

REVIEW AND REPORTS

What Unites and Divides Denominations?

Ecumenical reflections

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Have the denominations anything in common? This was the question put to the speakers at an ecumenical discussion held at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Regensburg¹. At first sight it seems a meaningless question, because no one seriously doubts that they do. One is more inclined to wonder whether what should really have been asked was whether there actually is still anything to keep the denominations apart? For many people that question could be expanded more or less on these lines: Aren't the divisions only kept in being by the inertia of habit, especially by the dead weight of institutions which do just as a matter of fact exist and are not willing to retire of their own accord? Before the late Council, Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope John are reported to have said jokingly that only the hairsplitting and obstinacy of theologians maintains the division between the Churches – the learned will not agree among themselves, and project their dispute over the whole of Christendom, though they cannot make any sense of it any more. In the meantime, theologians – I recall names such as Lengsfeld², Schuster, Ohlig³ – have addressed the same reproach in all seriousness to holders of office. Only the Church authorities, they say, have an interest in division, which is only kept in existence by them for the sake of their own survival. This is a remarkable change in the situation – have the theologians reached agreement in the meanwhile? Have they seen through their controversies as mere shadow-boxing? A certain suspicion that there must be something wrong can scarcely be avoided at the sight of such a rapid change. One wonders what change of mind suddenly made something possible that for centuries never came to anything. In the laborious search for truth, sheer new insights hardly come so suddenly and decisively.

This remarkable phenomenon needs closer examination if the real weight of assertions of that kind is to be estimated rightly and correct conclusions drawn from them. Without

¹ January 19th, 1972. The two other speakers were Franz Mußner (New Testament) and Traugott Koch (Systematic Theology, Lutheran).

² P. Lengsfeld, *Sind heute die traditionellen Konfessionsdifferenzen noch von Bedeutung?* in: *Una Sancta* 26 (1971) 27–36, p. 32: "The main obstacle that really prevents the denominational Churches from coming together, no longer lies in the sphere of belief and doctrine but in the obstinate tendency to self-preservation of ecclesiastical apparatus or organizations." Lengsfeld, it is true, himself speaks (p. 34f.) against "hasty reunion at the present time": "A merger of the various ecclesiastical organizations would produce such an agglomeration of power that the reforming forces would scarcely have any chance left . . . An institutional reunification carried through quickly without prior reforms would be like an amalgamation of two old peoples' homes" (p. 34).

³ K.-H. Ohlig/H. Schuster, *Blockiert das katholische Dogma die Einheit der Kirchen?* (1971). On the cover of the book we read: "Whilst the Church authorities still cling to rigid but theologically extremely questionable positions, the differences between the denominations have been long since rendered obsolete by the vital interests which Christians have in common." The statement in the book which comes nearest to this thesis is less clear-cut: "The . . . situation of dialogue between Christians is therefore completely misunderstood or distorted if people think they must first wait for the outcome of the talks between the official Churches, or even think that these official Churches must first wait for identity of views among the various theologies." One is surprised by the almost juvenile optimism with which the two authors of this small and in itself pleasant book undertake to solve in a hundred pages all the problems still pending between the denominations. If we only set about it correctly, they seem to be saying, there is an answer ready to every question.

denying the complexity of the matter, I should nevertheless like to venture the following diagnosis. On the whole the swing of thought evidenced by such assertions is to be explained more in terms of the sociology of knowledge than by strictly theological considerations. The first reason is the new self-confidence gained by Catholic theologians as a result of their position at the Second Vatican Council. Hans Küng has emphasized on several occasions since then that the succession of teachers (i. e. professors of theology) stands equal and independent side by side with what previously was exclusively known as the apostolic succession i. e. the sequence of bishops and their office⁴. This thesis is only a particularly bold expression of the new and increasingly widespread claim of theology and theologians generally⁵. This indicates the second step in this development. The theologians' new self-assurance in conjunction with the social situation as a whole, created a certain feeling of solidarity in the face of the Church authorities. For if the latter in virtue of their prescribed rôle are charged with maintaining what already exists, theology found itself by the very nature of the case, as it were, to be the advocate of change (which also corresponds to the rôle of the intellectual in society).

A further factor was the tardy and consequently all the more overpowering penetration of the modern mentality into theology, which previously had to a certain extent moved in a world of its own. This has brought theology almost abruptly to the resignation in face of the question of truth which since Kant has increasingly characterized modern thought. The outcome on the one hand has been a retreat into purely factual studies, and a sociological interpretation of the concept of truth on the other. The truth which previously they had argued about so bravely and with all too much assurance, suddenly appears unattainable anyway. What remains as the function of the human and moral sciences and therefore of theology as well, is the rational construction of the praxis of human social life. When the question of truth ceases to be raised, the division of Christians into different denominations does in fact lose any meaning; the only thing then is to try to replace it as soon and as thoroughly as possible by more rational forms of human association.

If the main features of this analysis are correct, it immediately clarifies our initial thesis. The new mentality which is the main reason for the new position of the theologians will be based on the increasingly sociological character attributed to the question of truth. What is to be said to this? First of all, I think, we must most certainly admit that the new outlook has shown up some merely apparent truth for what it is, and in many matters has certainly resulted in a more sober and realistic judgment than theological controversy succeeded in achieving. Many divisive factors were in fact sociological, not theological in origin, not determined by truth itself. This being admitted, we must quite plainly add that all in all such a shift certainly does not bring us to the kernel of the New Testament, that is, to what alone justifies the very existence of Christendom: faith in truth disclosing itself. In this respect, we might note in passing, there could be a task of the highest importance for the Church hierarchy in the new situation, that of keeping open the question of truth, of insisting on its acceptance, as opposed to the retreat into positivism and sociology.

We must, however, return to our question of what the various denominations have in common and what separates them. Another assertion which one hears more and more frequently springs from the same trend of thought. Experience shows, we hear, that a German Protestant and a German Catholic stand closer to one another, understand one another better, than a German and an Italian Catholic, a German and an Indian Catholic, etc. Such statements are all the more persuasive because for most people they correspond to their own personal experience. It is easy then, on account of their optimistic side, to lose sight of their fatal corollary. In fact the hope that beckons here is very

⁴ Cf. H. Küng, *The Church* (1967), pp. 434-436; *id.*, *Infallible?* (1971), pp. 151, 189f. etc.; one is struck by the remarkable way teachers, professors and prophets are treated as completely identical.

⁵ As an example we may once again refer to K.-H. Ohlig/H. Schuster, *op. cit.*, p. 34: "The functions of the Church's magisterium and that of theology are neither opposed to one another, nor can they be entirely separated; there is not even a primacy of the first over the second."

dubious; at all events one must thoroughly examine just what it amounts to before building on it. Has a new unity really come about, making the old divisions illusory, making it meaningless to maintain the old demarcations and unities? To affirm this would mean attributing such absolute preponderance to sociological, cultural and national factors that scarcely anything would be left of the universality of the Christian faith, of the universal communication in the truth across cultural frontiers. In that case all that would still count would be culture, civilization; the profound identity which faith strives to create despite the most radical difference of civilizations and cultures, would no longer exist. The growing unity that people are conscious of would open out new divisions. Furthermore, the specifically unifying power of faith would be destroyed, because it would once again be confined within the limits of existing sociological bodies. Faith seeks to create unity in distinction, People of God of the peoples of this world; but that is precisely what is refused it by such considerations. The sociological reduction not only unites, it also separates. And the search for manifest truth not only separates, it also unites, and does so more radically, that is, in a way that goes to the root of the matter.

If, after these reflections, we take another look at the remarkable question of the Regensburg discussion about what is common to the denominations, it is clear enough, I think, that the question is still worth asking. There is, of course, no doubt at all that something in common does exist (and to that extent the question is rhetorical). But where the really unifying element with a real future lies, and where the merely superficially common features, is something that calls for careful examination. Before going on, then, we may summarize our conclusions as follows. Having examined certain statements about the Christian world as a whole, we hold that it would be true to say that theological dogmatism and the self-perpetuating tendency of institutions have developed and are still producing divisive factors which do not concern the real question of faith. These must be vigilantly tracked down, and here both the self-criticism of the various groups and their mutual criticism is called for. But we must add that it would be an over-simplification to solve the division on purely sociological terms by tracing it back to the part played by institutions or by renouncing universal understanding of the truth as such. Perhaps the division is in fact largely the result of 'rôles' obtruding themselves and hiding the truth, for it does not come from truth or faith itself. But precisely if that is so, too superficial and sociological a settlement (or even a straight verdict of guilty against the 'other' rôle) will not do.

An incidental remark here. So far only two factors have been mentioned, each blaming the other for the split: the Church authorities and the theologians. In justice to the facts, however, a third element should be included, and even given greater prominence: the communities themselves. One small incident by way of example. After a lecture which I was permitted to give in a Lutheran Course on pastoral care, some of the ministers asked me whether I knew of any means of making the views I had expressed intelligible to the members of their congregations. They said that from their pastoral experience they could only say that the real supports of their congregations, the members who believed and acted upon their faith with the most vigour, were also those least accessible to ecumenical contacts. That may have altered to some extent, but is still largely correct on both sides. Those who have accepted the Church and its faith, those who are rooted in it and have found a home in it, affirm it in the form it has assumed in the course of history and thereby affirm the exclusion of the other. They cannot lay aside as unimportant today what they have been taught to be decisive. Their assent to faith and their churchmanship are so closely connected that there is a risk of destroying the first if any attempt is made to disturb the second. Here, too, there are certainly merely human divisive factors determined by social rôles. But it is no good merely discrediting the conservatism of pious people; here again, and here above all questions of great gravity are involved.

The way should now be finally clear for a positive treatment of the problem. What do the denominations have in common? First of all the crisis of faith in face of the problems of modern life; the kernel of belief in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Redeemer

of mankind. Common to all despite their divisions is the linking of belief with Church and divine worship on the one hand, and to the universal precept of love on the other.

First the crisis. It is still an extremely ambiguous factor. For it means first that all Churches have the same human beings, the same problems, the same opportunities, but also the same decomposition of belief. The Lutheran theologian Karl Hammer has recently described the not very glorious chapter of German theology of war from 1870-1918. Because of the differing sociological starting-points, very different judgments were passed on the 1870 victory and on the new German Empire by Catholics and Protestants, but the common situation they all occupied in the World War brought about a terrible uniformity in forgetfulness of the second article of faith and the paganization of the first⁶. The rapprochement brought about in this way could serve as a classic example of a merely sociological community which creates no real Church unity in the line of faith. But that is only one side. We also know that a common struggle in the distress of the age for a living contemporary faith, was and is a powerful help to slough off a purely human past and its egotism and to find the centre of faith which unites us. The most effective stimulus to ecumenism has come in this way. The distressing situation of missions opposed to one another was largely the starting-point of the world-wide ecumenical movement. When Christians do not look at one another in order to dispute but go together from the Lord towards men and the world, they do in fact find their way to one another. For theology and Church, a decisive ecumenical opportunity lies at the point where they enter critically and openly into present-day matters on the basis of faith. In the committee at the 1971 autumn session of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, which was to examine the question of whether a common formulation of faith is possible in the world of today, we more and more clearly came in our discussion to the point that common formulations are difficult when we start from within our particular theologies; we noted on the other hand the remarkable fact that in sermons and in the prayers that we try to compose, practically no difference is perceptible. What hope there is in this observation that where it is a question of announcing the faith, we find ourselves largely in agreement despite the unsolved problems!

This brings us to the two other points already mentioned. The possession of the Bible, of the Old and New Testaments, gives Christendom very much more than a book in common. Even the latter would be no small matter, for despite all problems of interpretation this book to an astonishing extent makes statements so clear that they are not to be obscured, whether by the magisterium or the cavils of theologians. And the Bible is more than a collection of statements worthy of consideration. Those who accept the very varied literature composed over a period of roughly a thousand years which is contained within the covers of the Bible as *one* book, as *the* book, those, that is, who accept the Bible, in principle accept the decision in faith of the ancient Church which brought together and recognized this literature as the Word of God. Quite logically the Reformation of the 16th century read the Bible within this conception of faith, in intrinsic conjunction with the baptismal creed of the ancient Church, the western form of which we know as the Apostles' Creed. If this fundamental decision is once again clearly recognized with the real claim it involves, it should not be too long before all sides can distinguish between essential and non-essential and so find the way to a diversified, pluriform unity.

I do not want to pursue this here, but simply to add a final remark. Commonly, the Church as a reality is regarded as what really divides, and in many respects this is so. But it must not be forgotten that not only the Roman Catholic Church and the various Eastern Churches claim and desire to be the Catholic Church, in the sense of the Church of the first centuries, but that the Reformation Churches too, especially

⁶ K. Hammer, *Deutsche Kriegstheologie 1870-1918*, (1971). At the same time it should be said that while the compensating factors that are certainly present are not passed over in Hammer, they are not given their full force. He probably does not take sufficient account, either, of the problems created by the situation.

those of the Confession of Augsburg, sought and seek the genuine, original catholicity⁷. The consequence is that despite the differences of theological interpretations and of historical starting-points within the various denominations, a surprisingly similar life persists, both positively and negatively. Against all divisions, the essential Christian content has again and again asserted itself with surprising uniformity, just as the humanity of men expresses itself in a very similar way in different contexts. I should like to draw two conclusions from this.

1. The true chance for ecumenism does not lie in revolt against the Church as it is, in a Christianity as free of the Church as possible, but in a deepening of the reality which is the Church. What continually surprises me in all contacts with the work of the World Council of Churches, is the correlation between faith and Church which is taken for granted; precisely in this, too, Christians with every kind of background recognize one another as unexpectedly close.

2. In practice this means that one cannot live ecumenism against one's own Church, but only by trying to deepen it in relation to what is essential and central. This means that one must seek the centre in one's own Church, and this, after all, for all Christians and Churches is truly only one. Conversely it means, as J. J. von Allmen rightly notes, that at all events one may not seek the centre in traditions that are *purely* one's own, which are not found in the *whole* of the rest of the oecumene⁸.

All this, however, can never be done by merely rational calculation. It presupposes spiritual experience, penance and conversion. And again, it begins quite concretely by overcoming mutual mistrust, the sociologically rooted defensive attitude against what is strange, belonging to another, and that we constantly take the Lord, whom after all we are seeking, more seriously than we take ourselves. He is our unity, what we have in common – no, who is the one who is common to and in all denominations.