

Receptive Ecumenism, Theological Plurality, and the Art of Disagreement

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In this paper I pick up on what Samuel Rubenson said yesterday: “Why do we cherish unity more than diversity?” I will argue in favour of approaching theological disagreements and differences as something positive. I’m not a masochist and I don’t believe in disagreement for the sake of disagreement. But I think the way we talk about and think about disagreement in the church matters – for example in regard to how we think of diversity and unity.

Unfortunately, I am not well acquainted with receptive ecumenism. But I found an interesting article by Nick Adams, which I take as a go to talk more about difference and disagreement at this conference. (Three quotations on slides):

The goals of Scriptural Reasoning and Receptive Ecumenism are not primarily those of agreement. They are practices which make deep reasonings public, and which foster understanding and collegiality in the face of enduring differences.

Receptive Ecumenism tends not to seek common ground in the face of difference. Instead, it tends to produce forms of thought which describe difference in ways that preserve long-term disagreements.

Receptive ecumenism can be seen as a practice that celebrates difference: A strategy – contrary to that of postdenominationalism, which tends to pursue strategies for agreement, whether of the “conservative” kind (through documents with approved forms of words) or the “liberal” (which more or less aggressively identify a common “essential” core and treat differences as “inessential”).

(Nicolas Adams, “Long-Term Disagreement: Philosophical Models in Scriptural Reasoning and Receptive Ecumenism”, *Modern Theology*, 2013, p. 169)

Before I continue, I will make two disclaimers: First: I am not so concerned with theological differences between churches. Rather, I am interested in dissent – or theological plurality if you like – as an intra-church phenomenon, as an inevitable cultural condition *within* any church. So, my engagement for differences does not primarily address ecumenism as such, but the way we think of ourselves as church. Second disclaimer: I don’t intend to make universal claims – disagreements can obviously also be destructive. However, I think they can also be opportunities to deeper understanding, to clarification, to involvement and the formation of tradition. So, how we symbolize disagreement, matters.

Ok, so what is the problem? Why consider difference and disagreement positive? Why try even to *preserve* long-term disagreements? We are used to value diversity and openness as something positive, while we are more hesitant towards dissent, disagreement, and conflict.

I think some of the problem regards how we – theologians or churches – talk about or symbolize disagreement. Dissent is often seen as something negative theology – as a threat to unity. As something that should be overcome through means of consensus. I will present to examples of different versions of this ecclesial strive towards consensus:

1) My first example comes from a very disputed context, namely the heated quarrel on human sexuality. In 2004 the Windsor report was published by an official commission of the Anglican Communion in order to study the problems stemming from the consecration of Gene Robinson – the first openly gay bishop in the episcopal church in the US. The report described the conflict within the Anglican church as illness and as sin. According to this reasoning, conflict is a derivation, or perhaps even a deviation, from the prior healthy nature of the church. Ecclesiologies that imagine the church as a holy people sometimes reflect this view of conflict-as-sin. Either conflict should be removed or overcome. It is seen as the opposing vice to the ontological peace constituting the holy people. Or, conflict is, theologically speaking, simply untrue. It doesn't really exist within the church because the people of God cannot be a people of conflict.

Against such conceptions, I would argue that Interpretations of the Christian symbols and of what it means to be a Christian, have always been contested. The people of God is not homogenous, neither in terms of political, ethical nor theological interpretations. The Christian community is a community of argument (as Kathryn Tanner has phrased it).

In ecumenical texts on ecclesiology, the marks of unity are often drawn from Acts chapter 2, in which the Jerusalem congregation is described, by saying "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." I have nothing against teaching, eating, and praying together. However, what is not mentioned in this effort of making a biblically grounded ecclesiology, is the disagreement described only a few chapters later. Here, the Jerusalem congregation disagree about the inclusion of the gentiles. A *strong* dispute breaks out between the members of the congregation, even between Peter and Paul. Should the gentiles be included or not? In other words, the faith that God's abundant mercy and love is for all people – required conflict. In this particular case conflict was the generator for the early church to grasp this reality. It was disagreement that generated new insight. It was conflict that sparked transformation.

The memory of the past we share as churches does not prescribe silencing of conflict. It rather helps us see that conflict is part and parcel to what it means to be church, to be an ecclesia or a public. Interpretive conflicts have been the normal state in church history – from the apostolic community remembered in Acts, to the patristic controversies, and the reformations, and up until today. In fact, it seems like every time new groups of people claim their belonging or codetermination in the church, conflicts occur. Most of the time, change does not take place without conflict. We can also see that nowadays, when women or queer people challenge established ecclesial structures in order to be properly included in the church; or when postcolonial Christian movements challenge Western and Eurocentric

definitions and structures and claim power and co-determination within the worldwide church.

My argument is that such power dynamics concerning the ongoing claims to Christianity is also theological productive. It nurtures tradition as well as the formation of faith. To claim 'We the people of God' or 'We are also the people of God' institutes a set of debates about who the people are and what they want.

2) My second example comes from a less disputed context, namely institutionalized ecumenism. (And it is in fact interesting that disagreements on doctrinal issues nowadays seem to be less harsh than disputes on ethical issues.) Although organic unity is no longer a vision in the ecumenical movement, *unity in reconciled diversity*, the current paradigm, is thought of and talked about, by many, as a step on the road towards a thicker unity. I think the anticipation of this future goal of ecumenism still keeps haunting many ecumenists and church people. A typical example of this anticipation would be the Charta Ecumenica document. It was launched in 2001 between protestant, orthodox, and catholic churches in Europe. Its opening paragraph proclaims that the churches should: "persevere in seeking a common understanding of Christ's message of salvation in the Gospel." But why would a *common* understanding of salvation be desirable? What does one achieve by stances that express agreement on this point? To me that sounds like an effort of reducing the mystery of salvation. Why not celebrate the richness of having many and diverse understandings of salvation, even if some might be mutually exclusive? Why not search for a unity in irreconciled diversity? Then communion will be the space within which conflict is addressed, and unity will not be a state characterized by the absence of contention.

So, why would disagreement in this situation be important?

Primarily because of interpretive openness. Theology is an enterprise that deals with urgent questions. The answers, however, are not ultimate but preliminary and contested. In such a cultural situation, my argument is that openness is often best secured through the multiple articulations of rivaling interpretations, not through procedural efforts of consensus. Disagreements – at their best – can have the capacity to widen and keep the interpretive space from settling. In short, this means that theological claims are not a threat against plurality and openness but rather their precondition. In order to maintain openness, someone has to fill the space with distinct claims. Otherwise, it implodes.

Another argument for welcoming diverse theological interpretations of salvation, is to get more interesting interpretations. Consensus statements are often quite boring. To put it in the words of Stephen Sykes: (new slide) "A formal definition [of Christianity] is both banal and boring. Christianity only becomes interesting as a concept when someone has the courage to spell out in greater or lesser detail one or other of the contestable possibilities which the definition permits." (Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth*, 1984)

I am not arguing in favor of an unlimited pluralism. I'm not saying anything goes. That would make theology an amorphous mash. Differences, limits and boundaries are just as legitimate as they are necessary for any theology or church. But the limits and lines of demarcation are

not cut in stone. They are historical and contingent, and they are articulated and upheld by someone. That's important to remember. Whose interests do the current boundaries serve? By tracing historical and conceptual differentiations instead of purported "essential" differences, one can hopefully get a clearer understanding of the constructed differences and understand why they tend to shift.

This is also a way of addressing power issues in theological meaning making. Theological symbols and interpretations are sites of contestation and hegemonic struggle. That does not mean one should not listen to others. But what one considers a gift is ultimately also a matter of decision – at least in a collective and ecclesial context.

Lastly, I will end by sharing with you an image which I find very beautiful. Actually, I learnt it from an old Jewish rabbi – so it is my receptive ecumenism moment: The rabbi taught me about the Jewish tradition(s) of dissent, which is very rich, and he illustrated that tradition by explaining the architecture of the ancient synagogue. According to him, the ancient synagogue was constructed a bit like the British parliament (House of Commons): The assembly would sit around an empty square (sometimes empty, and sometimes with the Torah in the middle), on benches on different levels, face to face. Gathered around the empty space, which symbolizes God, people meet to have discussions, conversations and disputes about the meaning of the empty space/God/Torah. What unites them is the engagement with the empty space, almost apophatic - and the assembly has to fill the room with diverse interpretations of God/the Torah.

I think that is a powerful and beautiful picture. And it was probably such praxes of dialogue and dispute that Jesus participated in when he attended synagogues in Galilee. In Roman times, however, the basilica took over and structured the space, and thus also the praxes, of the assembly quite differently.

So, in this paper I have stressed the need for other ways of theologizing or symbolizing interpretative conflicts and disagreement. Not in order to romanticize conflict. But in order to better qualify conflicts, and to look for traces of the Holy Spirit in interpretive conflicts. In order to see if there can come a blessing out of a conflict – like it did for Jakob when he wrestled with the angel.