one considers these conversations in the light of all that has been said about differences between christian traditions and about unity in faith, one becomes aware of a paradox. However necessary theological discussions are, they can only go so far; they cannot go the whole way.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf the Constitution on divine Revelation - *Dei verbum*, 5.

There remains a gap to be jumped. For you cannot in fact have unity in faith as a pre-condition for union. *You only have unity in faith when you are united.* It must be so, if faith is truly a sharing in the community's experience. To give one very central example: can you, or do you, share the same faith in the eucharist with other christians, except in the act of sharing the eucharist with them?

*Cross-communication*

But it would be quite a falsification of the whole picture of ecumenical conversations to suggest that they are an affair of two clearly separated and separable christian traditions trying to reach a common understanding. Anyone who has ever engaged in such an exercise has soon discovered that the divisions are horizontal rather than vertical. It may well start as an affair of, for example, catholics on one side and protestants on the other. But, whatever the question, it very soon becomes an argument between these catholics and protestants on one 'side' and those on the other. People divide by character and cast of mind, by education and background, by shared experience. Furthermore, the most pressing questions of today are not those that christians put to each other, but those put by the world, which present all of us with the same problems: for instance, the Church's ministry, her organization for mission, the appropriate language in which to preach the gospel to the world. But the same 'crossing of sides' can and does happen with the more traditional and theoretical doctrinal questions. The story is told that, at the Huntercombe meeting of the first roman-anglican commission, an anglican theologian gave a preview to a catholic of the still unpublished draft statement on the ministry then almost agreed between anglicans and methodists, in order to discover how a catholic would react to it. The comment he received was: 'Far too sacerdotal, in my opinion!'

But even if, in ecumenical conversations, one does not find oneself disagreeing more with one's brethren than with one's opposite numbers, one very soon reaches another, and in some ways disturbing, conviction: 'I can communicate far more deeply and easily with these anglicans or protestants than I can with so many members of my own church. The will to unite seems itself to unite. Yet I hardly seem to speak the same language as some of my fellow catholics'. And then one has to add: 'But, of course, I can only communicate (receive holy communion) with my fellow-catholics'. This is by no means just a play on words. It needs serious reflection.

There are, of course, many factors which have tended to polarize fellow-catholics. But ecumenism is one of them. And we have to face the fact that the ecumenical movement, while externally unitive, is internally divisive. We have to face and to accept the fact. It has been so for all the churches. The baptist union in this country, and evangelicals in general, are split from top to bottom by the question whether, and to what extent, and with whom, they can engage in ecumenical conversation without betraying their own principles. We have seen anglicans very deeply divided, and methodists split to a lesser extent, over a particular scheme of union between their churches. The crisis and danger that faces such schemes is that of producing further divisions: no good would be done, if three bodies resulted to take the place of the original two. The crisis, the paradox, has to be responsibly faced, because it is of the essence of ecumenism, and not simply a by-product. In various ways our comments have tried to show that ecumenical involvement does not simply unite with others, but divides oneself: it pulls one simultaneously in different directions. Until this contest, this *agonia*, has begun, ecumenism has not really started. It has not got beyond the tea-cup stage into the real thing. We have not become involved or committed, if we intend to be matey with other christians only so long and so far as it does not disturb ourselves: disturb our thinking and our hearts; disturb our set patterns of doing everything of importance on our own and in separation from others; disturb our assumptions about what is essential and a matter of principle and what is not.

#### *Communion and communication*

The theological relationship of communion and communication, as factors in the ecumenical scene, would appear to go somewhat as follows. We need to distinguish: (a) communion, understood as the basic and God-given reality of our union in Christ; (b) the expression of this communion in sacramental form; and (c) the actual human experience of our communion in Christ, that is, communication. And these factors need to be considered both in relation to members of the same church, and in relation to members of different churches.

As has already been observed, we are baptized into the Body of Christ, in whom we believe. The gift of his Spirit is a self-giving of Christ, unifying us at the deepest level of our christian existence. This basic union of baptized christians in Christ is the mystery of the Church, the mystery of the active presence in our human history

of the kingdom of Christ, and is an object of faith. But to say that it is an object of faith is not to deny that it is humanly expressed and experienced; on the contrary, it is rather to assert that this mystery-reality is more or less fully expressed sacramentally, and more or less fully experienced in our christian living.

The basic union of all christians with each other in Christ does not have its fullest or most adequate sacramental expression when churches are separated from each other, not as were the church of Corinth and the church of Ephesus, but in a mutually rejecting and divisive way. But even at this level of sacramental sign, the churches are not wholly or totally divided. Apart from much that is common in their professions of faith, in their prayer, in their exercise of ministry to fellow-christians and to the world, they share the same bible and they share a common baptism. The Decree on Ecumenism makes a point of asserting that baptism constitutes a sacramental bond of union.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is the visible christian community that is basically the sacrament. And so christians of different communities are at once sacramentally united and sacramentally divided. If the word 'communion' is used (as it usually is), not solely for the fundamental and given unity in Christ, but for the sacramental expression of this unity: then members of the same church are in full communion with each other; members of different churches are in partial communion. This way of setting out the ideas and the language does not prevent any one church from being convinced that among all christian communities it is the fullest sacramental sign of the unity of the Body of Christ, and therefore a necessary focus or centre of the full communion of all christians.

The term 'communication', however, denotes, not the sacramental expression of our given union in Christ, but the actual human experience of that union. This is surely wider than dialogue, or verbal communication, though this latter is a central part of the experience. And it is in this area of communication that the anomalies arise. I celebrate my full communion with my fellow-catholics in the eucharist, and thereby deepen my communication, my experience of union, with them. I know we share the same faith, *because* we share the same eucharist. Even so, I may have a fuller experience of union with some other christians than I have with some of my fellow-catholics, either because I have worked together with the former in the mission which Christ gave to his Church, or because

---

<sup>2</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, 22.

we talk the same language. It is this fact of experienced union that constitutes one of the greatest pressures for eucharistic sharing between christians of different churches.

This pressure is felt at its greatest in inter-church marriages, where the commitment is lifelong, the sacramental bond even stronger than that of baptism, and the communication most deep and full. The Constitution on the Church spoke of the christian family as the 'domestic Church'.<sup>3</sup> No doubt the catholic family was primarily in view. But in the two-church family, where husband and wife are both committed members of their own churches, all the pressures and tensions of ecumenical communication are at their greatest. And all its creativity and rewards.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 11.