

The unity we seek

Setting the agenda for ecumenism

by [George Lindbeck](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

A bit of history is needed in order to understand the present-day ecumenical options. I shall start with the year in which my own ecumenical involvement began. Fifty-five years ago, in 1950, there was general agreement, at least in France where I was then studying, on the goal of ecumenism and how to attain it. The goal was a visibly united church, but this goal would not be reached by the conversion of individuals or groups from one ecclesial allegiance to another. Rather it would take place in God's own time by means largely hidden but that can be pointed to by such words as convergence, rapprochement and integration. Each of the uniting bodies would have to change profoundly in order to enter into full communion, but they could do this, it was believed, without rejecting what is essential to their own identities.

The degree to which this quest would be successful before the eschaton God only knew, but to the degree that it was, the resulting ecumenical, catholic church would be richer and more variegated than anything we could imagine, and yet it would be genuinely one. This outlook is basically that of what can be conveniently named "convergence" ecumenism, which later became temporarily dominant.

Convergence ecumenism, insofar as it is understood as including Roman Catholics (and not just the Protestants and Orthodox who had organized the World Council of Churches in 1948), was in its beginnings when I encountered it. Those who were open to it were few in number and, on the Roman Catholic side, were suspect by church authorities. Yves Congar, O.R., author of *Chrétien désunis* (1937; published in English as *Divided Christendom*), the first and, in some respects, still the greatest catholic ecumenical manifesto, was officially silenced in 1954, but his work set the tone for the discussions in which I was one of the student auditors. The air was electric with hope and excitement despite suppressive measures.

The next decades brought far greater progress toward that goal than those who were active in 1950 had dared to hope. Congar's trajectory maybe taken as

representative. His silencing was lifted; he greatly influenced Vatican II, became a cardinal, and is reported to have been the favorite theologian of Pope Paul VI.

Convergence ecumenism came to dominate the ecumenical establishment (by which I mean those who to one degree or another are professionally engaged in ecumenism, whether as students, teachers, bureaucrats or active participants in relevant meetings, commissions and assemblies). Three of the high-water marks of 20th-century ecumenism reflect this dominance: the WCC's New Delhi statement on "the unity we seek" (1961), Vatican II's *Unitatis redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism, 1964) and the WCC's Faith and Order document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, which, though not given its finishing touches until just before its publication in 1982, reflects in its substance agreements that had been reached a decade or more earlier. In short, it took only until around 1970 for convergence ecumenism to reach its apogee.

Since then, ecumenism has been in decline. Significant convergences on doctrinal issues have not ceased, as in, for example, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), but these convergences tend to be the outcome of discussions already well advanced in earlier decades and are to be attributed more to institutional inertia than to continuing enthusiasm.

Nonconvergence strategies for moving toward visible unity have also weakened. Beginning already at the WCC assembly in Uppsala in 1968, the emphasis started to shift from the concerns of Faith and Order toward those of what ecumenists called Life and Work. It is almost as if the social activism of the 1920s and 1930s, summed up in the 1925 Life and Work slogan "Doctrine divides but service unites," were once again ecumenically triumphant.

A major change from 1925, however, is that since Uppsala it is the unity of the world, not that of the church in service to the world's unity, that is more and more the direct goal. In the imagery employed by those in favor of the change, the paradigm is not the old "God-church-world" but rather "God-world-church." According to this new paradigm, Christians should discern from what God is doing in the world what they themselves should do; or, in language that those hostile to the change often quote: "The world sets the agenda." This type of Life and Work ecumenism had considerable momentum in the heyday of liberation theology, but since the end of the cold war, it has joined Faith and Order ecumenism in the doldrums. The survival of the ecumenism we have known seems doubtful.

The doubts are widespread even among those who are professionally involved in ecumenism and are all in favor of its continuance, though in new forms. Consider, for example, the report of a participant in a weeklong meeting of directors of ecumenical institutes from around the world held in July 2003 at Bossey, the study institute of the WCC. There was, he writes, "nearly unanimous and almost immediate resistance" to the "traditionalist" notion

that the ecumenical movement has a single nature and a single goal. . . . Negotiating doctrines is giving way to . . . ecumenical spirituality. . . . Most people don't believe unity is the goal anymore; now it's dialogue, the sharing of stories. At Bossey it became clear . . . that the nature of the ecumenical movement is to have many goals, and the goal of the ecumenical movement is to let its many natures flourish and interact. . . . Nearly everyone in the seminar, including those who have devoted careers of many decades to the movement, responded positively to this new focus. [The comments were made by Patrick Henry as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research; they appear in the institute's collection *Ecumenical People, Programs, Papers*.]

The new focus includes the so-called "wider ecumenism," which is concerned with interreligious rather than intra-Christian relations and is greatly outstripping the latter in popular interest. What is problematic about this focus is not interfaith dialogue but the failure to realize that this dialogue differs categorically from the search for Christian unity: the first is a matter of learning how to communicate with strangers, and the second, of overcoming estrangement within the family.

Once the two efforts are equated, favoring foreigners over family is perhaps inevitable if for no other reason than that there are many families of foreigners and only one family that is one's own. Moreover, the turn from domestic to foreign affairs fits the now-dominant God-world-church paradigm, for to the extent that the world sets the agenda, the problems of religious pluralism will in our day seem more pressing than those of Christian disunity. New external pressures will no doubt arise, but if it is these rather than the church's own compass and rudder that determine direction, the demise of the ecumenism that flourished briefly in the 20th century is a certainty. That demise is what the directors of ecumenical institutes gathered at Bossey under WCC auspices expect, and that is what will occur if, to repeat, the world sets the agenda for the church.

If this happens, however, it will not be the first time in postbiblical history that the Zeitgeist has overridden concern for the unity of God's chosen people. Already in the second century, gentile Christians expropriated even the name Israel from the Jews and proclaimed themselves the New Israel. Then in 1054 came the break between East and West, to be followed 500 years later by the Reformation that sundered Catholics and Protestants and greatly weakened concern for unity.

With the loosening in recent centuries of the Constantinian symbiosis of church and state, space opened for further fragmentation, especially, among Protestants but also for unitive countercurrents in the 19th century that led to the modern ecumenical movement in the 20th. During the cold war, the spirit of the age actively encouraged ecumenism. Western nations led by the U.S. favored a united church front to protect a purportedly Christian civilization from the communist threat (think, for example, of the ecumenical activities of John Foster Dulles, secretary of state under Eisenhower), while countries under Soviet control supported the participation of their chiefly Orthodox churches in the ecumenical movement as an Eastern counterpoise. It is a testimony to the Christian integrity of the ecumenical leaders of this period that they for the most part sought to resist (and partially succeeded in resisting) both Western and Eastern pressures. Even the Orthodox ecumenical delegations, infiltrated with KGB agents though they were, were by no means always pushovers.

Now, however, the winds of the world have shifted once again. Church unity may be needed more than ever, even for worldly reasons, in view of the tensions generated by the simultaneous growth of pluralism and globalism, but it is now in disrepute. None of the major social, cultural and political trends favor such unity. Efforts to mobilize Christians for political ends may be unprecedentedly massive on the right and are by no means lacking on the left; but as is illustrated by antiabortion alliances between Roman Catholics and conservative evangelicals and by antiwar protests gathering together both Christian pacifists and nonpacifists, these groupings are indifferent to ecumenism because, among other things, it has no public influence. The historically ecumenical churches have for the most part become ciphers in this respect, and uniting them is a matter of joining weakness to weakness, while the evangelicals and Pentecostals who do have political weight are unecumenical or antiecumenical. The renewal of unitive ecumenism will have to come from within Christian communities without the support of external pressure.

What kind of renewal-minded unitive ecumenism might be promoted? There are many ideal possibilities from which to choose, but of real, actually existing ones, I know of only two at this time. Both visions protest the neglect of unitive ecumenism, but one does so from within the ecumenical establishment and aims to retrieve emphases that have been lost, while the other originates outside ecumenical and denominational structures and is open to the possibility that new organizational forms may be needed either in whole or in part.

I shall take Michael Kinnamon (MK) as spokesperson for the insider or establishment protesters and the so-called Princeton Proposal (PP), with which I was involved, as representative of the outsiders.

Kinnamon's formulation, represented by his book *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement* (Chalice, 2003), comes out of an "unstructured" meeting on the future of ecumenism attended by 30 veterans of the movement a half dozen years ago. Many participants were surprised that the major topic came to be what a Catholic participant called "the erosion of the [theological] basis." As Kinnamon puts it: "If you don't believe that God has acted in Christ for the salvation of the world, then the idea that God has created a new community in Christ of Jew and gentile as a sign and instrument of God's mission will seem like pure idealism—impossible and ultimately irrelevant. In the absence of such conviction, ecumenism will become simply another arena for pursuing political agendas." The Princeton Proposal presupposes the same conviction. (For the Princeton Proposal, see *In One Body Through the Cross*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson [Eerdmans, 2003].)

MK and PP also agree that the church's unity is an end in itself. An inseparable part of the ecumenical task is to move the churches toward visible unity in, as the New Delhi statement put it (I abbreviate), "one baptism, one gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all, a ministry and membership accepted by all, and the ability to act and speak together as occasion requires."

Unanimity disappears, however, when one turns to the relation between this unitive part of the ecumenical task and its other aspects. For Kinnamon, the "most significant" failure of the Princeton Proposal is that it

doesn't adequately link the concern for Christian unity to the church's ministry of justice. . . . The authors highlight Faith and Order while paying little attention to Life and Work. . . . [The PP] operates out of a God-church-world paradigm: the church must get its act together in order to carry the message of wholeness and reconciliation to the world. Many contemporary Christians think more in terms of God-world-church: the church participates in God's reconciling mission in the world and thereby discovers something of its own unity. The movement has got to insist that these are not an either-or. . . . There is one ecumenical movement committed because of the gospel to both unity and justice [from his review of the Princeton Proposal in the *Christian Century*, September 6, 2003].

There are other omissions in PP that Kinnamon complains of, but the downplaying of Life and Work and the related absence of the God-world-church paradigm are the main ones, as we have just seen. The remedy for him is a synthesis of the new and the old. As I understand the disagreement, the MK approach holds that Faith and Order (the cooperative search for unity) and Life and Work (the cooperative service of, e.g., justice) are coequal ends in themselves, for they issue from distinct paradigms. And yet they are inseparable because they reciprocally reinforce each other: the more unified the church, the better it serves "wholeness and reconciliation" (which are inseparable from justice). And the more it serves the cause of justice, the better it "discovers something of its own unity."

For the PP, in contrast, the God-church-world paradigm is the only one, and Faith and Order therefore takes precedence over Life and Work in somewhat the same way that faith takes precedence over works in Reformation teaching. Just as faith in God is an end in itself, so also church unity is an end in itself; and just as good works are the indispensable fruit and sign of true faith but not its end or its cause, so also cooperation "in witness and service to all," as New Delhi put it, is a necessary fruit and sign of church unity but not its end or cause. Without Life and Work, Faith and Order is dead, but without the primacy of Faith and Order, Life and Work is deadly; it becomes a countersign of the church, "simply another arena for pursuing political agendas," to use Kinnamon's own words.

Kinnamon writes as if that disaster threatens only when Faith and Order is forgotten. But an unspoken premise of the Princeton Proposal is that the marginalization of Faith and Order that has occurred in the ecumenical movement is inescapable once

Life and Work is legitimated by the world-sets-the-agenda-for-the-church paradigm. From this perspective, the MK synthesis is wishful thinking, and PP must be chosen if a choice is to be made.

As usual, however, there is a practical side to the theological conflict that complicates the choice. The conflicting ecumenical visions are designed for different constituencies. Kinnamon speaks especially to the ecumenically interested in the mainstream denominations that were originally and, now joined by the Roman Catholic Church, remain the mainstays of organized ecumenism. He does so as a member, a dissatisfied member, of the current establishment, but he seeks to retrieve lost emphases without abandoning more recent ones in order to formulate a synthesis as attractive as possible to all who are ecumenically interested. It is for practical reasons and not only theological ones that he stresses the importance for ecumenism of the Life and Work programs for justice, peace and the integrity of creation (as well as, to mention other topics of importance to him and his audience, the "celebration of diversity" and the need for an "ecumenical hermeneutic" to satisfy doubters that there is such a thing as the "apostolic tradition" to which ecumenism must be faithful). Even if one does not think his synthesis is viable, one can respect his motives. He is trying, it may be suggested, to make room in the ecumenical tent for the weaker brothers and sisters of whom scripture tells us we should take special care.

Moreover, it is not only these sisters and brothers but also the ecumenical cause that would suffer if Life and Work concerns were simply excised. Indeed, would not Kinnamon betray his duty to the largely liberal mainstream traditions that have nourished him in the faith and to which ecumenism is heavily indebted if he did not seek to correct what he sees as their ecumenical failures from within?

The audience that the Princeton Proposal has in mind is very different. It is chiefly evangelical and Pentecostal, on the one hand, and Roman Catholic and Orthodox on the other. While the majority of the (now disbanded) PP study group are members of Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian churches, they believe that the future of the kind of ecumenism that originated from these and other mainline Protestant denominations now lies outside of them. It is among evangelicals, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, polar opposites though they seem, that there is a measure of agreement on where and how the apostolic tradition is to be located and retrieved. They do not find it necessary to invent a special "ecumenical hermeneutic" in order to legitimate their search for the tradition in

scripture, under the guidance of the affirmations regarding God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit confessed, for example, in the Nicene Creed. Even professedly creedless evangelicals and Pentecostals do not deny the Trinity or that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. Without ever having heard of the catholic creeds in many cases, evangelicals and Pentecostals seek to read their Bibles in accordance with them, which makes theological convergence possible.

Proof of this possibility is evident in recent conversations between prominent Roman Catholics and evangelicals, but the main hope for bringing the fastest growing (and most fissiparous) portions of the Christian flock into the ecumenical enterprise probably lies in other ways of publicly witnessing to unity in Christ, of which the Princeton Proposal suggests a few. The sparseness of reference to Life and Work issues in the PP is regrettable, but these issues are so easily politicized when the audience is as varied as the one we thought of ourselves as addressing that no one actually proposed additional treatment of them.

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