Ecumenical Commitment: Reflections on the State of the Ecumenical Movement

by
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I   Ecumenical Unity as a Continuing Challenge

Ecumenical efforts seem to stagnate; it has become difficult to sense the presence of any ecumenical *movement*.[1] Major events like the 2003 Ecumenical Church Congress in Berlin, the 2006 plenary meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Porto Alegre, or the 2007 European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu seem to show little enduring impact. During important events, participants will use strong words and sweeping gestures to attest to ecumenical commitment und reject in any laments about a stalemate, let alone a setback. But the public events pass, largely without leaving any mark. The person in the pew is disappointed and turns to other subject matters, like the responsibility of Christians and interreligious dialogue. For many people, the times of ecumenism appear to be past: some regard the efforts as discontinued without any results; others believe that the traditional questions have been either answered or proven irrelevant, while considering the unity of all Christians a given reality that only the Church authorities fail to realize and some theologians still do not comprehend. While still others withdraw into traditionalistic circles, by far the greater number turn away disappointed and search answers to religious question outside the Christian churches.

Virtues that were once practiced in ecumenical contexts, such as the willingness to engage in dialogue and search for truth in common, the ability

[1] The position presented here rests on the (no doubt particular and subjective) experiences of a German ecumenist. Should more positive developments be found to dominate in other parts of the world, this could only be greeted with joy. It would seem nonetheless that, despite vastly differing preconditions, ecumenical efforts in South America, Africa, and especially in East Asia and China do not currently show any more power than those in Europe.

to distinguish religious reality from what our languages are capable of ex-pressing, and above all the readiness for tolerance, are now being transferred to the Christian relationship with non-Christian religions. The new buzzword is that of a larger ecumenism: the ecumenism of the religions. This seems to be more easily realizable since the aim is not a unity that would challenge established identities, but the peaceful coexistence of differing convictions and beliefs, possibly linked to the willingness to enrich and inspire one another. In his book *Die Ursymbole in den Religionen* (The Prime Symbols of Religions),[2] as well as in his ethics research and teaching in Germany and China, Gerhold Becker has offered significant stimulation for such a peaceful coexistence by exploring, teaching, and living it. In this "larger ecumenism," however, the quest is not for the kind of unity that is constitutive of Christian ecumenism. This unity has emerged as the focus of discussion in ecumenical work, and different paradigms for unity separate the Christian churches more sharply than traditional matters of dispute. We even encounter the thesis that "the divergent notions of unity in the Church are perhaps the greatest obstacle to the unity of the Church."[3] For this reason, to give up on the commitment to unity cannot be the solution. Ecumenism thus differs in its basic approach from interreligious dialogue; its progress can only be measured by the degree to which it serves the unity of the Christian churches. Yet success stories are a scarce commodity in today's ecumenical movement.

II   The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and Its Reception

Anybody pondering the state of ecumenism in our day should begin with the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). In Augsburg on 31 October 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity solemnly signed the declaration stating that the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification and salvation are open to one another and that the remaining differences do not have the power today to divide the churches. The relevant article reads: "The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent.

[2] Gerhold Becker, *Die Ursymbole in den Religionen* (Graz etc.: Styria, 1987).

[3] Reinhard Frieling, *Der Weg des ökumenischen Gedankens: eine Ökumenekunde* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1992), 257.

The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration."[4] This means that the remaining differences are considered acceptable; they do not destroy the consensus in the fundamental convictions regarding the doctrine of justification and salvation, and they no longer legitimate a rift between the churches.

This explanation concerns the problematic of faith and works. Luther was convinced that faith alone can justify, and that human beings cannot earn their salvation, but that they also have no need to earn it since it is given to them by grace alone. The council of Trent believed that this statement harbored the danger that people would abandon morality if their efforts were irrelevant for salvation. Why would anyone still strive for a righteous life that pleased God? For the purpose of preserving ethics, the Council of Trent required humankind's cooperation with God's grace. The Reformers in turn regarded this demand as a human endeavor for self-redemption and thereby an implicit rejection of the Cross of Christ, the attempt to manage God through magical practices. Conversely, the Catholic side considered the Reformation as a hotbed of immorality and a cause of the decline in all good morals. This seemed to them to explain the success of the Reformation, for who does not like to hear that individual effort is superfluous and that everyone can happily go about sinning since sin is the precise material on which God works?

Given these divergent points of departure, it would be a long road toward formulating a differentiated consensus on questions concerning the doctrine of justification. Numerous misunderstanding had to be removed and one-sided opinions overcome until a basic consensus could be reached that the churches felt reassured would not be called into question by the doubtless remaining differences. Thus it should not surprise anyone that the JDDJ compromise was not left uncontested.[5] Criticism was voiced above all from the Protestant perspective. For the Lutheran churches, the doctrine of justification constitutes not merely one issue of belief among others, but rather, as the formulation adopted in the Lutheran tradition reads, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*—the article by which faith and the Church stand or fall. "With regard to these articles, nothing can yield or give,

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[4] JDDJ, article 41. This statement was also repeated in the context of the official liturgical signing ceremony. For the full text cf. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils /chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html

[5] On this cf. Peter Neuner, "Ende des Streites – Beginn der Einheit?" in: *Zur Debatte. Themen der Katholischen Akademie in Bayern* 29/5 (1999): 7-10.

even if heaven or earth should fall."[6] Justification is the center of faith: it is what Luther succinctly described as "the Gospel." It is the message defining God as the One who effects human salvation. In the preface to *Loci communes*, the first dogmatic theology of the Reformed Church, Melanchthon formulates this stance thus: "To know Christ means to recognize his beneficence."[7] In the Reformation, the doctrine of salvation that God effected in Jesus became the systematic point of departure for formulating all of dogmatics. The doctrine of justification is therefore the criterium for orienting all other doctrines as well as every church order and structure.

Part of the criticism voiced against the JDDJ was the reproach that the declaration remained without consequences for the Roman side. No progress was in sight regarding either the recognition of the Lutheran churches and their ministries or the sharing of the Eucharist. While the JDDJ admittedly called the doctrine of justification an "indispensable criterium," this statement was in effect denied by the absence of any follow-up. Since a consensus regarding a decisive criterium cannot be without consequences, the very absence of such consequences proved that the only thing that had been achieved in the statement on justification was a consensus of appearances. The advocates of the JDDJ countered by pointing to a sentence in the text itself: "The consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must have effects and be borne out in the life and in the teachings of our churches" (article 43). In actual fact, this projected the judgment about the JDDJ into the future: should the shared approach to the doctrine of justification last, then it would have to prompt consequences, for instance, in questions of the recognition of churches, their ministries, and the sharing of the Eucharist. Should it remain without effects, such would constitute a negative judgment on the consensus regarding the doctrine of justification.

The ecumenical events since 1999 have not awakened much hope. It must be admitted that immediately after the signing of the JDDJ, the Catholic Church in particular issued statements that called the achieved consensus into question. Rome apparently considered the JDDJ as a self-contained agreement that had no impact on other areas of Catholic theology, especially on the teaching of the Church and its offices. Even before the signing, Rome announced a jubilee indulgence to be offered on the occasion of the new millennium, ignoring the fact that it was above all the question of indulgences

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[6] Cf. Luther, *Schmalkalden Article* II,1, in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1982), 415.

[7] Horst Georg Pöhlmann, ed., *Melanchthon, Loci communes* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlags-Haus, 1997), 13.

that had sparked the Reformation and its message of human justification from faith and grace alone. A few months later, the declaration *Dominus Iesus* stated that the Reformed congregations were "not churches in the actual sense" but merely "ecclesiastic communities."[8] The churches so addressed were outraged. A document published by the German Lutheran Church under the title "Kirchengemeinschaft nach evangelischem Verständnis"[9] should probably be regarded as a response to *Dominus Iesus*. It states plainly that Catholic and Protestant approaches to unity are "incompatible." This is no friendlier in tone than *Dominus Iesus*. One cannot go wrong in interpreting the Lutheran Church's revocation of a collaboration in a common translation of the New Testament as a riposte to Roman announcements perceived as provocations. A publication of the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, dated 29 June 2007, repeats the statements made in *Dominus Iesus*, according to which "those Christian Communities born out of the Reformation of the sixteenth century [...] cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called 'Churches' in the proper sense."[10] There is no question that the churches have hardly taken advantage of the opportunity to show unanimity in the basic criterium of Christian faith.

III   Societal Challenges

It would certainly be simplistic to conclude that such singular events are sufficient to explain the current state of the ecumenical endeavor. The churches are facing a far-reaching societal challenge to which they must respond, irrespective of their individual positions and possibly mistaken reactions regarding one or another concrete issue. In assessing the religious situation

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[8] Joseph Card. Ratzinger, Prefect, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, http://www.vatican.va /roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_ dominus-iesus_en.html. Cf. P. Neuner, "Belastungsprobe für die Ökumene. Anmerkungen zum Kirchenverständnis in einem Dokument der Glaubenskongregation," *Stimmen der Zeit* 218 (Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 723-737.

[9] "Kirchengemeinschaft nach evangelischem Verständnis. Ein Votum zum geordneten Miteinander bekenntnisverschiedener Kirchen. Ein Beitrag des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland," *EKD-Texte* 69 (Hannover: Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands, 2001).

[10] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*, cf. http://www.vatican.va/ roman_curia /congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_ 20070629_responsa-quaestiones_ en.html (29 June 2007).

in Europe, people have largely gotten used to the notion of secularization. This implies that in the development of a modern society, domains that were previously open to religious determination are increasingly taken over by mundane patterns of explanation and conduct. As a result, religious topics gradually vanish from view since they are dispensable. Despite the apparent plausibility of this thesis, questions remain. To begin with, the assumption of a general secularization does not explain why the development is so different in the technologically most advanced country on earth, the United States of America, where religious convictions and conduct in fact have been gaining in importance to a point where some states even prohibit schools from teaching evolution. Concurrently, the Islamic world witnesses a dramatic revitalization of religious convictions that decisively determine, if not frequently dominate, the political and societal spheres. This development involves above all the social and intellectual elites, not the illiterate segment of the populace. In China, where religion has been heavily suppressed for decades, faith is coming to life again and is valued by society at large, such that even the Communist Party now respects it as an important factor of society. Finally, even in Europe, the place where secularization is probably most advanced, sociologists are discovering opposing developments; some of them have even begun to speak of a "megatrend" in religion. Wolfgang Frühwald, a literary scholar at the University of Munich, observed a few years ago that "our world is steaming with religiosity." He finds religious traces everywhere in today's literature, far beyond the ecclesiastical sphere.

In this discussion everything depends, of course, on how one defines religion. Up until a few decades ago, Europeans considered it more or less self-evident that religion was to be equated with Christianity in its specifically ecclesiastical sense, and that being religious implied being at home and emotionally tied to the Protestant Church or the Catholic Church. A benchmark for religious conduct was participation in church rites, with attendance of church services serving as the main barometer. This parameter can certainly no longer be considered valid today. Two developments stand in the way. The first is the more or less clear influence that other religions exert in the West, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, and even Islam up to a point. The East Asian religions in particular have come to exercise a considerable fascination in Europe, even if it is often the case that only a few aspects or fragments are adopted. This explains a good part of the current rage in meditation practices.

A concurrent development can be described as a differentiation in religion. The term implies that in the wake of what is often called a post-

modern individualism, religion is increasingly becoming a matter of choice.[11] In terms of this proposal, religion is by no means waning even in the European world, but is only less tangible, more indefinite, often fluctuating freely and less ecclesiastical. Personal and free choices that range across the borders of confessions and religions are the rule rather than the exception today. Religion should be fun, and people speak of patchwork religion assembled liberally according to one's personal taste, with each individual acting as the composer of his or her religion. In the postmodern era, a religiosity that is nourished by irrational preferences and that includes even esoteric practices appeals to a large segment of the population. By contrast, the churches in their traditional form as organizational behemoths frequently meet with massive mistrust, especially when they refuse to join this open and pluralistic world view and instead formulate and demand an unequivocal and binding commitment.

It seems thus that today's world is not necessarily less religious than earlier times, but that its religion often operates in frameworks that are detached from ecclesiastical bonds. Or to put it differently, the churches are less capable today than formerly to answer the religious question and to bind religious powers to themselves. Perhaps one of the most obvious signs can be found in large bookstores, where esoteric literature occupies a whole wall whereas religion and theology are not in demand at all. To give an example from Munich: two large bookshops that specialized in theology have gone out of business in the past few years, while more than a dozen others, offering a wide selection of esoterica, have recently opened.

IV Ecumenism between Non-Commitment and Image-Building

All these factors represent a great challenge for the ecumenical endeavor. In the context of a widely dominating pluralism in which everything seems to have a place except for firm confessions of faith along with their claims of truth and commitment, the question of the unity among Christian churches appears downright obsolete. Why should one concern oneself with unity and not simply leave everyone to be happy with his or her personal religion? Most importantly, the traditional "consensus ecumenism," in which theologians strive hard to find a basis for agreement in questions that were hitherto controversial enough to keep the churches apart, comes across as a

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[11] On this cf. Karl Gabriel, *Christentum zwischen Tradition und Postmoderne* [Quaestiones disputatae 141] (Freiburg etc: Herder, 1992).

virtual counterclaim to modern religiosity. Its adherents consider the contrasting teachings that separate the churches just as strange as efforts made toward unity, which only appear to contradict freedom. Often one receives the impression that ecumenism is out while pluralism is in. If ecumenists stood, as late as a few years ago, at the forefront of new theological developments, they are now deemed, particularly in the United States almost as conservative—as those who have had to vacate their position for religious pluralists.

Ecumenical theology is further challenged by ecclesiastical reactions to postmodern religiosity since this also presents a huge problem for the traditional churches. In the wake of the individualization of religion, churches are literally less in demand. What they offer loses relevance or, to put it in worldly terms, is being provided by competitors who make the "goods" available more inexpensively. In our societies, the churches are appreciated as organizations rendering social services, and perhaps additionally as institutions that transmit the values of the European humanistic heritage to the younger generation. But with regard to what they themselves consider their central task—the promulgation of a message that cannot be true at the same time as its opposite—they have distinctly lost acceptance, at the very least in Europe and the United States. Luther's famous word, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise," becomes almost incomprehensible against this backdrop. Perhaps his question today would have to be rephrased as: "Why am I in fact standing here? I could, after all, do quite differently." This religious megatrend seems to go hand in hand with a massive "de-ecclesiasticalization."

It is probably true not only for the Christian churches but for all institutions that outside pressure, far from bringing the harried parties together, actually encourage them above all to look out for themselves and to salvage what can be saved. While it is true that Germany's Una Sancta movement received an important impetus from the hostility of National Socialism, it consisted in fact of rather informal groups, whereas the churches as such were not brought any closer together by these adversaries. Crises tend to lead to a solidification of ranks and to segregation rather than rapprochement of those facing pressure. By and large, this is the situation in which the churches find themselves today, with the result that their ecumenical interest becomes ever more limited rather than soaring to new levels. It is my impression that the churches are currently attempting to show a new profile within the pluralist society and to find a new stability in their identity. Both the tendency toward a free-floating religiosity and the ecclesiastic reactions to this challenge are of great significance for ecumenism.

V The Reactions of the Churches

The Catholic Church these days displays a tendency to close its ranks and bind local churches as well as the faithful more closely to the hierarchy, above all to the pope. The centrifugal forces that have become quite powerful in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and have led to the development of new and independent theological and ecclesiastical forms, especially in Liberation Theology in South America and today particularly in Asia,[12] are being pushed into the background in the interests of a new emphasis on the unity of Catholicism. The dominating stance seems to be that only when the interior space is brought back to a state of order and closedness can one hope to take concrete steps toward ecumenical unity. According to this conviction, efforts made on behalf of internal unity currently exclude taking any steps toward a deepened community among the churches. Since a self-contained Catholic milieu can no longer be established, the Church must at least seek to preserve its identity through retrenchment.

This is occurring today in the Catholic Church above all through the return to older forms and traditions. In July 2007, Pope Benedict XVI decreed that the pre-Vatican II Tridentine (not the Latin!) form of the Mass should once again be given greater weight. He announced that in the German translation of the Canon of the Mass, the statement that Christ had "died for all people" must be changed to "died for many." This does indeed correspond to the biblical turn of the phrase, but the modification will necessarily prompt the question of whether Christ in fact did not die for everyone, i.e., whether everyone was redeemed or whether "the others" have a different redeemer. All these conceptions would be quite incompatible with the Christian teaching, as the Vatican's declaration acknowledged. Yet these likely misunderstandings are taken in stride, obviously in order to accommodate a small but vocal minority at the extreme fringes of the Church without sacrificing fidelity to the Second Vatican Council. This concession may possibly help avoid or overcome a schism connected with the name Lefebvre. To this end, Rome is apparently prepared to risk a massive affront to those who consider the Council's initiatives indispensable for their ecclesiastical existence, especially those who feel committed to the cause of the ecumenical responsibility of the churches. In new Catholic movements that have received official ecclesiastical approval, the trend is toward a

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[12] On this cf. Luis Gutheinz, "Ein Blick in die Werkstatt der chinesischen Theologie," in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 225 (Freiburg: Herder, 2007): 619-631.

counter-society that defines itself precisely in its differences from societal developments. Cognitive minorities are powerful and above all, not easily rattled by outside forces. Retrenchment tendencies dominate at the expense of ecumenical commitment.

The Protestant churches are facing similar problems. How can they become visible in our world and society? In view of these challenges, they have, like many Catholic dioceses, turned to management consultants, especially McKinsey. Its most significant recommendation was that the churches should concentrate on their main purpose and thus become more distinguishable in the public eye, more recognizable in their specific message and thereby, more attractive, if ineluctably to a smaller circle.

The appeal to concentrate on the main business at hand conceals, of course, some difficulties. Who determines what the main business is? As a rule, the term has a different meaning for the ministers than for parents hoping to have their children cared for in the nearby church-sponsored kindergarten. A corollary—and by no means a small one— is that all people working for churches, above all those on church payrolls, will fear for the survival of their work and perhaps even their jobs if their task is not clearly related to the main business. The loss of ecclesiastical relevance has indeed financial repercussions. People withdrawing from church membership and even more alarming demographic and societal developments as well as changes in the levying of church taxes are leading to a significant drop in income. The churches in Germany in terms of all services rendered are among the largest employers in the country. According to some statistics, the social institutions maintained by the two leading churches form the country's largest employer altogether. Germany's Lutheran churches, including its pastoral and social facilities, have around 650,000 employees; numbers are more or less the same for the Catholic Church. Concentrating on the main purpose will have foreseeable consequences for many jobs.

The appeal to focus on the main purpose and to a new emphasis on identity seems to have affected the Protestant churches above all. They are traditionally more closely linked to the larger society than the Catholic Church, which has a higher profile and is for that very reason far more controversial. Its identity is much less at stake. Especially in the past few years, the Catholic Church has been eminently present in public life and in the media: worldwide on occasion of the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of his successor, and in Germany during the papal visits to the World Youth Days in Cologne in 2005 and in Bavaria in 2006. Everybody knows the Pope and knows that he represents the Catholic Church.

By contrast, the Lutheran Church has not had an easy task of being present in public life. Who, after all, can name the Chairman of the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany? And even the State Bishop of Bavaria is less present in the media than the cardinal of Munich, even though the state bishop is responsible for all of Bavaria while the cardinal is responsible for only one Bavarian diocese. In any case, the Lutheran churches have felt that they have been put on the spot in the face of the overpowering Catholic presence. They accompanied the papal visit in a friendly way with very little friction, but Margot Kässmann, the Lutheran State Bishop in Hannover, remarked with a certain pique that this event reminded her of why she is not a Catholic. How can one possibly be noticed in the face of such a strong media presence?

One expression of this attempt at distinction is a proposal of the Protestant Church of Germany entitled "Kirche der Freiheit" (Church of Freedom).[13] The text, about 100 pages long, seeks to define focal points in preparation for 2017 when the Reformation will commemorate the 500th anniversary of Luther's posting of his 95 theses. The wording is devoid of any anti-ecumenical tone and the controversies prevailing from the time of the Reformation until the middle of the 20th century are thankfully a matter of the past. But the subject matter and the challenge to be faced are framed in terms of the unique and distinguishing factors. Retrenchment is far easier to discern here than any effort at emphasizing a common ground. This is already apparent in the choice of the motto, "Church of Freedom," which underscores a tradition that places the Lutheran Church in opposition to the Catholic Church as the Church of Law and Obedience. With the issue framed in these terms, the ecumenical question plays at best an ancillary role. The heart beats elsewhere.

The 2007 Lutheran Church Congress also seems to have followed this line. Like all church congresses of either church, it was no doubt an ecumenical event as well. But its theme pointed in a different direction, with three adjectives referring to God's word as "Lebendig und kräftig und schärfer" (alive and strong and sharper). The Lutheran Christians came to Cologne to manifest their profile more clearly, thereby becoming more recognizable and distinct. One may well wonder whether it was a good idea for this occasion to decorate a fish—the early Christian symbol of Christ—with a shark fin in order to demonstrate strength and a distinct profile. Once

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[13] Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, *Kirche der Freiheit. Perspektiven für die Evangelische Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert* (Hannover, 1 July 2006).

again the impression is given that probably no anti-ecumenical was intended, but the preoccupation with self-image dominated at the expense of any efforts made toward ecumenical commonality.

VI   "Ecumenism of Profiles" and "Ecumenism of Differences"

The tendency on either side to distinguish oneself has become the occasion of many disappointments. The churches still act and speak today as if the texts of theological consensus-seeking and convergency had never been written. Moreover, it has become obvious that open questions remain even within these texts. Particularly with regard to the problem of the ordained ministry, there have been some rapprochements but no real agreements. Besides the question of the ordination of women, which is no longer open to debate for the Protestant churches, the role of the pope represents a continuing challenge, despite the fact that some Protestant theologians regard a ministry of the unity of the universal Church as possible or even desirable and that the churches of the Reformation no longer repeat Luther's reproach according to which the Pope is deemed the Antichrist and the devil incarnate. But how is one to handle the remaining disagreements in an ecumenical way?

In the course of his meeting with the Pope during the World Youth Day in Cologne in August 2005, the Lutheran bishop Wolfgang Huber from Berlin, Chairman of the Council of the Lutheran Church of Germany, coined the term "ecumenism of profiles."[14] He began by observing that what the Christian churches have in common is greater than what separates them. But then he proceeded to define the issues concerning which he believes no agreement can be reached, at least for the time being. These include the divergent interpretations of the Church and the Lutheran understanding of church ministry, which is determined by the fundamental idea of the priesthood of all believers. Not least because of the dire state of church finances, the number of parish ministries will be reduced, so that more and more non-theologians will be taking over part-time or voluntary tasks even in such areas as preaching and dispensing the sacraments. Discrepancies with the Catholic understanding of church ministry are already foreseeable. Even the emphasis on the distinctive marks of the Church will further accent the

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[14] The speech is documented in Wolfgang Huber, *Im Geist der Freiheit. Für eine Ökumene der Profile* (Freiburg etc.: Herder, 2007), 11-15 [14]. The volume combines an encouragement of ecumenism with an emphasis on distinct profiles (chapter 3).

differences between the churches, and the danger remains that the commonalities will back into the shadows. Bishop Huber is appealing for the common interests of ecumenism not to be neglected in the necessary discussions about the steps being taken. It would be desirable that both sides "agree as fully as possible about those aspects on which they cannot agree for the time being."[15] Huber suggests that perhaps this is not the time for overcoming traditional differences, but every effort should be made to "not reproach one another with respect to our remaining differences but to learn to understand them as differences with which to live ecumenically is our future common task."[16] *We agree to differ*, with the stress on *we agree*. With this statement on an "ecumenism of profiles," the Chairman of the Council obviously wishes to preempt disappointments. He urges that any decisions by either of the churches, whether simply different or perhaps even at odds, that concern areas in which no agreement can be reached, should not always be interpreted as the beginning of a new ecumenical ice age or as anti-ecumenical affronts.

The proclamations of certain Protestant theologians regarding an "ecumenism of differences" suggest a dissimilar approach. In the first place should be mentioned Tübingen theologian Eilert Herms's thesis on the basic contradiction between the Christian churches.[17] According to Herms, the convergences and consensuses claimed by ecumenical theologians are ultimately irrelevant since they are not supported by a shared fundamental understanding that encompasses the denominations. In their innermost core, in their essence, and their basic approach, the churches are still not only distinct, but oppositionally determined. Thus any efforts toward agreement in individual questions can only cure symptoms while leaving the basic disease unattended to. Agreement is therefore literally built on air, lacking the grounding in a fundamental consensus. Herms invokes the theologian Joseph Ratzinger when he propounds that the so-called "ecumenism of consensus" has only reached the appearance of results that are unable to withstand any critical stress. On this basis, no practical consequences for a unification of the churches could be drawn. Lasting reconciliation, Herms claims, depends on

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[15] Wolfgang Huber, "Was bedeutet Ökumene der Profile?," in: J. Brosseder and M. Wriedt, eds., *Kein Anlass zur Verwerfung* (Frankfurt: Otto Lembeck Verlag, 2007), 399-410 [407, with a quotation from Eberhard Jüngel].

[16] Ibid., 409.

[17] This concerns above all the controversy with Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner: Cf. Eilert Herms, *Einheit der Christen in der Gemeinschaft der Kirchen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984).

whether agreement in the fundamental points of departure of the confessions can be reached. Should this prove possible, disagreements in detail would automatically be overcome; should it prove impossible, even the most attractive consensus would ultimately show itself as groundless and nothing other than a verbal compromise. A unification of the churches, then, can only be achieved on the basis of this kind of decision. Yet no such rapprochement is in sight, and it may not even be possible, precisely because the basic decisions contradict one another. In light of this fundamental difference, even apparent commonalities come to be viewed as conflicting in principle. Finally, Herms's thesis implies the statement that even where similar terms are being expressed and professed, mutual admittance to the Lord's Supper, i.e., Eucharistic hospitality is called for. Further discussion will have to show more clearly how this request can be reconciled with the conviction of a fundamentally contradictory stance.

It was Vienna Protestant theologian Ulrich Körtner who coined the term "ecumenism of differences."[18] Körtner's point of departure is the fact that the earlier texts of ecumenical consensus have in face remained without resonance and reception. If this is not simply to be explained in terms of an anti-ecumenical dogmatism, self-assertion, or striving for power—even if such attitudes do no doubt exist—he sees enduring and perhaps deeper-seated discrepancies that have not yet been thematized at the level of consensus papers with which we must continue to live. These differences should not be glossed over by means of theological tricks, which never solve anything for the life of the churches. Körtner pleads for a paradigm shift away from an "ecumenism of consensus" and toward an "ecumenism of differences." The aim of ecumenical work should no longer be the theological striving for a unity of the churches, but a coexistence of mutually incompatible types of churches. The fundamental difference is the question of unity: should we be seeking a visible, institutionally tangible form of unity in a common Church, as Catholic and Orthodox concepts of unity require, or a union of diverse churches that recognize one another without assuming a single institutional form either internally or externally? Should the term "reconciled diversity" merely legitimize the *status quo* of inter-church relations, or do the biblical demand and the joint confession of *una sancta* actually call the churches to repent and overcome their schisms?

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[18] Ulrich Körtner, *Wohin steuert die Ökumene? Vom Konsens- zum Differenzmodell* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

Konrad Raiser, former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, disseminated a paradigm shift as early as 1989: ecumenism should no longer strive for unity, but for intimate cooperation (*Hausgenossenschaft*). The etymological root of the word, after all, is the Greek *oikos*, meaning house, and should accordingly be interpreted as "home belongingness."[19] He argues that "cohabitants have equal rights while remaining different; they do not build the home themselves but are integrated into it, joining already existing inhabitants. Even the weak, the dependent, the doubting, and the disengaged belong to the household of God as fully valid members. In the Father's house there are many dwelling places; it is not simply a single, obligated community."[20] "Home-belongingness" implies full participation for all members of the larger household. It is realized when all exclusion ceases despite remaining differences. The required conviviality—in the literal sense of sharing a life rather than a doctrine—aims for a church fashioned as an open entity, a "home without walls." Ecumenical documents should not attempt to point out commonalities and convergences between the churches but represent a broad panoply of ecclesiastical convictions as they become visible in church teaching and even more so in the practice of countless ecclesiastical communities of today. Above all, one should not strive to lessen diversity, but welcome it as an enrichment and rejoice in this colorful plurality. Taking its cue from the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, a proposal framed in these terms has suggested that ecumenism should aim to allow the other to be other and the stranger to remain estranged. In this framework, striving for unity is discredited as an attempt to dominate the other.

Without a doubt, the WCC began with a conception of its aims that were quite different from the ones highlighted here. Its current deliberations are largely attributable to disappointing experiences. The great goal the churches envisaged when they founded the WCC in 1948 has not been attained, and despite all progress, problems seem to grow rather than decrease. While the Roman Church is indeed active in the ecumenical movement, it has not joined the WCC. In the Third World, the majority of Christians by now belong to various Pentecostal churches that do not wish to be represented by the WCC—and some of them even pointedly reject it.

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[19] On this cf. P. Neuner, *Ökumenische Theologie: die Suche nach der Einheit der christlichen Kirchen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 1-5.

[20] Konrad Raiser, *Ökumene im Übergang: Paradigmenwechsel in der ökumenischen Bewegung?* (Munich: Kaiser, 1989), 160.

In view of such challenges, it is doubtful whether letting the differences remain and simply whitewashing them is a solution. As difficult as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches may currently appear in the ecumenical dialogue, their contribution has achieved at least one thing: one does not settle for the *status quo* or simple wrap it in a benign without avoiding the effort to strive for unity. Visible unity—which the WCC, by the way, has integrated into its constitution—is, at least in the Catholic understanding, the aim of the ecumenical movement. That this unity cannot mean uniformity or a "return to Rome" is by now self-evident. The correct form of this unity must be fought for, and it does not help simply to propagate an ecumenism of differences that no longer seems to take the commitment to unity seriously. Neither the Catholic or Orthodox nor the Protestant churches currently know what this unity may look like. But all the churches are equally called to work for it.