

Ecumenical Dialogue as a Project of Mutual Perception

In the last few years there have been constant remarks regarding the ecumenical movement, complaining about its situation and proclaiming an end to the ecumenical success story. On one hand, the outcomes of many interchurch dialogues were criticised for being too ineffective or not truly genuine. This was also the case of the Common Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

On the other hand, there was also a big debate on the role and possibilities for the Orthodox churches to participate in the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the compromise and changes on ecumenical prayers and voting procedures were, at least in Germany, perceived by many as a step backwards in the ecumenical process.

I. Pace and Direction

Thus, there seems to be wide-spread frustration about the current pace and direction of the ecumenical movement, of which the examples mentioned above are only the tip of the iceberg.

There are many possible reasons for this feeling; be it the shattered hope that after the end of the East–West division in the political realm, the denominations would now more easily come together.

They could do it, although it has been a long time since the hopeful 1960s and the encouraging 1980s, which still have not yet developed a tangible overall success in the mutual recognition of the different denominations.

There is also, at least in Germany, a growing lack of understanding of the reasons why the co-operation between Roman Catholic and

Protestant parishes is not followed by closer recognition from the official church bodies.

While these feelings, frustrations, and criticism of the pace and direction of the ecumenical movement are all real and are drawing attention to serious challenges, there is, however, an ongoing, successful and promising element within the ecumenical movement, which should be valued and cultivated.

This we would regard as one of the key elements in the ongoing story of ecumenism and the ecumenical movement. I personally worked a lot in the Europe Region of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), participated in several dialogue activities, and was in touch with others doing so.

Therefore, I would like to draw attention to ecumenical dialogue as a project of mutual perception. This is no new insight, nor a new paradigmatic approach, and it also may seem to be very insignificant. We already have reached quite an impressive standard of theological and practical co-operation between denominations.

Still, it seems to me the crucial foundation to all the rest and also a basis, which through the years is constantly carried on and bears fruit at the same time, even though there are no papers, resolutions or the like produced.

II. Surprise, Joy, Excitement and Friendship

This approach to ecumenical encounters as a project of mutual perception is triggered by the element of surprise, joy and friendship, which I have experienced very often in conferences, meetings or visits alike.

It is the moment we realise not only how much we have in common, but also where the differences seem to be. Yet, we still cannot refrain from realising that the Other is nevertheless a sister or a brother in Jesus Christ, be she or he a friend, a partner or simply a person we enjoy talking to, working and celebrating with.

It is the moment in which we begin to feel the pain of division, maybe without even realising it at that very moment. This might seem to be a very simple element which is not really able to carry the weight of ecumenical progress.

Nevertheless, it is an expression of the excitement of mutual perception. We perceive the Other Person as a Fellow Christian and are able to stand the difficult situation of simultaneously experiencing elements of similarity and difference.

In this way, we start to realise the challenge and value of ecumenical dialogue. While this is a personal process, it is still a very important one since it involves the same persons who are engaged in dialogue.

Unless this element of personal encounter and mutual perception—including the simultaneous experience of similarity and difference—is experienced in ecumenical dialogue, there is no chance of moving forward.

At the same time, this dialogue is a way of experimenting with new ideas and formulations regarding the way people from different traditions can come together, and might be useful for implementation on other levels.

III. The Ephesian Moment

Behind this experience lies a theological and Biblical truth that not only challenges us today but also challenged the early Christian communities. It is the element that Andrew F. WALLS, the famous missiologist, calls the Ephesian Moment.

It is the moment in which Christian communities are forced to realise that while being different, while being challenged by the praxis of the others, the different communities need each other to realise the Body of Christ, which the Church is indeed supposed to be.

Reflecting on Paul's letters to the Ephesians, where it is said: "In union with Jesus Christ, you too are being built together with all the others to a place where God lives through the Spirit" (Ephesians 2,22), WALLS draws a conclusion about the differences between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians (page 78.):

"Each Christian lifestyle, representing a culture converted to Jesus Christ, expressed something that the whole body needed. Hellenistic Christianity was not a Torahless soft option for benighted heathen, who could do no better, as some Jerusalem believers undoubtedly thought it.

Nor was Judaic Christianity a system of legalistic bondage for people who had never known the benefits of a cosmopolitan culture, as some Hellenistic believers may have thought it.

Nor was it the case that each was an authentic form of Christian faith complete and valid in itself, apart from the other. Each was necessary to the other, each was necessary to complete and correct the other; for each was an expression of Jesus Christ under certain specific conditions, and Christ is humanity completed.



The understanding of Christ—knowing the ‘full stature’—thus arises from the coming together of the fragmented understandings that occur within diverse culture-specific segments of humanity, where He becomes known.”

So basic to the Ephesian Moment is the realisation of the need for other conceptions of Christian life, in order to become Christian oneself. Similarly, essential to the project of mutual perception is the realisation that in other sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ, in people of other denominations, we meet other Christians.

Thus, the challenge of the ecumenical movement lies in the beginning of dialogue, in the recognition of the other’s faith in Jesus Christ, which is also the very aim of dialogue at the end: the full recognition of the other denomination as being a right-believing and right-acting church, with which a full communion is possible.

IV. Ecumenical Hermeneutics

This is a question of perception, rather than one of knowledge, since it is often the phenomenon of awareness that comes long before the process of reflection and reasonable discourse.

At that moment we begin to be open for the other person in her or his expression of faith, we need to allow the other person to be herself or himself. More often, however, we tend to reduce other believers to being the way we like to think they are “supposed” to be.

This is not so much a question of being biased or prejudiced, but rather a question of hermeneutics, of the way we understand messages and information, the way we make sense of our experiences.

We try to link a pattern of behaviour or a way of expression that we witness to some previous knowledge or experiences. And this is of course important and useful; otherwise we could not understand new experiences.

In ecumenical encounters, however, we often feel the need to allow other persons to act only in the way we would expect them to act. Thus it is a challenge to develop an open mind, to allow the other to be different, and at the same time still to share familiar elements.

The already-known elements are the ones that enable us to realise automatically that the other person is a Christian, just like we are. This element, being presented to us in a completely different context than we would expect, challenges us to take a closer look, to perceive the other person’s expression of faith or being in a way formerly uncommon to us.

By fully recognising the element of personal experience and learning as an important starting point of ecumenical work and dialogue, we are able to better appreciate the ongoing ecumenical success, which is indeed continuously experienced at different levels.

And by conceptualising ecumenical dialogue as a project of mutual perception, we realise the important role played by all ecumenical organisations, which allow opportunities for such experiences.

But this project of mutual perception needs work, and many efforts need to be invested into its development. This process is not “just happening”; it is not an automatically-acquired experience.

V. Preconditions for Challenge

To be able to learn to perceive the other person as similar, kindred and different at the same time, and to be open to the expressions and patterns of behaviour of the other person’s faith, we need certain preconditions:

We need a space in which none of the participants is in the role of the outsider, the exception, the alien. Fairly balanced groups are needed. We need a space in which trust and understanding can be developed in mutuality.

Thus there is a need for learning and the willingness to be challenged. We need the freedom not to be forced to represent more than we are, that is: we need the freedom not to be seen as “the Protestant” or “the Orthodox” or “the Roman Catholic.”

This labelling would force us to defend and justify all the other previous experiences or knowledge the others might have had with persons from our Christian background. I can only represent myself as a Protestant, and maybe find ways to explain the behaviour of other Protestants. I will never, however, be able to stand in for all persons of my denominational background.

Thus inner denominational plurality should be accepted. We need some sort of common ground or common aim, for which the developing group in the encounter is responsible, and therefore in need of working together.

Thus, there should be conferences, seminars, exchanges, work camps, team visits, etc. The common aim serves as a proper starting point for the common experience of difference and familiarity at the same time.

And, finally, we need space for reflection, in which our freshly gained

experience can be put into the right context: the context of our own experience, which is as well the context of a wider theological map.

Therefore we are in need of a chance to “digest” our experience, and in some cases we need to avail ourselves of such theological expertise—be it by experts or by books or both—that would enable us to put our experiences in some wider and deeper perspective.

When planning and developing spaces for ecumenical encounters, we should learn again to appreciate some sort of inner-denominational time to reflect on our experiences. This is done, for example, in the German churches when they hold *Youth Forums on Orthodoxy*, in which participants of different Protestant–Orthodox encounters meet and reflect on their diverse experiences.

VI. Developing Dialogue

None of these suggestions are in any way new to ecumenical dialogue, nor are they the only ones. The point is rather to appreciate that we are able to experience such encounters, and that we already are able to look back at a long ongoing history of such encounters.

The ecumenical movement was only possible because of people, women and men, who were triggered by experiences of mutual perception, which opened new horizons of Christian faith, urging them to continue following this path.

Nowadays, sometimes I can discern more differences between myself and a fellow Protestant from another country, than between myself and some Roman Catholics from my own town.

In these utterly pluralistic times, the project of mutual perception allows us to find new starting points for dialogue and urges and enables us to reach different levels of ecumenical co-operation.

The history of the ecumenical movement is today so long and complex that each new generation will have difficulties in weaving its own experiences and questions into the fabric of ecumenical history.

Still, there is continuity, and there is an ongoing work for which we are very grateful. At the same time, it becomes more and more difficult to be familiar with all developments, and people feel the need to make their own ecumenical experiences and follow new and possibly different agendas.

This is the continuous challenge for the Ecumenical Movement as a movement of denominations in dialogue, a movement of different movements happening at the same time. The denominations need to set long-term agendas.

The movements, like the WSCF, however, are needed for the formation of new ecumenists and for the development of more spontaneous and current agendas, which focus on up-to-date challenges.

The different Christian denominations need to follow the various theological dialogues in order to establish and maintain a reflected and premeditated basis and foundation for their dealings with each other.

The denominations rather tend to try to send representatives who are more familiar with the language of their own tradition, as they have to develop new understandings of their own tradition after the encounter and also need to be ambassadors of their church-bodies.

This makes their participation in the ecumenical movement quite slow, and the achievement of lasting insights and developments even slower. The movements depend on active and motivated individuals.

So, they need a very focused, very specific and up-to-date agenda, in order to open up the space for individuals to grow and reach common aims and goals that transcend local and individual needs.

Here the need for creative and open minded participants is much needed, as here is the field of experimenting – in the positive sense of the word – with new approaches and concepts for the future of Christian communities growing together.

All the parameters of our political, social and cultural lives are being drawn together by the process of globalisation. As our traditions are changing their way of functioning, they are lived out in a new and pluralistic context.

So, we need to step back and look closely at the realities of our everyday faith, as well as at our theological reflection upon our faith. This is much easier for the movements, as they may focus on specific challenges and changes.

It is harder for the denominations that need to balance the changes and new approaches with the traditions and doctrinal heritage they carry. There are some people who are challenged by specific contextual issues. Only those very people, however, who are motivated and shaped by experiences of mutual perception and who are allowed to experiment within their traditions, will finally give a new quality to ecumenical dialogue.

VII. Prophetic Confession

We should not be constantly frustrated by the unfulfilled aims of the ecumenical movement. We should rather recognise the time of change in our common Christian lives.

Instead of with frustration, we should view ecumenical dialogue as a project of mutual perception that allows us to come to terms with reality as it is changing, while also being a constructive part of the forces shaping these changes.

In today's world there is a need for committed contribution from Christians. As always confessed in Christian belief, the world desperately needs a firm and valuable Christian contribution.

In many European countries, Christian denominations suffer from a feeling of neglect in public discourse or from not having the proper and desired positions that they believe they should rightly have.

Still, Christians are asked for their commitment and contribution. This should, however, be a united Christian message—not a Protestant, next to a Roman Catholic, next to an Orthodox, contribution.

Thus, dialoguing in the way of mutual perception allows us to raise an ecumenical voice in the multitude of voices. To raise a voice is valuable, as it not only focuses on some lost past or never-reached future aspiration.

On the contrary, it is based on a serious analysis of the situation and close perception of the Christian praxis, of which we believe is beneficial and salvific. This prophetic voice is the one which needs to be raised.

Suggested Reading

- BANTON Michael (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. London, 1966.
GEERTZ Clifford, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays*. New York, 1973.
JEANROND Werner, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*. London, 1994.
MAALOUF Amin, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*. Harmondsworth, 2000.
NIEMAN James, *Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations*. *International Journal of Practical Theology* 2002/6.
WALLS Andrew F., *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. Maryknoll, 2002.
WALLS Andrew F., *The Ephesian Moment: At the Crossroads in Christian History*. In WALLS Andrew F., *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. Maryknoll, 2002.
ŽIŽEK Slavoj, *On Belief*. London–New York, 2002.

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Pavel HANES

Messianic Prophecies on the Transformation of Human Society

The interpretation of prophecies is laden with historical and contemporary misapplications. Some of these are for political purposes, and others are to support a particular interpretation of Scripture, such as extreme chiliasm.

Therefore, before directing attention to the Old Testament prophetic texts, it is necessary to introduce the methodology used in this article. Before doing this, however, I would like to point out that I do not favour any of the “travel guides to eschatology” written to support a particular political or theological bias.

The method used could be called a paradigmatic analysis. The paradigm, structure or model will be to note what God is doing – in this case in the transformation of human society.

This method comes from the reality that prophecies, without consideration of their time of fulfilment, talk about God's values, which God expects from humans and society, and, according to the prophecies, safeguards in the end.

This is in sharp contrast to the usual method of using time as the paradigm, the main way of focusing on the prophecies, either when the prophecy was fulfilled, or when it will be fulfilled.

Using God's work in society as the paradigm does not contravene the time limits of the prophecies or deny that the Biblical prophecies foretell the future, and in some cases deal with the past and present. This method simply allows us to avoid misapplications and draw from them timeless practical teaching as well as eschatological teaching and encouragement.