

Where's the passion? Why ecumenism needs the heart as well as the mind

A conversation starter.

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Ecumenism and the ecumenical movement are all about change. This is not really surprising because the gospel embodied in Jesus Christ is all about change. Mary's song in her pregnancy highlights the radical nature of change in process:

He [*The Lord*] has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1.51-53 NRSV)

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue in Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4.18-19 NRSV)

Later, it was an early Christian claim that through Christ:

God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1.20 NRSV)

Everything changes and is to be changed in Christ. You can't get more radical change than that.

Change is a common thread across the four streams of the ecumenical movement which were combined in the WCC - Faith and Order, Life and Work, Mission and Education. We cannot have church unity, however we want to define that, without change. A just order internationally, nationally and locally is not achieved without change. Education is a change process. For all that these four streams and their rivulets constantly appear to meander off in different directions, change is the constant factor of ecumenism because it is the constant factor of the Gospel.

The WCC archives from the 1950s contain a telling semi-public put-down by the General Secretary, Visser't Hooft, of a senior but fairly new member of staff in what we would now call an advisory body. The staff member made a comment to the effect that if the churches thought that in signing up to the WCC they were signing up to change they would never have joined. Visser't Hooft's sharp response was that is what they had actually done in Amsterdam and since. In agreeing the new consensus process in the WCC, the member churches signed up, at least in theory, to an openness to change. Consensus implies not a way of finding some outcome to which everyone can comfortably agree but being open to changing position or discovering the new. In spite of the 2006 WCC Assembly theme of *God, in your grace, transform the world*, I am not convinced that all the current member churches of the WCC and all those that join are actually committed to the change that involvement implies. Does this mean that churches that are unwilling or unable to change are defaulting on ecumenism and on the Gospel?

The Bible recognises that, in order for God's purposes to be fulfilled, there needs to be repentance. The New Testament Greek word *metanoia* implies a change of mind and heart, of consciousness (about which we will talk more later), of attitudes and behaviour.

Most management textbooks tell us that, in order to change organisations, as much attention, if not more, needs to be paid to people and their attitudes as to structures and procedures. We can explain the rationale of new structures and ways of working so that everyone may understand them in principle. However, understanding the words and the organigrams does not necessarily translate into the changed attitudes and behaviours that will make things work in practice. This requires a deeper process than explanation and a more interactive process than simply being told. It all sounds like common sense, though it's surprising how some organisations fail to grasp it.

I use this as an illustration of the way in which change requires as much of an engagement with the affective as with the cognitive. That is the area of emotion, feeling and attitude as well as intellectual thought process. The heart as well as the head. At the 1998 WCC Assembly in Harare, the Programme Guidelines Committee declared:

An ecumenism of the heart

The assembly theme beckoned us to "turn to God". The one ecumenical movement is not, first of all, about programmes, structures and cooperation. Rather, the foundation for all our ecumenical engagement is our response to God. It asks for nothing less than conversion of our hearts.¹

I want to say both affective and cognitive in a holistic way² but for today's purposes I ask 'Where's the passion?' because this I argue is where we need most attention.

My, as yet incomplete, researches into WCC's understanding of ecumenical education/learning/formation have thrown up many examples of the way we have missed, ignored or deliberately avoided the affective in favour of the cognitive – all too often reverting to processes that, as described by others as we will hear, are elitist and academic.

One of the exciting, to me at least, discoveries I have made in the archives was an early draft of the responsibilities of an emerging World Council of Churches from one of a complex series of meetings in the 1930's. There the responsibility 'to promote ecumenical education' had been altered by hand to 'promote the growth of ecumenical consciousness'³. At another meeting this was changed to 'promote the growth of ecumenical consciousness in the Churches' which was amended in the final version of a constitution for the WCC to read 'promote the growth of ecumenical consciousness in the members of all Churches'⁴.

The significance of this was twofold:

1. From earlier documentation, it is clear that the original notion of ecumenical education which was replaced was based on a formal education, instructional model. In other words, highly cognitive. However, replacing it with the notion of consciousness brings in the affective as well. The intellectual history of the preceding

¹ Together on the Way, report of the eighth assembly of the World Council of Churches, Harare, 1998, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 3.8 Report of the Programme Guidelines Committee

² see Schreiner, Banev & Oxley (eds), *Holistic Education Resource Book: Learning and Teaching in an Ecumenical Context*, Munster, Waxmann, 2005

³ WCC Archives Box 301.001

⁴ WCC Archives Box 23.1.003

period is marked by an interest in consciousness (eg Marx, Freud and Nietzsche)⁵. In the realm of faith both Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* and Underhill's *Mysticism : The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* added to the understanding of consciousness. In both Schleiermacher and Underhill, consciousness was used as referring to more than a general sense of awareness. There is a sense of depth which relates to the whole being and a sense of consequence that is, or should be, a direct result of the consciousness.

2. It was to be the responsibility of the WCC to promote that ecumenical consciousness - not just in general terms to the churches as entities or institutions but in all their members. This gave the WCC a mandate not only to challenge the walls that were erected around the churches but to undermine them from the inside by engaging the hearts and minds of their members.

Between 1956 and 1961 a wide ranging discussion took place in the WCC Division of Ecumenical Action on ecumenical education. The Youth Department reflected on the special contribution of ecumenical work camps, mainly engaged in post-war reconstruction, to ecumenical education. In an internal paper in 1956 it was noted that the experience of ecumenical work camps had a profound effect on the participants. The paper raised the question as to what should be expected:

It is obvious that our aim should not be that campers go away merely knowing the structure of the WCC, its departments and divisions. Is it not to bring Christians and their Churches out of their ignorance, isolation and complacency? We want them to be concerned about the renewal, the unity and the mission of the Church, about the basic elements of the church's life and witness. We want them to go home from the camp, from what may have been 'a mountaintop experience', with the vision and the determination to make the ecumenical movement reality there where they live.⁶

One issue that came out of the whole discussion was the task of ecumenical education to make people discontented.

The ferment of the ecumenical church is to stimulate each church to work out its own methods, to make (as Bossey says it tries to do) the churches and the people 'terribly dissatisfied'.⁷

This is an illustration of the way that Bossey bought heavily into the concept and practice of developing ecumenical consciousness in its earlier days. However, as time went by the language of ecumenical studies became more dominant with greater concentration of formal academic learning.

It was felt within the Division of Ecumenical Action that there should be encouragement:

to reach out beyond the limits of their particular parish, locality or denomination. We can fire their imagination⁸

⁵ eg Hughes, H S, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930*, Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1979 and Bell, M, 'The Metaphysics of Modernism' in Levenson, M (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999

⁶ Internal paper entitled *Ecumenical Education* produced by the Youth Department in 1956. WCC Archives Box 423.009

⁷ Note on meetings on 30 October 1956 and 18 April 1957 taken by Helen B Turnbull, WCC Archive Box 423.009

The process resulted in a report to the General Secretary in 1957 which emphasised that there should not be:

any attempt to limit the scope of ecumenical education either to the history of attempts to reunite the churches ought to the story of the organisation of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical organisations.⁹

This was later affirmed by central committee. The report concluded with the remark that:

since ecumenical education is concerned not only with the transmission of information or with providing opportunities ecumenical experience, but the heart of the matter lies in bringing people to points of decision¹⁰

The Workbook for the participants in the 1961 New Delhi Assembly reflected this kind of understanding of ecumenical education. It noted that the task of sharing information was principally the responsibility of the Department of Information. I haven't found anything in the archives to explain what happened, but the Assembly came up with the advice that the major educational concern of the Division [of Ecumenical Affairs] at present was with:

(i) *ecumenical education* ie information about the history and present expressions of the ecumenical movement¹¹

So after years of discussion which emphasised the affective dimension, ecumenical education ends up by being described as informational rather than transformational.

Unfortunately, this kind of story repeats itself over the years. There are processes, discussions, reports and calls to action which challenge an emphasis on an ecumenism purely of the mind and embrace the affective dimension Yet these never seem to have a lasting effect in practice and the WCC keeps reverting to instructing people rather than inspiring them.

I want to mention two more thoughtful, if not damning, contributions which illustrate our problem before drawing some conclusions. Ernst Lange's *And Yet It Moves: Dream and reality of the ecumenical movement* although published in English in 1979 is well worth reading today. Lange commented that:

... all over the world, the awareness and conscience of ordinary church members, most of them at any rate, has not kept pace with the ecumenical movement. This presents the ecumenical movement with a vital question: How is it to set in motion the learning process, which is absolutely essential if the ecumenical possibility is to become the reality of Christendom?¹²

He contrasted parochial conscience with an ecumenical conscience:

⁸ Draft entitled Ecumenical Education written by Francis House, June 1957. WCC Archives Box 423.009

⁹ Report to the General Secretariat to the Committee of the Division of Ecumenical Action, *The Responsibilities of the WCC for Ecumenical Education* prepared by Francis House, Director of the Division of Ecumenical Action, June 1957, WCC Archives Box 423.009, p1

¹⁰ i Report to the General Secretariat to the Committee of the Division of Ecumenical Action, *The Responsibilities of the WCC for Ecumenical Education* prepared by Francis House, Director of the Division of Ecumenical Action, June 1957, WCC Archives Box 423.009, p6

¹¹ World Council of Churches, *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, London, SCM Press, 1962, p198f

¹² Lange, E, trans Robertson, E, *And Yet It Moves: Dream and reality of the ecumenical movement*, Christian Journals, Belfast, 1979, p138f

Christians are living with a parochial conscience in a universal world. This is the ultimate problem for the ecumenical movement, a problem which it simply must solve if it is to become conclusive and decisive, and so to advance.¹³

and

The ecumenical movement suffers because of the member churches. The member churches suffer because of the ecumenical movement. ... Without the support of ordinary Christians, however, both levels are incompetent. They both stand or fall with the liberation of the parochial conscience.¹⁴

Ian Fraser, working on the WCC's Participation in Change programme, prepared a memo in 1972 on the internal implications of this programme in relationship to studies undertaken by WCC. He began by quoting from a contribution to a Week of Meetings:

We get people excited about something - development, for example - and then the WCC has so many initiatives and structural duplications that the churches get little sense of direction from us. The sophistication of these programmes, perhaps an unavoidable curse, seems to contribute to an increase in unconscious elitism in the council. Is there a tendency is for us to think more and more of working with our specialised peers, often other bureaucrats, and to spend more and more time raising funds for specialised programs? Are we spending less time in contact with pastors and worshipping congregation; less time in communicating ideas that have meaning to the whole people of God?¹⁵

His own observation was that there was a tendency to have themes and issues for studies that are developed by a North Atlantic dominance and then taken out to the world. Representatives of churches on bodies such as the WCC Central Committee, tend to have a high level of formal education and to be appointed from a position of power. They represent their churches institutionally but may not be representative of the members of those churches. The processing of the feedback from studies by staff and committees in Geneva could:

squeeze out the living juices which characterise the plurality of contribution, and result in something abstract and desiccated.¹⁶

The danger for WCC was:

that programmes make servants of the constituents. People are urged to pick them up and work on them so that something might be produced to the next committee which has to give it further clearance. Thus the programmes become programmes of some other body called the WCC. ... people should be persuaded to have nothing to do with them unless their participation is crucial for themselves.¹⁷

There was an implicit understanding that studies and processes, while there may have been some interaction with the constituency, work on the principle of filtering down their outcomes to the grass roots who are then expected to take action upon them.

¹³ *ibid* p140

¹⁴ *ibid* p141

¹⁵ Participation in Change: Change at the Ecumenical Centre. Draft Memo on WCC Studies prepared by Ian Fraser, 1972, p1. WCC Archives Box 42.54.45

¹⁶ *ibid* p3

¹⁷ *ibid* p3

There are two obvious and damaging criticisms of this assumption. One is - it simply does not work, the filtering down does not take place. The other is, it should not work; the exciting and imaginative development in the life of the church is much less often at the level of the decision-maker and strategically-placed person (so-called) and much more as a basic and local level.¹⁸

It was sometimes suggested that problems could be simply solved by better communication:

the need to set out clearly and simply the fruits of study in a way which would allow ordinary people to understand and take advantage of them. It ought to be quite clear now - those who are not asked to participate in producing work are not going to buy a finished product manufactured elsewhere. Their concerns, priorities, discoveries need to be part of the process.¹⁹

Lange points to the need for an ecumenical rather than parochial conscience. Fraser highlights the WCC's ability to dampen excitement by its own confusion of programmes and the tendency of those who collect and collate the products of other people's engagement to produce lifeless and nuanced reports which neither enthuse nor offend those who receive them. Fraser raises the question for us: how can we expect people to be passionate about ecumenism if we simply use them as agents of our programmes?

Why does the passion get squeezed out?

Accommodation – have ecumenical institutions become more about the coexistence of churches than the mutual challenge of churches. Have we seen the development of unspoken non-aggression pacts between churches and churches and ecumenical institutions that might be upset by people who are passionate for ecumenism?

Institutionalisation – where processes become bureaucratic and exist to serve the institution and to control rather than liberate its constituency. How do we shape ecumenical bodies so that rather than absorbing energy they energize?

Professionalization – the reign of the experts whose job it is to know and to instruct those who do not know with enough knowledge for them to do what is required. Dialogue is between experts not with people. Have we developed an ecumenism of technocrats in which passion has no place? However, are the principle skills required by WCC and other ecumenical bodies those of process because the wisdom and knowledge is already out there?

Complexity – complexity is a daunting reality and, if we constantly start with how complicated things are, our emotional energy will always be low. Jesus wasn't afraid to cut through religious complexity to emphasise the principle:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22.37-40 NRSV)

Passion for principle can give the impetus to deal with complexity.

¹⁸ ibid p6

¹⁹ ibid p4

Celebrity – Has the popularity of celebrity overtaken integrity as the hallmark of the individual, the congregation and the organisation. The Vatican's *L'Osservatore Romano* has just forgiven John Lennon for his remark in 1966 that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus²⁰. I remember the outcry of Christians at the time. Yet few asked the question whether Jesus was supposed to be popular. Is Jesus' call, even to those who try to follow in his way, ever popular in the celebrity sense? Ecumenism, like the gospel it reflects, is challenging, forcing people to take sides. Passion divides. It turns some off as much as it turns some on. Is this why we fear it?

Intellectualisation – the belief that only intellectual thought processes are respectable and serious and that passion is ill-disciplined if not dangerous. Let me give you a counter illustration:

Earlier this year the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, straddling the French/Swiss border a few kilometres from here, was inaugurated. Particle physics is one of the most difficult and complex areas of science yet popular newspapers and radio and tv programmes were full of quarks, the Higgs boson particle and dark matter. Children in primary schools as well as university professors were talking about it. Scientists working on this project to take our knowledge deep into to the creation of the universe were passionate about it and communicated that passion. They neither kept their knowledge within their circle of expertise, nor presumed it was all too difficult for ordinary people. Their passion was contagious.

We need to apply our minds to ecumenism. I am not denying or decrying the importance of the need for excellence in our thinking. However, this must not be done in superiority to or parallel with the affective. Affective and cognitive belong together for we are whole people, individually and collectively.

So, how do we create and maintain passion for ecumenism? What music do we need to make, what pictures to paint, what stories to tell, what games to play, what songs to sing, what patterns to weave, what dances to move to? What laughter, what tears? What lamenting, what protesting? What holding on, what letting go? What worship? Passion comes from life and feeds life. It does not develop or grown in abstract or by artificial processes.

Ecumenism, like the Gospel, requires us to change. Change requires the engagement of heart and mind. Meeting in the Library and Archives we are surrounded by the output of our cognitive processes. Where's the passion?

²⁰ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7744282.stm> Accessed 25 November 2008