Inter Faith and Ecumenical Dialogue, resonances, differences, problems and possibilities: A View from the British and Irish Context

I want to begin with the story of Lyndhurst Road United Reformed Church in Hampstead, North London. The church was a successful and distinguished congregation situated in a prosperous suburb of London, known for the large number of middle class people with strong liberal convictions. However in 1978 whilst it had a large and healthy membership, it voted to close and sell its building. Its decision to close had nothing to do with any negative view of itself, its size, financial solvency or its long-term viability. It closed out of a strong and radical conviction that the visible unity of the church was an achievable goal within a few years, but that the achievement was only likely if sacrifices were made, if aspects of the institutional church, including the excessive large number of church buildings and separate congregations, were to change. And so they closed, and dispersed to other churches in the fervent belief that this would help to achieve the visible unity of the church. Today we look back and judge their actions to be naive however it reflected a strong and visionary belief at the time that the goal of visible unity was achievable within a generation, if not a decade.

In the second decade of the 21st century the ecumenical movement looks very different and much of the visionary and even revolutionary beliefs of what ecumenism could achieve seem quite remote from current ecumenical priorities. Then, unlike now, the ecumenical movement believed that it had the potential not only to transform the church, but to change the world. This conviction was reflected as recently as 1989 when, with the creation of the Council of Churches of Britain and Ireland, Bernard Thorogood, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church, was reputed to have commented that, bringing the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical structures for the first time, offered realistic prospect of genuine reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and thus seeing the end of the enmity and violence that had plighted so many communities.

When we turn to inter faith dialogue we see striking similarities in the convictions and beliefs as to what is achievable. For the most part, practitioners of interfaith dialogue have not pursued the goal of seeking the unity of religions, however the conviction that dialogue and cooperation is the key to solving many of the world's ills is certainly prevalent. Hans Küng best summed up that conviction when he said:

"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions."

Is it still the case that the ecumenical movement believes that the one church will, inevitably have a transformative impact on the world at large? The view of Küng and others, that interfaith dialogue can effect global change might well be seen to have moved away from the Christian view that the existence of the church in the wider community can change the course of human history, or at the very least that the church can only achieve this in partnership with others. However, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald suggest how this relates to the ecumenical identity of the church:

"…dialogue is not simply about living in harmony and cooperating for the benefit of

humankind, important though these goals may be, but rather is called to go deeper. There is constant invitation to Christians and people of other religious traditions to live out to the full their religious commitment, to respond with greater fidelity to God's personal call. I this way relations between people of different religions can become truly a dialogue of salvation."

If so this has profound implications for the next stage in the ecumenical journey: for if ecumenism is still concerned with human transformation, then how does dialogue with other faiths intersect with this? However, if ecumenism is only concerned with denominational or confessional cooperation, then what is its global significance and why stop at inter-Christian cooperation and dialogue? These are not only important questions for inter religious dialogue but they are important questions for Faith and Order too. Michael Barnes gives us one particular pointer as to how this faith and order question might be explored:

"The Church is Catholic because it is, in principle, the whole of humankind redeemed in Christ; at the same time, the Church exists not as some distant ideal but as *this* community of faith on pilgrimage with others. To put it another way, the Roman Catholic Church is a particular Christian community but a community which exists not for itself but f*or others*; its identity is truly to be found only in and through the relationships it establishes with others."

In the post 9/11 context the view that interfaith dialogue was key to overcoming violence in the name of religion became a new orthodoxy. The former British Prime Minister Tony Blair was almost evangelical in his espousal of this view, with key Government initiatives in this area being inspired by his conviction. After he stood down as Prime Minister he founded the "Tony Blair Faith Foundation" which aims to "provide the practical support required to help prevent religious prejudice, conflict and extremism". This thinking continues to form part of the orthodoxy that informs UK Government policy including projects such as Prevent, Near Neighbours and the Inter Faith Network for the UK. In short this model of inter faith dialogue has strong resonances with some of the more visionary elements the ecumenical movement.

Thus a model of interfaith dialogue emerged that has its heart a strong political aspiration that offers a realistic promise of real social and political change at a time when the ecumenical movement seems to have lost much of its radical and visionary edge. Archbishop Rowan Williams has spoken of the ecumenical boat being becalmed and many have spoken of an ecumenical winter. Furthermore, as denominations become concerned with defining, redefining and sometimes even recreate their ecclesial identities, often over and against the ecumenical movement, and the consequential restriction on what Ecumenical Councils might do and act, the activists and visionaries have left the ecumenical scene and in some cases these have been picked up by interfaith dialogue, Küng being a notable example.

The perception that the "agenda has moved on" from ecumenical to interfaith, at least in terms of what might achieve genuine social and political change for the better, is largely the reason why some have characterized interfaith as "the new ecumenism" and whilst that is certainly a crude and simplistic analysis, it is easy to see how such a view might emerge. Whilst the two forms of dialogue clearly are concerned with different goals, leading to easily dismiss the characterization, it is also possible to see how the two have elements where they resonate with each other but also where they have created new

challenges and opportunities to one another.

Yet there is a different story to be told about interfaith; one that is located at the heart of the ecumenical movement. Religious diversity has for some time been recognised as an important ecumenical challenge. In 1979 the World Council of Churches produced guidelines on inter faith dialogue and based on this the British Council of Churches developed the Four Principals of Inter Faith Dialogue. The ecumenical movement, and the Roman Catholic Church, building upon Nostra Aetate, has often led the way in pioneering interfaith and inter-religious dialogue.

An addition to this broader point a number of other concerns are worth noting in the broader context of the relationship between ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

Religious diversity is a reality of globalization that has transformed how people view their communities and the world. Furthermore the reassertion of religious identities, often manifested in overt political forms, has presented important political and theological challenges. Whilst much of this has led to the political prioritizing of interfaith dialogue with a number of politically motivation initiatives, much less has been said and written about the impact upon Christian and especially ecumenical self understanding. Christian communities who have existed in majority Islamic contexts have for many generations been sensitive to Islam polemic about the relationship between unity and truth (and conversely between disunity and untruth) however there has been less exploration of how religious diversity, especially in the West has impacted upon Christian ecumenical self-understanding at a time of apparent decline and rising secularisation.

There has been a tendency, in the face of greater religious diversity, towards a levelling out of intra-Christian difference for fear of providing a 'poor Christian witness' to other faiths. That is particularly acute when many churches, once dominant in society, are feeling the pinch of decline and wish to continue to assert the Christian character of Western society. As such, differences within and between churches are often ignored or obscured. There is a curious paradox that at a time when national church leadership attempt to reassert, and in some cases recreate, their ecclesial identities over and against the ecumenical movement, those involved in official or semi-official interfaith dialogue initiatives present Christianity in basic and elementary "ecumenical" formulae.

The need to present Christianity as more united than it actually is, also colludes with those within other religions who wish to present their faith as lacking disunity, or who wish to present their own tradition as normative of a world faith. This can in fact seriously distort interfaith dialogue. For example in the British context, the Swaminarayan movement is relatively large and political well connected for all sorts of historical and economic reasons and as such has been perceived by many Christians has being representative of Hinduism globally, whereas in India it is a relatively small and less influential tradition.

In part the modern ecumenical movement grew out of a European context where intra-Christian divisions was the primary religious context, with the blight of centuries of anti-Semitism to offer any non-Christian narrative, although that should not be understated. The present European context is a very different one characterized by growing religious pluralism, decline in many established European churches, growth in migrant churches (often Pentecostal in character) and growing secularization. When it comes to movements for social justice, a key expression of the ecumenical movement, there is an

important question to consider. The Christian ecumenical approach to social justice in Europe has assumed that it was the only faith-based locus for movements for social change, but this was in the context of significant ecclesial strength and dominance. Do these assumptions still hold true? What we are witnessing at present is the growth in a number of cross-denomination, grassroots initiatives that work for the good of local communities that have developed apart from local and national ecumenical structures (eg. Food Banks, Street Pastors). Many have characterized this as an example of how ecumenism is still flourishing without traditional ecumenical structures. Bob Fyffe (General Secretary of CTBI) has described these phenomena as the "Post-Ecumenical context", especially given that they inevitably take no account of traditional Faith and Order questions and thus leave unanswered questions as to why Christians remain divided. However an additional question is why such Christian-only initiatives continue to make sense in the new plural context? The CTBI research "A Good Society" reveals that many church based social initiatives are undertaken, not only ecumenically but also in partnership with people of other faiths, and indeed people of no faith. This suggests that that the praxis of ecumenical work for social justice is increasingly undertaken in partnership with other faiths. So in one sense a "new ecumenism" has emerged out-with movements for social change that had their home in the search for the visible unity of the church but are led to the wider search for reconciliation and justice. In some ways a return to the classical understanding of oecumene.

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