

## Theological Trends

# CONFESSIONALISM, ECUMENISM AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

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THESE IS AN APOCRYPHAL STORY told about Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (1870–1979), Secretary of the Congregation of the Holy Office and one of the most prominent of the conservatives at Vatican Council II. Upon leaving his lodgings to go to St Peter's for the next session, Ottaviani is supposed to have instructed the driver: 'Take me to the Council'. The driver responded by taking him to Trent. With the wry Roman eye for manoeuvres of the hierarchy this *pasquinade* gets at a deeper historical reality in the life of the Church. From the Catholic perspective, the prelates at Trent set up clear and necessary rules for dealing with their newly separated and protesting brothers and sisters: stony hostility to the 'heretics' expressed in the canonical anathemas was matched by an equally virulent hostility on their part for the minions of the Antichrist and their benighted dupes. The way of the immediate future was to articulate and define reformed and mutually antagonistic Christianities. Modern historians have labelled the process of hostile codification 'confessionalization'. Reformation gave way to confessionalization as the 'new churches' sorted through their Christian inheritance, and disposed of the 'rags of popery' in canon, theology and practice. The old church 'took some time to recover its nerve'<sup>1</sup> and grimly disposed of much of that permissiveness and wideness of spirit which seemed all too clearly to have invited catastrophe. By 1962, however, the conservatives caricatured in the person of Cardinal Ottaviani were under siege. A new era of opportunity had dawned and an enhanced awareness of the common and underlying reality of the Christian community stimulated Catholics and Protestants alike to re-examine old ecclesiological assumptions in light of the *oikoumene*. The spirit of 'Ecumenism' was upon Christians. It is difficult to imagine what an extraordinary transformation this reorientation involved. Perhaps it is a human characteristic to account for such transformations in terms of personalities: Pope John XXIII and Cardinal Bea were living in the present; Cardinal Ottaviani was living in the past. Satisfying for their simplicity, such explanations fail to tell us much. Perhaps the polarity is attractive because it matches other satisfying simplicities: old and new; us and them; right and wrong; confessionalism and ecumenism. If, however, we get below them or behind them it is possible to discern the vital connections between the confessionalism characteristic of the early modern period and the ecumenism of the twentieth century. The successes of the ecumenical movement, and especially Roman Catholic participation in that movement, were only possible because of the doctrinal

clarity of the confessional period and the accommodation of the ecclesiastical structures set up at that time.

Once the churches of the broken body of Christ, in confrontation with modernity and especially with secularism, recognized that, in the modern world, what they had in common was far more than what separated them, they were able to begin to transform the negative aspects of their confessional legacy. Although Vatican II and the establishment of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity were watershed moments and the choreography of the reunion continues today – witness the Pope's companions in this year's Good Friday procession – modern ecumenism continues to engage with its confessional legacy. The original reality of early modern confessionalism and its subsequent transformation are the firm foundation for modern ecumenical successes.

With hindsight one might suppose that division and confessionalization were inevitable consequences of the Reformation. Contemporaries, however, strove to preserve unity and resist the looming division that hardened into the Christian confessions. For example, Emperor Charles V sought desperately to find a means to unite the Church because he realized that religious divisions had dire political consequences. He had hoped that the Council he had been promised by the popes would bring the warring parties back together. The emperor hoped that he would be able to compel a compromise that would address the abuses that he felt had provoked the Reformation. An 'imperial party' among the prelates at the Council of Trent took his part, believing that unity could be re-established if notorious and familiar abuses were curtailed. If the Bishop of Rome found his freedoms further curtailed as well, that would be an added benefit for his imperial rival. The fundamental point, however, was to resolve quickly the ecclesiastical abuses which outraged all Christians so that the emperor could get on with more critical matters – his endless wars with France and the struggle with the Turks. This was the motivation which drove the imperial party to demand that reform be considered before doctrine, lest the prelates at the Council become bogged down in obscure theological controversies and avoid self-reform.

One can imagine the emperor amplifying Pope Leo X's supposed dismissal of Luther's early challenge as a 'squabble among monks' to a more general squabble among the theologians at the cost of the unity he needed in order to accomplish his aims. Yet Charles V had distinguished company in misunderstanding the nature of the Protestant challenge and the required solution. No less sophisticated an observer than Desiderius Erasmus had earlier failed to recognize that Luther's acerbic articulation of ecclesiastical abuses was driven by theological insights. Erasmus' 1524 *Diatribes on free will*, written because his Catholic patrons insisted that he take a position on the 'Luther question', chided Luther for overthrowing the Church on account of its abuses rather than reforming them. Flawed the Church might be – Erasmus himself had blazed this familiar way with his own barbed criticisms – but what was the alternative? Tearing the Church of compromise and tradition apart in the

service of the truth was only another variety of falsehood: 'As if, indeed, falsehood may not be a neighbor on both sides of the truth if you go beyond the mark!' as he put it in one of his adages.<sup>2</sup> The Church might be flawed, yet grace would prevail where Christians behaved with charity and concord toward one another. Had it not always been so from the beginning? The idea of separate, hostile Christian churches was both preposterous and tragic – a sinful self-indulgence.

Neither Erasmus nor Charles V, however, were theologians; they failed to recognize that the Lutheran and the emerging Reformed Churches were driven at their heart by theological insights that Catholic theologians felt were intolerable. These theological innovations had to be tested and judged, whatever imperialists or humanists thought. Accordingly the prelates at Trent compromised and agreed to consider the reform of abuses and doctrine simultaneously. By the end of the first phase of the Council they had debated and anathematized several fundamental points of Protestant doctrine. For example, the decisive rejection of the single-source theory of divine revelation (*sola scriptura*) at the fourth session during the first phase of the Council in favour of the famous 'two-source' theory of revelation affirmed the necessity of both Scripture and tradition as sources of revelation. Protestant observers were invited to the second phase of the Council with the promise of imperial safe conduct, but they insisted that everything debated and settled prior to their arrival had to be re-opened and this demand was unacceptable to their hosts. The canons and decrees of the Council of Trent, confirmed in 1564 by Pope Pius IV, represented a systematic Catholic repudiation of Protestant doctrine, buttressed by uncompromising assertion of the validity of tradition and the teaching authority of the Church.

This doctrinal assertiveness was not one-sided. Protestants were no more willing to compromise. The Lutheran Book of Concord (1580) defined religious orthodoxy in the Lutheran territories of Germany and Scandinavia. The Thirty-Nine Articles (1572) performed the same confessional role for the emergent Anglican Church. The anathemas of Trent and the bold formulas of the Protestant confessions hardened into the sectarian divisions feared by both the emperor and Erasmus. Christian unity could only be attained by the victory of one confession over another and in anticipation of that triumph Catholics and Protestants alike devoted their energies to codifying their doctrinal bastions and installing them in their respective societies. This process required of both confessions much the same tasks. Both Protestants and Catholics developed new catechetical instruments with which to internalize in the faithful their newly defined doctrines: both made 'social discipline' a correlate of ecclesiastical identity and doctrinal conformity: both confessions sought to 'Christianize' a great mass of the European population whose faith was deemed, upon the closer inspection demanded by confessional competition, to be mostly lacking. Thus both Protestants and Catholics undertook internal missions as formidable as the more familiar external missions, bringing the new Christianities to the 'pagans' of the European

countryside. Finally, both the mainstream Protestant Churches and the Catholics lent vital aid and comfort to the emergent absolutist secular orders which supported and controlled them.

In agenda and in challenges to the success of their respective agenda, therefore, the confessions had a great deal in common. Similar internal processes troubled both confessions too. The hostile engagement with the rival confessions demanded vigilant orthodoxy against doctrinal deviance: thus the stern response of the orthodox Calvinists at the Synod of Dort in 1619 which condemned Arminianism. Although it required different structural manoeuvres – a variety of appeals to Rome, reconsiderations, and finally silence under apostolic obedience – the protracted Jansenist controversy similarly laid out the frontier between orthodoxy and Protestantism on the difficult though critical question of justification.

Confessionalization also encouraged two besetting flaws that troubled both Protestantism and Catholicism in the era after the Reformation. The drive toward doctrinal precision in the Reform traditions, often coupled with ecclesiastical decentralization, led to sectarian proliferation. The response to doctrinal or ecclesiastical dissonance was schism, mutual anathemas, and ever more costly sectarian purity. Calvinists, Lutherans and Anglicans attacked each other with great fervour, united only in their condemnation of Rome and the ‘sects’ which had broken off from their own churches. The opposite response troubled the Catholic Church. The need to preserve unity in a sea of hostile factions required the hierarchy to insist on conformity at all costs. Innovation, inquiry and tolerance were eschewed lest the ‘One True Church’ slide toward sectarian chaos. No compromise could be tolerated and the Church stood or fell by its rigid adherence to the proper authority which exercised its proper teaching authority. For the confessions, ‘Christian unity’ meant not unity among Christians but internal unity derived from fidelity to a doctrinal inheritance. For Catholics this removed the possibility of reunion and stifled most efforts to accommodate the modern era.

How then came about the ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches and the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity? How, as it were, did Cardinal Bea triumph over Cardinal Ottaviani and Amsterdam over Dort? Part of the answer may be found in a transformation as fundamental as confessionalization was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the triumph of secularism. The interpenetration of church and society in medieval and early modern Europe gave way from the late eighteenth century on to a secular culture independent of and, sometimes, hostile to divided Christianity. The churches of the era of confessionalization and consolidation were dependent upon and supportive of the secular order under which they flourished. Scientific autonomy, Enlightenment, revolutions political and industrial: for the divided Christian churches these aspects of modernity embodied a hostile, or worse, an indifferent secular order and underlay the ecumenical impulse.

How could a broken Church legitimately witness to Christ in a world tending increasingly to marginalize Christianity? Effective witness and successful missions demanded greater unity. The principal initiative for ecumenism came from the churches of the Protestant traditions. If those churches were troubled by a tendency toward fracture, one can discern in them as well a tendency toward reconciliation – a persistent desire to re-establish union. In the modern era it was the Protestant confessions that sought out Christian unity across the centuries-old bulwarks of confessionalism. Both the impulse toward internal renewal and the impulse toward mission were at the heart of the Protestant ecumenism. Thus the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh (1910) began as an effort to co-ordinate Protestant missionary activity, but also quickly led to more explicitly ecumenical bodies such as the International Missionary Council, which was animated by the conviction that unity was a critical prerequisite for missionary success and therefore an important goal in its own right. The operating principle at Edinburgh had been that co-operation could only be attained if questions of doctrine and organization were set aside. The Faith and Order Movement, which achieved institutional realization at the World Conference for Faith and Order at Lausanne (1927), approached the issue of unity on a different and more arduous path. Its founders had attended the Edinburgh conference and believed that the obstacles created by doctrine and church organization – the accomplishments of confessionalism – had to be confronted openly and honestly. The task of the Lausanne Conference was ‘to consider the things wherein we agree and the things wherein we differ’.<sup>3</sup> The extent of these differences led to a grim realism about the obstacles to genuine unity. It also made attractive the parallel Life and Work Movement which had adopted the more optimistic slogan: ‘Doctrine divides, but service unites’. In an address to the Faith and Order Conference at Lund in 1952, Dr Y. T. Brilioth, Bishop of Uppsala, reflected upon the swirl of motivations that had driven the parallel movements:

Looking back, I seem to discern several stages in the history of our movement. The first stage, represented by the preliminary meeting at Geneva, and to a large extent by the Lausanne Conference (1927), was characterized by a certain minimizing of the differences . . . A certain tendency to gloss over differences by formulas that could be interpreted differently was perhaps not absent at this stage. During the second stage the real depth of our differences became gradually more and more apparent. That was the result of the answers which came in from the Churches, and the very thorough work done by special commissions . . . Gradually the tenacity of the confessional tradition, the different background and temper of the different Churches, became realized. It is remarkable that the ecumenical movement has had a parallel, perhaps partly as a result, a great revival of confessional consciousness . . .<sup>4</sup>

A joint proposal of the Faith and Order Movement and the Life and Work Movement in 1937 led to the creation of the World Council of Churches. The Council, which held its first meeting in Amsterdam in 1948, represented not some new superchurch but rather a fusion of the different trajectories of Protestant ecumenism, and provided the ecumenical movement with an enduring institutional structure. As the first General Secretary of the Council, Dr W. A. Visser t'Hooft, put it:

We are a Council of Churches not the Council of the one undivided Church. Our name indicates our weakness and our shame before God, for there can be and is finally only one Church of Christ on earth. But our name indicates that we are aware of that situation, that we do not accept it passively, that we move forwards towards the manifestation of the one Holy Church.<sup>5</sup>

By 1948, the churches of the Protestant confessions had explored the range of options for reunion open to them and adopted one that conformed with their fundamental confessional nature.

The Catholic Church reached a remarkably similar end, although its particular confessional realities demanded a different process. For decades the Catholic hierarchy took a dim view of Protestant ecumenism. In 1927 Catholic representatives were invited to the Faith and Order Conference in Lausanne but chose not to attend. Indeed the papal encyclical of 1928 on Christian Unity, entitled *Mortalium animos*, was a rejection of the ecumenical agenda. The encyclical denied that doctrinal compromise was acceptable and denied that the 'One Church' could be a group of organizations holding different beliefs. The encyclical concluded that 'the union of Christians can only be promoted by promoting the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it, for in the past they have unhappily left', and urged that 'the separated children draw nigh to the Apostolic See . . .'.<sup>6</sup> The road between Rome and reunion seemed irremediably blocked. As late as the first meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1948, Catholics were permitted to attend only in their private capacity and only with the permission of the Curia.

Yet the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity did not spring full grown from John XXIII's genius. Pius XI, the pope who had promulgated *Mortalium animos*, himself initiated a series of gestures toward the Orthodox Churches. During the pontificate of Pius XII, the Holy Office – with the participation, incidentally, of the future Cardinal Ottaviani – responded to the gathering momentum of Protestant ecumenism by issuing its *Instruction on the Ecumenical Movement* (20 December 1949). On the one hand, the *Instruction* reiterated the warnings and prohibitions of previous declarations and encyclicals.

Bishops, for example, were to be

on their guard against those who under false pretexts stress the points on which we agree rather than those on which we disagree . . . [and] the so-called spirit of 'eirenicism' which, looking in vain for a progressive assimilation of the various creeds, subjects the tenets of Catholicism, whether dogmas or truths connected with dogma, to a process of comparative study, whittling them down and bringing them into line with non-Catholic teaching. In this way the purity of Catholic doctrine is jeopardized and its original and true meaning obscured.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the *Instruction* legitimated several important advances. For one thing, it recognized the existence of the ecumenical movement and approved of its purpose – 'this excellent work of "reunion" of all Christians'.<sup>8</sup> It also spelled out the conditions necessary for Catholics to participate in ecumenical dialogue: Catholic representatives could meet with their counterparts in other traditions to discuss matters of faith and morals if they had the approval of the appropriate authorities. Catholic observers could participate in international conferences with the permission of the Holy See. Those with the appropriate training and authorization could participate in such discussions and their mission was to explain the Catholic position in full rather than tailor it or water it down so that it was generically acceptable. In a sense the *Instruction on the Ecumenical Movement* recognized the agenda of the Faith and Order Movement by making it possible for the appropriate Catholic authorities to participate in discussions of 'the things wherein we agree and the things wherein we differ'. Thereafter Catholic observers began to appear at ecumenical conferences – at Faith and Order Movement conferences at Lund (1952), Oberlin (1957) and St Andrews (1960), and at the World Council of Churches conferences in New Dehli (1961) and Montreal (1963).

By the time Catholic representatives arrived at the latter two conferences, Pope John XXIII had already established the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity as part of the *aggiornamento* of Vatican Council II. The Secretariat's purpose was to institutionalize contact with the 'separated brethren' but also to help them 'to find more easily the way to attain the unity for which Jesus Christ implored his heavenly Father in fervent prayer'.<sup>9</sup> A curial congregation, the Secretariat became the institutional embodiment of the Catholic ecumenical enterprise. Its director, Cardinal Augustin Bea, met with the heads of other Christian churches. The Secretariat facilitated the attendance of observers from the Protestant Churches, the Orthodox and the World Council of Churches at the sessions of Vatican II. If the creation of the Secretariat legitimated ecumenism in the curia by fitting it into the curial structure, the Council's 1964 decree *De oecumenismo* (*On ecumenism*) integrated Catholic ecumenism into the Catholic doctrinal system. The decree

built upon all that was good about progress and the stubbornness of previous decades. It continued to reject a 'false eirenicism' that would disfigure the truth, while recognizing the legitimate distinction between the deposit of the faith and its never exhaustive formulations as grounds for discussion.

What is critical to acknowledge about the Catholic entente with ecumenism is that the Catholic Church came to terms with it in a characteristically Catholic manner. Catholicism came to the ecumenical movement without abandoning the doctrine and the structures that were so painstakingly re-affirmed during the confessional period. The hierarchy zealously avoided compromising its traditional positions on faith and ecclesiastical structure. Indeed, it drew deeply upon these structures and traditions to confront the call for greater external unity without sacrificing internal unity. In the discussion of divine revelation at Vatican Council II, Archbishop Guerry of Cambrai expressed this same deeper fidelity to what was unique to the Catholic tradition which made Catholic ecumenism possible.

There is no room for a loose or inexact statement of doctrine. The word of God must be set before the world in its purity and entirely. What was wanted actually was a deepening and enlarging of our doctrinal perspective, to include all the advances made by science and discovery in our world of today. This was not asking for a diminution, but an extension, of our doctrinal tenets. But this should be done with charity, which means choosing the hard way of working selflessly to approach modern man in his needs and anxieties, and not the easy way out by condemning and negating and rejecting.<sup>10</sup>

If the Protestant tradition nourished the ecumenical movement and provided a critical example for the Catholic Church, the latter's tradition as well has its critical role to play by embodying a sort of benign confessionalism. Cardinal Bea's forthright assertions that charity and toleration were possible without abandoning the Catholic tradition and Archbishop Guerry's programmatic intervention at Vatican Council II validate the importance of operating out of rather than against the Catholic confessional legacy.

Confessionalization in the early modern period demanded evaluation of the shattered inheritance of the faith; ecumenism permitted rediscovery of the reality that 'even before the great division between East and West and the rupture brought about in the West by the Reformation, that praxis was never the same everywhere. The Church of God has always been pluriform, even during the most striking periods of unity.'<sup>11</sup> The Christian confrontation with the modern world has prompted in all the confessional traditions an awareness of both the need for and the advantages of unity. In search of the means towards such reunion, even if incomplete, the churches have succeeded in the twentieth century in transforming the characteristic vices of confessionalism

into the characteristic virtues of ecumenism. The Protestant Churches recognized the need for unity out of their particularly acute experience of disunity. Initial optimism notwithstanding, the Protestant confessional experience of doctrinal precision and ecclesiastical decentralization dictated the form and limits of the World Council of Churches. Likewise the Catholic Church embraced the ecumenical movement in accordance with the doctrine and structures of Catholic confessional experience. The desire for unity among Christians led to the confrontation with ecumenism which, like its confrontation with modernity, required the Catholic Church to explore more deeply its faithfully preserved traditions and somehow to accommodate the structural realities of the curia and hierarchy. If this characteristically Catholic process was ponderous and slow, it was sure, as witnessed by the final note of the bishops on the decree on ecumenism at Vatican Council II: 2,137 bishops voted for the decree and only 11 voted against it.<sup>12</sup> It is in part the transformation of the legacy of Christian confessionalism that has made Christian ecumenism an ongoing success. This transformation promises continued benefits for 'separated churches'. Within a structure of cordial cooperation, Protestant insistence upon their varied and characteristic church orders is a bulwark against a fatal Catholic triumphalism. Catholic fidelity to an enormously rich tradition of doctrine and praxis, preserved and regulated by the *magisterium*, remains a resource upon which the Protestant Churches continue to draw. Liturgical reform and monasticism are two enriching contributions to the Protestant Churches made possible by Catholic confessional stubbornness. One can argue that Cardinal Ottaviani was more suited to the age of Trent than the age of Vatican II, but the Church had no less need of him than of Cardinal Bea, his old collaborator from the Holy Office. The pair of them were necessary for the Catholic Church to engage constructively with ecumenism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p 94.

<sup>2</sup> John C. Olin (ed), *Christian humanism and the Reformation: selected writings of Erasmus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), p 159.

<sup>3</sup> *New Catholic encyclopedia*, s.v. 'Faith and Order'.

<sup>4</sup> *The Report of the Lund Conference*, 1953, p 101, quoted in Bernard Leeming, *The Churches and the Church: a study of ecumenism* (Westminster MD: The Newman Press, 1960), p 63.

<sup>5</sup> *New Catholic encyclopedia*, s.v. 'World Council of Churches'.

<sup>6</sup> *Mortalium animos* (1928) in Claudia Carlen Ihm (ed), *The papal encyclicals, 1903-1939* (New York: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), pp 317-318.

<sup>7</sup> 'Instruction from the Holy Office to Local Ordinaries on the Ecumenical Movement', Appendix II in Leeming, p 283.

<sup>8</sup> 'Instruction' in Leeming, p 286.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Vorgrimler (ed), *Commentary on the documents of Vatican II*, Vol II (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p 2.

<sup>10</sup> Xavier Rynne, *Letters from Vatican City: Vatican Council II (First Session): background and debates* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Company, 1963), p 154.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Marie Tillard, 'Theological pluralism and the mystery of the Church', in Claude Geffré, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Virgil Elizondo (eds), *Different theologies, common responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?*, Concilium 171 (1984), pp 62–63.

<sup>12</sup> Vorgrimler, p 56.