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THE HERMENEUTICS OF UNITY

Paul AVIS
Secretari General del Consell per a la Unitat dels Cristians, Londres

1. Introduction

As the Church of England's chief ecumenical officer I spend much of my time working for greater understanding between the Church of England and other churches. This includes interpreting the Anglican tradition, especially its ecclesiology, to ecumenical partner churches. It involves receiving in turn their interpretation of their own traditions. We bring our perceptions of their churches and they bring their perceptions of ours. This kind of interface between the churches is not without its surprises: we discover that others do not necessarily believe what we thought they believed and do not necessarily disbelieve what we assumed they disbelieved. And they make similar discoveries about us. Above all, as we dig deep into what makes us what we are as churches, we always strike the same bedrock, the bedrock of love for Christ and his cross, and faith in his resurrection and its sustaining power. That is the deepest root of our unity.

In the course of my work I have met many interesting people and made many excellent friends across the world. There is no substitute for meeting each other and talking at length. Ecumenism takes place at the inter-personal level; it is a relational activity. We study together, pray together, wrestle with problems together, eat and relax *together. Cor ad cor loquitur* – heart speaking to heart, Newman's motto. Like all forms of relationship ecumenism shapes us and changes us. Relationships make us what we are; they constitute us as persons. We are not first of all fully formed individuals, finished products, who then present ourselves to others for a relationship. We are created as persons by our relationships with all around us, especially «significant others» such as par-

ents, siblings, teachers, spouses, close colleagues.[1] So it is in the great enterprise of Christian unity. The experience of ecumenism enriches us, transforms us, and in the end makes us different people.

When enough people in the churches have been touched by the lived experience of unity and changed by it, the churches also will begin to change. But that critical mass in the churches needs to be achieved first. The churches as institutions are like huge ocean-going vessels, oil tankers or aircraft carriers: they cannot change tack quickly. Any change of direction needs to grip the whole vessel, from stem to stern; it needs to be understood on the ship's bridge. The transforming experience of Christian unity has to pervade a church before it can influence policy and inspire reform. And reform is what it takes: a deep, penitent refreshment and reorientation of our perceptions of the other and a revision of the judgements of them that have directed our stance until now.[2]

Deeper mutual understanding is what our work is about, because that understanding is the pre-condition for realising our unity in Christ and expressing it in visible ways. Whatever goodwill individual gestures may generate, only the churches themselves, as institutions, can take steps to unity and they cannot do this unless sufficient mutual understanding has been achieved at an official level. So the test of all our efforts is whether the prerequisite of deeper mutual understanding is being achieved. Now, to seek understanding, whether of texts or of cultures, or even of peoples and their communities, such as churches, is to engage in hermeneutics, in the art of interpretation. Gadamer writes:

> The way that we experience one another, the way that we experience historical traditions, the way that we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world constitutes a truly hermeneutic universe».[3]

Looked at in this light, ecumenism is essentially a hermeneutical enterprise. To make progress in Christian unity, we need skills in the art of interpretation.

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1. The personalist framework that is presupposed here is articulated in such works as M. Buber, *I and Thou* Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1937; J. MacMurray, *Persons in Relation*, London: Faber 1961; A I. MacFadyen, *The Call to Personhood,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990; J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion,* New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press 1985; Id., *Communion and Otherness*. P. McPartlan (ed.), London and New York: T&T Clark 2006. C. Schwöbel – C. E. Gunton, *Persons Divine and Human,* Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

2. On the theme of reform in the tradition of the Reformation and in the Roman Catholic Church since the mid-twentieth century see P. Avis, *Beyond the Reformation? Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition,* London and New York: T&T Clark 2006, especially ch. 13.

3. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1975, p. XIV.

2. The ecumenical task

I understand the ecumenical movement of the past century as, in the first instance, a quest for mutual understanding between churches. The churches find themselves separated, for various reasons —some good, some not so good— from one another, but all the time they know that in Christ they belong together. The churches hold the unforgettable knowledge that the Church is one in Christ. This knowledge is inscribed in their DNA. In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed we confess that the Church is one. The biblical charter of Christian unity is found in Ef 4,4-5: «There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all». The unity that is referred to in Ephesians is clearly not a structural, political or institutional unity (though those aspects are eventually inescapable for us today), but it is a unity in the Spirit, who calls God's people together, and in the common, basic confession that is expressed in baptism. «In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body» (1Co 12,13).

So in one sense, according to the divine constitution of the one Church of Jesus Christ, division is a christological and pneumatological impossibility. And yet it exists. We encounter bitter division and cruel exclusion all the time. Division is just as much a mark of the Church as unity is. We are dealing here with an intolerable anomaly, the ultimate *aporia*. The Church is one, but is obviously divided; it is united, yet remains fragmented. It is simultaneously united and divided. «How can these things be?». Precisely in that unbearable tension lies the ecumenical imperative. The title of a recent book of essays sums it up: *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek*.[4] Unity is already given in Christ and the Spirit, but the imperative, the vocation laid upon the Church is to grasp and that unity and to express it. It is both gift and task.

Ecumenical activity, as the drive to realise the unity that is a given reality, is therefore a prolonged and far-reaching search for understanding of one another. But to understand one another as churches must mean to understanding the Church of Jesus Christ as it is discovered in one another. As those texts from Ephesians and 1 Corinthians remind us, we come to know the Church only in the Spirit and through the Spirit. The Spirit who resides in us, in our expression of the Church, reaches out to embrace the same Spirit who resides in our fellow Christians and in the expression of the Church to which they belong. Just as Christ cannot be divided, his Spirit cannot be divided (1Co 1,13). The Christ in us longs to be united with the Christ in them. Heart speaks to heart and Spir-

4. J. Morris – N. Sagovsky (eds), *The Unity We Seek and the Unity We Have*, London and New York: T&T Clark 2003.

it cries out to Spirit. St Paul is saying something like like this when he writes: «The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God» (1Co 2, 10-11).

The nature of the Church and the nature of its unity cannot be known in the abstract, a priori, but only through encounter with Christ in Christians and churches. It will not do to start with a paper blueprint of the Church and then measure churches against it (which is something, I confess, that we are all, as ecumenical theologians, prone to do, and that all churches are prone to do). The Church is known in ecclesial praxis —practical experience of being the Church, shaped by theology, but not dictated by it. We come to know what the Church is through our experience of *koinonia*, that key New Testament Greek term that refers to a mutual participation or sharing in a reality that is greater than any partial appropriation of it. As the first letter of John puts it: «We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have *koinonia* with us; and truly our *koinonia* is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ» (1Jn 1,3). The ecumenical quest is a profoundly spiritual calling, a pilgrimage of faith. All true ecumenism is «spiritual ecumenism». By the same token, when ecumenical activity lacks zest, and has become dreary and uninspiring, that is because it has lost its way and drifted from its original calling, which is to seek Christ and the Spirit of Christ in all the manifestations of the Body of Christ, seeking to discern the Body (cf. 1Co 11,29).

Because ecumenism is devoted to understanding through a process of ever deeper exploration, it takes the form of a narrative quest —a search for the identity of the Church. But because the Church is Christ's body, it is a search that is inseparable from the search for the identity of Jesus Christ, which must be the ultimate goal of all Christian theology.[5] Identity is not so much a «given» as a quest. The evolution of a coherent human identity over a lifetime can be seen as a narrative quest, a search for the unity of a character within a story.[6] The same applies to communities and to the traditions and histories that shape them: they are constantly evolving in ways that serve the long-term survival and success of the society. Similarly, the ecumenical process is a journey on which we are engaged in a search for ecclesial identity —the identity of the one Church of Christ, the identity of our partner churches, and the identity of our own church. These identities are not given apriori,

5. Cf. H. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1975.

6. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, London: Duckworth [2]1985, 202-203; P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press 1992; P. Avis, *A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture*, London – New York: T&T Clark 2003, 28-44.

not presupposed, not fixed non-negotiable positions, but are unfolded, discovered, disclosed.

The revelation of the nature of the Church can only be the work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness to Christ in his Body. The longing for unity is undoubtedly inspired by the Holy Spirit and will be achieved by the Spirit, provided we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, as the Apostle Paul urges (Rm 8,14; Ga 5,18). In Paul, as we have noted, the Spirit searches the deep things of God and makes them known to the Church. In St John's Gospel, the Paraclete is the interpreter who makes known the things of Christ to the disciples (Jn 16,13-14). It makes sense to see the Spirit as the interpreter because the Spirit creates communion (*koinonia*, communio) and communion cannot come about until there is mutual understanding, rapport and trust. The Church, in which misunderstandings, distorted perceptions and competitive power struggles are endemic, is called to be a community of authentic interpretation, a community of understanding, a community of personal knowledge.[7]

We can get to know someone only by inhabiting the same personal space as they do, interacting with them, living, working, thinking, eating and relaxing with them. After a while we begin to think that we understand them a bit. As we live together in a family, a marriage or a small community we gradually come to understand one another quite well, though there is always the possibility of a surprise. Then we say that a person has «acted out of character», but what we really should say is that we did not know them as well as we thought we did. So too the ecumenical process of understanding involves interacting together in many ways and at various levels: not least by praying together, reflecting and studying together, and by co-operating and collaborating in forms of witness and mission to the wider world. I am convinced that the clearest, most authentic mutual understanding between still separated churches comes about when they work in harness as mission partners, that is to say in evangelisation. Because then they are fulfilling together the primary task of the Church, which is make disciples of all nations, to proclaim the gospel to the whole creation (Mt 28,16-20; Mc 16,15 [longer ending]). In this activity of mission they are closest to what it means to be the Church and this creates the conditions for knowing one another in truth.[8]

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7. For the notion that we know only as whole persons see M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1958 and for the application of this to theology J. Crewdson, *Christian Doctrine in the Light of Michael Polanyi's Theory of Personal Knowledge*, Lewiston – Queenstown – Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press,1994.

8. On the tasks of the Church within the *missio dei* and the relation between mission and ministry see P. Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*, London and New York: T&T Clark 2005 and P. Avis – P. Gooder – M. Davie, *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, London:

The ecumenical experience has been described in terms of mutual «reception».[9] The notion of reception has been applied theologically in several ways: the reception of texts —say biblical or conciliar texts— by a community; the reception of certain new developments in the life of the Church; the reception of the contributions of particular theologians; and the mutual reception of churches as they recognise, accept and begin to trust each other, so making possible an exchange of the gifts that they have to offer, for the sake of mutual enrichment and mutual correction. The New Testament, particularly the Pauline literature, is rich in «reception» language, deriving from the Greek *lambano* and its cognates. Particularly apposite here is Rm 15,7: «Receive [as the AV/KJV translates *proslambanesthe*; accept or welcome; literally, take to yourselves, to your homes] one another, as God in Christ has received you, for the glory of God». Ecumenical reception means churches taking one another to themselves; taking their faithful, their traditions and their spirituality to themselves. Ecumenical reception means the symbiosis of churches, the interpenetration of traditions. Reception is a spiritual process and requires that we open ourselves to the other, giving theological hospitality, thinking more of what we can learn than of what we can teach, more of what we can receive than what we can give. What has recently been called «receptive ecumenism» is the only sort of ecumenism worthy of the name and gets to the heart of what is going on when we interact ecumenically, but non-polemically.[10]

One prominent feature of the ecumenical movement is the theological dialogue, which is often set up on an international basis. The Anglican —Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) is the one best known to Anglicans, but it is one of many. The Methodist— Roman Catholic International Commission is an estimable example. International dialogues, such as these, attract considerable interest within the churches and their reports can arouse strong reactions. These dialogues do not drive the ecumenical movement but are a particular expression of its overall quest for mutual understanding. Dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, the World

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The Council for Christian Unity 2007 (available only from Church House Bookshop or the Council).

9. W. G. Rusch, *Reception* 1997; P. Avis, «Reception: Towards an Anglican Understanding» in P. Avis (ed.), *Seeking the Truth of Change in the Church*, London – New York: T&T Clark 2004, 19-39.

10. «Receptive Ecumenism» is the title of a research project in the University of Durham, England, headed by Dr. Paul Murray, devoted to mutual «ecumenical learning». It was launched with an international conference at Ushaw College in January 2006. The proceedings are due to be published as *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning,* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008.

Methodist Council, the Lutheran World Federation, etc., are especially centres of ecumenical expectation, conductors of mutual suspicion or mutual reconciliation. The dialogues are an absolutely essential part of ecumenism because their task is to attempt theological convergence. Theological convergence, especially on the nature of the Church, is the *sine qua non* of ecumenism. Without theological convergence between the churches, ecumenical activity can degenerate into mere sentiment or pragmatism. Convergence provides a basis for working together and worshipping together with integrity. Every initiative in shared life and mission should be based on the degree of convergence that has been achieved. And every step of convergence should be matched by steps in shared life and mission. Convergence makes formal mutual recognition between the churches possible and that demands mutual commitment (recognition and commitment are the standard pattern of ecumenical agreements).

It is sad and frustrating when genuine convergence is offered to the churches and seems to disappear into a Black Hole: it makes no difference in practice, or is even regarded with suspicion. It sometimes feels as though this is the case with ARCIC's agreement on «Ministry and Ordination» and «Eucharistic Doctrine» in the early 1970s and with the various Anglican-Orthodox reports that have achieved broad convergence on ecclesiology.[11] The extent of such convergence is very encouraging, but not particularly surprising for those who have a decent knowledge of the traditions concerned. But there are many who do not want to accept the reality of deep convergence between the major Christian traditions. They prefer to maintain their entrenched positions and to define the other in their own terms, which are usually a caricature.

The dialogical method is not restricted to the prestigious international dialogues, but pervades the whole ecumenical enterprise in all its activities.[12] Understanding comes through dialogue, as we question our partner and allow ourselves to be questioned. As we lay out the results of our conversation, we seek to discern threads of argument that link together, ways of saying the same thing in different words and of affirming the same underlying reality concealed beneath different philosophical models. These are the building blocks that contribute towards a common mind. Dialogue is not served by one party making lofty pronouncements that are meant to be beyond challenge or by pronouncing judgement on the other partner. Dialogue is served by patient, courteous explanation, by interpreting ourselves to one another, identifying inappropriate

11. ARCIC, *The Final Report*, London: SPCK/CTS 1982. Anglican – Orthodox Dialogue, *The Moscow Agreed Statement* (London: SPCK 1977), *The Dublin Agreed Statement* (London: SPCK 1984 [includes the Moscow Statement]; Anglican-Orthodox International Commission, *The Church of the Triune God*, London: Anglican Communion Office 2006.

12. Cf. B. Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments*, London – New York: T&T Clark 2006.

presuppositions, correcting misunderstandings, dealing with stereotypes, and struggling to find forms of words that both can own as they recognise their own faith as it is articulated in fresh ways.[13]

As we feel our way towards a truth that is greater than either of us, light dawns in several areas. We learn how we appear to others —often a salutary experience. We recognise the part that fear and resentment, jealousy and desire play in distorting our perceptions. As we are subjected to questioning about the tradition we represent, we may wonder whether we ourselves know it well enough, that is as much as to say, in those circumstances, whether we know ourselves. And we come up against the fundamental hermeneutical challenge: can we know what it is like to be the other? If we cannot know what it is like to be the other, to stand in their shoes and to feel something of what they feel, even to some extent, understanding will elude us. But this enlightenment cannot be attained in any casual way; it will not drop into our hands. It has to be worked for by hard study combined with demanding spiritual discipline. We are talking about a process of education of the heart as well as of the head, an enlargement of the imagination, a purification of the intention and all in all a conversion to the Christ who indwells the other in a way that is not exactly identical with the way that he indwells us.[14]

In his recent work *Communion and Otherness*, John Zizioulas has placed otherness at the heart of Christian existence and at the centre of ecclesiology. The relational ontology that he set out in *Being in Communion* is now developed to accentuate the tension between the two poles of integration and otherness. For Zizioulas human beings are «defined» through the reality of otherness: it is what makes each person unique. We are created and destined for communion, but not without the *frisson* of otherness. Human beings uniquely have the capacity to combine communion and otherness: «only a person can express communion and otherness simultaneously». In the Church, communion (*koinonia*) does not stifle or threaten otherness, but generates it and allows it to flourish. True unity gives a place to otherness because it needs it. «Otherness is *constitutive* of unity». The Church can be described equally as communion in otherness or otherness in communion.[15] It is the reality of otherness within communion that sets ecumenical hermeneutics its challenge.

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13. The avowed method of ARCIC is «to discover each other's faith as it is today and to appeal to history only for enlightenment, not as a way of perpetuating past controversy» (Preface to *The Final Report*, 1982: see fn. 10).

14. Cf. Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches*, Geneva: WCC 1993.

15. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 5, 29, 39-40 and 76. W. C. Ingle-Gillis is on a similar wavelength when, within the framework of relational ontology, he insists that «plurality» is «an ontologically significant fact of Church life»: *The Trinity and Ecumenical Church Thought* (Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2007, 171.

Although the structural, institutional results of ecumenical dialogue are fairly meagre (though certainly not negligible), theological convergence has been substantial and has begun to change the way that the churches view one another and behave towards one another. The huge collections of documents in two volumes under the title *Growth in Agreement* testify to the extent of convergence.[16] In some areas of dialogue, the participants have learned the valuable lesson that if they have not achieved 100% agreement (has this ever happened?), what they should then do is not to find a form a words that glosses over and conceals real unresolved differences (what we call in English a «fudge»), but rather that they should set out a «differentiated consensus».[17] A differentiated consensus is an agreement that is incomplete, a statement of convergence that has limitations. You say what you can say together, and you say what you need to say separately. You flag up issues for further work. Differentiated consensus represents the convergence of two lines of tradition that have approached each other but have not yet met and joined. The outstanding example of an agreement for differentiated consensus is the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of* Justification, signed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on Reformation Day, 31 October 1999.

3. The hermeneutical task of ecumenism

I have been arguing that the search for Christian unity is essentially a hermeneutical matter, concerned with achieving mutual understanding between communities and traditions. Though there is a «family resemblance» between these communities and traditions, there is also difference and the experience of otherness.[18] Forms of Christianity that are not our own are sufficiently similar to allow us to indwell them to some extent: we can identify with them, own them and feel, up to a point, that this church is our concern, not merely someone else's. The tension between sameness and difference makes it possible for us to «have a stake» in them, while not belonging to them. At the end of the conference on Receptive Ecumenism (see n. 9), I was able to say that for the first time I felt that the Roman Catholic Church was «my church» – even though I know that that church does not accept my Anglican Orders and

16. *Growth in Agreement*, New York: Paulist Press; Geneva: WCC 1984; *Growth in Agreement II*, Geneva: WCC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2000. A third volume is in an advanced stage of preparation.

17. H. Meyer, *That All May Be One: Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity*, trans. W.G. Rusch, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1999.

18. The notion of «family resemblances» occurs in L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe), Oxford: Blackwell ^{3}1968, 32 (no. 67).

does not normally allow me to receive Holy Communion at the Eucharists that it celebrates. There is plenty of difference and otherness, but that does not entirely blot out the sense that there is a belonging too.

4. Texts and trust

On the narrowest definition, hermeneutics concerns the interpretation of texts. It asks, What is a text saying? What does it mean? But in that little word «mean» there lies much perplexity. There is a small philosophical industry devoted to the meaning of meaning! We immediately get into a multiplicity of questions about who is speaking to whom in the text. Is the meaning that of the original author, and what if there is not a single author but a committee or a council, or if the text has been edited by someone else, or passed through centuries of redaction, like some of the Old Testament literature? Or do we intend the meaning as experienced by the reader today in his or her particular context, and if so, does that imply that the meaning is infinitely flexible? Without plunging into those contested issues, we can say at the least, that there is an inescapable semantic element to hermeneutics. We know that we need to look closely at words and combinations of words in propositions of various kinds. We need to identify the genre of the statement in question, before making up our minds what it is saying. We need to be alert to the context in which the words are spoken. We need to hold back on judgement and critique, to bracket out the question of the truth or validity of the statement, until we are reasonably confident that we have understood what it «intends» to say. But even then our work is hardly begun.[19]

Careful semantic enquiry was vital to the achievement of convergence on the doctrine of justification between Roman Catholic and reformed traditions, which had condemned each other on this point at the time of the Reformation. The various dialogues that tackled this problem needed to tease out the various scholastic senses in which the Council of Trent spoke of the «cause» of justification. They needed to bring out clearly the fact that when Roman Catholics used the word «justification», they included sanctification, whereas reformed writers used the term «sanctification» to refer to a conceptually distinct process of personal growth in holiness following the act of justification. They needed to see that when Reformation theologians spoke of «justification by faith» they did not understand faith as simply intellectual assent or as a human work, but

19. For a recent example of the application of these general principles of interpenetration to the Scriptures see J. Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, Louisville – London: Westminster John Knox Press 2007.

as a personal act of trust, a receptive appropriation of an act of God's grace.[20] The dialogues set aside polemic in order to clarify misunderstandings and overcome stereotypes. There was a will to succeed, to understand, and to reach agreement, though not at the expense of «fudging» the problems. Karl Lehmann has described hermeneutics as the attempt to reach intersubjective agreement.[21] Hermeneutics is indeed about the meeting of minds across a distance, and in that quest the study of words and statements has a vital place.

In discourse about the Church certain «big» and luminous words are unavoidable: Church, unity, body, catholic, mission, sacrament, Eucharist, Bible, even bishop and certainly pope. Such words are used in more than their «plain sense». They are often deployed rhetorically to give signals, to mark a position, to point to an as yet not fully specified future. They are words that are invoked or declaimed, spoken in a different register to other more manageable words. I think that «unity» is the most powerful of these. Unity is a luminous and indeed numinous word, a spell-binding word. It attracts and draws us, though some people seem to shrink from it. A thesis that I examined several years ago analysed the use of the word «unity» in a range of ecumenical statements. The author could find no common or coherent meaning attached to that word. The conclusion that ecumenists did not know what they were talking about when they used the word «unity» was difficult to resist.[22] This sort of exercise raises the question whether ecumenists are saying the same thing when they use the same words. We need to be constantly alert to that question. Some years ago the ecumenical instrument Churches Together in England conducted an enquiry among its member churches on ecclesiology and unity, using a questionnaire. The first questions were: «What do you mean by Church?» and «How do you use the word?». Not surprisingly, the answers were multilayered and nuanced, but they were not incoherent.

An alternative to the approach that says, «When we use the same word, do we mean the same thing?», is to ask, «Can using the same words help us to think the same thoughts?». Words like «Church», «unity», «body» have enormous resonances and carry an army of meanings in their wake. They are over-

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20. The main documents are the Lutheran – Roman Catholic report «Justification by Faith», *Origins* 13 (1983) 277-304; ARCIC, *Salvation and the Church*, London: Church House 1985; Lutheran World Federation – Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999). Major studies that helped pave the way for these agreements are H. Küng, *Justification*, London: Burns and Oates, [2]1981 and A. E. McGrath, *Justitia Dei*, 2 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986; For a brief discussion from an Anglican perspective see P. Avis, *Christians in Communion*, London: Geoffrey Chapman Mowbray [2]1991, ch. 7.

21. K. Lehmann, «Hermeneutics», in K. Rahner (ed.) (J. Cumming, ed. ET), *Encyclopedia of Theology: A* Concise Sacramentum Mundi*,* London: Burns and Oates 1975, 611.

22. S. Harrison, «Conceptions of "Unity" in Recent Ecumenical Discussion: A Philosophical Analysis», PhD dissertation, University of Exeter 1999 (published by Peter Lang).

determined; they have an aura and a numinous power. Is this simply because of all the layers of history that they incorporate (as Polanyi suggested)? Or do they tap into something in the collective unconscious, in the Jungian sense; have they become symbols of what they stand for, participating in the reality that they represent? Either way, they are inevitable and unsubstitutable; no other words will quite do. Their depth cannot be understood purely analytically. They evoke a response from the whole person, one of empathy or of antipathy (in the case of bishop, pope or mass, they can be «neuralgic» words).

To understand how such words perform in a text we need to adopt what Polanyi called the «fiduciary» approach to language and to truth. We need to take language on trust and let it work within us, as well as for us. We have to trust it before we can test it. We have to indwell it before we can marshall it. As S. T. Coleridge put it, «words are not things, but living powers, by which the things that are of greatest importance to mankind are actuated, combined and humanized».[23] They have creative potential to call into existence the reality to which they point.[24] They are words to meditate on, not to bandy about. The task of distinguishing meanings is still necessary, but it needs to be carried out in a humble awareness that the material we are handling has explosive power.

5. Distance and empathy

If the narrowest definition of hermeneutics is the interpretation of texts, a wider application, developed by F. D. E. Schleiermacher, concerns the interpretation of all form of expression: written, oral and symbolic.[25] While particular techniques are still required (as in the interpretation of texts), it may be true to say that intuitive perception plays a larger role, because the data is more diverse and more dispersed and there are no technical methodological princi-

23. S. T. Coleridge, «Aids to Reflection», in J. Beer (ed.), *Collected Works*, vol. 9, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1993, p. 10 (capitalisation altered).

24. See P. Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology*, London –New York: Routledge 1999.

25. For Schleiermacher, followed in this respect by Dilthey, to understand a text, we have to move beyond the actual words and to seek to understand the subjectivity of the author; thus grammatical interpretation needs to be supplemented by psychological interpretation. The aim amounts to the re-creation of the original creative act and thus even to understand an author better than he understood himself: Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 164. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, H. Kimmerle (ed.), J. Duke – J. Forstman (trans.), Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1977; Ibid., *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, A. Bowie (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998.

ples that enable us to grasp them as a whole. Gadamer has called these intuitive skills «tact» —a particular sensitivity are awareness to diverse situations and a sense of how to negotiate them.[26] Wilhelm Dilthey took Schleiermacher's approach further, applying hermeneutics to the interpretation of whole «life-», large communities that are sustained by their traditions, including distinctive beliefs, symbols of identity, recognised moral values and mores, and structures of authority that preserve that identity by policing boundaries.[27] These life-worlds may be in the past, requiring an historical (diachronic) hermeneutic, or they may be in the present, requiring a contemporary (synchronic) hermeneutic.

In either case we come up against the problem of conceptual distance, either historical or cultural. Interpretation in the face of distance, in either context, is immensely difficult: a sense of resistance due to strangeness, of alienation, has to be overcome. The feeling of otherness is palpable – though this strangeness, alienation and otherness are not complete, but only partial. We could not get started unless we had some ground in common. We find that common factor in the questing mind. It is the human mind and imagination that has shaped both them and us, so there is an essential affinity. In the mid-eighteenth century G. B. Vico wrote in his *New Science*:

> In the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.[28]

The hermeneutic of remote life-worlds is not only supremely difficult, it is also painful. It hurts to peer into what Shakespeare calls «the dark backward and abysm of time»[29] and it hurts to try to align ourselves with a community and culture that is different to our own. Vico spoke of the agonising effort of empathy that was required, combined with strenuous research. Dilthey said

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26. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 16.

27. See H. P. RICKMAN (ed.), *Meaning in History: Wilhelm Dilthey's Thoughts on History and Society*, London 1961; IBID. (ed.), *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Writing,s* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976); W. KLUBACK, *Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of History*, New York: Columbia University Press 1956.

28. G. B. VICO, *The New Science*, T. G. BERGIN – M. H. FISCH (trans. and ed.), Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1961, p. 96 (para. 331). This was Vico's key principle *verum factum*. For a brief introduction see P. AVIS, *Foundations of Modern Historical Thought: From Machiavelli to Vico*, London: Croom Helm 1986, ch. 6. For a major account see J. MILBANK, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico 1668-1744*, 2 vols, I, *The Early Metaphysics*; II, *Language, Law and History*, Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen 1992.

29. W. SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*, I, II, 49.

that history was «a great dark book, the collected work of the human spirit, written in the languages of the past, the text of which we have to try to understand».[30]

The hermeneutics of unity are no less challenging. The imperative of Christian unity is not selective, but all embracing, requiring an attitude of «all round and every level ecumenism», whereby we take whatever steps we can to make more visible the inalienable unity of Christ's body in the world. We may feel an «elective affinity»[31] with certain Christian traditions, and be repelled by others. But, to adapt a famous classical saying: I am a Christian and nothing Christian is alien to me.[32] Just as, when we look at the lives of the saints, we try to see Christ in them, so with Christians of traditions that leave us cold, something of Christ in them answers to something of Christ in us. As it evokes empathy, it bridges the distance.

6. Projection and enlightenment

The ecumenical enterprise is about working for deeper mutual understanding between separated Christian churches and the traditions that make them what they are. We seek to achieve this understanding through sharing in fellowship, prayer and ministry, and above all as we join together in mission and evangelisation initiatives. On a different plane, ecumenical theological dialogue works to remove misconceptions, demolish stereotypes, set out common ground and clarify remaining differences: in other words, dialogue creates understanding. For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was «the art of avoiding misunderstandings».[33] The more we do understand each other, the more we will be able to accept each other. Understanding and acceptance are the preconditions for institutional changes that will enable us to express our indestructible unity in Christ in visible ways before the world.

In general epistemology, understanding comes when our powers of perception go out into the object, the other, and seek to indwell it. When we indwell a piece of literature, a work of art, a landscape or even the *persona* of another human being we internalise that object and it becomes part of our own subjec-

30. Cited Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 156. It was a weakness of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics that he underplayed the problem of historical distance: it was the personal otherness of the subject that was the barrier for him.

31. J. W. Von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.), Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971.

32. «Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto» («I am a man; I count nothing human foreign to me»): Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*, 77.

33. Cited Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 163.

tivity. This is how we come to know, to understand and to make sense of reality. But when the spirit of a person is drawn out without their being aware of it, unintentionally and unconsciously, and is installed itself, so to speak, in another, we use the psychological term *projection*. Projection has been defined as «the process by which specific impulses, wishes, aspects of the self, or internal objects are imagined to be located in some object external to oneself».[34] Here perception has become projection. Projection has a distorting effect, reshaping what it perceives in the act of appropriating it and fashioning it in its own unacknowledged image. As Jung put it: «Projections change the world into the replica of one's unknown face.»[35]

A distorting process of projection can take place on a collective scale, as well as at the level of individuals —community to community, nation to nation, and church to church. Collectivities can define themselves over against other collectivities. You name your enemy in order to know who you are. Anti-semitism and general racism are particularly ugly and indeed lethal forms of collective projection. The two great collectivities that were antagonists in the mid-twentieth century were Fascism and Communism, both authoritarian, totalitarian ideologies. Horkheimer and Adorno developed the Freudian concept of «morbid projection» as a critical tool against authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Morbid projection consists of the transference of socially taboo impulses from the social subject to the social object. In violently reacting against those impulses seen in the other, the individual is rejecting a disowned part of himself or herself. A combination of psychological analysis and ideological critique is needed to unmask it.[36]

In a sense that appears rather trivial compared to the gigantic ideological conflicts of the last century, churches that live in the same space and compete for hegemony also define themselves over against one another (e.g. Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland until very recently). But it applies across the board, not merely in extreme situations, that you know who you are when you know that you are not the other. Roman Catholics know that

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34. C. Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, London: Nelson 1968, 125f. Cf. M.-L. Von Franz, *Projection and Re-Collection in Jungian Psychology*, La Salle: Open Court 1980.

35. C. G. Jung, *Collected Works*, R. F. C. Hull (ed.), New York: Bollingen Foundation; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1954, vol. 9, II, 9.

36. M. Horkheimer – T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press 1973, p. 192. For an examination of the concept of projection as a weapon used against Christian belief in Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Jung, see P. Avis, *Faith in the Fires of Criticism: Christianity in Modern Thought*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1995. There is a discussion of projection and transference in mass movements in P. Avis, *Authority, Leadership and Conflict in the Church*, London: Mowbray 1992.

they are not Protestants and vice-versa. Anglicans know that they are not Methodists and vice-versa. Orthodox know that they are not any of these. Whenever we perpetuate the stereotyping and stigmatising that has has proved so destructive in Christian history we entrench separation and division. No authentic hermeneutic is at work here. I speak with feeling because I often do not recognise my church in the way that the Roman Catholic Church describes it and passes judgement on it.

However, where the hermeneutic of unity is allowed to do its work, we can come to see that the state of separation is at the same time a state of symbiosis —a pathological symbiosis that needs the other in order to react against it. We can truly confess to our fellow Christians in another church that we engage with: we are what we are because you are what you are. We would not be what we are if it were not for you; you would not be what you are if it were not for us. We have made you what you are and you have made us what we are —at least in part. Because we have each invested something deep and difficult about ourselves in the other, we cannot see each other for what we are. Understanding is inhibited. When once we become aware of that strange mutual dependence and mutual investment, an enlightenment dawns in which truthful interpretation can now take place. We can bring to light the unity that exists deep down and begin to build in a visible way on that.

Paul AVIS
Chwich House
Great Smutz St.
LONDON SWP3AZ
E-mail: paul.avis@c-of-e.org.uk

Resum

En un sentit que pot semblar trivial, comparat amb els enormes conflictes ideològics del segle passat, les esglésies que conviuen en un mateix espai i competeixen per l'hegemonia, també es defineixen a sí mateixes per la seva contraposició d'una amb l'altra (per exemple, els catòlics romans i els protestants a Irlanda del Nord fins ben recentment). Però s'aplica de manera general, no només en situacions extremes, en les que saps qui ets quan ets conscient que no ets l'altre. Cada vegada que perpetuem l'estereotip i estigmatitzem allò que s'ha comprovat tan destructiu en la història del cristianisme, generem separació i divisió. No farem hermenèutica en aquesta ponència. Tanmateix, on aparegui l'hermenèutica de la unitat en aquest treball, podrem comprovar que l'estat de separació és al mateix temps un estat de simbiosis —una simbiosis patològica que necessita l'altre per tal de poder reaccionar-hi en contra. Podem confes-

sar veritablement als nostres seguidors cristians que ens mantenim amb ells: nosaltres som qui som perquè vosaltres sou els que sou. No seríem qui som, sinó fos per vosaltres; vosaltres no serieu qui sou, sinó fos per nosaltres. En el moment en què ens assabentem d'aquesta estranya i mútua dependència que es miralleja l'una amb l'altra, ens adonarem que una interpretació honesta pot tenir cabuda. Podem treure a la llum la unitat que existeix en el fons i començar a construir d'una manera visible en aquesta direcció.