

The relevance of Receptive Ecumenism for formal bilateral and multilateral ecumenical dialogue

I served for some years as Principal of Westminster College in Cambridge where we held an extensive archive of material related to Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. She corresponded liberally with the Wesleys and we had the side of the correspondence that she *received* from them. We decided one day to get out some of the things in this treasured archive and invite our friends from Wesley House, in Cambridge, to come and see them. So, Methodist students and staff came to share worship in our United Reformed chapel, to have dinner and to view the archive. Among the items was a small book of Charles Wesley's hymns written in his own hand. I remember being deeply moved to see the awe and delight on the faces of my Methodist friends. One of the tutors knelt before the hymn book, and though we all laughed a little at the gesture I realised that I was experiencing something of how much those hymns meant to her. I have never forgotten that moment and whenever I sing a Wesley hymn I think of it. It was a moment in which that precious friendship from the past lit up a present-day ecumenical conversation.

There are two chapters in the book we are celebrating today that reflect on dialogue and conversation between Roman Catholics and Methodists. In one, David Chapman, a Methodist, describes how something shifted in a bi-lateral dialogue when they moved away from what he describes as the 'narrow horizons' of a Faith and Order kind of dialogue towards an exchange not only of ideas, but of gifts. He found that when the focus moved onto the experience of *living* in a tradition, it was much more possible to find understanding, and even convergence, on holiness, for example. In another chapter, a Roman Catholic, Peter Phillips, writes about his experience of what he describes as *re-receiving* Catholic Eucharistic theology, through the hymns of the Wesleys. Observing that Catholic and Methodist eucharistic narratives are remarkably similar (and the differences between them not so interesting for ecumenical dialogue) he turned to hymns that Methodists sing at the eucharist only to discover that his own sense of Catholic theology was deepened and enriched. He saw expressed in those hymns what Catholic tradition had been putting into words in other ways; that the cross and the supper are not two different sacrifices, that Christ is not veiled and hidden in the elements but revealed in the heart of the church's celebration, that Christ's presence is not 'cloaked' but proclaimed in the eucharist, that there is a profound link between the Church as the body of Christ and the eucharist itself. Whatever you make of his discoveries he bears testimony to a way in which receiving the gifts of another tradition (the hymns of the Wesleys) made more vivid and full his appreciation of his own.

Those two chapters, and my opening story, reveal something of the treasure of receptive ecumenism. At its best it moves the place of ecumenical conversation away from either an unreflective sharing of life and action *or* a dwelling on official doctrine only towards engagement with the actual lived reality of inhabiting particular traditions. The two chapters also reveal how the conversation does not mean that there is always an experience of loss or humiliation on one side or any kind of victory at the expense of the other, but actually an enrichment and a real honouring of both.

Another chapter in the book, chapter 3, the only chapter by an Orthodox writer, reveals how receptive ecumenism (even if it is not actually identified as such) can operate within a multilateral setting in a way that enables a tradition not to feel threatened by the encounter, but to feel encouraged. Tamara Grdzeldze writes as an Orthodox out of long, and sometimes painful, experience in Faith and Order at the World Council of Churches. She tells an important story, a story I had glimpsed already from one of the official responses to the Faith and Order text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. She writes first about how hard it can be for participants in ecumenical dialogues to take the results 'home' so that they can be received there. (Many Orthodox participants in such conversations face not only apathy, but often highly vocal and even violent criticism for their involvement when they return – a reality which is important for us all to recognise). Some of the official Orthodox responses to TCTCV were critical of the text, despite strong Orthodox involvement in preparing it over decades. But there was one moment, which Tamara brings to the fore, when Orthodox respondents applauded the text for its emphasis on mission and said that 'this is one area in which the Orthodox Church is challenged by this document to be faithful to her own missionary theology and heritage' (p.36). It is significant that Orthodox readers of the text found it possible to accept a challenge because it was one that could be understood as a re-discovery of their own tradition. In my experience of engaging in dialogue with Orthodox participants, using the kind of language that this book often employs about 'openness to change' often sounds rather threatening, 'Western' and liberal, but the language of rediscovery and of re-receiving the best of your own tradition is entirely welcome. I think that Tamara is right to say, as she does in the book, that this comment from the Orthodox responses to this multi-lateral dialogue does indeed resonate with a key principle of receptive ecumenism, that dialogue at its best leads to the fulfilling of your own tradition and not to its dismantling.

Tony Curren, in chapter 10, relates how the ARCIC III conversations moved from seeking 'differentiated consensus' to using receptive ecumenism, beginning with 'seeking to learn from our partner rather than asking our partner to learn from us' (p.112). He reports that instead of doing what they had been doing before, which he suspects was sometimes little more than re-clothing the status quo in different words, the more dynamic conversation shaped by receptive ecumenism leads to something much more concrete. Starting from a different place, a less threatening and vulnerable place in some ways because participants are not simply defending their own tradition, seems to give new energy to ecumenical conversations. Risto Saarinen and Minna Hietamäki, in chapter 8, also relate how a new interpretation of Luther may have revealed elements within his theology that, when re-received, make dialogue with 'ancient' churches and the quest for coherence more possible than (in the example they suggest) the laborious seeking of consensus in the process that led to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.

Without doubt, receptive ecumenism often opens up conversations in new ways and brings renewed energy and hope to the ecumenical movement. Certainly it can be a profoundly attractive alternative to the kind of defensive rivalry that ecumenical conversations can often become. Unquestionably, its values and spirituality are gentle, kindly, demonstrating humility and hospitality on our common pilgrimage on the way of Christ. And its emphasis on the transformative learning that all of us need as we seek to walk of the way of Christ is admirable. All this is to be celebrated and applauded.

But, as someone who has laboured in the field of Faith and Order, I think there are some challenges to be faced too.

Sometimes there is a sense of relief expressed by those who embrace receptive ecumenism, a relief of which I am just a little suspicious. Callan Slipper reflects, for example, that receptive ecumenism might have 'more achievable goals'. There may be the relief of finding a new opening, a new encouragement in the conversation, but might it also sometimes be the relief of ending some of the difficult and laborious conversations that might actually be really necessary if we are to find the gift of unity that Christ prays for? I remember so well those moving images of the Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala being embraced with the kiss of peace by Pope Francis. Would that really have been possible without the hard labour behind the scenes to seek the differentiated consensus around the JDDJ?

You cannot read a book like this one without being struck by the number of times that we are encouraged to be 'open to change' and to make ourselves 'vulnerable', and to display our wounds to one another. But I know that, despite many reassurances, this will sound uncomfortable to those who see 'openness to change' (rather than say 'restored faithfulness to the tradition') as a decidedly modern and Western value. I also wonder how those, for example, in black churches in the US can be urged to be vulnerable when their wounds are all too visible and still so deeply painful and founded in injustice. And, is it possible that, sometimes, receptive ecumenism becomes a way to avoid exposing your tradition to the *critique* of others because they will be searching first for your gifts – and so to avoid some of the appropriately challenging parts of traditional dialogue? I wonder if sometimes receptive ecumenism can succumb to a temptation to do something that feels 'safer'?

Paul Murray's final chapter sets out plainly the direction and motivation of receptive ecumenism, arguing that it is a journey towards each tradition's healing and flourishing. Here I see that it is certainly not simply 'reconciled diversity' (what Jurgen Moltmann described as 'the sleeping pill of the ecumenical movement'¹), but neither is it convergence. Murray also says that it is not motivated by the high ideal of the call to Christian unity (which is not enough, he argues, to sustain a commitment to real ecclesial change), so much as the felt needs of the churches as they are right now. It is an 'ecumenism of need' (p.474). He looks to a future of 'redeemed diversity', with differences that need no longer divide us and uses images of rainbow, polyphony and Christmas tree to stir our imaginations. But, am I really alone in being motivated still by that high ideal? There is diversity to be celebrated and I revel in it as much as anyone, but there is plenty of room for diversity within a united church – diversity not being the opposite of unity, but even its pre-requisite. And I think that a test of receptive ecumenism will be whether, with all the other ecumenical disciplines, it can bring us closer to that day when we can sit around one table together and share the one bread and the one cup – and we can celebrate that we have one church, one faith and one Lord.

¹ *A Broad Place. An Autobiography*, Fortress Press, 2008, p.86