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UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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Editorial

Geoff Thompson

It is frequently acknowledged that the existence of the Uniting Church in Australia owes much to the twentieth-century ecumenical movement. Of course, various church unions were not hitherto unknown. Nevertheless, it was the particular theologies of union developed and promoted in the twentieth-century, especially from within the World Council of Churches, which provided much of the motivation and rationale for the formation of the Uniting Church and other united/uniting churches birthed in the same era.

At the same time, it is also frequently acknowledged that *that* ecumenism has lost its momentum, perhaps even run its course. It is common today to hear reference not only to an "ecumenical winter," but also to theological and ideological criticisms of many of the assumptions underlying modern ecumenism. But talk of ecumenism *per se* has not ceased. The conversations about it are, however, pursued differently than they were half a century ago. And those conversation are producing new ideas and fresh discourses about the possibilities of what ecumenism does and could yet mean.

Three of the articles published in this issue were written in response to an invitation to consider emerging understandings of ecumenism.[1] The first was written by Amelia Koh-Butler, a Uniting Church minister who is currently based in Singapore where she works for the Council for World Mission. Adopting an ethnographic approach and, via a series of vignettes, drawing on her experiences within and beyond the Uniting Church she identifies some of the challenges faced by contemporary ecumenism as well as the gifts it is producing. Discussions of world views, cultural identities, ecumenical motivations and emic-ectic approaches leads to several proposals for thinking about and practicing ecumenism in the UCA. These cluster around modes of communication, strengthening the study of mission, and the importance of global interactions. All the proposals have the potential to provoke new thinking about the UCA's ecumenical endeavours.

The second of the themed papers, by Sean Winter, Head of Pilgrim Theological College in the Victoria/Tasmania Synod, interrogates the customary application of Paul's notion of the unity of the body of Christ to the idea of "Christian unity." "What," he asks, if Paul's vision of unity…wasn't Christian?" According to Winter, the assumption that unity amongst first-century Jewish and Gentiles Jesus-followers means what we mean by "Christian unity" produces a very misleading anachronism. Focusing on Paul's own arguments in Galatians 3 and Romans 14–15, He argues that Paul's notion of unity was not intending a single ecumenical "household." It did not aim for a goal that negated differences of culture, ethnicity or ancestry; rather it preserved them. UCA readers of Winter's article will quickly realise the significance of these ideas of Paul not only for emerging understandings of ecumenism but also of our self-understanding as a *uniting* church.

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[1] Other invited articles were not able to be completed in time for this issue. It is possible that one or more may appear in subsequent issues of the journal. I also note the contribution of my colleague, Professor John Flett, in suggesting the theme and developing the parameters of the invitation extended to the various authors.

The author of the third of the themed papers is Y. T. Vinayaraj, the Director of the Christian Institute of the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore, India. He draws attention to the various connections between the theologies of unity developed by the "Ecumenical Movement" on the one hand and the ideas of unity employed and imposed by hegemonic empires on the other hand. The paper begins with two presenting questions: (1) What would be a relevant theology of Ecumenism in the contemporary context of Empire? and (2) If Ecumenism denies the unitarian logic of Empire, then how does it define the life in common? Through engaging the work of several post-Contintental and post-colonial theorists, he offers a threefold redefinition of ecumenism based on an ecclesiology which privileges (a) kenotic multiplicity over oneness, (b) fluidity and difference over unity-in-diversity and (c) *enmattered* life over the economy of life. Vinayaraj's paper takes the discussion in some challenging but unavoidable theological and ideological directions.

The first of the two general articles, "A Chronicle of Joy," documents the path of dialogue between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Lutheran Church of Australia which produced *At the Table: the Eucharist*, an agreed statement on the Lord's Supper. The author is the Lutheran, Rev Dr Peter Lockwood. He acknowledges that the chronicle was begun by a former UCA member of the dialogue, Rev Dr Rob Gallacher. This issue may appear to belong to the themed articles on ecumenism. It is set apart from them only because it was not written in response to the invitation to address emerging understandings of ecumenism. In an unusual publishing arrangement, this article is appearing both in this journal and its Lutheran counterpart, *Lutheran Theological Journal*.[2] This is itself a statement of the fruitfulness of this longstanding–and resilient–dialogue. The chronicle tells the story, in Lockwood's words, of the "cut and thrust of the conversations in the dialogue" thus providing both churches with a "deeper appreciation of the polished statements which finally emerged." Whilst separate from the themed articles, it makes a valuable contribution to understandings of ecumenism and its possibilities.

Over the years, *Uniting Church Studies* has published the texts of various public lectures presented within the life of the Uniting Church. Such lectures have often been presented by leading scholars whilst being hosted by the theological colleges and/or other institutions of the UCA. These lectures offer opportunities for the UCA to engage with and be informed by issues larger than those specific to its own life. Being published in the journal not only makes the lectures more widely available, but also provides readers with an insight into the wide range of theological issues being discussed in the Uniting Church. Greg Carey's essay, "Death and Beyond: how to talk eschatology," belongs to this category. A leading New Testament scholar and member of the United Church of Christ in the USA, Carey was a guest of Pilgrim Theological College in the Victoria/Tasmania Synod in early 2023 where he gave one of the latest in that college's Northey Lecture series.[3] After outlining the diversity of eschatological ideas present in the bible, Carey builds a constructive argument suggesting that the vision of the heavenly messianic banquet provides a unifying symbol for an understanding of Christian hope.

George Oommen's article on the Church of South India continues this journal's series on other united and uniting Churches. Those familiar with the history of the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia will

[2] The article is scheduled for publication in the August 2024 edition of the journal.

[3] The Northey Lectures are named after J. D. Northey, a leading Congregational minister, academic theologian and ecumenist. Following his retirement in 1971, the Congregational Union of Victorian established a fund in his name to sponsors visits of theologians to Melbourne to promote the "enjoyment" of theology by "more and more people."

know of the (unsuccessful) proposal for the UCA to form, at the time of union, a Concordat with the Church of South India as a tangible sign of a widening unity in mission.[4] The memory of that possibility has kept alive a certain level of interest in the CSI within the UCA. This article will help to sustain that interest. The story of the CSI's origins and current challenges, as told by Oommen, has many parallels with the account given of the neighbouring Church of Pakistan, published in the previous issue.[5] Oommen draws specific attention, however, to the CSI's wider ecumenism in its recognition of "Christ's reality…beyond the confines of the Church" and its continuing theological exploration of religious plurality, social justice, and the various strands of Dalit theology.

The single book review included in this issue is Liam Miller's review of Anne Carpenter's critical exploration, and reconstruction, of the notion of tradition: *Nothing Gained is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition*. Protestants will quickly affirm the quote from Carpenter with which Miller begins his review: "Christian tradition is a problem." But this book is far from a predictable protestant polemic against tradition. It is a Catholic investigation of the way the *traditioning* of Christianity cannot but be touched by sin. In Carpenter's case it is the sins of colonialism and racism that must be acknowledged in any contemporary constructive account of tradition. Miller notes that tradition "is a problem which has gone undertheorized." It would be hard to deny that this is true in the Uniting Church. The now standard appeal in various UCA discussions to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and its somewhat benign recognition of tradition could well do with some interrogation itself. Miller's review points us to one possible resource for doing so.

There is much in this issue to inform and provoke. I hope readers will be enriched on both fronts.

[4] See Joint Commission on Church Union, "The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering," in *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 69–186 (140).

[5] Anthony Lamuel, "The United Church of Pakistan," *Uniting Church Studies* 25, no 1 (2023): 63-72.

Intercultural Ecumenism: elements of enlightenment

Amelia Koh-Butler

Abstract

Employing an auto-ethnographic approach, and building on the author's various identities and roles in and beyond the Uniting Church, this article sketches a vision of the possibilities of contemporary ecumenism, some of the challenges it is engaging and the gifts it is producing. Employing a series of vignettes, each of which crystallises a particular set of issues (world views, cultural identities, ecumenical motivations and Emic-etic perspectives), the article moves towards a consideration of Global Ecumenical Councils, the Space for Grace process of the Uniting Church, and the sending-and-receiving nature of ecumenical mission.This leads to a series of proposals for the Uniting Church as a way of promoting the *–ing* of Unit–ing.

Introduction

Each Church has its own institutional culture. The Uniting Church in Australia proclaims itself to be multicultural and intercultural, offering its gifts to the cause of ecumenism. As this paper is focused on interculturalism and ecumenism, I intentionally avoid privileging a Western linear approach. Rather, I use explanations of relationships and narrative vignettes to ground a conversation about my own continually emerging experiences and learnings within a variety of community understandings. The ideas are not organised by chronology or the process of one proposition leading to another. Instead, using auto-ethnographic reporting, I invite the reader to regard my intercultural and ecumenical experience as a weaving of multiple threads, with some being more prominent than others, but supported by the integration of warp and weft. Ethnography, the systemic description and analysis of culture, is helpful in understanding how ecumenism play out in societies where cultures collaborate, compete and, sometimes, clash. The chosen vignettes are used to draw attention to particular aspects of ecumenical work. I write from the margin of diaspora, an Aussie living in Singapore and serving in an ecumenical organization of which my own Church is not a member Church.

Vignette 1: Communication opens worldviews.

In this story, readers are invited to consider the relationship between styles and modes of communication and experiences of inclusion.

> I sit in a room in Bangkok, listening to a Bembe woman (from Zambia) talking about marginalized youth with profound disabilities. She is talking about how a liberation theological lens can help reframe relationships and communities of inclusion. Her audience is made up of people from Korea and the Philippines, Belgium and Singapore, Wales and Canada, South Africa and Mexico, Samoa and Hong Kong, India and Brazil. When she finishes, I will act as an interpreter

> for a French-speaking junior scholar who will present in a conference for the first time. I pinch myself as I wonder, how does a vision develop that brings people together to talk about things that dare not be spoken of?[1]

In such ecumenical gatherings, of people with different communication languages and styles, interpretation can bridge gaps. It is not enough to translate words literally. Meaning is grounded in shared stories and subsequent questions and conversations. People entering into such groups for the first time, can be assisted by introducing the resource of intentional interpretation. Experienced interpreters will often ask clarifying questions to assist both communicating parties to better understand each other. The role of the interpreter is not just to translate language, but to understand both culture well enough to know what might need clarifying.

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I work in an ecumenical environment. A Minister from the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), I serve as the Council for World Mission (CWM) Mission Secretary for Education, Formation and Empowerment and the Pacific Region. CWM is what the London Missionary Society became in 1977, when it attempted to start the slow and painful process of truth-telling and decolonisation. Much of this happened under the watchful eyes of UCA leaders who served as General Secretaries, such as Rev Dr Bernard Thorogood and Rev Dr Andrew Williams. Today, we continue to truth-tell and seek redemption in *The Onesimus Project*, focusing on the Legacies of Slavery (related to the historic trans-Atlantic Slave trade), Modern Day Slavery, entrenched racism, and salvific need for adaptive and contextual theologies of liberation.[2]

In the various communities with which I work, we situate ourselves within the influences that have shaped us. This is a form of recognition and respect for those who have carried us. So, I find myself bringing a variety of UCA-formed identities into this work:

1. awareness of the need to engage in deep listening for Indigenous voices and practices (for which I particularly give thanks for the works of my dear sister, Rev Dr Denise Champion,[3] and National Superintendent of the Australian Wesleyan Church, Rev Dr Rex Rigby[4]);
2. valuing of *talanoa*,[5] and respectful mixed-culture conversations (see the discussion below on *Space for Grace*, and the work I shared with Rev Dr Tony Floyd, former UCA National Director of Multicultural Ministry);

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[1] Council for World Mission (CWM) DARE Conference, Author's Diary Note, Bangkok, 14 September, 2023. DARE stands for Discipleship and Radical Engagement and consists of more than 100 global scholars who gather to engage in liberation theology and missiology.

[2] See "The Onesimus Project," *Council for World Mission,* accessed October 17 2023, https://www.cwmission.org/programmes/the-onesimus-project/

[3] Rev Dr Denise Champion is an Adnamathanha women of the Ikara region in South Australia. She is theologian-in-residence at Uniting College for Leadership and Theology in Adelaide.

[4] Rev Dr Rex Rigby is a Gai Gabi man from Southern Queensland area. He is National Superintendent for the Wesleyan Church in Australia. His DMin, awarded by Tabor College in 2021, on multicultural ministry in the Wesleyan Church in Australia highlights how his own Aboriginal-identity story contributes to a deep understanding and commitment to intercultural engagement for the sake of social cohesion.

[5] *Talanoa* is appreciated with thanks to Rev Dr Jione Havea and Rev Eseta Wacabaqa-Meneilly for their challenges to the Church to engage in different kinds of 'around-the-mat' conversations. It has been important to learn some of the protocols of such conversations, laden with respectful listening and a sense of order.

3 deep identification with ecumenical relationships, grounded in practical work (the work of Ann Gibbons and Emma Parr in Special Religious Education in Schools has been most helpful) and involvement in ecumenical organizations (Rev Tara Curlewis,[6] Rev Sandy Boyce,[7] and Rev Ann Hewitt,[8] have led the way with respective ecumenical councils in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia);
4 particular commitments to interreligious dialogue (Rev Dr John Squires, Rev Dr Elizabeth Raine and Rev Dr Matthew Wilson have taught me much of Christian-Jewish relations and Associate. Professor Rev Dr Clive Pearson, Dr Derya Iner, Dr Mahsheed Ansari[9] and Fr Patrick McInerny[10] have been companions in Muslim-Christian Dialogue);
5 experiencing long-term relationships, characterised by hyper-diversity (the National Reference Group on Multi and Cross-cultural Ministry was a committee made up of people who embodied their diverse ecumenical formations and who made a commitment over some years to interrogate and learn from one another, becoming spiritual family.)[11]

Emerging Pronouns and Identities

Vignette 2: Names matter

In this quote, readers are invited to consider how people of different cultures identify themselves.

> *Colleague:* Here are the participants who will need nametags …
> Oh – the 1st and 5th have their family name, followed by their given names.
> The 3rd and 4th both prefer their anglicized nicknames, because few bother learning the pronunciation for their names…[12]

It is worth noting that some cultures emphasize personal identifiers, while others prioritize communal identifiers. For societies where identity is vested in role and responsibility, honorifics may also be important. In ecumenical settings, using appropriate identifiers is a key aspect of hospitality and courtesy. In some cultures, we give our family name, or our tribal identity, before offering a given name. In many indigenous cultures, it is common to introduce kinship (including land/country) connections before offering a name. The relationships are considered as vital context for names to be placed within.

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6 Rev Tara Curlewis is the Ecumenical liaison to the Vatican from the World Council of Reformed Churches.
7 Rev Sandy Boyce serves as the Executive Officer of the Victoria Council of Churches
8 Rev Anne Hewitt serves on the South Australian Council of Churches
9 I met Dr Derya Iner and Dr Mahsheed Ansari through Scriptural Reasoning gatherings organised jointly by the Islamic Studies Research Association and Charles Sturt University, and have since worked with them both in interfaith activities with Western Sydney University.
10 Columban, Fr Patrick McInerny, has offered ecumenical and interfaith leadership in the development of The Sydney Statement, see https://www.thesydneystatement.org.au/
11 My involvement with the National Reference Group on Multi and Cross-cultural Ministry spanned more than 10 years from 2008-2018. Initially, I would sometimes report on intercultural activity in NSW-ACT, where I was the Synod Chairperson for four years. Later, I became Chairperson-elect and Chairperson. With both Committees, I was often asked by others to speak on their behalf, as I was one of the few people with heart-language English. This involved often having to speak words for others that were not always from me. This taught me of the need to sometimes companion by being the voice for someone else.
12 Verbatim, based on a real conversation (names deleted), 12 October, 2023, CWM Singapore Office.

For the Adnyamathanha people, who I now call family, when making personal introductions, we give place and kinship connections, including moiety (lineage, illustrated by wind direction), to help the mob to place us. The position within the family is explained and the given names follow. Likewise, with ecumenical introductions, place, position and relationships often need detailed explanations to make sense.[13] I was born into a Chinese-Aussie family as a first daughter, relinquishing the responsibilities of that role when I became a Christian. Entering a marriage relationship, I took on responsibilities in my husband's family. Entering into the relationship with Adnyamathanha, I have a sense of home and country, connectedness to people and community. Introductions help to provide context for communication.

The last few years have seen the adoption of brackets after names (he/him), (she/her) and (they/them). For some of my family and friends, the practice is an important way to be identified and include and affirm the identities of others. How we address one another and how we are addressed helps to position us within communities. The use of the pronoun identifiers has become normalised among white privileged English-speakers, and while some migrants have adopted them, many have not. As I reflect on identity conversations of the past decades, I wonder if another option might be helpful: (we/us)?

For people from collectivist cultures and communities where corporate identity is stronger than individual identity, (he/him) and (she/her) can be confronting. For people who have come from communities that have experienced stereotypical *othering*, the terms (they/them) are associated with fear and rejection. To identify as *they*, is to not be part of *we*.[14]

Ecumenism invites us to participate in a shared we identity. It is an identity characterised by difference. We are part of a family, but we come from different families. The very idea of ecumenism is full of contradiction. When an introduction takes place, outside of daily relationships, assumptions about context can easily lead to critical misunderstandings. For example, if someone is introduced as a Bishop, it is important to know what responsibility and authority is applicable in their ecclesial setting. The differences of assumed identity can easily catch us out.

To make matters more complex, there may be several competing understandings at play, embodied in the one Bishop. The person may be from a country with high expectations of power differential between a named authority figure and their followers, yet also serve in a Church that seeks to promote equity and emphasize equality. They may reasonably behave differently in their own diocese than in other settings, where their positional authority has less immediate and visible impact.

As I sit within ecumenical communities, I am keenly aware that we are not the same. We may choose some of our identities, but some may be inherited or given to us. It is our very diversity that provides value to cultivating togetherness. The ecology of ecumenism requires difference to enhance identity and appreciation. In the Uniting Church in Australia, we have often used the expression "unity is not uniformity". We share

[13] Rev Dr Denise Champion teaches this lore to participants in *Walking on Country* cultural contextual immersion programmes organised by Uniting College for Leadership and Theology.

[14] I lay the foundations for exploring the identity of WE in the essay, "Becoming We, Exploring Liminality" in *When We Pray: The Future of Common Prayer*, eds. Stephen Burns and Robert Gribben (Melbourne: Coventry Press, 2020), 333-353.

some commonalities, but we also share out of our unique experiences. The people in the ecumenical gathering can point us to fresh aspects of human-divine relationships. Together we are exponentially more than the sum of our own stories, for the Spirit multiplies our offerings and transforms them to become *ecclesia divina*. The term *ecclesia divina* refers to the Vedic poems of Hinduism. In these Hindu Sanskrit writings, ideas and thoughts relate to the providence of God, creation and sustenance of the universe, knowledge and education, universal identity, polity and ethos, human society, relationships and unity. Such an ecclesia gives expression to hope in God using multiple voices.

Eschatological Identity

Vignette 3: Shared Concerns

In this reflection, I draw attention to the motivations for ecumenical conversations.

Listening to Professor Kenneth Ross,[15] Professor of Theology at Zomba Theological College, Malawi, delivering a Keynote address to 32 General Secretaries in a global gathering in Singapore, I hear the call for ecumenical ecological conversion, echoing the call by Pope Francis.

> Churches and mission agencies have too often been complicit in the life-denying activities that … have choked the life out of us. …
> There are those who have turned away from the church because it smelled too much of death. … perhaps we need to turn away…
> It is human behaviour that has caused the crisis.[16]

If churches can respond to this call, they can reignite a shared missionary journey, rising to life by facing the issues of climate-crisis planetary death. He challenges the churches to be at their best, informing, reminding, and inspiring political commitment to life across human societies. He reminds us that at the heart of our faith is a death and resurrection.

Within the larger gathering, General Secretary Taunao Vai (United Church in Papua New Guinea) challenges a small group of international General Secretaries: We [the churches] have been and become too casual. General Secretary Rev Dr Lungile Mpetcheni (Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa) responds with the need for collaborative ecumenical action plans.[17]

In this story, we can see ecumenical gatherings are initiated with intent. While established patterns of meeting may provide opportunity, successful ecumenical relationships breed collaborative work products. There may be a crisis or shared concern around topics of common interest, such as climate, migration, conflict, technology, family life, economic justice, or gender issues. When ecumenical partners appreciate each other's experiences, missional imagination can lead to partnerships.

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[15] "Dr Kenneth Ross," The University of Edinburgh, accessed October 13, 2023 https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/ken-ross
[16] Professor Kenneth Ross, CWM General Secretaries' Conference, Keynote Address, Singapore 4 October, 2023
[17] The Author, Verbatim, from DARE Programme Diary note, 4 October 2023, Singapore.

The gathering of General Secretaries is a biennial event. A keynote input session is chosen with a global theme. The General Secretaries share their common and diverse responses. Then, for the sake of transformation, ecumenical leaders name the need for moving from conversations into action plans. To be agents of change, the Churches need to be engaged in the truth-telling prophetic activity of naming and confronting death, in order to call forth the prayer and vision for resurrection. We too easily become accustomed to conflicts (e.g. Ukraine-Russia, Israel-Palestine) and we become complacent. As I listen to leaders express the oppressions associated with democracy, I am reminded of past experiences of confronting death and rising to new life.

The Witness of Uniting Informants

Vignette 4: Emic-Etic Perspectives.

In this reflection, I draw attention to the intercultural role for missionaries. Emic-etic refers to Insider-outsider awareness. Missionaries entering a new context often look for a local informant to assist with cultural interpretation. The local informant is an insider who will assist the missionary outsider to better understand the context. The Uniting Church's identity, as a multi-cultural Church, allows us to become emic-etic informants in a variety of contexts.

A Voice from a Sister-Church:
There is so much pain in the truth-telling.
I wonder how this can ever be resolved. Healing seems like too big an ask.
Terry: I am filled with hope,
for I have heard stories of how saints have kept praying together,
despite all the obstacles.
This is what we, as witnesses and friends, need to testify to when we go home.
Perseverance was built on prayer.
Without prayer, there was no chance for peace.
Prayer prevented so much more pain and bloodshed. [18]

In 2000, my late-husband, Terry, and I travelled to Belfast to be part of an Ecumenical International Observer Team. A tentative peace had been in place for just over a year and we were visiting different communities across Northern Ireland to see how Catholics and Protestants were working to build lasting peace. At the end of a 10-day programme, most of us were spiritually and emotionally exhausted from sharing in the pain and truth-telling of locals. Yet, Terry pointed out to us that lasting peace was not being built on a year of cease-fire, but on the decades of prayers offered by the suffering faithful who had lived through the experience. From both sides of the Troubles, we heard of deep ecumenical spiritual prayerful commitment, day in and day out. Peace comes at the cost of lifelong practices. Ecumenism is not to be found in one-off events, but in building lifelong relationships and networks.

For both of us, our commitment to global ecumenism found a base in accompaniment and companioning. This is what it means to be a missional informant. Our role was not to solve the problems of others, but to

[18] 2000, meeting of international observers, Dublin.

journey with the faithful, bearing witness to their faith. Ecumenism starts with *being* in relationship rather than measuring the relationship by *doing* things to or for one another, although these may certainly follow. In Ireland, we were travelling with people from non-Commonwealth countries, so part of our role was to explain the political governance systems. Likewise, our Uniting Church experiences of religious and political pluralism provided us with tools to help clarify some of the questions and assumptions of the visitors.

In this vignette, we can see how ecumenical encounters can move us from outsiders to insiders. Shared conversations in significant places invited deep listening. In turn, those who had been listeners could become witnesses and informants for others.

Global Ecumenical Councils

Gatherings in Councils, such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Council of Reformed Churches (WCRC), the World Methodist Council (WMC) and the Council for World Mission (CWM), provide an opportunity to go beyond simply building networks. From the relationships developed can come partnerships, collaborative regional, and global strategies. Each of the aforementioned Councils host ecumenical educational and consultative programmes that enable high-level exchange of information and the development of working and task groups.

In my work environment (at Council for World Mission), we talk a lot about the need for contextual approaches to mission and education. We encourage Member Churches to reflect their own local context in their projects and plans. However, there is always a danger of isolationism. Intercultural accountability takes significant investment of time and resources. CWM holds fast to the attitude that local mission can be enhanced by involvement with and commitment to regional and global mission, promoting partnerships and collaborations, with a *from everywhere, to everywhere* approach. Local, regional and global missionary activity should not be considered either-or, but part of a missional eco-system of spiritual movement, inspiration, and empowerment. Too often, mission decisions seem to be driven by what can be located in a bank account, viewed with a survivalist question: can we survive on that?

Bringing an ecumenical commitment to mission will start with different postures: These include:

- What do I need to sacrifice or die to, in order to contribute to God's life-flourishing purposes? Here I am, send me!
- How can we share? Who can we partner with?
- How can we effectively communicate with one another? What are we learning from each other?
- What more can we bring and do together, that brings honour and glory to God?
- Holy Spirit, breathe new relationships into being, so that we can become your new missionary Church.

The enthusiasm to join the ecumenical party quickly wanes when we realize how complex communication and culture can be. The Disney-style romanticism of "It's a small world after all" gives way to the realisation that we embody different values, styles and concepts. We may stereotype "rice time" (value = respect is expressed in punctuality) or "coconut time" (concept = the coconut will fall when it is ready and cannot be rushed). Our societies may be shaped by individualism or collectivism. Our households may be designed about personal space or extended kinship interactions.

Understanding these and other cultural dimensions can help us become aware of how we work and how we can work well with other.[19] In ecumenical relationships, it is important to consider: How well do we cope with uncertainty, or do we avoid uncertainty? How do we view disparity or equality?

Uniting Church in Australia – intercultural commitment and *Space for Grace*

In the experience of the UCA's National Multi- and Cross-cultural Reference Committee, learning and gaining understanding of cultural dimensions was a slow (often painstaking), but immensely valuable, process. Managing a committee of hyper-diversity (often 14+ different first languages and cultures in the room!) was challenging and required patience and compassion. Such patience and compassion does not come from following business agendas. Love for one another grew as we took the time to hear one another's stories, pray for one another, study scriptures together, reflect on issues and encourage one another.[20] Out of our learning together came proposals to the Uniting Church in Australia to deepen our understandings and practices of *A Manual for Meetings* and Consensus procedures by embracing *Space for Grace*.[21]

Some years after contributing to the development and articulation of *Space for Grace*, I have come to reflect on the process as a step towards decolonising ecclesial communications and governance. Space for Grace involves developing practices of respect for cultures and contributions of those who have often been marginalised or silenced in their indigenous or migration experiences. It is difficult to effectively communicate the stories of marginalization that highlighted the need for *Space for Grace*. Members of the National Multi and Cross-cultural Reference Committee were able to share, over some years, stories of personal and institutional racism, disempowerment and abuse. These sit alongside the experiences of inclusion, hospitality, affirmation, respect and hope that they have also found in the Uniting Church in Australia. Most notably, the various language and regionally-organised National Conferences of the Uniting Church in Australia have provided community fellowship for migrant communities and the opportunity to think and share in heart languages. Recent studies have raised questions about how these National Conferences could more effectively relate and contribute to the wider Uniting Church in Australia.[22]

National Conferences organically involve ecumenical relationships. Members of the Conferences often hail from (and may have been formed by) our ecumenical sister Churches.[23] They were born and baptised into sister Churches. They were discipled and married by the sister Church. They were sent by the sister Church to become Members in the Uniting Church in Australia.

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[19] Based on the cultural dimensions sociological work of Geert H.Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkov (2010), James Plueddemann outlined a continua of behavioural preferences, in "Leading across Cultures" (IVP, 2012).

[20] The story of this learning is detailed further in Amelia Koh-Butler and Tony Floyd, "Space for Grace: Growing up and redesigning 'home'" in *Growing Up Uniting: The Proceedings of the Third Uniting Church National History Society Conference,* eds. Patricia Curthoys and William W Emilsen(Hoppers Crossing: 2021, Uniting Church National Historical Society, 2021), 135-142.

[21] See "*Space for Grace*," Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, accessed October 13, 2023, https://uniting.church/space-for-grace/

[22] Jason Kioa's dissertation on the Tongan National Conference tells the story of the largest of the Conferences and raises questions about future developments. Kioa, I. J. (2020). *The role of the Tongan National Conference in the Uniting Church Australia*. [Doctoral Thesis, Charles Sturt University]. Charles Sturt University.

[23] I have refrained here from using the term "Partner Churches," as this carries a particular definition of shared project work and funding arrangements.

Relationships between National Conferences, diaspora congregations, local Uniting Church Presbyteries, Synods and Assembly and UnitingWorld are often connected with visits from leaders from those ecumenical sister Churches. Invariably, when leaders from sister Churches revert to "home language" to address National Conference members, they offer instruction and advice to those who have moved to Australia on the importance for diaspora members to contribute to the Uniting Church in Australia for the glory of God. How then should we receive this spiritual gift of God's people? Such a gift should not be hidden away (like a lamp under a bowl), nor do we wish a treasured special ingredient to be lost among the myriad of dishes on the banquet table.[24] For people operating in second, third or fourth languages, trying to contribute in English can feel like using salt that has lost its saltiness.

Ecumenical Mission is both sending and receiving

We receive the gifts of individuals, but we should also look at the impacts of Church-to-Church influences. Can we quantify or qualify the gifts the Uniting Church in Australia has received via Tongan/Aotearoa New Zealand diaspora, when we look at two Moderators (Rev Dr Jason Kioa and Rev Mata Hileau-Havea) and a President-Elect (Rev Charissa Suli)? The Uniting Church in Australia is the beneficiary of ecumenical missional migration. Jason, Mata and Charissa are strong prophetic preachers of the Gospel. They burn with missionary hearts tempered with pastoral wisdom. When we celebrate their individual and personal gifts, we may fail to also appreciate the value of the communities that have nurtured them. Perhaps we celebrate their Tongan-ness, giving thanks for the Church in Tonga, but fail also to recognize the importance of the Uniting Church Tongan National Conference and the ecumenical families of nurture in New Zealand? Ecumenism can be multilayered. Ecumenism is not a one-off event, but a lifelong commitment. Ecumenism pushes us to recognize both similarity and difference. In identifying the other, we become more aware of our own identity.

I did not plan to live in Singapore. As a young, emerging leader, I remember well when Rev Dr Tony Chi became Moderator in the Synod of NSW-ACT. He was from Singapore. I had grown up with the Chinese-Australian consciousness of the *white Australia policy*, so I was astounded that this migrant was asked to lead. My surprise stemmed from the behaviours I had grown used to and my experiences of racism growing up in Sydney. Name-calling and dehumanizing had been normalised. Seeing Asian-Australians emerge as public and church leaders was inspiring and confronting. For people who are not of *dominant-culture* it can be difficult to claim a voice. Now, residing in Singapore, I note that being a half-half mixed-ethnicity Eurasian can be an advantage in ecumenical and intercultural settings.

I find some inspiration from missionary history and the practice of recruiting cultural informants. An informant is a person who will help, over time, to guide and interpret cultural behaviours and protocols. Ideally, the informant is from the culture, or has lived in it for a long time and has current knowledge. Another good attribute for an informant is the capacity to be both verbal and social. They should be able to explain and advise on both verbal communications and non-verbal communications, explain community networks and help identify hazards and opportunities.

[24] Some of our migrant leaders have expressed the sadness that their contributions are sidelined and remain unheard. It is not that they do not wish to contribute, but our meetings and structures rarely provide appropriate opportunity for them.

As I have moved into a global ecumenical lifestyle, I have needed cultural informants in multiple countries and ecclesial communities. I rely heavily on the goodwill and guidance of others. Sometimes my informants need time to understand me and my questions, so we both need to be willing to invest in complex and layered communications. I have found that it can be helpful to be some things and it can be equally helpful to not be some things. For example, I am seen as somewhat independent because my own denomination is not a Member Church of my organization, so I cannot be accused of having vested interests in discussions about Member Churches.

Coming from a smaller denomination (with little institutional significance in the global context) can be an advantage. In many of the global council settings, Uniting Church leaders have had a history of making significant contributions, probably because they are not seen to have a power-political agenda. Could this marginal identity shape the future contributions the Uniting Church can make to ecumenism? As a smaller Church, we are not to be feared, so there is little risk when we are asked to manage meetings.

The Uniting Church in Australia – called to be Ecumenical Informant?

Past UCA Presidents, General Secretaries and other leaders have contributed greatly to the spread of consensus practices and respectful dialogues around the world. Such a contribution is possible only when UCA leaders are able to focus attention on being able to hold multiple understandings together, rather than privileging particular opinions. We can only facilitate dialogues and broader conversations between multitudes when people believe they will have an opportunity to be respectfully heard, and not *corrected* by us.

Holding multiple worldviews within a community is an art, one for which I believe the Uniting Church was formed. As a National Church, we experience the world coming to us. Migrants come to be part of the Uniting Church from all over the world. Together, we learn how to be with one another, sometimes taking decades to figure out how to design a kitchen that will work for multiple cultures. Armed with adaptive learnings, we are able to contribute to the global communities.

Within the global ecumenical setting, I have already noted that the Uniting Church is a relatively small Church. It does, however, have advantages and assets for the global ecumenical task. Being a comparatively young denomination allows some flexibility. Having woven together values and practices of Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian heritages, the Uniting Church has since managed to weave in newer threads in more recent decades. New Uniting Church leaders (from Armenian Evangelical, African Anglican, Churches of South and North India) influence thinking through immigration. Such leaders can act as ecumenical informants.

As we consider ecumenical ways forward, it seems fitting to share the conclusions of the National Multi and Cross-cultural Reference Committee after years of working towards the visionary paper, *One Body, Many Members* adopted at the 13th Assembly in 2012[25]:

[25] For background and links to this document and the remarks that follow see, "Our Journey as a Multicultural Church," Uniting Church in Australia, https://uniting.church/our-intercultural-church/

What if – there is not any choice to be made between 'this' or 'that'? What if diversity and inclusion mean living with multiple understandings on a range of issues? What is the place of equality and acceptance fully in the life of God's people?

What if – all we can or need to know is that God's creative and re-creative acts of loving- kindness and mercy are the foundation of all relationships and communities?

What if – that is all we need to know, and we don't need to insist on one way or the other, God makes those decisions?

What if – God's gift is that there is a path between our absolutes, and paradoxically the Christ 'who in his own strange way constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church', walks with all of us, with all our profound differences, complex safety barriers and means of exclusion, all of our rich and enriching insights, views of truth, and hopes for wholeness?

What if – such a middle path is not a passive path, a sitting on the fence avoiding struggle, difficulty, and some form of perceived theological purity? But rather is a very active, insightful and wise path that provokes significant change in our minds and transformation in our lives, and is another step in God's intention for the redemption of all creation? All of which challenge the fall motif.

What if – God is calling us to faithfully journey, and the learning and faithfulness is not in our answers, but in our being a "one-anothering community" in Christ, with a full and honoured place for all?

Conclusions

Working in an ecumenical setting, I sometimes have to explain what it means for me to have come from the Uniting Church in Australia. I usually start by saying that those who come from everywhere else learn from Indigenous Aboriginal Australians about the importance of country, of place. Migrants do not simply adapt to the physical environment, but also face new challenges of living in a hyper-multicultural society. Each new encounter is an opportunity for new insight. In my grandmother's Buddhist language, we might call this the potential for enlightenment.

This paper began with a broad outline of some of the enlightening relationships that have shaped my ecumenical heart. The subsequent vignettes illustrated how communications, courtesies, identities, interpretations and collaborations can work. I have proposed that the Uniting Church recognise its missional potential to take on the role of intercultural ecumenical informant.

For the Uniting Church to live into its ecumenical task in order to promote the *-ing* of Unit–ing, I propose the following:

1 Adopt multiple models of sharing discernment, including non-verbal ways of communicating;

2 When verbal translation is required, ensuring the translations are multi-direction, not just from English into other languages, but also sharing the wisdoms from other cultures;
3 Strengthening studies of mission history and studies of contemporary ecumenical documents and events;
4 Long-term commitment to and strategically-managed participation in global and regional ecumenical communities;
5 Regular reviews and prioritising of collaborative and partnering relationships, with a priority given to multi-communion relationships (i.e. not just Partner-Church to Partner-Church, but looking into regional and inter-regional collaborations);
6 Revisiting the question of what might be the Basis for future Unions with ecumenical partners?

These above six areas shape my current work priorities. I continue to explore what Unit-ing can look like beyond the Uniting Church in Australia. As I write this conclusion, I am about to head into conversations with female clergy from New Zealand, Korea, Malaysia, Africa, Caribbean and India. As a Minister from a small, but hyper-multicultural, Church, I feel well-prepared for seeking enlightenment with them.

Non-Christian Unity: Jews, Gentiles, and Paul's ecumenical vision

Sean F. Winter

Abstract

Ecumenism is usually considered to be a quest for unity among Christian churches. This modern ecumenical vision is informed by biblical traditions that emphasise the idea of the unity or 'one-ness' of the church as the body of Christ, a notion expressed clearly in the letters of Paul. But what if Paul's vision of unity, when viewed historically, wasn't Christian, and what if his exhortations were not directed at 'churches' as we commonly understand the term? This essay considers the implications of Paul's vision of 'non-Christian' unity in Galatians 3:28 and his exhortations to the ethnically and culturally diverse Christ-believing assemblies in Rome (Romans 14–15) for contemporary ecumenical reflection. It concludes that Paul insists on the importance of maintaining and preserving ethnic, cultural and antecedent religious practices even as he calls for their renegotiation in light of the Christ-event. Paul's ecumenical appeal is not for the creation of a single ecumenical 'household' but for strategies of mutual welcome and support that enable reciprocal 'building up' across difference.

Paul and Ecumenism

The history, development, and ideological framing of modern ecumenism make clear that it is a Christian and ecclesial enterprise, oriented towards making "the essential unity of the Church real and effective in history."[1] It is true that the Church's confession of Christ as Lord over the whole of creation prompts a necessary expansion of the ecumenical vision to include, for example, the quest for forms of unity between different religious traditions, or between humanity and non-human components of the created order.[2] But these universal impulses emerge from and build upon the initial ecumenical impulse to make the Church's unity "visible in such a way that the inculturation of the Gospel allows legitimate diversity in ecclesial life."[3] The realities of the Church's life that together generate the ecumenical question and task have been in place since the Day of Pentecost: the gift of the Spirit to "all" the disciples gathered "together in one place" (Acts 2:1);[4] the manifestation of "divided tongues…on each of them" (Acts 2:3); and the ensuing further division, beyond the disciple community, among those who witness the divine bestowal of diverse languages (Acts

[1] David M. Chapman, "Ecumenism and the Visible Unity of the Church: "Organic Union" or "Reconciled Diversity""? *Ecclesiology* 11 (2015): 350–369, here p.350.

[2] S. Wesley Ariarajah's calls for an ecumenism composed of both inner (ecclesial) and outer (interreligious) 'movements'. See the essays in S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Moving Beyond the Impasse: Reorienting Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).

[3] Chapman, "Ecumenism," 350.

[4] The πᾶς of Acts 2:1 alludes back to that of 1:14 where the community (including women and members of Jesus' family) and the phrase ὁμοῦ ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ (literally "together on/in the same") used in 2:1 and 1:15 draws attention to the unity of the group's activity and location. That single location is named in 2:2 as an οἶκος.

2:12–13). The ecumenical vision, and its ensuing commitments, are thus shaped by the reality of division in the community of the one Spirit, seeking and working for appropriate unity within diversity, precisely as a form of witness to the world.

As is commonly observed, the quest for Christian unity is grounded in the prayer of Jesus, as remembered in the Gospel of John: that the community of disciples may "be one, as we are one" (John 17:11, 22–23). Yet, is also informed by the Pauline vision of ecclesial unity, whether it be the connection between the oneness of God and the unity of the church in Ephesians 4:4–6 or the appeal for unity predicated on sacramental participation in Christ's death and resurrection in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17).[5] And, when the relationship between Christian unity and various kinds of "division" or "diversity" is in view, Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 is rarely far from view: "There is neither Judean nor Greek, neither enslaved nor freeborn, not 'male and female,' because all of you are one in Christ Jesus."[6]

For example, the Second Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism cites Galatians 3:27–28 when speaking about the work of the one Spirit who brings the faithful "into union with Christ, so that He is the principle of the Church's unity."[7] The convergence text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* cites Paul's vision when speaking about the "genuine baptismal unity of the Christian community," now threatened by ecclesial division.[8] And the Pauline vision surely lies behind the phrasing of the *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) to the effect that those who are baptised are "united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy".[9] However, it is in paragraph 2 of the *Basis*, which explicitly locates the vision leading to the creation of the UCA into the wider ecumenical vision, that alludes most directly to the Pauline formula in declaring that the UCA "believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries."[10]

Paul's formulation in Galatians 3:28 and the wider construal of ecclesial unity that it represents also come to expression elsewhere in the Pauline letters. The appeal for unity among the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:10–13 relates closely to a unity which is secured through eucharistic participation ("one bread…one body," 1 Cor. 10:17) and is therefore embodied in eucharistic practice ("discerning the body," 1 Cor. 11:27–29). Such unity is grounded in participation in Christ through baptism, initiated and sustained by the Spirit ("in one Spirit…baptised into one body," 1 Cor. 12:12–13). As in Galatians, the christological and ecclesiological dynamics at work in 1 Corinthians seem to relate particularly to the question of how ethnic (Judean and Greek/Gentile) and social (enslaved/free) diversity is somehow transcended in the 'one body' of the church. The other Pauline letter that clearly addresses these issues is Romans, where the notion of the "one body"

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[5] See Chapman, "Ecumenism," 351–352. Paul's language of sharing in the body of Christ in 1 Cor 10:16 both serves as a parallel image for spiritual participation in Christ (cf. 'sharing in the blood of Christ') as well as anticipating the imagery of belonging to the church as the body of Christ, set out in 1 Cor 12:12–27.

[6] Translation mine, reflecting convictions that: (a) the initial comparison relates primarily to ethnic identity (and not religious beliefs or practices); (b) δοῦλος is a term referring not to inherent but assigned social status; (c) the final comparison explicitly alludes to Genesis 1:27 LXX.

[7] "…in Christo coniungit, ut Ecclesiae unitatis sit Principium," *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para 2, accessed December 13, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

[8] *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), commentary to para.6.

[9] *The Basis of Union*, para. 7.

[10] *The Basis of Union* para. 2.

reoccurs, and where division and conflict between the "strong" and the "weak" leads Paul to encourage his audience to "walk in love" and to "welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you" (Rom. 14.15; 15:7). These texts provide an obvious scriptural resource for thinking through the nature of the ecumenical vision and potential priorities in our ecumenical commitments.[11]

Responsible reading of the Pauline evidence must, however, take into the historical, contingent, and social circumstances that generated his vision of "unity". Here we run into two very obvious difficulties, best stated directly: *Paul was not a Christian, and the communities to whom he writes were not churches*. While these assertions should not prevent us from drawing on the Pauline tradition as a source for our own commitment to Christian unity, a historically and critically responsible reception of these texts must recognise that Paul was not pursuing what we understand as "Christian" unity and is not addressing or talking straightforwardly about what we now call the "Church". In what follows, I briefly set out the rationale for these negative assertions, before looking more closely at Paul's arguments in Galatians 3 and Romans 14–15. My aim is to allow a historically nuanced perspective on Paul's non-Christian ecumenism to inform our own understanding of an ecumenical vision and commitments for the church today.

No Christianity, No Church: Reading Paul in Context

There is a sense in which the claim that "Paul was not a Christian" is to state the obvious.[12] No serious, critical New Testament scholar would claim that Paul's self-understanding and theological convictions closely resemble the faith tradition that developed in subsequent centuries (albeit under Pauline influence). Yet, beneath the obvious recognition lies a serious point, not just about terminology but also about the foundational components of Paul's theology. The same applies to the language of "church". Construing the early Pauline communities as churches not only runs the danger of anachronism. It leads us to make a number of unjustifiable assumptions about what Paul is up to when he describes those communities as "one" in Christ Jesus.

Pauline scholarship is nothing if not diverse. In recent years there has been a tendency to divide approaches to Paul's theology into distinctive categories: old and new perspectives, apocalyptic approaches, and now, more recently, the so-called "Paul within Judaism" school of interpretation. This is not the place to adjudicate these debates (which in many ways are the result of scholars asking rather different kinds of questions about the texts, and ordering the data from Paul's letters differently in response to those questions). Nevertheless, the basic insight of recent scholarship, that historically responsible accounts of Paul's thought must begin

[11] I do not have space to enter into direct dialogue with other discussions of the relationship between Paul's theology and current ecumenical questions. Interested readers might like to consult Vitalis Mshanga, "The Ecumenical Vision of the Apostle Paul and its Relevance for Contemporary Search for Full Unity of All Christians," *Exchange* 40 (2011): 144–169. Useful reflections on Romans can be found in Robert Jewett, "Ecumenical Theology for the Sake of Mission: Romans 1:1-17 + 15:14-16:24," in *Pauline Theology Volume III: Romans*, ed. David M. Hay and Elizabeth E. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 89-108. The wider discussion in Kathy Ehrensperger, *Paul at the Crossroads of Cultures: Theologizing in the Space Between* LNTS 456 (London: Bloomsbury / T & T Clark, 2013) is highly suggestive. For an attempt to use Paul as a resource for addressing specific ecumenical challenges see Sean F. Winter, "Ambiguous Genitives, Pauline Baptism and Roman *Insulae*: Resources from Romans to Support *Pushing the Boundaries of Unity*," in *Baptist Sacramentalism 2*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 77-91

[12] See the extensive discussion in Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

with the recognition that it is only comprehensible when viewed as thinking *within and not beyond* Judaism, should be taken seriously when we think through Paul's understanding of unity.[13]

In a helpful essay relating the question of terminology to the wider "architecture" of discussions of Paul's theology, Anders Runesson proposes that the terms "Christians," "Christianity," and "church" should be "retired" in our discussions of Paul's letters in so far as they are aimed at "serving contemporary needs in the formation of religious identities rather than helping us to describe Jewish and Greco-Roman society in the first century."[14] The former term does not, of course, occur in the Pauline letters, but this does not stop us from talking about "Pauline Christianity." Notwithstanding the obvious danger of reading back into Paul questions and concerns that pertain to what we understand the term "Christian/ity" to connote, the main problem with this approach is that it leads to readings of Paul that portray the apostle, his theology, and his work in community formation as, somehow, something other than a kind of Judaism.[15] The simple implication of this insight in relation to our topic is that whatever the Pauline vision of unity was, it was not *Christian* unity.

Nor was it unity for a community that was recognisably the church. To speak of ecclesial unity is, as we have noted, to envisage the reconciliation and ensuing partnership / koinonia of diverse communities within an identifiably "Christian" tradition and institution. Yet, the Pauline language of the *ekklēsia* is a way of talking about various kinds of Jewish and Greco-Roman social civic and non-civic institutions.[16] Once again, the effect of unreflective use of the language of "church" is to distance Paul and the Pauline assemblies from Judaism. But the "pattern of belief" that Paul sets out in his letters and the forms of social organisation to which those letters refer are neither wholly new nor fully distinctive. They are variations of belief patterns and social forms already present within Paul's own religious tradition and, beyond, in those of his largely pagan audiences. Paul believes that there should be unity between Jews and gentiles, but it is a unity configured on Jewish terms and within a Jewish frame of reference. It is also expressed in terms that reach across to establish points of recognition and resonance with Greco-Roman religion, social organisation, and ethics.[17] Whatever the precise configuration, it is a non-Christian unity.

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[13] The best introduction to Paul from the "within Judaism" perspective is Matthew Thiessen, *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah's Herald to the Gentiles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023). In addition to the works mentioned in the following discussion, see John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Mark D. Nanos, *Reading Paul within Judaism: Collected Essays of Mark Nanos vol.1* (Eugene: Cascade, 2017); Matthew V. Novensen, "Whither the Paul within Judaism *Schule*?," in *Paul, Then and Now,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 157–166. The decisive paradigm shift took place much earlier, with the publication of E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977), surely the most consequential work of New Testament scholarship of the 20th century.

[14] Anders Runesson, "The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary Discussions on Paul," in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 53–77, here p.55. Of course, connecting Paul's letters to contemporary needs relating to religious identities (here, the ecumenical question) is precisely what this essay seeks to do. The point is not to deny the legitimacy of undertaking this task, but to avoid anachronism and recognise its significant distortive power in relation to our interpretation of the New Testament texts.

[15] Runesson, "Question," 61–62.

[16] Runesson, "Question," 68–76. As Runesson notes, Paul's language in texts like 1 Thess 2:14 and Gal 1:22 presupposes that he is making a distinction between Jewish *ekklēsiai* that are "in Christ" from those that are not (see p.73).

[17] On this see Andrie B. Du Toit, "Paulus Oecumenicus: Interculturality in the Shaping of Paul's Theology," *NTS* 55 (2009): 121–143.

Ecumenical Vision: Gentiles and the Family of Abraham in Galatians 3

If we return to the rhetoric of Galatians 3:28, we can see how this recasting of the basic architecture of Pauline thought provides us with a new way of understanding its influential vision of unity beyond ethnic, social, and gender diversity. Given the likely situation that gave rise to the composition of Galatians, we focus especially on the unity of Jew and Gentile.[18] The clear insight that emerges is that Paul's vision is not that of Jews and gentiles becoming "one in Christ" as a consequence of a removal or renunciation of their ethnic identity (and associated forms of praxis) in favour of adopting a separate, distinctive "Christian" identity. This is a reading of the text generated by deeply problematic notions of Christian universalism, set over against Jewish (and pagan, but especially Jewish) particularism.[19] It depends on reading Jewish ethnicity, religion, and culture as *problematic* precisely because of their failure to embrace the universal vision of unity that Paul believes has now arrived in Christ. Instead, Paul's envisions the preservation of the particularity of both Judean and non-Judean/gentile ethnicity. The notion of gentiles joining the family of Abraham is a form of Jewish "ethnic reasoning" and the language of "adoption" that emerges in Gal 4:1–6 constitutes the renegotiation, not the transcending of ethnicity.[20] In light of the overall rhetorical situation and implied audience of Galatians, we can say that the reason that Paul rejected the idea of Gentile circumcision (a practice promoted by certain "agitators" in the Galatian assembly) was not because he believed that circumcision was no longer important, or because he didn't want gentiles to become Jewish. Instead, it was crucial to Paul that gentiles joined the family of Abraham *as gentiles*. What they leave behind is their idolatry, as they now come to offer their allegiance to Israel's God and Messiah (see Gal 4:8–11). But they are neither completely assimilated into Jewish identity and culture, nor do they become proselytes. Un-circumcised gentiles in Christ are now, in the now famous formulation of Paula Fredriksen, "ex-pagan pagans."[21]

It is important to note that in Galatians 3:28 "unity" is not configured as the goal for the community that lies beyond difference. Instead, it is the basis ("you *are* all one in Christ Jesus") upon which difference is retained ("and you are Abraham's [uncircumcised] seed"), at the same time as identities are being navigated and renegotiated. Ethnic, social, and cultural diversity is not, however, transcended or overcome "in Christ."[22]

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[18] The relationship of Paul's statements about ethnicity to those about gender are explored in Kathy Ehrensperger, "The Question(s) of Gender: Relocating Paul in Relation to Judaism," in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 245–276.

[19] The problematic modern history of this way of reading Paul, with its associated racism and anti-semitism, is traced in David G. Horrell, "Paul, Inclusion and Whitness: Particularizing Interpretation," *JSNT* 40 (2017): 123–147, and see the more extended discussion in David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, and Whitness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

[20] The crucial study here is Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity Language in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For the language of ethnic reasoning see Denise Kimber Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge, "The Politics of Interpretation: The Rhetoric of Race and Ethnicity in Paul," *JBL* 123 (2004): 235-251.

[21] Paula Fredriksen, *Paul the Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 74. See also her earlier article Paula Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel," *NTS* 56 (2010): 232-252.

[22] See the excellent discussion in John M. G. Barclay, ""Neither Jew nor Greek": Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden: Brill Academic, 1996), 197–214.

Ecumenical Commitment: The Weak and the Strong in Romans 14–15

The ecumenical vision I have just summarised leads directly, of course, to questions of what this navigation and negotiation of the various religious, social, and cultural practices of identity negotiation entails. There are times when Paul encounters division and exhorts his communities to a single view (usually Paul's own) and shared pattern of behaviour (usually reflecting Paul's own Jewish ethical commitments). Nevertheless, when dealing with diversity and conflict between assemblies whose self-understanding and religious and cultural practices are shaped by long standing cultural assumptions, Paul seems to be committed primarily to the preservation of difference and to the consequent need for commitments to mutual understanding and welcome.

Romans 14–15 illustrates these commitments. There remains considerable scholarly debate about the likely historical and social circumstances that led Paul to identify with and address a group he calls "the strong" (Romans 15:1) with a view to challenging their attitudes and behaviour towards "the weak in faith" (Romans 14:1).[23] Even though Paul himself has strong views on questions relating to food purity, informed of course by his ethnic, religious, cultural identity as a Jew, he neither imposes that view on those with a different cultural identity nor ignores the potential conflict that such differences can create. Rather, he urges the work of mutual welcome, service, upbuilding, and understanding.

Again, this appeal is predicated not on a vision of ecclesial unity held out as a goal to be achieved. Instead, Paul consistently appeals to the shared identity of both groups as those who have been welcomed by God / Christ (Rom 14:3; 15:7), who belong to the one Lord (Rom 14:8) who is Israel's Messiah who makes it possible for gentiles to worship Israel's God *as gentiles* (Rom 15:8–12). Jews and gentiles, the weak and the strong, are not exhorted to put aside the culturally specific perceptions and practices related to dietary observance, or calendrical observance (Rom 14:2–6) as obsolete. Neither does Paul seek to avoid his own association with one of these groups over against the other. Instead, he encourages each group to move towards each other, across the boundaries of these cultural differences but without seeking to eradicate them.

What Paul envisages, then, as the primary ecumenical impulse or commitment in this passage has little to do with the creation of a "Christian" *oikoumenē*, a single household of uniform identity.[24] The language of Romans 14–15 suggests a different model. First, the language of "welcome", used as the primary exhortation in Romans 14:1 and 15:7, specifically refers to the idea of receiving another into your own house or dwelling.[25] The long list of greetings in Romans 16 fills out the picture of what this might mean, referring to the assembly meeting in the house of Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3–5a) as well as those associated with other figures.[26] In this situation of multiplicity and diversity, the main exhortation is instead to "mutual upbuilding": *oikodomē*.

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[23] The best overall discussion of the problem is Mark Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1-15.13 in Context* SNTSMS vol. 103 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Valuable analysis of the historical background and social dynamics can be found in Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

[24] Paul does use the noun *oikoumenē* in Rom 10:18 but with reference to the scope of the gospel to reach beyond Israel to the nations, not as a descriptor of a new, third community, beyond that fundamental division.

[25] Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 835; Esler, *Conflict and Identity*, 346–347.

[26] See the classic study of Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians in Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

This is a distinctively Pauline term, and one that I would argue articulates the central thrust of Paul's commitment to the unity of his communities. It is a word closely connected to Paul's apostolic self-understanding (Rom 15:20; 2 Cor 10:8; 12:19; 13:10). He can use it as an image / metaphor which conveys the constructed nature of the early Christian assemblies (1 Cor 3:9; Eph 3:2; 4:16) and the idea of 'building up' is central to Paul's parenesis as he addresses situations of conflict, often resulting from diverse forms of social and cultural belief and practice (1 Cor 8:1, 10; 10:23; 14:3–5, 12, 17, 26; Eph 4:12, 29; 1 Thess 5:11). In short, Paul's vision of unity in Christ leads less to an "ecumenical" impulse and more to the "oikodomical" commitments of genuine respect and regard for the well-being of the other.[27]

Non-Christian Unity?

Pauline ecumenism is then, the work of creating the conditions for mutual relationship, support, and respect across ethnic, social, and cultural diversity. Unity, in the sense of that which we have in common, is not the goal but the presupposition for this work. It is a gift that is now to be embodied precisely within the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of early Christ-believing communities.

In relation to the development of a contemporary ecumenical vision, one that is explicitly Christian and ecclesial in its presuppositions and conditions, Paul's vision provokes ways of thinking and action that have less to do with creating a single "household" through processes aimed at securing greater levels of structural unity, and more to do with discovering the forms of "building up" that can take place across the many different households of the church.

In these early stages of the movement that became Christianity, those multiple households were distinguished from each other not simply on the basis of diverse beliefs or practice (what we might now call Faith and Order issues) but also on the basis of culture, geography, ancestry and ethnicity. A shared identity did not necessarily equate to the negation of these other features. The ecumenical dynamics we see at play in Paul's letters are primarily related to the challenges of negotiating the relationship between these fundamental aspects of social identity and faith and order issues. When viewed historically, these are challenges related primarily to the question of how pagan idolaters could come to be regarded as members of the family of Abraham while retaining their identity as pagans. Yet, it is precisely in its non-Christian form, that Paul's vision has the capacity to speak into many of the ecumenical questions facing the Christian churches today.

[27] For the centrality of "other-regard" in Pauline ethics see David G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics* (London / New York: T & T Clark International, 2005).

Re-Defining Ecumenism in the Context of Empire

Y. T. Vinayaraj

Abstract

This article notes various connections between the unity assumed and imposed by hegemonic empires and the notion of *oikoumene* as employed in the modern Ecumenical Movement. This connection is interrogated via the posing of two questions: (1) What would be a relevant theology of Ecumenism in the contemporary context of Empire? (2) If Ecumenism denies the unitarian logic of Empire, then how does it define the life in common? Through critical dialogue with the work of Negri and Hardt, a constructive proposal is developed around the idea of "commonwealth." It is shown to be a basis for an ecumenism which includes an ontology of multitude, a democracy of multiplicity, and a political theology which is ecological and materialist.

Introduction

Etymologically speaking, the Greek word *oikoumene* which generally means "the whole inhabited world," out of which the notion of Ecumenism has been derived, was applied to the Roman Empire in the first century BCE.[1] Both in biblical and ecclesiastical tradition the word *oikoumene* was used to signify the political meaning of the Roman Empire. Biblical scholars argue that the word *oikoumene* in both Testaments generally signifies the imperial rule that entails God's judgement and trial. They hardly find any Biblical references that *oikoumene* signifies God's creation.[2] In the fourth and fifth centuries, *oikoumene* was used to denote the Christian councils convoked by the emperors. In this period, *oikoumene* was used to signify the imperial authority and legitimacy of the decisions taken by the early church councils. On the other hand, the modern Ecumenical Movement used this term in the twentieth century to imply the global unity of churches and later to the wider ecumenism – the unity of whole creation. This essay asks whether the contemporary theology of Ecumenism repudiates the imperial trajectory of *oikoumene*. And, if so, how?

Furthermore, the Patristic notion of *oikonomia* (economic trinity) which later became the philosophical/theological foundation for Ecumenism offered a "mysterious unity" between God and the creation. The Patristic notion of *oikonomia* was originally conceptualized against the monotheism of the Emperor Constantine. *Oikoumene* affirms the equivocity – the absolute difference – between the Creator and the creation. Here, God is sovereign and the creation is connected to divine as the "exterior other." The creation—the "other" – is accommodated within the ontology of God (Being of God) through the act of salvation.

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[1] Here I use Ecumenism and Empire with capital letter 'E' in order to denote them as philosophical concepts.

[2] For a detailed discussion on this point, see Barbara Rossing, "Re-Claiming Oikoumene? Ecumenism, Ecology, and Empire," in *Churasco: A Theological Feast in Honor of Vitor Westhelle*, eds. Mary Philip, John Arthur Nunes and Charles M. Collier (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 174-176.

Contemporary philosophers and postcolonial theologians interrogate this notion of *oikonomia* (economy of life) for legitimizing an imperial logic of "Oneness" and locating "creation" as the "exterior other." Like *oikonomia*, the contemporary notion of Empire – the post capitalized economy and politics also offers an "enclosed ontology" by which it legitimises an imperial logic of "Oneness." Hence, this essay asks whether the theology of Ecumenism disavows the imperial logic of "Oneness" and affirms "multiplicity" and "manyness."

Engaging with the post-Continental and the post-colonial theological discourses, this essay asks: (1) What would be a relevant theology of Ecumenism in the contemporary context of Empire? (2) If Ecumenism denies the unitarian logic of Empire, then how does it define the life in common? In other words, how does the unity perception of Ecumenism differ from the imperial logic of "Oneness"? This distinction is very crucial for the re-imagination of ecumenism and church today. Thus this essay offers a constructive proposal for re-imagining ecumenism and ecclesiology today. It has three major sections; the first section exposes the nuances involved in the etymological conviviality between Empire and Ecumenism as they are derived from the same root word *oikoumene* in both Biblical and Roman literature. The second section delineates the contemporary political meaning of Empire and its hegemonic logic of "Oneness" as it is exposed by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. Signifying their concepts of multitude and commonwealth, the third section offers a radical vision of Ecumenism in the contemporary context of Empire.

Ecumenism and Empire: The Etymological Paradox

In the first century BCE, the word *oikoumene* was used as a synonym for the Roman Empire. Barbara Rossing, the well-known Lutheran Biblical scholar, is of the opinion that "in relation with the Roman political conquests of lands and peoples, *oikoumene* was claimed not only the ends of the world in a geographical sense but also in a political sense, as the ends of Roman imperial sway."[3] Claude Nicolet supports this argument and contends that Rome's empire and its geographical knowledge developed hand in hand, as evidenced in the use of the Greek word *oikoumene*.[4] In that period, the Romans were called "lords of the oikoumene" (*kyrioi tes oikoumenes*). Ancient authors like Josephus use the term *oikoumene* for the imperial propaganda and even call Romans as the "recruited inhabitants" of the *oikoumene* from the uninhabited world (*aoiketou*). In this sense, *oikoumene* points to the geographical area that is controlled by the Roman government and not the whole inhabited earth.

The Biblical literature also followed this notion and defined *oikoumene* as the Roman Empire. Delineating it, Barbara Rossing argues that in the Septuagint *oikoumene* is used to denote the Roman Empire – an empire that must come to an end. The Roman Empire, as she explains it in the book of Revelation, is nothing but a hegemonic rule that requires a trial or judgement.[5] She writes: "In light of the book's [the book of Revelation] overall anti-Roman polemic, the "hour of trial that is coming upon the whole oikoumene" in Rev. 3:10 should be read not so much as a general eschatological tribulation that will come upon the earth, but more pointedly as the trial or judgement that God will bring upon the entire Roman Empire and on

[3] Barbara Rossing, "Re-Claiming Oikoumene?, 174.
[4] Claude Nicolet, *Space, Geography and Politics*, 11 cited by Barbara Rossing, Re-Claiming Oikoumene?," 174.
[5] Barbara Rossing, "Re-Claiming Oikoumene?, 176.

all those who benefit from Rome's injustice."[6] Though there are some parallel references on *oikoumene* and earth (*ge*), for e.g., Psalm 18; predominantly the word *oikoumene* in the Biblical literature refers to the Roman imperial world. Rossing is of the opinion that both in Old Testament and New Testament there is no such clear connotation for *oikoumene* as God's creation. Rather it connotes a pagan rule that anticipates the divine judgement and trial.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, *oikoumene* was used to denote the ecumenical councils. The early Christian councils were convoked by emperors who summoned the bishops, paid their expenses, and gave their decisions binding force. These councils were called 'ecumenical' since the bishops represented the world. Another significant term that is to be noted in this Patristic tradition is *oikonomia* (economic trinity). Early church fathers defined the salvific act of God on the basis of the "economic trinity" through which they affirmed the sovereignty of God and God's external (mysterious) connection with creation. In order to challenge the monotheistic tradition of Constantine while affirming the equivocity (the absolute difference) between Creator and Creation, the fathers found refuge in this concept of "economic trinity." Giorgio Agamben, in his critical analysis, contends that through this theological notion, the early church was able to accommodate the creation within the divine program of salvation as its "missiological other."[7] The other is mysteriously (*sacramentum*) accommodated within as the "exterior other."

On the contrary, the Ecumenical Movement defined *oikoumene* as God's *oikos* (household) with the vision of global justice and peace. Following the theological notion of *basileia* (kingdom of God), the Ecumenical movement signified *oikoumene* as the Christian vision of just-community and eco-justice. Differentiating the unitarian logic of globalization with the ecumenical vision of plurality and diversity, the WCC Harare assembly used two categories: "*oikoumene* of domination' and the other is "the *oikoumene* of faith and solidarity."[8] K.C. Abraham calls this "*oikoumene* of solidarity" "liberative ecumenism" – a common platform for all religions to come together and struggle for justice and human liberation.[9] The problem that we face here is that neither the biblical tradition nor the ecclesiastical tradition gives any substantial philosophical/theological foundation for this "oikoumene of solidarity." How do we explain this "oikoumene of solidarity" disavowing the imperial logic of unity? This essay brings some contemporary concepts like *multitude* and *commonwealth* into our attention in order to re-claim Ecumenism today as they envision "a life in common" over against the logic of Empire.

Multitude and Commonwealth: 'living in Common'

Antonio Negri, the Italian philosopher (with Michael Hardt) offers a detailed discussion on the contemporary project of Empire.[10] Their notion of Empire is not a military-imperial regime like the Roman Empire or the American Empire. Here, Empire signifies a post-globalised human condition where we see the free flow of

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6 Barbara Rossing, "Re-Claiming Oikoumene?, 177.

7 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 50-51.

8 "Policy Reference Committee II Report 8.4, Appendix II: Globalization," 16; in Kessler, D., ed., *Together on the Way: The Harare Report,* Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998.

9 K.C. Abraham, ed., *New Horizons in Ecumenism: Essays in honor of Bishop Samuel Amirtham* (Bangalore: BTESSC & BTTBPSA), 1993), 174.

10 Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, M.A: Harvard University Press, 2004), xii.

capital, information, and technology. Negri and Hardt describe it thus: "Empire is an imaginative geography of globalization of world space, where boundless flow of capital, labor and information transcend the older imperialist order and yet at the same time plant the seeds of the destruction and transformation of Empire."[11] Empire has no territorial centre of power and does not rely on any territorial boundaries. As Negri explains, Empire "is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers."[12] As a post-capitalist machinery and cultural biopower, Empire produces new subjectivities in favour of capitalist culture, politics, and economy. In order to resist the biopower of the Empire, Negri proposes the theory of *multitude* as a radical, anti-imperial, political subjectivity that resists Empire from within.

Multitude is the living alternative that grows within Empire. In Negri's perspective, there are two types of globalization: (1) Empire spreads globally its network of hierarchies and divisions that maintain order through new mechanisms of control and constant conflict; (2) new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters.[13] This is the possibility to live in common in the context of globalization and act together while we remain different. In that sense, multitude is the "negative globalization." For Negri, *multitude* is an open network – life in common. *Common* is not homogeneity but alterity and difference. Unlike the concept of "people" which is unitary and identitarian, multitude is many.[14] *Multitude* is composed of many "irreducible singularities" of cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. *Multitude* is composed potentiality of all the diverse agents of social production. Unlike the present notion of democracy, in the democracy of *multitude*, the economic, cultural, and the social realms enacted together to envisage an alternative life in common. It is not just a collection of "voices of dissent"; rather it is a counter political ontology where all are invited live in a de-imperialised subjectivity. In short, *multitude* is the possibility to envisage a political democracy of "common" in the age of Empire as we see today in the multiple forms of local struggles for basic necessities of life, food, water, land, and human rights etc., – the "commonwealth" of humanity.

Negri's notion of *Commonwealth* articulates the anti-imperial social relations and institutional forms of a possible global democracy. It is a democracy that invites all to share and participate in the common, that is, the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, all nature's bounty – the inhabitance of humanity. Hardt and Negri explain this radical sense of political subjectivity: the notion of the common does not position humanity separate from nature, as either its exploiter or its custodian, but focuses rather on the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world, promoting the beneficial and limiting the detrimental forms of the common. In the era of globalization, issues of maintenance, production and distribution of the common in both senses and in both ecological and socio-economic frameworks became increasingly central.[15]

With *Commonwealth*, Negri and Hardt conclude the *trilogy* begun with Empire and continued in *Multitude*, proposing an ethics of freedom for living in our common world and articulating a possible constitution for radical democracy in the context of Empire. It is an invitation to search for a political subjectivity which

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[11] Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, 137.
[12] Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), xiii.
[13] Negri and Hardt, *Multitude*, xiii.
[14] Negri and Hardt, *Multitude*, xvii.
[15] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, M.A: Harvard University Press, 2009), viii.

is ontologically connected to the politics of the *multitude*. To fight against Empire is to search for a life in common – the inhabitance of humanity, the *commonwealth*. What constitutes this ontology of *multitude* or *commonwealth* is our politics of common inheritance – an enmattered subjectivity. Doesn't this notion of *commonwealth* signify a radical ecclesiology and ecumenism in the contemporary context of Empire?

Ecumenism Re-defined in the context of Empire

Negri's *commonwealth* offers the global church or the movement of Ecumenism a radical ontology – the ontology of the *multitude*. According to this ontology, the marginality is not a diaconal space for the church to extend its missiological obligations; rather it is the "kenotic space" for the church to "de-activate" its inherent imperial structure. Giorgio Agamben, while defining church as the "coming community" argues that today's church has become Empire (*oikeo* which means "dwells like an Empire") and forgets its calling to be a "coming community" – sojourner (*paroikien*) in this world.[16] For him, church is not an enclosed community that is constituted for itself or for its "missiological others." When we declare that church stands for the marginalized, it automatically defines the marginality as the "exterior other." Unlike the patristic notion of *oikonomia* (economy of life), marginality is not a "missiological other" for the church. Church does not substantiate the marginality within or without; rather the margin is the church. Church is a marginal community that resists the imperial logic always. As the crucified body of Christ, church nullifies all kinds of imperial logics of discrimination within and envisions a global community of the de-imperialised subjectivities/tortured bodies. Thus Ecumenism as *commonwealth* invokes church to be a church of the crucified people.

Secondly, Ecumenism as *commonwealth* denies the imperial logic of "Oneness" and signifies a democracy of "multiplicity" which is contrary to the unitary, absolute, totalitarian democracy. *Commonwealth* offers "a life in common" – a shared solitude – a radical univocity – a radical embodiment – a radical enfleshment. It is not just unity in diversity or commonality between units. *Commonwealth* offers a common realm of being and becoming; but it is always fluid, relational, differential, and materialistic in content. God, according to this logic of multiplicity is also to be located in relationality. Jean-Luc Nancy, in his recent work *Deconstructing Christianity* speaks about God as a *Singular plural*, an ever-flowing excess, not just as One.[17] For Alain Badiou, God is an event, out of which we have many meanings and experiences of becoming.[18] Catherine Malabou alludes to the *plasticity* of God. According to Malabou, plasticity denies the Western logic of "One" and offers an existence of "divine manyness" that substantiates new possibilities for configuring human subjectivity in relationality.[19] As Catherine Keller affirms it is an *enmattered* God who "became flesh"– the inter-carnating God.[20]

Thirdly, Ecumenism as *commonwealth* offers a radical political ontology which is ecological or materialistic in content. It is a radical enfleshment where all are invited to live in a state of inter-carnality. It is to affirm our *enmattered* subjectivity. Affirming and protecting the elements of Life – water, air, soil, vegetation

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16 Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012), 2.
17 Jean Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
18 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
19 Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
20 Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University, 2017).

etc. is nothing but realizing the politics of *commonwealth*. According to this vision, the indigenous people, aboriginals, Dalits, women, the farmers who resist Empire locally and protect the inhabitance of humanity constitute the real church. The inter-carnation into the politics of the multitude signifies Ecumenism as *commonwealth* today. The God of this commonwealth is an *enmattered* God. The human subjectivity is defined in terms of an *enmattered self*. The challenge before the present church and ecumenical movement is to envision a theology of the *enmattered life*; rather than the economy of life (oikonomia). The theology of *oikoumene* that retains the imperial logic of the church and renders "marginality" as a "missiological other" is to be rejected while ecumenism as a radical ontology of the *multitude* and *commonwealth* is to be re-claimed in the contemporary context of Empire.

A Chronicle of Joy: the path toward eucharistic agreement between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Lutheran Church of Australia

Peter Lockwood

Introduction

As a major step towards formulating a Concordat for full communion between the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA), to consist of agreed statements on core church teachings, the UCA/LCA Dialogue prepared At the Table: the Eucharist (ATT), a comprehensive agreed statement on the Lord's Supper. Work on ATT commenced in 2011, and after helpful feedback from our two churches, it was received and adopted by the UCA Assembly Standing Committee on 13 November 2022, and by the LCA General Synod on 11 February 2023.[1]

At an early stage in the joint work on the Eucharist it was decided that a Chronicle be compiled, to trace in broad-brush strokes the discussion at meetings and so provide the wider context for the development of each constituent part of ATT. The Chronicle was updated after each biannual meeting of the Dialogue. It reflects ways in which misgivings have been allayed and reciprocal challenges have led to new insights. Highlighting in this way the cut and thrust of the conversations within the dialogue, it was believed, would lead to a deeper appreciation of the polished statements that finally emerged. It would give readers the opportunity to participate in the dialogue journey by providing background and context, thereby helping them to understand and embrace the finished document.[2]

As with most inter-church dialogues, the long-term goal has been to work and pray for full communion between our churches in response to the Spirit's call for a deeper expression of the unity we have in Christ. That is not to say that full communion is pursued at the expense of more proximate goals, such as deepening our understanding and appreciation of the partner church's teachings and practices, testing inherited misgivings about the other church through careful listening and thoughtful probing, and preparing clearer and more comprehensive articulations of shared understandings. However, dialogue participants constantly bear in mind the final goal, that of full communion, the hope and promise of reciprocal eucharistic hospitality and shared ministries.

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1 In the form that ATT was presented for discussion and adoption at the 2023 synod of the LCA, see https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/955?lsk=69e0a2a8739e22073384c4f6c2c22a24 (accessed 8.12/23).

2 It was finally agreed, however, that the Chronicle was better suited to separate publication in the theological journals of our respective churches. Rev. Dr. Rob Gallacher, UCA, was the initial author of the Chronicle, and following his retirement from the Dialogue the author of this article saw the project through to completion. What follows is a revised version of the Chronicle.

Another more immediate goal of the LCA-UCA Dialogue has been to provide theological and liturgical resources for so-called cooperating congregations. These are congregations, or preaching places, that agree to receive the minister from either church as their minister where it is no longer viable for both denominations to maintain an ordained ministry, but where one church might do so with the support of the other. The dialogue determined that previous agreed statements, on baptism (1984), the Eucharist (1985), the ministry (1986), the church (1988), and Christology (1990), should be reformulated succinctly and then gathered into a publication, which came to be known as the Declaration of Mutual Recognition (DMR), to serve as the founding charter for such cooperating congregations. In other words, local mission and ministry imperatives drove the formation of DMR.[3]

The brief theological statements in DMR demonstrated sufficient doctrinal agreement between our churches for congregations to begin formally cooperating due to the urgency of providing ongoing ministry where needed.[4] More detailed work was still ahead – beginning with *At the Table* – for full communion and each church is committed to this.

The Chronicle

Employing the principles of Receptive Ecumenism[5]

It was agreed from the outset that the Dialogue would engage in the principles of Receptive Ecumenism, whereby we committed ourselves to exploring in depth the characteristic emphases of each church through in-depth conversation characterised by respectful listening. The practice of Receptive Ecumenism meant that we were constantly reminded to listen appreciatively to perspectives other than our own, and to remain open to new insights that had not formed part of our own tradition. Receptive Ecumenism also calls for a willingness to recognise blind spots in one's own tradition.

Receptive Ecumenism led the Dialogue to appreciate the necessity of using fresh language for ATT rather than the shorthand terminology that would immediately be seen to represent one church or the other and therefore would have to be laboriously unpacked before it could be understood by the other church. Avoiding denominational jargon did not mean avoiding theological language, but it was also recognised that theology is best expressed in simple English. Receptive Ecumenism made us all the more eager to seek new and better formulations appropriate to the present time, within the broad sweep of a rich ecumenical theology of the Eucharist, while retaining without compromise all that our two traditions affirm.

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[3] DMR was adopted by the LCA in 2009 and the UCA in 2010.

[4] The Dialogue prepared helpful material for cooperating congregations, such as 'Guidelines for establishing Shared Ministry' (2009), and 'Rites of Installation and Induction' (2009). Another document, 'Guidelines for the oversight of cooperating congregations, LCA-UCA' (2012), was finalised only after the first cooperating congregations commenced. The LCA required that a UCA minister serving a cooperating congregation be male, teach baptismal regeneration, and confess Christ's presence in the sacrament. The UCA required that an LCA pastor in such a situation feel at ease with the ethos of the UCA.

[5] The prime mover behind Receptive Ecumenism is Paul D. Murray, Catholic theologian at the University of Durham. The principles of the movement are presented in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford University Press: 2008).

Receptive Ecumenism calls on practitioners to adopt the posture of recipients as opposed to the ingrained habit of thinking primarily about how others might benefit from one's own wisdom. As a result, we developed the practice of asking representatives of the other church what they most wanted to safeguard in their tradition, and why, and what they wanted the other church to emphasise to a greater extent. This helped to identify most clearly what was at stake for each church and what might be gained from the other. In this way we came to understand each other better and to value more highly each other's critical emphases.

By adhering to these principles, we were also given the freedom to name our misgivings about the position of the other church on this or that aspect of eucharistic teaching. The intense conversation that ensued repeatedly led to the discovery that such misgivings were invariably based on limited, even false, understandings of the other tradition. Paradoxically, at the same time, we were led again and again to a better understanding and appreciation of our own tradition. The precepts of Receptive Ecumenism created an eagerness to find together a new place in the conversation, drawing on the best aspects of our churches' traditions in search of a new synthesis. The reward has been the refreshing discovery that our positions on the Lord's Supper complement one another far more than previously thought.

Focusing our gaze through collaboration

Midway through the journey the Dialogue realised that meetings had mostly been spent spelling out the characteristic teaching and practice of our respective churches on the Eucharist, to determine points of overlap and difference. The time had come to undertake the more difficult, more urgent, and more gripping work of preparing agreed statements. This would be done by focusing attention on the liturgy of the Eucharist itself, so that the theological document that emerged would be based on the various aspects of the rite, and not simply consist of a disinterested treatise on the Lord's Supper.[6] In doing so, it was hoped, the distinctive marks of either church, identified in our respective rites, might be viewed as enriching our understanding of the Eucharist as opposed to being viewed as reasons for ongoing separation at the Lord's Table.

It was then agreed that the heading for each section would be drawn from the liturgy, in most cases employing appropriate scriptural terms.[7] Two people, one from each church, were assigned the task of formulating the wording for each part of the rite, in order to initiate the discussion, always intense, always constructive, at successive meetings of our plenary gatherings.

A gratifying aspect of the Dialogue was the thrill around the table when breakthroughs occurred during the discussion of a specific topic. There would be a momentary lull in the conversation. Then, as the conversation continued, the atmosphere was more that of prayer than dialogue. Some ventured that at

[6] At an early stage of the discussion the Dialogue prepared a composite eucharistic liturgy that drew on the rites of both churches. This service order, 'A Great Prayer of Thanksgiving with Commentary' (2013), was intended to serve as a guide for cooperating congregations and as an educational tool in both churches. It certainly provided an ongoing reference point for the Dialogue as the work continued on the constituent parts of the rite. 'A Great Prayer' can be accessed on the UCA website under Resources, Ecumenism, Lutheran-UCA Dialogue.

[7] *At the Table: the Eucharist* was chosen as the title for the finished work. The main sections were headed: 'Do this in remembrance of me: Anamnesis'; 'This is my Body, this is my Blood: the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist'; 'For the Forgiveness of Sins: Reconciliation and Mission'; and 'Take and Eat, Take and Drink: Fitting Participation'. Sections titled 'Children at the Table' and 'Lay Distribution beyond the Gathered Congregation' were included, as were sections on 'The Epiclesis' and 'The Fraction', the last two practices familiar to the UCA and from which the LCA representatives were eager to learn.

these moments they gained a remarkable sense of the presence of Christ in the gathering. Certainly, with each new discovery, we were given the almost palpable impression that we had been growing into a far deeper appreciation of the divine sacramental mystery, as embraced in both churches.

The distinguishing marks of the LCA and the UCA

It was agreed among us that the LCA is primarily a confessional Church, while the UCA is primarily a confessing Church. This means that the UCA is not bound to its historical confessions in the same way that the LCA is bound to the *Book of Concord* of 1580. Even though both churches continue to draw on and learn from their confessional writings, it was readily acknowledged that whereas the teachings of the LCA are anchored primarily in its confessional tradition, the UCA is known for its openness 'to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds'.[8] We asked ourselves whether these different perspectives would rule out meaningful and effective dialogue. Without denying that our churches understand the authority of their confessional writings in different ways, it was quickly agreed that these very differences give the dialogue its vibrancy. The differences indicate how much we need each other for a fuller and richer expression of the universal church.[9]

Moving from hesitancy to consensus

The following section of the Chronicle shows the shifts that took place within the Dialogue as it reflected on the various aspects of the Eucharistic liturgy, leading beyond queries and misgivings to consensus, followed in each case by brief statements on the mutually enriching emphases of both churches.

This is my Body, this is my Blood: the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist

An early misunderstanding was that the LCA members imagined that the UCA spiritualised the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. When this was examined closely it could not be sustained. Misgivings were allayed. The UCA affirms that in the Eucharist Christ is present bodily under the species of bread and wine but extends its understanding of that presence by affirming the bodily, incarnate presence of Christ in the faith community gathered around the table. As the congregation consumes the elements it becomes what it consumes, namely the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17). In the Eucharist Christ offers believers a remembrance (anamnesis) of his sacrificial death for humankind, he absolves his people, he builds up the members of the community in faith and love, and he provides a foretaste of the heavenly feast. The Holy Spirit is appropriately invoked in the Epiclesis as the agent in the converting, saving work of the triune God.

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[8] *Basis of Union*, para. 11, page 12.

[9] Not only do our respective strengths complement one another, the Dialogue also took careful note of the high degree of consensus that has been achieved in ecumenical reflection on the Eucharist. For example, by paying attention to the renewed focus on Trinitarian theology, especially the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Dialogue made every effort to adopt explicit Trinitarian statements in preference to traditional Christocentric statements, wherever it was thought to be appropriate. Additionally, we took careful note of agreed statements between Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe, such as the *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973), and others that led to Lutheran-Reformed unions elsewhere (in Germany, England, Scandinavia and the United States). And information was gleaned from the sections on the Eucharist in recent World Council of Churches statements on church teachings and practices. Most important among these were *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Commission Paper 111 (1982), and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (2013).

For its part UCA members were concerned that the LCA members appeared to reduce Christ's presence exclusively to the consecrated bread and wine. In response, the assurance was given that the LCA affirms that Christ is present both in the elements and in the community of believers, while distinguishing the modes of Christ's presence in each. Believers receive the sacrament as a gift of grace for their present and eternal benefit. As they receive the sacrament, Christ continues the work of transforming them into the body of Christ, through the Spirit, making Christ present in them and present to the world.

But it is true that the LCA has traditionally placed greater weight on the bodily presence of Christ in the consecrated elements. This is stated most succinctly in *The Small Catechism*, where Luther writes that the sacrament of the altar 'is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink'.[10] The gifts of the sacrament, Luther continues, are 'forgiveness of sin, life and salvation', which are conferred on believers, not by eating and drinking per se, but by faith in Christ's words of promise, 'given for you' and 'shed for you for the forgiveness of sins', that accompany the reception of the elements.

In searching for terms to differentiate between these emphases, the Dialogue initially characterised the LCA understanding as more ontological; that is, the LCA has been eager to describe the *nature* of Christ's presence in the sacrament. The UCA approach was characterised as relational; that is, the UCA focuses more on the *way* that Christ is present in those consuming the elements, both as individuals and as a faith community. The UCA highlights the gift of Christ in the sacrament as creating 'the communion of saints' for love and service, in such a way that the reconciliation of individuals to God coincides with the creation of the new community. And it could be said that the LCA highlights the 'certain comfort for troubled consciences' that people derive from the assurance of forgiveness, and thereby the freedom from self to serve the neighbour in love.

The impact of Christ's eucharistic presence in believers for the sake of the world is made clear, it was agreed, among other things by the context in which Paul cites the Words of Institution in 1 Corinthians 11. The words are quoted in the context of Paul's ministry of settling disputes among the believers, and dealing with the unworthy way in which the church was celebrating the sacrament. Following chapter 11 Paul goes on to speak about spiritual gifts in the one body in chapter 12, introduces the hymn of love in chapter 13 as the more excellent way, speaks of the importance of orderly worship in chapter 14, reaches a grand eschatological climax in chapter 15, and then returns to more practical matters such as the collection for the wider church and his travel plans, before extending personal greetings, in chapter 16. The presence of Christ in the elements permeates the full range of ecclesial relationships. If the ontology of the sacrament is understood properly, it emphasises that it is Christ, the giver, who is present, and that his presence has a profound influence on the nature and conduct of the community formed around the table.

These reflections led to a significant shift in the focus of the discussion from, 'How is Christ present?' to, 'Who is the Christ who is present?' By answering this question in terms of the one who gives his life for others, it became clear that the LCA and UCA emphases are indeed complementary; in fact, they need each other. The twin emphases—on the bodily presence of Christ in the elements, and on the mission of

[10] *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Fortress: 2000), 362, 363.

God to the church and the world—are needed for a balanced understanding of the Eucharist. In this, each Church has a distinctive contribution to make.

What makes a valid celebration of the Eucharist?

The question was raised: 'What are the essential elements of a valid celebration of the Eucharist?' The discussion that followed provided one of many opportunities for initial misunderstandings of one church's position to be dealt with to the satisfaction of the other church. The issue of the valid Eucharist arose during the preparation of *A Great Prayer of Thanksgiving with Commentary*,[11] when LCA members became uneasy when UCA members identified not only the Words of Institution but also the Epiclesis and the Fraction as 'essential' for a valid Eucharist. LCA minds were put at ease, however, when it was explained that the word 'essential' means that the Epiclesis and the Fraction are considered necessary 'for a full diet of worship'.[12] For their part UCA members were concerned that LCA members could say that, strictly speaking, only the Words of Institution (the *verba*) could be described as essential for a valid Eucharist. Few in the LCA would agree that the Eucharist should be whittled down to nothing but the *verba*. But to say that they alone are essential for a valid Eucharist, it was explained, was to focus attention on what makes the sacrament valid: Christ's command to 'do this in memory of me', and his promise to be present for the community with his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The Eucharist as sign and seal of Christ's presence with his people

The LCA members sought assurances from their conversation partners that the UCA does not hold to a purely symbolic understanding of Christ's presence in the sacrament. The issue arose when it was pointed out that the Westminster Confession employs the words 'sign' and 'seal' when speaking of Christ's presence in the sacramental elements. In reply it was pointed out that the UCA had taken pains to replace the nouns with verbs, as follows:

> Christ signifies and seals his continuing presence with his people in the Holy Communion. In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptised people on their way to the final inheritance of the kingdom. Thus, the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the Lord's death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which he will bring to consummation.[13]

Properly understood, the terms 'sign' and 'seal' emphasise Christ's bodily presence rather than suggest a symbolic or spiritual presence. When it is said that the Eucharist 'signs' Christ's presence, the people hear that there is a sign-off on Christ's presence in the sacramental elements, as with a signature at the end of a document. When it is said that the Eucharist 'seals' Christ's presence, the people hear that the Eucharist makes him present, or ensures his presence. In other words, the authenticity of Christ's presence

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[11] See footnote 6, above.

[12] 'Ordered Liberty in Worship for UiW2',1. This was distributed on CD-ROM with *Uniting in Worship 2* (Sydney: The Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 2005). Several other versions of this document exist, including at https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/Theology_Discipleship/pdf/Ordered_Liberty_in_Worship.pdf (accessed 6/2/2018), although this phrase is not present in all versions.

[13] *Basis of Union*, para. 8, page 11.

is confirmed with a sign and a seal. To guard against a purely static understanding of Christ's presence, the words 'sign' and 'seal' emphasise the action of God in the sacrament. As Davis McCaughey has written: 'In the bread and wine, the power of Christ's cross is brought into the life of believers'.[14]

This was a true breakthrough moment in the Dialogue as LCA members grew to appreciate that the terms 'sign' and 'seal' do not imply a symbolic or spiritual understanding of the Eucharist for the UCA, but far rather they underscore the dynamic, active presence of Christ. In keeping with the commitment to avoid terms that are peculiar to one church or the other, these two do not appear in ATT.

The Lutheran term 'real presence'

The expression 'real presence' was also seen to create problems for the discussion on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. For the LCA the expression is a shorthand phrase that captures core elements of Lutheran theology. To steer away from a term that required extensive unpacking before its meaning and significance could be determined, other terms were explored, such as 'bodily presence' or 'embodied presence'. Finally, the decision was taken not to use qualifiers for 'presence'. It was also agreed that in addition to saying that Christ is present in the bread and wine, it was important to use action verbs with Christ as subject, such as Christ feeds, unites, and nourishes his people, as noted above. The dynamic presence of Christ implies that there is a flow of communion from Christ to the people and beyond, leading to a more holistic understanding of the sacrament.

UCA members were puzzled by the LCA distinction between Christ's special presence in the Eucharist and his general presence in other contexts, such as the worship assembly (Matt. 18:20). While not denying the presence of Christ in contexts beyond the Eucharist, the LCA wants to say that Christ is uniquely present in the Eucharist, first, in terms of the unique mode of his presence (in bread and wine), and, secondly, in terms of the certainty that with the sacrament Christ is unquestionably present 'for us' (pro nobis) and 'for me' (pro me).

The expressions 'sign and seal', 'real presence', 'special presence' and 'general presence' are good examples of inhouse expressions that are associated with one church or the other and have been avoided in the statements of agreement in ATT, given the extensive explanation required to clarify their meaning and remove misunderstanding.

For the Forgiveness of Sins: Reconciliation and Mission

The LCA's emphasis on the 'for me' (*pro me*) character of the Eucharist sparked lively discussions on two or three occasions. Does not the heavy emphasis on forgiveness promote a self-centred personal piety, or an obsession with sin and guilt? Is it not too highly individualistic, considering that the second person pronouns in the Words of Institution are all plural? (see Matt. 26:26-29) In response, the Lutheran representatives said that the focus on the individual has the intention and effect of releasing the individual—and the community—from self-centredness, guilt and fear, and it frees believers to live for God and for others.

While agreeing that the forgiveness of sins is bestowed in the Eucharist, the UCA members observed that the biblical accounts place the weight on the reconciliation of God and the community which is inextricably

[14] See J. Davis McCaughey, *The Basis of Union: a Commentary* (1971, revised and expanded, 2016), page 41.

bound up with reconciliation between neighbours. The experience of forgiveness includes being embraced within the community by others—people equally broken and wounded—in a mutual togetherness of holding, forgiving, and accepting. God's love for the individual and the individual's love for the neighbour are not to be understood in sequential terms. The two go hand in hand.

The LCA emphasised that, in theological terms, God's love for the individual precedes the love that individuals show to one another. While these two dimensions cannot be neatly separated in practice or chronology, the LCA position is that when they are not distinguished, law (neighbour love) and gospel (God's love) become muddied, and justification and sanctification get confused. When the command to love the neighbour, understood as law, is placed alongside God's unconditional love for sinners, the focus inevitably moves away from God's justifying grace and falls instead on the believer's response of love for others. The result of such a move is the uncertainty that arises about whether one has ever shown—and can ever show—sufficient love. The gospel is then all too readily obscured and diminished.

In response, the UCA suggested that justification applies both to the individual and to the community; justification is lived out communally. Believers' freedom and wholeness are found in their belonging within the body; their true identity is discovered within the community.

Furthermore, in UCA perspective, the gospel is also spoken of in terms of the relationship between the Father and the Son into which the believer is drawn by the Spirit. Nor can the dimensions of healing and restoration be overlooked. Might it be that an over-emphasis on the sinful condition of believers has had its deleterious effect in terms of low self-esteem and dysfunctional guilt? It was countered that underplaying personal sin and guilt can be equally problematic, in terms of the tendency to overlook personal culpability, and the failure to see that sin has consequences. An excessive focus on communal guilt has the potential to undermine a sense of personal sin, and it may lead to an inability to give a personal account of the faith, 'what Christ means for me'. In resolving these tensions, we agreed that personal and communal sin should not be played off against each other, and that confession of sin always occurs in the light of the promised absolution, an absolution declared so that the individual and the community may bask in the extravagance of divine grace, the final goal of confession and absolution.

A significant spin-off from this discussion was a decision to include in ATT a section about reconciliation vis-à-vis forgiveness. Recognising that there can be no reconciliation without forgiveness, it was proposed that the term 'reconciliation' was a broader unifying concept for the work of Christ in the Eucharist. The term 'reconciliation' has its application both before God (*coram Deo*) and before humanity (*coram hominibus*). With this in mind, the possibility was explored of placing forgiveness within the broader setting of reconciliation, so that justice can be done to the divine-human, the communal, the cosmic, and the eschatological dimensions of the Eucharist.

Certain comfort for troubled consciences

A major feature of the LCA understanding of the Eucharist is that the primary sacramental gift of forgiveness provides certain comfort for troubled consciences. Undoubtedly the absolution and the read and proclaimed word, addressed to the whole congregation, let alone the hymns and prayers, also assure believers of their peace with God through the forgiveness of their sins. But the Eucharist personalises the gift more

profoundly and unquestionably, in that believers receive Christ's body and blood on their own lips and in their own mouths, removing all doubt that 'this truly means me'.

The emphasis on certain comfort for troubled consciences has not played a major role in formal UCA reflection on the Eucharist. UCA Dialogue members addressed many questions to their LCA partners about the meaning and function of the phrase. However, while the language of 'certain comfort' is not used in the UCA context, UCA member affirmed that the personalised gift of forgiveness and the assurance that this brings are an integral part of UCA heritage, through its liturgies, hymnody, and pastoral care practices.

The Epiclesis

The Epiclesis—the invocation of the Holy Spirit in the context of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving—is more at home in UCA eucharistic practice, but it does appear in recent LCA services. Both churches welcome its inclusion and note that it revives a practice of the early church. The Dialogue noted that historically there are two traditions in relation to the Epiclesis, one a consecratory prayer and the other a prayer for the blessing of the community. The focus of the Epiclesis on the work of the Holy Spirit helps to demonstrate that the Eucharist is a work of the Trinity.

Anamnesis

In two versions of the words of institution (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24,25), Christ commanded the church: 'Do this in remembrance of me' (*eis tēn emēn anamnēsin*). The Dialogue agreed that Jesus' words do not mean that the Lord's Supper is simply a memorial meal, an opportunity to call to mind Christ and his sacrificial death for us on the cross, by regularly re-reading the last supper narrative, for example, or by re-enacting the meal in the church.[15] Rather, the human act of remembering is the community's response to God's prior salvific remembering of us. Just as it is Christ, the risen and exalted Lord, who speaks to us whenever the gospel is proclaimed, so also in the sacrament Christ continues to give the church his crucified and risen body, as he did to the disciples at the last supper.

Furthermore, as a meal of remembrance, the Lord's Supper bridges the gulf between past and present. The past is brought into the present and the present is made contemporaneous with the past. The Spirit works through the sacramental word, the effective promise of Christ, to make Christ present in the consecrated bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

The UCA defines Anamnesis (the eucharistic remembrance) as follows: 'In "remembering" Christ we are "re-membered" in Christ, "rejoined" to him as he is present with us in the action of this meal. We are "re-called" to the presence of Christ in our midst', which the LCA can affirm.[16]

Neither of our churches understands Anamnesis as a discrete element of the eucharistic liturgy. Rather, for both churches the Eucharist itself has an inherently 'anamnetic' character. Anamnesis refers to the

[15] A brief conversation took place regarding the way our two Churches understand 'sacrifice' in connection with the Eucharist. Dialogue members agreed there should be no suggestion that the Eucharist is a supplementary work to Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. For both Churches the Eucharist is understood as a 'sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving'. Through it, Christians are to be enabled more and more to offer themselves as a living sacrifice.

[16] *Uniting in Worship 2*, page 136; see also 'A Great Prayer of Thanksgiving', page 6.

action of the liturgy as a whole, whereby the saving events of the past are recalled and made effective in the present. Therefore, speaking of 'the' Anamnesis can prove misleading.

The Fraction

Christ broke the bread at the Last Supper, and 'the breaking of the bread' (*fractio panis*) quickly became one of the names for the entire liturgy (Act 2:42). Even though the Fraction (the one loaf and the breaking of the bread) has been a distinguishing mark of Reformed celebrations of the Eucharist, the Dialogue quickly concurred that the practice greatly enriches the Eucharist for purposes of gospel proclamation, eucharistic teaching, and faith formation.[17] As one of the visible manual acts that ensure a 'full diet' of the Eucharist, the UCA says that the Fraction is valuable, but not in the sense that its absence would make the Eucharist invalid. In view of the theological richness of the Fraction, the LCA may welcome the use of a single loaf or a large wafer and the accompanying rite of Fraction as an occasional practice prior to distribution. But there was a note of caution about overloading the liturgy with additional symbolic acts.

Worthy participation in the sacrament

Discussion of the topic of worthy participation in the Lord's Supper showed again how one church emphasises a matter that receives little prominence in the other. The LCA speaks of worthiness in terms of recipients' faith in the promise in Christ's words, 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins'. An indispensable dimension of worthy reception is the recipients' awareness of their unworthiness of Christ's gifts, in the spirit of the centurion who said that he was not worthy to have Christ enter his home and heal his servant (Luke 7:1–10). Paradoxically, worthy recipients are those who acknowledge their unworthiness, that is, their sin and their need of God's grace and forgiveness. In *The Large Catechism*, also one of the Lutheran confessional writings, Luther says that those whose pride prevents them from seeing that they are unworthy sinners in need of grace and absolution, and therefore have 'no intention of improving', are the only ones who should absent themselves from the Lord's table.[18]

At this point the LCA representatives appreciated a brief excursus from the UCA representatives on what John Wesley understood by describing the Lord's Supper as a 'converting ordinance'. Wesley did not have in mind conversion from unbelief to belief, from non-Christian to Christian, as has often been assumed. Rather, he had in mind those whose assurance of salvation was not yet secure, and who imagined (or whom others alleged) that this disqualified them from attending the Lord's Supper. They thought they were unworthy of the all-surpassing gift of the sacrament. Wesley affirmed that nobody has anything in their hands to offer God that could make them acceptable in God's presence, but they should stretch out their hands in total confidence and sheer delight that they have received the gracious invitation to come to the banquet as Christ's

[17] In the simplest form of the Fraction, a loaf or large wafer is elevated and broken during the Words of Institution to coincide with the words, 'Jesus took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it'. To make the Fraction more prominent it is sometimes performed, also in the UCA, either during the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*), or as a separate rite, with the breaking of the bread accompanying the words, 'The bread we break is a sharing in the body of Christ', followed by the raising of the cup and the words, 'The cup we take is a sharing in the blood of Christ'. Then the bread and the cup are extended towards the congregation with the words, 'The gifts of God for the people of God'. Among other things that it signifies, the Fraction draws attention to Christ's broken body on the cross, and thereby vividly reminds worshippers of the world's redemption through the cross, Christ's perpetual fellowship in suffering, and the church's vital role of living out Christ's solidarity with the poor and broken of the world.

[18] *The Book of Concord*, page 473.

guest. And the ordinance of the Lord's Supper would have the ongoing effect of 'converting' them into people of firm faith, more and more confident of God's grace, and producing the fruit of the Spirit in abundance.

Our churches agree that worthy eating and drinking presupposes a recognition of the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, and behaviour conforming to the gift that participants receive. The Dialogue rejoices that we are in substantial agreement about 'worthy participation'. In particular, we agree that the sacrament pre-supposes the Baptism of those attending, and faith in the words and promises of Christ regarding the sacrament.

The LCA has a specific rite of admission to the Lord's Table, which may follow confirmation instruction in the teenage years, or a shorter preparation for a younger child with no minimum age prescribed, at the discretion of the pastor and the parents. Baptism is the rite of admission to the Lord's Supper in the UCA, and age-appropriate preparation is encouraged.

The open and closed table

The Dialogue also considered the vexed issue of the open and closed table. It would be too simplistic to say that the LCA practises a closed table and the UCA an open table. Even the expression 'open table' leaves open a range of possible interpretations. At one extreme, does it mean that the Lord's Table is open to all people irrespective of whether they are Christians or not? Does it mean that it is open to all the baptised, or only after confirmation? Or does it mean that it is open to all who confess Christ as Lord whether they have been baptised and confirmed or not? The UCA position is that the table is open to baptised believers.

Within historical Lutheranism 'closed communion' has been understood to mean that communion tables are for Lutheran communicants, except at the discretion of the pastor. The LCA's practice, however, is that the table is closed to the impenitent and unbelieving, not necessarily closed to non-Lutherans.[19] Many LCA congregations include a statement in the Sunday bulletin about the significance of the Lord's Supper and what is expected of participants. In the UCA the words of the 'Invitation' state who may come to the table,[20] and it is understood that the liturgy well prepares worshippers to partake of the meal. In the LCA, the baptised receiving communion for the first time are prepared by instruction and a formal rite of admission to the table. In the event of visitors or newcomers presenting themselves for communion, ministers of both denominations would follow up pastorally. Ultimately, the Dialogue decided that a separate section on the open and closed table was not necessary in ATT because it is well covered under the theme of worthy participation.

Lay distribution beyond the gathered congregation

It quickly became apparent that there was unanimity between the UCA and LCA on the practice of taking communion to those who are unable to attend worship. It was determined that the Eucharist may be regarded as continuing until the last person has partaken—including people at home, in hospital or in

[19] The LCA's stance is set out in the document, 'Some Pastoral Guidelines for Responsible Communion Practice, 1990' (re-edited August 2001), *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia—Volume 2*. https://lca.box.net/shared/static/92pc8stplb03hzgp1jgu.pdf (accessed 10/11/2023)

[20] The 'Invitation to the Eucharist' in *A Great Prayer of Thanksgiving with Commentary* is worded: 'Christ invites to his table all who confess him as Lord, earnestly repent of their sin, and seek to live in peace with one another' (page 4).

prison—when the sacrament is taken to them following the service. Both churches have the practice of training and installing lay people to take the elements to such people, using the rites of their church. In neither case are the elements re-consecrated, but the words of institution are read as a reminder of the consecration that occurred in the presence of the gathered community. Towards the end of the main service, it was agreed, it is good practice to alert the assembled congregation to the fact that the Eucharist is to be shared with specific people beyond their midst, who are named and prayed for.

Concluding comments

This revision of the Chronicle has been written in the conviction that readers would value the opportunity to accompany the Dialogue on the journey it has taken to reach the goal of the great consensus on the Eucharist represented by ATT. The many difficult conversations that took place along the way may well have blocked the path to full agreement. But, combined with a happy blend of good will, prayer, and persistence, such frank exchanges undoubtedly contributed to the joy of the discoveries that kept on surfacing. As we listened to each other carefully, in the spirit of Receptive Ecumenism, we finally concluded that the specific nuances of our two churches need not be seen as barriers to full communion. Instead, we found that we were continually being enriched by the characteristic emphases of our partner church. And rather than viewing them as causes of ongoing separation, we kept discovering that they contributed to a more profound statement on the Eucharist, not only in fresh language but also without compromising the essential elements of our two traditions.

Death and Beyond: how to talk eschatology

Greg Carey

Abstract

After defining eschatology as a field of theological reflection, this article (a revised version of a public lecture) models how to interpret biblical teachings regarding death, judgement, and an afterlife. The Bible includes diverse perspectives on what death means and what lies beyond it. Four different starting points are suggested for dealing with this diversity: that the Bible offers multiple points of view of many topics is not itself a problem; that Christian hope is grounded God's past action in creation, the story of Israel, and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; that eschatological language is inherently poetic; and that the common Christian resistance to a dualism of body and soul is destabilised by the diversity of the biblical witness. Building from these starting points, the article presents New Testament's themes of the kingdom of God, New Jerusalem, and the heavenly messianic banquet as promising images for afterlife hope. The last of these is suggested as the unifying eschatological symbol; it conveys community, joy and abundance, and resists the reduction of Christian hope to something otherworldly and individualistic.

Introduction

As a father and a grandfather, I am entitled to deploy underwhelming jokes.[1] Here's one: I like to say that "Eschatology is a big word." This is true: eschatology has eleven letters. Students routinely ask me to spell eschatology on the classroom board. Truly, eschatology is a big word.

But eschatology is also grand in subject matter. The word signifies ultimate things, realities that lie on or beyond the edges of our ordinary experience. Most people are aware of two dimensions of eschatology. One involves death, its significance and what, if anything, lies on the other side of it. This paper focuses primarily upon that set of questions. A second dimension of eschatology speaks to the fate of the world, the course of history. This topic often drives people away due to the negative influence of the self-proclaimed Bible prophecy teachers and their way of construing current events as signs of the last days. We don't, however, talk much about a third dimension of eschatology, the question of cosmology or ultimate reality. For instance: Do we believe in God? Do we believe in other spiritual powers? Do we believe in evil ones? Do we believe these beings have dwelling places? Some Christians major on these topics, but most of us do not.

[1] This paper is a revised version of the 2023 Northey Lecture, given at Pilgrim Theological College on March 9, 2023 and therefore has a somewhat informal tone. The paper is adapted from my book, *Death, the End of History, and Beyond: Eschatology in the Bible* (Interpretation: Resources; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2023). I am grateful to the administration and faculty of Pilgrim Theological College and the Uniting Church in Australia for their invitation and their hospitality.

Our present question involves how the Bible speaks to death – and how we Christians might speak of death and what lies beyond in the light of Scripture. Outlining one problem in the interpretation of Paul, I will use that example to tease out assumptions about the Bible as a resource for thinking about eschatology. Then I will address a series of individual topics related to death and the afterlife: the relevance of afterlife hope, the question of judgment, the language of resurrection, and the images we use to imagine a blessed future.

Paul and His Own Death

Let us begin with something I learned fairly recently, something I was wrong about for over twenty years. As many people will know, the apostle Paul apparently expected to be alive when Jesus returned. That's what he conveys in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:35-58. Moreover, he believed that dead persons are just that – dead – until they are raised at Jesus's return. This is not how most people, or even most Christians, imagine things now, but Paul seems clear on this point.

But did Paul change his mind when it looked like he was about to face death? Paul writes Philippians while in prison, very aware his own death may lurk right around the corner. He wants to live, he says, but he also feels the attraction of death: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (1:21, NRSVue). His desire "is to depart and be with Christ" (1:23). It appears that Paul has changed his mind. Earlier in his career he believed the dead remain in the ground until Jesus's return. Now, facing his own death, he apparently thinks believers meet Jesus immediately after they die. Commentators have tried to explain away this discrepancy, but I came to believe that Paul had changed his mind.

And this is where I was wrong – only partially, but wrong in print. I now think Paul came to understand himself as a potential martyr, a class of holy people who dwell immediately in the presence of God without waiting for the resurrection. If Paul expected a martyr's glorious reward, then he need not have changed his mind about the resurrection. Martyrs get special treatment. This idea may be new to many, so let us work it through.

Although Paul expresses the hope that death will bring him immediately into Jesus's presence, he still has not abandoned the language of resurrection in Philippians:

> I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (3:10-11)

One could explain this language by positing that different parts of Philippians were composed at different times and reflect earlier and later stages in Paul's thought. But if Paul holds two different yet compatible expectations, one for martyrs and another for the rest of the saints, the contradiction evaporates.

This line of thinking surprises many hearers. It is fairly new to me, though not entirely new in scholarship. It turns out that ancient Jews like Paul faced many options in thinking about an afterlife.

- One might affirm that the dead live in an intermediate realm and await a judgment as disembodied souls, as in 1 Enoch's *Book of the Watchers* (22:3).

- One might expect that the righteous receive immortal souls upon their death, as in 4 Maccabees (18:23; see 17:12).
- Like Daniel – best we can tell – one could expect that the righteous rise to a glorious star-like existence. (Jesus's debate with the Sadducees may be read that way: "like angels in heaven.")
- One could simply maintain that people have immortal souls, an idea that may lie in view in Luke. (Think of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus or the criminal on the cross: "Today you will be with me in paradise"; 23:43).
- Or one could insist that dead bodies await the resurrection, buried or unburied, as we see in Revelation: "the sea gave up its dead" (20:13).

I surely have not exhausted the options. But one is that God held martyrs in special favour. Consider Revelation 6:9-11: "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given." Revelation anticipates a future resurrection, but right now the martyrs reside in heaven. We find this model also in 4 Maccabees 17:18, according to which martyrs "now stand before the divine throne and live the life of eternal blessedness." I think Paul adopted this view.

Paul's apparently contradictory statements in Philippians open us to the diverse ways of talking about the afterlife we encounter in the Bible and ancient Judaism, and the necessity that – this is the key thing – *we must employ disciplined imaginations in reading this literature with eschatological questions in mind*. It will not do to ask simply, "What does the Bible say about the afterlife?", as if it will give a single clear answer. The Bible speaks with multiple voices, and often in metaphor and symbol. This is our first starting point.

More Starting Points

This first point holds that the Bible is a library, not a single book. We do seek God's Word in the Bible, but God has given us a Bible that emerged over a long period of time, one that offers multiple points of view on many important topics. On the question of death, the Bible contains lots of material, some perspectives irreconcilable with others.

As an additional example, let us consider two stories related to Jesus's crucifixion. Above I mentioned Luke, where Jesus promises to one of the men crucified alongside him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (23:39-43). This promise suggests the view that people die and immediately go to their afterlife fates. Luke's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31) conveys the same impression. Many people believe something like this today. This includes believers and unbelievers. Most modern Americans expect to enter a blessed afterlife immediately after death, though Australians seem somewhat less convinced.[2]

But what about perhaps the strangest passage in the New Testament, which occurs in Matthew? At the moment of Jesus's death,

[2] A 2021 Pew Research poll found that 73 percent of US adults believe in heaven. See "Views on the Afterlife," Pew Research Center, November 23, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/. Meanwhile, a 2021 What Australia Thinks poll found that 50 percent of Australians believe in heaven. See "Losing touch with God," What Australia Thinks, August 30, 2021, https://whataustraliathinks.org.au/data_story/losing-touch-with-god/.

> The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. (27:52-53)

Matthew gives a very different impression from Luke, instead resembling the outlook expressed by Paul in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians 15. Holy persons, having deceased, remain just that – dead – until a moment of resurrection. These saints have long dwelled in their tombs. But Jesus's death disorders everything, including the sequence of final events. Now they rise and walk about Jerusalem. Matthew never describes what *happens* to these holy ones as time passes. Do they return to their graves? Do they continue to wander the earth? Do they ascend to heaven?

Luke envisions mortals proceeding immediately to their eternal destinations, while Matthew depicts people who rise from their graves prematurely, apparently reflecting the view that the dead lie in their tombs in some sort of sleeping condition. To make things muddier, Luke also includes passages that anticipate a future resurrection: how else would one hope for being "repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (14:14; see 20:27-40)?

This kind of discrepancy occurs even in our modern liturgies. In preparing for this talk I consulted "The Funeral Service" in *Uniting in Worship 2*. The introduction to the service affirms "the Christian conviction that while death is the end of mortal life, it also marks a new beginning in our relationship with God."[3] The service notes generally avoid specifics concerning the nature of afterlife hope, but the moment of committal entrusts the deceased to the elements "in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life."[4] One sentence conveys the impression that eternal life begins at death, the other that the dead await a resurrection.

American liturgies more explicitly present confusing language. I've surveyed several, all of which include this tension. Just one example: The United Church of Christ's *Book of Worship* includes an Order for the Time of Dying. There we encounter prayers suggesting hope for a grand future reunion along with those expressing hope that death brings people immediately into God's presence. On the one hand, we await a "new day… when we are joined again… in our heavenly reunion."[5] On the other, we pray that the deceased will rest *today* in God's eternal home.

Let death be as gentle as nightfall, promising a new day when sighs of grief turn to songs of joy, and we are joined again in the presence of Jesus Christ in our heavenly reunion.	May you rest this *day/night* in the peace of God's eternal home.

[3] Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, *Uniting in Worship 2* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2005), 437
[4] *Uniting in Worship 2*, 473.
[5] *Book of Worship, United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church of Christ Office for Church Life and Leadership, 1986), 361, 365.

I do not wish to criticize our liturgists, only to point out that their language is evocative rather than precise, conveying the same tensions we find within the New Testament itself.

Of course, the Bible scarcely functions as the primary source of people's imaginations. Social media is full of references to household pets crossing the rainbow bridge – to where? Victorious sports figures refer to the happiness of loved ones who are "looking down at us right now." Folks commonly speak of joining their dear ones in heaven. And people we love and admire report personal encounters with their deceased loved ones, or they see signs of these departed friends in nature. We might dismiss some, or all, of these expressions of hope as wishful projection, beaming our deepest longings onto the cosmos. But I imagine many of us have voiced some of these hopes or affirmed others when they do.

We should account for all this diversity whenever we engage eschatological topics. As for death and the afterlife, variety extends far beyond the matter of whether or not death brings us immediately to our eternal state. If we believe in an afterlife, we also face questions such as the nature of this existence, the relationship between our current selves and any afterlife selves, and the matter of judgment.

A second starting point: Hope looks backwards. Whereas many people imagine hope as empty optimism or wishful thinking, biblical eschatology draws inspiration from a sacred past. This is what distinguishes hope from optimism. Hope has a grounding. Ultimately, we anchor our hope in the character of God as revealed to us in Scripture and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul demonstrates how hope grounds itself in the past. We see his logic when he comforts the Thessalonians concerning those who have fallen asleep (1 Thess 4:13-18). Here hope for a future resurrection springs from Jesus's own resurrection. "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died." Modern readers may struggle to grasp the connection. But the point is obvious for Paul, since he participates in the logic of Jewish apocalyptic discourse. As in Daniel 12, resurrection is a sign of the end-times, and it does not happen to solitary individuals. Moreover, Paul believes God is faithful and will complete what God begins. Thus, Jesus's resurrection cannot stand alone: it *necessarily* represents the "first fruits" of a general resurrection (1 Cor 15:20, 23). Paul's hope for a future resurrection begins with what God has already done for and in Jesus Christ.

Let us proceed to a third starting point. Among other things, eschatological language is inherently poetic. This is not to rule out that biblical authors mean what they seem to say. They may even intend their language to be taken literally. Nor do we dismiss contemporary believers who actually long for their white robes and golden crowns. But most modern people have a difficult time making straightforward sense of the Bible's eschatological language. I do. This is because the Bible's eschatological language works like poetry.

Once I tried to introduce students to this problem, asking, "Do you believe Jesus ascended up into heaven?" I assumed that students these days do not imagine that heaven resides somewhere in or beyond the sky. But as in law, never ask a question when you're not prepared for the answer. Sure enough, one student insisted he believes just that. Meanwhile, Luke and Acts describe the risen Jesus rising up into the heavens. The basic idea extends to John, where Jesus comes down from heaven and goes back up, to Paul, who describes Jesus at God's right hand somewhere, and to Revelation, where John ascends through a door into the

heavens. We modern folk cannot wrap our imaginations around this cosmology. We have a telescope in space that promises to see the very boundaries of our universe, a concept I would hope blows the minds of the most brilliant physicists. It is unlikely we can make straightforward sense out of the ascension or other eschatological concepts. Similar considerations apply to the notion of resurrection.

Our path requires that we take eschatological language seriously. If we cannot apply it literally, we need not dismiss it either. Nor will it do to translate biblical language into modern cultural categories, as Rudolf Bultmann so influentially modelled after the Second World War, without working through the specifics of those texts themselves. Instead, we need to explore eschatological language through categories such as metaphor and poetry. We can demonstrate that many ancient authors were very much engaged with previous traditions, adapting them freely to address new contexts and concerns. They took their sources seriously, but they generally worked *through* them rather than *around* them.

Finally, a fourth starting point: Many of the historical arguments we have heard in school or from pulpits require revision. Perhaps you have been uncomfortable with some of them for some time. We may have heard that Israel's Scriptures assume a unity of body and soul, that the idea of a self, a soul, independent of the body emerged through Greek cultural influence. According to this model, Israel's Scriptures are supposed to regard death as an absolute end of the self prior to the idea of resurrection. After all, without a body there could be no self – at least, not until the Greeks introduced the concept of an immortal soul.

But honestly? The Hebrew Bible can be quite vivid in describing dead people. Consider the prophet Samuel who appears to the medium of Endor after his death. Saul recognizes Samuel, and the prophet is angry: "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" (1 Sam 28:15). Even in death Samuel can still prophesy. Or consider David's deathbed command that Solomon should exact revenge upon Joab and Shimei: Joab must not descend to Sheol in peace; as for Shimei, Solomon is to "bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol" (1 Kings 2:6, 9). An innocent reader would assume that in the afterlife Joab and Shimei bear the signs of their violent deaths. I strongly doubt any direct influence between these biblical scenes and Odysseus's journey to Hades, but we grasp the resemblance. There warriors wear their blood-stained armour, Odysseus's mother Anticleia longs for news of her family, and Teiresias still prophesies, bearing his familiar staff. Given the historical and cultural interactions among societies, it rarely makes sense to attribute single ideas to one stream of cultural influence. Nor is it persuasive to split the Jewish from the Christian scriptures so neatly, as if Judaism were not fully Hellenized.

To review, I've offered four assumptions, or starting points. One, the Bible includes diverse language concerning eschatological matters. We are better off engaging this multiplicity rather than seeking to condense it. Two, we should recall that eschatology works backwards. Hope doesn't just pop out of our desires; instead, it is shaped by our sacred memories and stories going back to creation and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Three, we should work through the Bible's poetic and metaphorical language rather than around it. Every metaphor opens paths of meaning – and every metaphor brings its own limitations. And four, many of us have received certain teachings about how various ancient cultures inform the Bible that may be outdated. We should hold those familiar teachings loosely and allow us to find ourselves surprised by what we encounter.

Eschatology and Our Disposition toward Death

Eschatology offers more than comfort. It can help us do better in this life. In his final public address, commonly known as the "Mountaintop Speech," Martin Luther King Jr. put eschatology in its place. It's fine to think about heaven, he argued, but the time comes to focus on towns like Memphis, Philadelphia, and Accra.

> It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preachers must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.[6]

This is the voice of a modern Christian, and King was certainly that, deeply educated in twentieth-century theology. King begins the speech by saying he'd rather live in his current moment, where freedom struggles were breaking out all over the world, than in any other point in history. Neither future eschatology nor afterlife hope sat first in his mind.

But toward the end of the speech, King began to reflect on his own mortality. It's eerie. He was assassinated the next day. The preacher recounted his most serious assassination attempt, a stabbing that very nearly ended his life. He shared the threats on his life in Memphis, where he was standing. And he built up to the conclusion that is so deeply etched in our social memory:

> Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

It was an awkward, abrupt ending, and immensely powerful. King seemed tired before the speech, and he seemed completely exhausted at its end. King didn't say a single word about heaven or immortality. But he does speak the language of eschatology: he has seen a future that will surely arrive. And in the light of that future, he can live the struggle in the here and now. King doesn't want to die, but he can die. He can face death this way because he lives in hope.

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[6] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968; online: https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/ive-been-mountaintop.

A Final Judgment

The past dozen years have produced a series of bestsellers on the question of a final judgment. Authors include megachurch pastor Rob Bell, theologian David Bentley Hart, and New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman. In very different ways these authors all undermine the assumption that the Bible teaches eternal torment for those who reside beyond God's favour.[7]

Christians have often read hell into the New Testament where it does not belong. Yet the idea is present. Among the Gospels, Matthew stands out for its imagery of separation, fire, outer darkness, and weeping and gnashing of teeth. In contrast, Luke's lone reference to weeping and gnashing of teeth envisions people grieving their exclusion from the final banquet, not physical agony (13:28-29) – though Luke also depicts a rich man experiencing fiery torment in Hades (16:19-31). Paul speaks of a coming wrath, of those who are perishing, and of a final judgment, but he never describes eternal torment.

Yet as much as I would like to adopt a universalist interpretation or at least exclude the idea of hell, I do not find it helpful to explain away, or push away, the language and imagery of judgment. But I do choose to read hopefully – acknowledging my bias against eternal torment and foregrounding my own interpretive choices.

We may begin by reclaiming the good news about God's role as judge. Ancient people knew a lot about corrupt judges, those who would rule according to partiality (Lev 19:15; Jer 5:28; Mic 7:3; Zeph 3:3; Luke 18:1-8). But consider the prophet Isaiah, who presents God's judgment in terms of swords beaten into ploughshares (2:4; see Mic 4:3), the Branch as bringing equity to the lowly (11:34), and the Judge as the king who saves the elect people (33:22). Biblical authors regard God's justice as threat – and as hope. As the psalmist says, God "will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity" (98:9). God's judgment, as Philip G. Ziegler affirms, ultimately conquers God's powerful enemies: sin and death.[8] Judgment is hope and liberation.

Paul's language of justification emerges from this sense of God as judge. I choose to emphasize the element of rectification in the Greek terms *dikaioō* and *dikaiōsis* rather than the imputation or recognition of a righteous status, not to rule those out. I understand Paul to proclaim the empowerment of believers and the repair of the world. These matters are hotly contested in Pauline interpretation, but I take Paul's broader view to encompass the liberation of creation, most powerfully communicated in Romans 8:19-25. Paul applies that argument to believers in such a way as to imply not merely their declaration as righteous but their transformation to become righteous: "And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified [rectified]; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom 8:30). Thus Paul locates the saints' redemption within the drama of creation.

A further interpretive choice involves elevating some aspects of Paul's epistles above others. This means reading Paul beyond the apostle's own horizon, a move anticipated by the disputed epistles (see Eph 1:10;

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[7] Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011); David Bently Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Bart Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[8] Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 28.

Col 1:20). Paul declares that sin and death come to all people through Adam, while rectification and life come through Jesus (Rom 5:12-21; see 1 Cor 15:20-22, 45-49). He anticipates a coming day of wrath and expects that many people will perish; he is not a universalist. But we may join Paul's argument concerning Adam and Jesus in Romans 5 with his hope for cosmic liberation.

Jesus's power to give life is no less potent than Adam's power to bring death. We have good reason to read the analogy expansively. "Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom 5:18). Maybe Paul knew more than he was able to integrate. Surely, Paul would admit, Jesus's saving power is more effective than Adam's sinning power.

We encounter a similar dynamic in Revelation's presentation of the New Jerusalem. It's unlikely the author of Revelation was a universalist, but it is possible to read Revelation more hopefully. Revelation offers dire warnings even for believers who fail to repent, while it paints vivid pictures of the torment awaiting the "inhabitants of the earth." In Revelation, everyone whose name isn't found in the book of life is thrown into eternal torment (20:15), and nothing unclean enters the New Jerusalem (21:27). If we want to find various classes of transgressors, they reside outside the gates (22:15). This is the language of judgment as punishment and exclusion.

But some signs point in a very different direction. Revelation's New Jerusalem imagery draws on multiple biblical sources, not least Ezekiel 40-48, but Isaiah plays a critical role as well (Isa 65:17; 66:22). When Revelation envisions "the nations" walking by the light of a city whose gates never shut (21:24-25), it draws directly from Isaiah (60:11; see Jer 3:17). The tree in the middle of the city provides fruit that heals the nations (22:2). As Revelation comes to a close, bringing the Christian canon to completion, its final note sounds exclusion (22:18-19). Yet even with sinners dwelling outside the gates, those gates remain open for those who wash their robes (22:14-15). As with Paul, it is possible to read Revelation hopefully.

Kingdom, City, Banquet

The theologian J. Richard Middleton maintains that "it is clear from Scripture that heaven is not the final destination of the redeemed."[9] In some ways this is an overstatement. Daniel's risen saints who "shine like the brightness of the sky" suggest a heavenly angelic existence (12:3), as does Jesus's reference to resurrection life resembling "angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25 par.). When Paul journeys to the "third heaven" (2 Cor 12:2), he appeals to the apocalyptic tradition that includes multiple levels of heaven, some including dwelling places for the dead. But Middleton has a point: the Bible certainly includes other ways of expressing an afterlife hope, images that bear their own compelling virtues.

The kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem, and the messianic banquet offer three biblical expressions of eschatological hope that don't necessarily entail a disembodied afterlife. The kingdom of God holds singular privilege as Jesus's primary eschatological metaphor. The New Jerusalem stands as the Bible's culminating vision, and it involves God's dwelling coming down to earth, not mortals ascending to heaven.

[9] J. Richard Middleton *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 237.

The messianic banquet receives less direct attention in the Bible, but it benefits from direct relationship to the other two symbols.

These three symbols share two valuable features: they are world-affirming, and they leave room for social interaction. Kingdoms, cities, and meals rely upon human communities and human labour. They also suggest embodiment and interaction. And while we might transfer these metaphors into a heavenly realm, the biblical authors make no such explicit connection.

I am biased toward eschatology that includes both world-affirming and social dimensions. Some eschatological aspirations focus on abandoning the struggles that attend this vale of tears, while others look to renewal and restoration. That distinction is longstanding, and "heavenly" eschatology often accompanies spiritualities that invest little energy in remediating suffering and inequity. The climate emergency intensifies the need for theology that promotes healing for this world and all its creatures. Biblical audiences were familiar with environmental degradation,[10] although I doubt they could imagine that humans would clutter the heavens with space junk. Even so, biblical eschatologies recognize the present order's brokenness. Those that affirm its healing and rectification are especially valuable in our age.

I likewise value eschatological visions that project a social dimension. As Jan Assmann has demonstrated, ancient Egyptian burial practices assumed a profoundly social understanding of the human self, even in death.[11] Assmann's research has guided scholars to appreciate similar dynamics in Israelite and Judahite burial practices and in biblical texts.[12] Ancient Egyptians and Israelites anticipated what psychologists and philosophers tell us today: we are more than a collection of individual genetic and spiritual dispositions; human beings form ourselves in relation to one another, to our natural and social environments, and to the social roles we inhabit. A future hope that does no more than perpetuate our current social realities, with all their harm and injustice, is hardly desirable. But neither is a hope in which the social dimensions of human experience are simply erased.

Jesus, Paul, and the Book of Revelation refer to the kingdom as a reality already active in human experience and as the future fullness of God's reign. Thus, Jesus claims the kingdom is "among you" (Luke 11:20; 17:21) while he instructs his disciples to pray for its future arrival. Paul doesn't have much to say about the kingdom and generally does so with reference to inheriting the future kingdom (1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal 5:21; see 1 Cor 15:24). But Paul also speaks to the present experience of the kingdom: it is "not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). Revelation already identifies the believing assemblies as a kingdom (1:6, 9; 5:10) while it anticipates God's kingdom coming in fullness (11:15, 12:10). Jesus of course is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16; see 1:5).

All these images are inherently social, and they bear this-worldly implications. The kingdom is coming, Jesus announces (Mark 1:15), so people had best prepare. When disciples pray for the kingdom's arrival,

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[10] Micah D. Kiel, *Apocalyptic Ecology: The Book of Revelation, the Earth, and the Future* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).

[11] Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (trans. David Lorton; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[12] Matthew J. Suriano, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

it means God's will being enacted on earth as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10). One striking thing about Jesus's teaching in the Synoptics is the number of "the kingdom is like" parables. Some of these, like those of the Sower/Soil (Mark 4:1-20 par.), the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30-32 par.), and the Pearl (Matt 13:45-46), are very much material but lack obvious social dimensions. But others are intensely social: consider the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35), the Labourers in the Vineyard (20:1-16), the Banquet parables (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24), and the Bridesmaids (25:1-13). Although it may be a stretch to identify them with the kingdom, other well-known parables feature a social dimension, not least the Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the Prodigal (15:11-32), the Corrupt Manager (16:1-13), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), and the Persistent Widow (18:1-8).

What happens in the kingdom? The Gospels don't say much. But one thing going on is eating, dining with Abraham and the other patriarchs (Matt 8:11; Luke 13:28-29). The kingdom is like a feast, after all (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24). In Luke the parable of the Banquet follows a dinner guest's exclamation, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (14:15). The messianic wedding banquet also figures prominently in Revelation (19:9).

Eschatological banquet discourse derives from Isaiah 25, full of mouth-watering imagery: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples, a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear" (25:6). The scene is poetic. And it is very much worldly. Poetic imagery matters. And there's one other thing: Isaiah's scene occurs "on this mountain"—that is, on Mount Zion. Revelation's wedding feast also relates to Jerusalem, as the bride is the New Jerusalem, come down from heaven to earth. The messianic banquet motif blends with Jesus's message of the kingdom and with the New Jerusalem.

Poetic and metaphorical imagery can be messy. Jesus is at once the bridegroom of the marriage feast and its host, separate roles in most ancient weddings. But many scholars have proposed that Jesus's pattern of feeding crowds, entertaining at other people's banquets, dining with sinners, and his final meal with the disciples all convey that Jesus is celebrating the great banquet in and through his ministry.[13] His final meal anticipates the great meal in the kingdom of God (Mark 14:25; Matt 26:29; Luke 17:18; see 1 Cor 11:26). The banquet motif connotes joy, abundance, and community.

If I may step out of my role as a biblical scholar, the eschatological banquet invites churches to a renewed emphasis on the sacred meal. Whether we understand it as Eucharist, Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, nearly all Christians interpret the meal eschatologically: proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes. Too rarely do many of us take the opportunity to name that by sharing the meal we take a mystical seat in the eschatological future. Liturgical churches prepare for the meal through the confession of sins, an acknowledgement of pardon, and the passing of the peace, all signs of gifts we have already received, all communal. In societies so fractured by tribalism and inequity, I can scarcely imagine a more relevant way

[13] Influentially, John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), esp. 303-53); see Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 154-55.

for the church to live out its identity and mission than by celebrating the meal's eschatological dimensions with authenticity.

As we noted above, the New Jerusalem does not communicate going to heaven, although it's often taken that way in hymnody. Instead, the Holy City comes down from heaven to earth. Rather than taking mortals up to heaven, God comes down to dwell with them.

Some readers discern a strong whiff of escapism in the New Jerusalem image. Revelation has already shown multiple scenes of unimaginable devastation on the planet, and the New Jerusalem comes down only after "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (21:1). The city descends into a new heaven and a new earth. Moreover, the new heavens and new earth language derives from Isaiah, where "the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (65:17). But Isaiah also stresses continuity between the old and the new: both the city and the people "remain" in this future reality (66:22), where they are a "delight" (65:18-19).

Making sense of biblical eschatology requires discernment and disciplined imagination. It is possible to read the New Jerusalem as a replacement for this world and this cosmos, and legitimately so. Other New Testament passages suggest the present order passes away, as if it is discarded (Mark 13:31; Matt 5:18; 24:34-35; Luke 21:33; 1 Cor 7:31; 2 Pet 3:10). But we can also understand the New Jerusalem as a renewal and rectification of the world we inhabit now. In one instance Paul comes close to saying that very thing: the new creation occurs even in the present moment (2 Cor 5:17; see 1 John 2:8, 17). The New Jerusalem offers beauty, fresh water, and new fruit by the month. The presence of the Lamb illumines it. It has no room for sin, violence, grief, or death. It welcomes the nations and keeps its gates open.

I propose the eschatological banquet motif as a unifying symbol that may guide our interpretation of the kingdom of God and the New Jerusalem. This is an interpretive choice, far from obvious. However, the banquet appears in conjunction with the other two models. It conveys the community, joy, and abundance that signal true healing for an abused humanity and a depleted creation. That is not to suggest that the banquet exhausts the possibilities presented by the other symbols. The New Jerusalem, for example, calls us to the beatific vision, where we enjoy the presence of God and the Lamb together. That vision of heavenly worship come to earth reminds us that God's ultimate reality transcends what we can even begin to imagine.

Conclusion

It is far too common, at least in my American context, to reduce the gospel to an otherworldly and individualistic hope. That tendency often alienates people who confront manifest injustice and existential threats. It also short-changes the gospel, even eschatology. The Bible, as we say, says "lots of things," and we can manipulate it to deadly ends. But it also attests to a grand and profound hope for the healing, renewal, and restoration of all things. That hope is not empty optimism. It is grounded in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. It is also no excuse to sit around and wait.

The Church of South India's Journey into Its Ecumenical Identity: a history, still in the making

George Oommen

Abstract

An essential characteristic of the CSI's formation was the absence of unbending dogmatism, especially around ecclesial form, without seeking to project the exaggerated fundamentals of their own traditions and practices. Despite its recent movement towards "mega denominationalism," we cannot ignore the CSI's effort to live up to its original ecumenical calling. This can be seen in its later theological and ecclesial developments especially in becoming part of an ecumenical path where it envisioned that Christ's reality was beyond the confines of the Church. Religious plurality, social justice and the place of Dalits have determined the way the subsequent theological formations took shape in the church.

Introduction

The Church of South India (CSI) came into being at a time when Asian Christians were in search of both identity and unity in Christ. Christ's prayer "That they may all be one," (John 17:21) was at the heart of the CSI's founding. Indeed, this prayer emerged as – and remains – the CSI's motto. The CSI was founded at the peak of the Indian struggle for independence from the British, providing a context that was particularly conducive to the creation of a church that was anti-colonial and nationalist in its character, keen to move away from Western missionary and denominational control. Thus, in 1947, churches from four confessional families – Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists – united into a single entity, the CSI. This unprecedented union between Anglican Episcopalians and non-Episcopalians was, in itself, a path-breaking ecumenical venture.

A Search for a 'True' Indian Church

However, the process of creating a common theological and institutional vision had begun long before 1947. Both overseas missionaries and Indian thinkers were part of this reimagining, working across denominations to create an indigenous, unified church, both as an ecumenical expression of Indian Christianity, as well as a model for the universal church. The earliest articulation of this vision emerged at Tranquebar in 1919, where a group of 31 Indians and two Western missionaries gathered to create what became known as the "Tranquebar Manifesto." [1] The manifesto sought to balance and combine the rich traditions of

[1] See M. K. Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials* (Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1982), 317-319 for the Manifesto and the names of the thirty-one Indians and two missionaries involved.

the Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist and Episcopal confessional groups, declaring that all four elements, "no one of which is absolute or sufficient without the other, should be included in the Church of the future, for we aim not at compromise for the sake of peace, but at comprehension for the sake of truth."[2] For the authors of the manifesto, the search for a "true" church in India demanded a reimagining, creating a vision for a church that simultaneously affirms certain fundamentals while also forging a new identity and essential nature. It also demanded sacrifices among both Western missionaries and Indian Christians as they "dared to cross the denominational boundaries, died to the old selves and identities and rose as new reality with a new identity." [3]

Whither Denominationalism

An essential characteristic of the CSI's formation was the absence of unbending dogmatism, especially around ecclesial form. Instead, its founders focused more on the mission of the church in India, and no one insisted upon the exaggerated fundamentals of their own traditions and practices. Instead, they sought to design an authentic ecumenical Church that was structured for the Indian context and its needs. At a deeper level, we also witness a conscious departure from Western doctrinaire heritage: the CSI's founders insisted that the new church should "express under Indian conditions, and Indian forms, the spirit, the thought and the life of the Church Universal."[4] R. D. Paul, one of the early ecumenical interpreters of the CSI stated the self-understanding of the new church in India in these terms:

> The Church of South India does not imagine itself to be a Church which has been brought into existence in order that it may be one more Church among the various Churches in the world. The C.S.I., on the other hand, conceives of itself as being the means of bringing together other Churches, and that when the moment comes when other Churches also would unite, it will dissolve itself in its present form, lose its present identity and will agree to take its place in a bigger and larger united Church which would carry out God's will in the world....It is willing to give up its identity and its constitution, if by so doing it can bring into being something even more in accordance with Christ's will for His Churches in the world.[5]

Further, the CSI's constitution acknowledged its provisional character as being core to the nature of a united church, accepting the church as a temporary construct that transforms for the sake of its mission. Indeed, the CSI envisioned its first thirty years as a period of assimilation and merging into a unified amalgam of its constituent denominations. This multi-denominational, ecumenical approach stood in stark contrast

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[2] Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union*, 1900-1947, (London: Lutterworth, 1954), 101-102.

[3] O.V.Jathanna, "Response to Dr. Isarael Selvanayagam's Publication, *The Greatest Act of Faith: The First Organic Union of the Church of South India*, (Delhi: Christian World Prints, 2019)," A paper presented at the United Theological College, Bangalore, on February 5, 2020 (unpublished), 7.

[4] Rajaiah D. Paul, *The First Decade: An Account of the Church of South India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1958), 8. Indeed, there is a possibility that the CSI's founders had a grand vision of a larger, pan-Indian union of churches. However, the ecumenical journey of Indian churches in North India came to completion only in 1970 with the formation of the Church of North India, which was a much larger union that included the Baptists and the Disciples of Christ.

[5] Paul, *The First Decade*, 9.

to the confessionalism movement that emerged during the 1980s, which saw the enhanced identities of denominational churches in India, and around the world.[6]

In contrast to this initial vision, the CSI today has instead evolved into a super-denomination with unwieldy ecclesial structures, hierarchy, and institutionalization. Its increasing rigidity around liturgy, sacraments, and other rules provides further evidence of this denominationalism, as does its focus on membership numbers. Its most recent public narrative celebrates the CSI's status as the second-largest Indian church denomination, with over 24 million members, second only to the Roman Catholics. However, while one can be critical of the processes that have resulted in this trend towards "mega denominationalism," we cannot ignore the CSI's effort to live up to its original ecumenical calling, as we will see in its later theological and ecclesial developments.

Episcopacy and Apostolicity

The Tranquebar Manifesto of 1919, which formed the basis of the CSI union, retained the four foundational elements of the universal church:

> (1) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as containing all things necessary to salvation. (2) The Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed. (3) The two sacraments ordained by Christ Himself – Baptism and the Lord's Supper. (4) The Historic Episcopate, locally adopted.[7]

While integrally linking itself to the Catholicity, this was a "new coming into being" recognizing that "union cannot be brought about either by the rigid imposition of the ancient creeds and confessions or by drawing up a detailed new statement of belief."[8]

The union of Episcopal and non-Episcopal denominations had implications for the emerging global union movements in the church. The Anglicans made episcopacy, with apostolic succession as its foundation, a necessary condition for the union. The Lambeth Conference made its endorsement of the CSI contingent upon the acceptance of the Anglican theology on episcopacy. The greatest stride that the CSI made was to bring Episcopalians into the union, standing up to the Anglicans' repeated efforts to either stall or reject the efforts towards union in the name of their rigid interpretation of the "historic episcopate" and the doctrine of the apostolic succession. The CSI valued the significance of the episcopal overseership in these negotiations, because it wanted to access its lineage not from any single interpretation of the office of the bishop, but rather from the early apostolic church, while still leaving room to interpret and practice episcopacy on its own terms. So, while recognizing the centrality of episcopacy in the ecclesial structure, they have employed the term "historically adapted" in regard to the acceptance of that office in the CSI. As a result of these negotiations with the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican hierarchy, the CSI union received support from Anglican missionaries and bishops. Bishop Hollis, a high Anglican by background, made the prophetic observation that "any union scheme cannot leave Anglicanism 'fundamentally untouched'

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[6] See the issue on "Whither Denominationalism?" *Word & World*, 25, no. 1 (2005).
[7] Bengt Sundkler, Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union, 1900-1947, (London: Lutterworth, 1954), 101-102.
[8] Sundkler, Church of South India, 102.

and that Anglicanism itself must be willing to change as churches move from disunity to unity".[9] Bishop Newbigin's position was that organic union is not a "terminus" but a "starting point" and that "[t]he new united church needed to be defined in terms of what it was becoming rather than in static formulations."[10]

By tracing episcopacy back to the early church, the CSI not only enabled non-Episcopalians to accept it as a "common basis," but also trace its oneness to the apostolic age. Integrity with the present of the Church, rather than its past, is essential to being a true church. Thus, Apostolicity has not been spelt out in the CSI, but assumed by claiming access to the Apostle's Creed. The apostolic tradition and faithfulness to its values are more important to the CSI than apostolic succession. The CSI declared that apostolicity is not simply about an unbroken succession to the office of the episcopate from the early church, but also the continuing process of integrating its nature with the contemporary reality of the church in India.

However, what has been evolving over the last few decades is the episcopal office about which members of the CSI are generally unhappy and sharply critical. In fact, in the 1960s the theological commission of the church warned that the "temporal power and the worldly honour" associated with the office would only discredit the episcopacy.[11] The ascendency of the episcopacy further emerged in the constitutional amendments brought by the synod in 2016, making the office more powerful, conferring the Moderator and the diocesan bishops with the power to nominate their treasures, thus undermining the CSI's long-established democratic processes and traditions.

Christ beyond Christianity

The CSI's formation reflected the post-colonial confidence that accompanied the independence of the Indian Republic. The new church not only affirmed its unity within and between churches, but also with the new spirit of Indian independence. As a result, the CSI's early leaders also wanted to shape a church that was in dialogue with the new Indian nation and with other Indian religions, with a special interest in sustaining both inclusive religious plurality and social justice. By the 1960s, the CSI was part of an ecumenical path where it envisioned that Christ's reality was beyond the confines of the Church despite it not being acknowledged at times.

Such theological leadership came from great ecumenical thinkers like D. T. Niles, Sabapathy Kulendran and P. D. Devanandan. P. D. Devanandan, a presbyter of the CSI, challenged the World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly in 1961 to take into account the younger church's experience in working with people of different faiths and working together in the nation-building processes. He became the first director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS), which promoted inter-faith dialogue as an essential character of Christian mission and ecumenism. With M. M. Thomas, he edited the pioneering journal *Religion and Society*. S.J. Samartha, another presbyter of the CSI, became to founding director of the Dialogue Centre of the WCC in 1971.

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[9] As quoted in Mark Laing, "The International Impact of the Formation of the Church of South India: Bishop Newbigin versus the Anglican Fathers," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 33, no. 1 (2009): 20.
[10] Laing, "The International Impact of the Formation of the Church of South India," 21.
[11] Rajaiah D. Paul, *Ecumenism in Action: A Historical Survey of the Church of South India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society,1972), 195.

M.M. Thomas, affiliated with the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, had a wider ecumenical influence and impact. Many in the CSI – both presbyters and lay leaders – followed his theological insights in promoting ecumenism in India. His position was that a Christ of justice is present in India's multi-religious and poverty-stricken reality.[12] In the 1980s, he proposed a Christology of liberation that urged dialogue with other ideologies, which continued to influence Christian thinkers in India, including within the CSI.[13]

In recent years, with the rise of Hindutva and theocratic nationalism in India, the CSI faces new challenges to its ability to perceive and present itself as a church bound by and committed to its national identity.

The CSI was formed in the crucible of Gandhian nationalism, which affirmed plurality and diversity as the hallmark of the new India. But theocratic nationalism, which rose to prominence in the 1990s, has challenged the CSI to develop a new role in Indian national life, which has become a precarious political balancing act. Whereas the CSI was once able to engage in issues of social justice as a confident, co-equal religious institution in a pluralistic and secular India, it has now been forced to adopt a theology of "non-interference," retreating from the public sphere and Indian national life, without a moral resolve, for fear of falling afoul of today's majoritarian Hindutva politics.

Dalit Theology

In the 1980s, it became clear that Dalits – who constituted a substantial majority within the CSI – and Dalit identity politics were going to play an important role in the church's life. Their struggles for social justice led Dalits to search for a space both within the CSI as well as in India's broader social structures. As part of this struggle, they constantly engaged with non-Christian Dalits in South India, breaking boundaries of religion and finding common ground for the struggle for basic human dignity and rights. While this was a pan-Indian development, some of its pioneering and foundational elements emerged within initiative and shaping of it took place within the context of the CSI.

It was not easy for a church that was formed on the basis of the prayer of Jesus "that they may all be one" to also accommodate Dalit caste consciousness, which encouraged a form of resistance and liberation for Dalits. However, the Dalit caste's oppressed identity became the major source of a pathbreaking movement within the CSI. Great theologians who were either bishops or presbyters of the CSI were at the forefront of this movement, including V. Devasahayam, M. Azariah, Sathianathan Clarke and Franklin Balasundaram, among others.

One of the major sources of Dalit theology is their experience of suffering and pain. The narration of the story of their pathos and their protest has a primary place in this theology and its practice, which results in the recovery of their past and the memory of their rejection. This recovery of the collective memory of their "wounded psyche" also has another purpose. It helps Dalits and Dalit theologians to reflect on the "subjugated and submerged" rich cultural identity of Dalits.

[12] See M. M. Thomas, The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance (London: SCM, 1970).
[13] See M. M. Thomas, Risking Christ for Christ's Sake, (Geneva: WCC, 1980).

Thus, history is fundamental to the theological task in this movement. History is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical philosophy may make one to believe. First, history is fundamental in the sense that realization of Dalits as the "subjects" of history is an essential step towards recovery and recapture of their lost dignity. Secondly, it is unlike classical Indian Christian theology, or for that matter the Indian classical philosophy of the high castes, which is based on the transcendental nature of the Ultimate Reality and a cyclical view of history. History is fundamental in comprehending Dalit humanity. Human experience and ultimate liberation, which are integral parts of the "here and now," are primary to the practice of Dalit theology. Dalit theologians affirm that the Christian god is a Dalit god. This God who is revealed in the Old Testament and the Jesus who sided with the Dalits of the world are liberative paradigms of Dalit theology. It not only helps them to come to terms with their historical consciousness, which is submerged in pathos and protest, but also to comprehend a God who in Jesus restores "humanness" to Dalits. Dalit theologians also envision a new community under God. Here the emphasis is on Jesus' invitation to equally and fully participate in a new "new community of freedom and fellowship, love and justice."[14]

The ultimate function of Dalit theology is twofold: to act in solidarity and to act for liberation. Liberation is envisaged as liberation of Dalits from the historically oppressive structures, both religio-cultural and socio-economic. Hence, theological articulation is not only a faith expression but also a means for social liberation. According to this school of thought, any theological expression that will not lead to action and the resultant liberation is futile, and that the God of the Bible demands that Dalit Christians act in solidarity with fellow Dalits, regardless of their faith.[15] Here, it should be acknowledged that, in the same way that the interreligious dialogue movement affected the whole Indian religious landscape, the Dalit movement within the church also initiated other secularistic Dalit movements, especially in South India, later developing into a pan-Indian movements.

Liturgy

In addition to its organic ecumenical model, the CSI's cohesive liturgy was another product of the church's ecumenical thought. If a new liturgy can embody ecumenical togetherness, then the CSI had a great beginning. Its liturgy integrated diverse traditions "with beauty and cohesion."[16] During its first 30 years, the CSI's liturgy evolved slowly, serving as a source of gradual oneness among its constituent traditions. The CSI's approach combined both order and freedom, allowing different denominations in the union to use their own liturgy until they were ready to move to the CSI liturgy. Great classical traditions of Christian worship and the insights of the Reformation period came together in the formation of the liturgy, especially in the Holy Eucharistic liturgy.[17] The CSI's village churches have further adapted its liturgy through improvisation, folk music, and the adaptation of English tunes to fit in with their own Indian musical sensibilities, including through the use of native musical instruments. As a result, the CSI liturgy has a soundscape that is very much Indian, despite its Western "feel."

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[14] Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 31. Also see Arvind P. Nirmal ed. *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul, n.d.) and Sathinathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[15] Arvind P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," in Frontiers in *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) 28f.

[16] Robert Gribben, "The Formation of the Liturgy of the Church of South India," *Studia Liturgica*, 30, no. 2 (2000): 142.

[17] Robert Gribben, "The Formation of the Liturgy of the Church of South India," 129-42.

However, much like the book of Common Worship in the Anglican tradition, the CSI liturgy eventually achieved an iconic status. It assumed the place of a statement of faith, and any deviation from the liturgy has become an anathema. In its original form, it was seen as a liturgy with space for spontaneity and lay participation. However, the liturgy is growing increasingly rigid and institutionalized, mirroring the CSI's growing sense of denominationalism. The liturgy no longer leaves space to be contextualized and or adapted to contemporary realities, except during the sermon or the intercession. Revised and alternative forms of the liturgies have been produced in the recent past, including with highly indigenous elements. However, as a practical matter, CSI churches only use the "traditional" CSI liturgy. The growth of "non-denominational" and charismatic churches has only served to further challenge the relevance of liturgically-centred, rigid church practices in the CSI.

Organic to Conciliar

There were great expectations in the continuing legacy of the organic union that Indian Christians achieved. Bishop Newbigin declared, it "would be the starting point for wider union." And that "It will have largely failed if this hope is not realized."[18] In fact, the CSI paved the way for many such future unions globally. In South India, it went on to work closely with the Baptists, and in 1955, it was agreed that the CSI would share "full pulpit and Alter Fellowship" with the Convention of Baptists Churches. Eventually, the CSI also entered into union negotiations with the Lutheran Church as well. None of the processes came to successful fruition.

However, in 1999, a conciliar fellowship led to the creation of the Communion of Churches in India. In this union, the full communion that the CSI and the Church and North India (CNI) and the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian churches entered into started with the invitation of the CNI "to explore the ways and means of further cooperation and witness in India." The negotiations commenced in 1974, aiming at union between these churches. However, this organic unity with a common name did not take place on "the question of losing the identity" of each church. In this conciliar model, although each church remains autonomous, there is a "mutual recognition of their sacrament and ministry" with a view to further fulfil mission of God in Christ.[19]

While the CSI began with the idealized theological framework of "whither denominationalism," we see that – like in many churches – the CSI took a more institutionalized form, including in its liturgy, offices (especially the episcopacy), and prominent theological formations. Here it would be appropriate to conclude my observation with the words of O.V. Jathanna, a theologian and presbyter of the CSI, on the recent attribution of idealism to the "Organic Union" model and the failure of the CSI by becoming more Anglican in its polity and ecclesiological patterns in its recent history:

> "While the organizational expression of this oneness is not excluded, what is even more important is the reality of being bound together by love and mutuality, and being sent into the world, i.e., the mission. The primacy of being bound in love – love of God and love of others – needs to be

[18] J.E. Lesslie Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1960), 128.
[19] See website: "The Communion of Churches in India," https://communionofchurchesinindia.org.in/

born in mind, without neglecting the need for the authentic and effective visible expressions of it in the given context. It is also important to note that this does not require a particular model of union to be the only legitimate one, but, while making the need for "oneness," i.e., unity, absolutely necessary it allows room for the most authentic and effective model to be adopted in context."[20]

[20] O.V. Jathanna, "Response to Dr. Isarael Selvanayagam's Publication, *The Greatest Act of Faith: The First Organic Union of the Church of South India* (Delhi: Christian World Prints, 2019)," a paper presented at the United Theological College, Bangalore, on February 5, 2020 (unpublished), 3.

Review

CARPENTER, ANNE M. *Nothing Gained is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022 (ISBN: 9781506471730)

"Christian tradition is a problem" (xi). This provocative claim opens Carpenter's rewarding work. Christian tradition is a problem as it is a body of action "traditioned" by its own sin (175). Sin that spills "poison and grace into the world" (xix) allowing nothing to reach us "untouched by the time that intervenes between then and us" (173). For Carpenter, the intervening sin that requires attention in any theoretical consideration of Christian tradition is that of colonialism and race. For "Christian tradition not only provides essential frames and reasons for the colonial project but also recapitulates both rather helplessly" (75). The "struggle," of the book is to "present a metaphysics of tradition and to frame that metaphysic according to an encounter with the problem of race" (38).

Carpenter sets out to produce a theoretical account of tradition. An argument about the being of tradition (hence a metaphysics) and its existence in history as mediator of divine truth (xv). Tradition is neither history or truth, but it binds and distinguishes dogma and history (the former makes it objective, the latter concrete, 58-60). Carpenter approaches each step in her theory first through a modern Catholic theologian, who is then resourced, repaired, and revolutionised by a figure in the Black theological or intellectual tradition.

In Chapter One (Actions) Carpenter begins with Bernard Lonergan's theory of history as "human action" (10). History must consider a totality of actions of "every single human being over all of time" (11). This human action has directionality which can be characterised as decline, progress, and (with God) divine redemption (13). History then is both something we do, and what "makes human beings what they are" (34).

Carpenter turns to M. Shawn Copeland to bring the theory of history into the concrete situation. For race is a historical product, a meaning that mediates our world. Copeland is necessary to correct Lonergan's "all" of history, by making that "all" really "all" by making it mean the oppressed (30). The Christian theory of history must include both a turn to persons (the oppressed) and emphasise the solidarity of the mystical body of Christ (33).

In Chapter Two (Mediations), Carpenter begins with Maurice Blondel to explore human action's determinism, freedom, and "radical reliance on the supernatural action of God in order to be" (37). Tradition lives in a world whose history is constituted by natural and supernatural meanings. The two are absolutely distinguished even while they are united without confusion - with the natural relying on the supernatural (43). Human action then has an origin and horizon beyond itself in God, which means history is not solely the product of human beings (55). This opens the possibility of change in human action and history, when humans (and our tradition) surrender to the supernatural origin (73) allowing that force to act within and transform it (60).

Here Carpenter utilises Wille James Jennings to demonstrate the ambiguity of Christian action. An ambiguity which, in the concrete situation, is tied to colonialism and the origins of race (75). There is no pure tradition outside of the facts of our situation, however, the supernatural horizon of human action allows us to evaluate truth in Christian practice (75). Tradition doesn't escape ambiguity but gains

a horizon by which it might be measured (by the "consciousness of Jesus's consciousness") and its harms (which are beyond our power to undo or resolve) find response.

In chapter Three (Revolutions) Carpenter considers time with Charles Péguy. For Péguy Christian tradition is a memory that is (eternally) true and (temporally) historical (80). The mediating action of the tradition "lives on only in a specific act of remembering, one where the aliveness of the original is reiterated by being begun again, a beginning again that infuses the original with new richness" (92).

This new richness is consistent with the picture of revolution, *ressourcement*, and recommencement that Carpenter develops with Péguy, Jennings, and Copeland. A revolution calls from a less perfect tradition one more perfect (91). Such a calling is possible because "all human action remains open to recommencement and, thus, to self-transcending perfection" (93). For *ressourcement* lets us "reach more deeply into the roots of [our] humanity… and tradition that [we] share" (98).

All this is possible because our humanity (and so our tradition) is God's instrument. It is a cooperation with divine action and thus perfectible (102-104). We have the possibility to begin-again, which means tradition cannot be reiterated or repeated but requires "an act of arduous purification" based in Christ's action, by which "the past lives on as alive and so enriched" (119).

In Chapter Four (Dramas) Carpenter begins with Hans Urs von Balthasar. The human actor and the world stage of history do not have their own centre, but are rooted in the single act of the Triune God (141). This means that the "I" is fissured and open to an other. In particular, the other of Christ who enters into our situation to change it from within (146). To enrich Balthasar's fissured self, Carpenter introduces James Baldwin. Baldwin unbalances the racialised situation by insisting on the privilege the Black subject who exposes the real of historical reality and the inadequacies of the colonial measures of the real (157-158). And it is this subject, in the supernatural "more" of their love and rage, who is able to free another (161).

This freedom is not only for the actor but the stage. The facts of our present and their history "need not be" (163). This "need not be" both defies historical determinism and is itself the only hope for the past. It gives us the freedom to will the other to be, and the hope that in the divine act of an original gesture God who "lets nothing slip away" (164).

In Chapter Five (Ends) Carpenter explores the eschatological hope for the redemption of Christian tradition. Carpenter wants to give the past back to itself renewed, for doctrine must change to remain itself (170). This is not a betrayal, because the circumstances of the present are our responsibility. We are asked to lay hold of the "need not be" and strike out in a new direction, perfecting the figures of the past by the providence of being later (174). This is an expansion of Christianity performed in the hope that we will be corrected and enriched by those later still.

This beginning again relies on the self-transcendence of the Black being. Because it is they who are already real, despite the system existing as if they are not (178). For where colonisation sought to reduce people, traditions, and cultures to things (and present in exchange the Christian tradition as the best of things, (185)), now every Black "I" who expresses their mysterious existence as personality witnesses an efficacious sign of God's work in history (179).

Carpenter ends with the task that lies before the reader. Tradition is a living mediation within which God supernaturally acts to bring human

life into divine life (193). This means Christian tradition needs to be an art of discovery rather than conservation. With God, history can be transfigured, but it is only in the honest appraisal of the ugliness of our history that we might rediscover Christian compassion. "I would that we were not so guilty, together, in our history" Carpenter concludes, "But since we are, we must begin again" (191).

Tradition is a problem which has gone undertheorised. Carpenter helpfully redresses this lacuna and does so in a way that attends directly to the concrete surd in our tradition. The work rewards a slow reading, but is accessible even to those unfamiliar with the primary Catholic interlocutors. For while decidedly Catholic, Carpenter has much to offer by way of critique and *ressourcement* to members of the Uniting Church whose own tradition is mired in and has perpetuated the sin of colonialism and racism.

Liam Miller

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