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CHRISTIAN UNITY RECONSIDERED
- Comments on the dream of the ecumenical century -

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Introduction

The driving force behind the ecumenical movement in the last century was a magnificent vision of a clearly visible, universally accepted Christian unity which would be truly global, reaching out across all cultures. The quest for unity as such, of course, is not a peculiarly modern phenomenon. Philosophically, it has engaged humankind ever since the pre-Socratic thinkers wondered how the many and the one could be conceived as belonging together. Religiously, it has been prominent in all so-called monotheistic religions: sharing in the unity in which all things have their being was seen as the ultimate destiny of human life. In both these ways, the unity theme has occupied Christian faith and theology from the first centuries onward. In both perspectives, the unity of the *church* was an article of faith with eschatological overtones: like the unity of humankind, it referred to a meta-historic reality that could be experienced to some degree but remained dependent on a final action of divine grace. In modern times, however – more specifically: in the European world after the religious wars in the seventeenth century – a new element entered into the quest. Churchmen and theologians began to consider the possibility of a visible, overarching unity of Christians that could be managed and justified on the basis of the content of the various Christian traditions, and that would enhance the credibility of Christianity in the contemporary world.

At first this idea of visible unity was advanced with a view to the sad division between eastern and western Christianity and to the devastating effects of the conflicts between the Roman church and the churches of the Reformation. But as plurality increased in following centuries, the idea became a strong counter-movement, aimed at reminding Christians of their unity 'in Christ', pointing to the ultimate unity of all things to which this unity would testify. In many ways, this counter-movement was heir to the Enlightenment concept of a basic, inalienable unity shared by all human beings. The historical rise of the movement was due to the firm belief that, notwithstanding all sorts of cultural and confessional differences, both legitimate and illegitimate, it was possible to discover a common Christian identity, enabling Christians all over the world to pray, celebrate and act together. Transnational theological research and dialogue, crossing the borders of church confessions and differences of culture, were considered to be the appropriate means to this end.

It cannot be denied that the story of ecumenism has been, by and large, a great story, a story of success. The founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948, the Faith and Order report on 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' (Lima 1982) combined with 'The Eucharistic Liturgy' (Lima 1982) which made common celebration possible after centuries of separation, and the common declaration by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation on the doctrine of justification (1999) are just a few examples of constructive discussion and good practice. Concerning the relation between church and world, mention can be made of the

fruitful concept of 'responsible society' (Amsterdam 1948), of the concept of the 'just, participatory and sustainable society' (Nairobi 1975), and of the 'conciliar process of justice, peace and the integrity of creation' (1983-1990).

However, the modern quest for unity inescapably also stimulated free 'mature' thinking and thus, implicitly, of plurality. It is one of the tragedies of the twentieth century ecumenical movement, that it cherished both unity and plurality and often underestimated the basic antagonism between them. The movement had to face the painful fact that each effort to turn the quest for unity into an historical project necessarily implies the taming of plurality; that the discovery of what is binding – in the sense of holding the traditions together – necessarily implies the *imposing* of what is binding, in the sense of limiting spontaneous expression. The histories of individual churches and their efforts at (re-)union as well as the history of the ecumenical movement give ample evidence of the fact that there is some violence in the management of visible unity, to the extent that it stages conflicts between different views, collisions of interests and power games, - and also to the extent that it is inclined to enforce the outcome of these conflicts, collisions and games on a reality in which plurality remains alive.

Notwithstanding its impressive achievements, the ecumenical movement, as we have known it in its heyday, is no more with us. In Western countries, the spirit of ecumenism probably died somewhere between 1989 and 1991, when, according to historian Eric Hobsbawm, the twentieth century – the age of extremes – came to an end. In our day, the question of Christian unity in universal perspective has become very perplexing indeed. The cynical, relativistic mood of our times stands in glaring contrast to the fairly simple and optimistic expectations of the ecumenical pioneers. Today the issue of Christian unity is heavily burdened with disillusions, and men and women who have devoted a great deal of their lives to the spirit of ecumenism are inclined to wonder whether they have made the right choice. How can we explain this change? Why has the issue of Christian unity become so complex and confusing? Why has disintegration of Christian unity and identity, at least in the Western world, become so apparent? How can we explain this historical paradox: that the achievements of what might be called 'consensus ecumenism' have not produced a clearer sense of Christian identity, but, on the contrary, a feeling of disintegration and crisis? Why has consensus ecumenism become a stumbling block for the ecumenical movement in dealing with the vital issues of today, such as globalisation, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, popular religion and the spectacular growth of charismatic churches and movements? Looking back on the 'ecumenical century' at a time in which most of its ideals no longer generate wide enthusiasm, it has become necessary to investigate the question to what extent the historical ecumenical quest for unity was, after all, a mistake.

In dealing with this question, we will try to determine how unity and plurality have generally been understood in the history of ecumenism. We will see that both concepts are complex and problematic. We will conclude that the tenability of some fundamental premises of consensus ecumenism needs to be questioned. Without denying that the building of consensus between different church traditions remains important, we will plead for a different way of dealing with Christian tradition(s) and identity.[1]

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[1] As this article is dedicated to Anton Houtepen, who is well-known as a man of wide reading, we do not find it necessary to burden this text with footnotes. Our contribution should be read as a continuation of the stimulating discussions the three of us had while working on the ecumenical handbook *Oecumene als leerproces,* Zoetermeer 1995 (second printing).

Two different concepts of plurality

To begin with, it is necessary to look somewhat more closely at the understanding of plurality that is generally implied in the ecumenical discourse on unity. It is a plurality of confessional positions in dispute with each other about the legacy of the one tradition. In this approach, unity is about the mutual recognition and reconciliation of these positions; and unity discussions tend to concentrate on those elements of ecclesiology that emphasize 'tradition', such as sacraments and ministry. This understanding of plurality and unity is obviously bound to the historical and geographical context of post-Reformation Europe. The churches of eastern Christianity, for example, do not understand themselves as a part of the problem which condemns the Roman Catholic and the mainline Protestant churches to each other. Might this not be true also for those churches and movements which emerged during the modern expansion of Christianity, and for the churches which came into existence in the non-western world in the context of the modern missionary movement? Of course, most of these churches do participate in 'mainline' unity discussions about confessional plurality and the unity of the one tradition, and their contributions remain important. Nevertheless, the theological agenda that is implied in the logic of these discussions does not necessarily reflect the dominant concerns of these churches.

A few general historical remarks may be in order here. The transformation of the one Catholic Church into a plurality of confessional institutions was a traumatic process, including fragmentation, confusion, violence and war. It was the reverse side of a thorough renewal in European Christianity which ultimately stabilized itself in Protestantism and post-Trentian Catholicism. Some of the radical movements that had participated in this renewal but had not become part of the stabilization went underground and awaited their chances in the westward movement of Christianity. Their full flourishing would depend on the integration of the heritage of radicalism with movements of inner renewal, such as Pietism and Revivalism. It was the turbulent history of the Church of England in the seventeenth century, and especially the emergence of Puritanism, that created the setting in which this 'new' Christianity found fertile ground for further growth. Puritanism was a major constructive element in the transition between the period of Catholic and Protestant Reformation and the period of the 'modern' church. It stressed both personal conversion and social construction – elements which would ultimately appear to be working against each other but which, especially in North America, created a new alliance between religion and culture. Millennial visions provided an eschatological framework in which the development of a modern world and the ongoing covenant of God with his people remained related to each other.

It is fascinating to see the double function of the Church of England at the intersection between a plurality that remained bound to one geographical space (and to the dispute about the one tradition) and a plurality that was linked to expansion. On the one hand, this church claimed to be the only legitimate and feasible channel for a constructive handling of the 'confessional' separation between Protestantism and Catholicism. In that respect, it still has a significant place in the order of comparative ecclesiology and consensus ecumenism. On the other hand, it became the breeding ground for a variety of movements that ultimately went in a different direction, in the process producing what is sometimes called – in a generalizing way – 'evangelical and charismatic Christianity'. It is equally fascinating to see how this functional duality was reproduced in New England Congregationalism which was both an establishment of tradition and a springboard for separation movements. The duality was

reproduced again in the eighteenth century, when Methodism – originally and intentionally a movement of renewal within the Church of England – organized itself as a separate denomination in North America; and then again in the nineteenth century when various holiness movements, borne in the womb of Methodism, could not be contained in the existing organization and established themselves independently. We have an ongoing history of pluralization here, which is not primarily the result of disputes about the right interpretation of the Christian tradition, but of a further contextualization of the Christian faith among an increasingly pluralized population. In other words, the modern westward expansion of Christianity produced its own kind of plurality.

All this leads to the supposition that we might have to distinguish between (at least) two concepts of plurality, both important but not always recognized as such. One has its place in a stabilized confessionalism, where disputed claims to the one tradition determine the theological agenda. The other belongs to a context of expansion and construction, where radical questions are raised about individual salvation and the millennium. The focus of the first is ecclesiological, the focus of the second eschatological. They differ in their implied perception of tradition and identity. The point is not, that the churches and movements of 'westward Christianity' all concentrate on eschatology instead of ecclesiology and that they are not concerned about church, sacrament and ministry. The point is, rather, that the pluralization of Christianity in its westward movement took place in a social and cultural configuration that differed from post-Reformation Europe; this new configuration implied and favoured a different approach to the issue of Christian identity and, consequently, a different ordering of theological issues.

It is of course possible – and to a certain extent also legitimate – to ignore this difference, and to try to do justice to the so-called free churches and movements in a confessionally and ecclesiologically focused framework. This is in fact what happened and still happens in the dominant ecumenical discourse about Christian unity. What remains underexposed in this method, however, is the fact that, in the particular historical configuration of the westward movement, ecclesiology (especially issues of sacraments and ministry, and the concept of unity) has a different position in the hierarchy of theological concerns. This different position implies, that separation and separateness in the churches of modern Christianity are not necessarily only valued in a negative way. Separations are sometimes considered and used as a means to express a development of theological insight or even as an enrichment of the reality of the church. To regard all ruptures and expansions as failures of communion would mean to judge them one-sidedly on the basis of the paradigm of confessionalism.

As long as the dominant ecumenical discourse about unity embraces only one concept of plurality, it implicitly claims the right to set the terms of the discussion to the 'one given tradition'. In doing so, it makes the European inter-confessional problem normative for all of Christianity. What we see here is in fact an example of the domestication of plurality. Plurality is 'tamed' for the sake of confessional unity by means of disputes on confessional differences.

The heterogeneity of the ideal of unity

We take a second step by recalling the well-known fact that there were (at least) three preludes to the 'dream of the ecumenical century'. There was, fervently shared by the eastern churches, the desire to transcend the separations within the one body of the Church, and this desire became linked to the discovery of 'tradition' as an organic whole that allowed for a certain degree of plurality while remaining a common breeding ground for living Christian faith. But there was also the dream of the missionary movement – one might say: the answer of Christian eschatology to the new accessibility of the 'ends of the earth'. And, last but not least, there was the revival of moral consciousness and social concern, related to new problems of modern world society: totalitarian ideologies, war at world scale and structural poverty. Each of these movements cherished its own vision of unity, albeit implicitly. The first focused on the Church as a community of reconciliation, confession and celebration. The missionary vision, by contrast, was more inclined to strive for a world-wide network of contextual witness. Churches, in this perspective, were first fruits of the coming kingdom of God or springboards for the renewal of cultures. The social-ethical vision, finally, saw churches and movements as strategic instruments for the moral transformation of society.

In other words, the one dream of the ecumenical movement was threefold from the beginning: we see three different ways here of ordering theological questions, three different sets of ecumenical priorities. Even so, the three movements converged in the formation of the World Council of Churches. This formation and its preparation took place in times that clearly called for a strong network of churches. The Life and Work world conference in Oxford (1937) and the world missionary conference in Tambaram (1938) make that point emphatically: the 'unity of humankind' presents itself in the guise of dangerous neo-pagan ideologies and a worldwide culture of secularism, and Christianity is challenged to place its own unity over against this danger in the form of prophetic witness and service by the churches. This choice gave birth to the World Council of Churches, and granted to the ecumenical movement as a whole a definite *church focus*. That focus held the three prelude-movements together, at least provisionally.

Could it be that the emergence of the three distinct movements was in itself a symptom of modernity? In pre-modern Europe, where the Christian church occupied a position of cultural dominance, these three different concerns were, in a certain sense, aspects of one church establishment. It was an establishment that contained the eschatological reference to the 'unity of all things' in itself: it simultaneously provided a vision of the church as the body of Christ and a vision of the world as the context of salvation in which Christian faith and life find expression. All this changed – gradually, of course – with the advent of modernity. The establishment fell apart; the church was transformed into a community with a specific social identity among other institutions, in need of a confessional ecclesiology to define and defend itself; and the missionary and moral concerns re-emerged outside of the church, re-shaped as it were in their own confrontation with modern visions of the world. In the course of this historical development, an important function of eschatology was subtly taken over by modernity itself: modernity provided a (new) way of conceiving of world and history as a continuing narrative of human progress with a beginning and an end. The church came to represent a particular phase in that narrative, even in its religious-millennial versions. In that perspective, it should be noticed that the tensions between church and modern culture also reflect a certain de-eschatologization of church and ecclesiology. The self-understanding of

Christianity in the world became defensive; it was transformed into, and narrowed down to, the self-definition of the church over against the modern world. The modern world became, explicitly or implicitly, the point of reference for the self-understanding of the churches.

Against the background of this loss of connection between the eschatological vision and the self-understanding of the church, the modern missionary movement acquires a special significance. This movement embodied a specifically modern messianic hope: expansion, conquering the ends of the earth, was linked to the coming of the kingdom of God. The missionary movement sought to connect its modern messianic vision with original biblical substance. In other words, it re-christianized a partly secularized eschatology. It is not surprising that the modern missionary movement was not fully trusted by the established churches until far into the twentieth century. Even now, 'mission' appears to resist complete integration into 'church'. Is it possible to say similar things about the social-ethical movement? There can be no doubt that Christian ethics as a discipline is a specifically modern phenomenon. It came into being when Christians were challenged to match the development of Enlightenment ethics by finding ways of relating Gospel and world, faith and life, more explicitly. It joined the project of modern ethics – the effort to deal with the moral dimensions of the complexity of social life on the basis of autonomous reason, individual judgment and communication by argument – with the intention to (re-)christianize it.

If this analysis has some plausibility, the convergence of the three movements in the twentieth century is not without its problems. The convergence might have become a first step in the re-integration of eschatology and ecclesiology, of world-concern and church-concern; it might have contributed towards a creative link between the focus on traditions as separate entities in need of reconciliation and a recapturing of eschatology from modernity. What happened instead, however, was that the *church focus* caused a privileging of only one of the preludes. The unity of churches, conceived in the modern sense as bodies with specific social and confessional identities, came to be regarded as the main agenda, to which the so-called 'world issues' were added as second-order problems. The eschatological perspective thus gradually became a specific concern assigned to 'missions' (proclaiming the Gospel to all nations) and to 'ethics' (striving for peace and justice), instead of remaining a fundamental theological reference point for the self-understanding of the church and the ecumenical movement as a whole. The participation of the eastern orthodox churches in the ecumenical movement strengthened this tendency. The consequence of all this was the reduction of mission to 'witness' and of ethics to 'service' and 'commitment'. Missions and ethics became functions of the church and lost their original eschatological status.

There can be no doubt that it was a major achievement of the ecumenical pioneers to create one organization for the renaissance of western and eastern Christianity, and to develop a vision that could somehow hold missions, ethics and unity together. At the heyday of the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century the building stones of this vision were: a christocentric universalism (Raiser), a biblical theology that focused on a continuing salvation history of election and mission, and concepts such as 'missio dei' or 'conciliarity' that referred to the ultimate coherence of church, world, mission, and kingdom of God.
In hindsight we see more clearly that this vision masked to a certain extent the co-existence of heterogeneous elements. In addition we notice that the church focus in fact privileged a largely de-eschatologized ecclesiology. That implied that existing plurality could not be taken

fully seriously. In other words: the church focus became another instance of the taming of plurality.

The Catholic option

Against the background of the preceding two points, we now proceed to look at the discussions on unity within the World Council of Churches, more particularly within its 'Commission on Faith and Order', during the second half of the twentieth century. The discussions took place on the basis of a widely shared dedication to the goal of organic, full, visible unity of all Christian churches: first of all 'in each place', but then also in supra-local, 'conciliar' networks of sustained and sustaining relationships in common recognition of ministry and sacraments. In all this, the 'one given Tradition' was meant to become visible within an acceptable (and limited) diversity. It is very interesting to see how 'unity' began to refer not only to formal agreements, but also to sharing of faith, spirituality and even suffering, and to common action in witness, service and renewal. Since the 1990's, the word *koinonia* has come to the fore as a comprehensive expression of the quality of unity. Church unity is described as founded upon the Trinitarian *koinonia* in God, and as including dedication to the coming kingdom in mission and in the formation of a common moral life. 'Unity' began to mean the development and the maintenance of a uniting ecclesiology: a common understanding of the 'church' in and for the 'world'. The various proposals for alternative models to 'organic unity', such as 'conciliar fellowship', 'reconciled diversity' and 'communion of communions', basically shared this agenda.

Of crucial significance in these developments was the contribution of the Roman Catholic Church which took an active share in the discussions on Christian unity from the Second Vatican Council onward. The event of the council itself produced a new model for unity, called conciliar fellowship; this model envisioned a world-wide network of relations of communion and accountability among locally united churches. It added an emphasis on mutual recognition and cooperation to the already existing emphasis on organic oneness. It even implied the possibility of a future council that might be able to speak for all Christians. At the same time it allowed for diversity and plurality on condition that there would be continuous open communication, in the framework of a commonly recognized communion. Generally speaking, the attractiveness of the Catholic approach to issues of church and unity for the larger ecumenical movement begins here.

It is an attractiveness that implies much more, however, than merely the idea of a council and of 'conciliar' relations. It concerns the vision of the church as a meta-historic reality, once for all given to the world as communion with Christ, and as such intrinsically related to the unity of humankind and the unity of all things. The Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church calls the church a sacrament, a sign and instrument of the unity of the human race. In terms of our analysis of the three preludes we might add that this strong statement made it possible for the unity discussions to move beyond the dilemmas and stalemates of the modern disjunction between ecclesiology and eschatology and to revive once again the pre-modern vision of a church at the centre of the universe. At the same time, the Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World embraced a definitely modern concept of

'world': world with a more or less autonomous narrative of its own, partner of the church in its pilgrim journey through history. Yet here too, the church remained the central focus, and in this sense even this constitution preserved essential elements of a pre-modern self-understanding. The relation between the two constitutions, and the mixture of pre-modern and modern notions of the church in the world creates a problem, namely the implication that the church is (also) a strong powerful institution in the modern sense of the word. Notwithstanding the promising aspects of the Catholic option, this implication in fact intensifies – so it seems – the ambivalence already present in the church focus of the ecumenical handling of the unity question.

At first sight the Roman Catholic entry in the ecumenical movement seemed to offer the possibility to combine the ideal of church unity with the (eschatological) vision of the unity of humankind. Obviously under the impression of this accomplishment, the Uppsala assembly of the World Council of Churches (1968) called the church 'a sign of the coming unity of mankind'. This superficial resemblance, however, masks a certain confusion. Catholic ecclesiology tends to see the unity of humankind as the outer circle of the continuous, coherent and institutional church, as the community of all human beings who, in a certain sense, by nature and divine appointment already belong to that church. Uppsala, by contrast, spoke in a much more modern way of a unity which is hoped for in the midst of the complex problems of human interdependence and of a church which, by its missionary and social-ethical involvement in the world, might become a signpost towards that unity. The ambivalence resulting from this confusion remained throughout the unity discussions of the remaining decades of the twentieth century. The strong attraction of the Catholic option, which seemed to be able to place all aspects of Christian communal and 'worldly' life under the arch of a strong ecclesiology, paradoxically entailed a strong continuity with a de-eschatologized church focus. Reverting to our comments on the different concepts of plurality and on the heterogeneity of the ideal of unity, we have to raise two questions about the actual role of the Catholic option. Can the modern phenomenon of expansion and plurality truly be taken seriously in this option; can the option allow for a blossoming of plurality or is it basically another subtle form of taming and domestication? And secondly: can the eschatological quality of the encounter with the world in missionary, intercultural and social-ethical struggles in this option really be allowed to nourish and enrich the institutional church? There is room for serious doubt in both cases.

Radical plurality

The two questions more or less summarize the results of our brief historical inquiry. Unity and plurality have been at odds with each other from the beginning. Consensus ecumenism succeeded in the heydays of ecumenism to establish an overarching framework, albeit provisional and vulnerable. Defining the management of visible unity as the core business of the ecumenical movement, however, implied the taming of plurality. During the last decades of the twentieth century this taming process gradually lost its credibility. Due to several developments inside and outside world Christianity the problem of radical plurality came to the surface in a way that can no longer be avoided. There is an interconnectedness here of internal and external factors.

The twentieth century witnessed the rapid development of the experience of Christian plurality, in the context of the discovery of radical cultural and religious plurality of humankind as such. After the plurality experience which was an aspect of the expansion and consolidation of the modern western world, it is now the culture question that constitutes a genuinely new challenge. We have to realize that, for the past fifty years, a major shift is going on in the history of Christianity: its gravity centre is moving away from Europe. At the beginning of the last century more than 70 per cent of the world's Christian population still was European. Now, one hundred years later, the European percentage has diminished to about 28. Gradually Christianity is becoming a religion of the Southern Hemisphere.This dramatic shift makes the culture problem acute. Consensus ecumenism, however, is unable to deal with this problem in an adequate way. It has no room for serious reflection on the inculturation and contextuality of Christian faith, as it tends to handle recent forms of 'contextual theology' as more or less legitimate variations of the dominant 'universal' theological discourse. For a long time, even the missionary movement recognized the culture question only as a problem of adaptation and indigenization of the universal missionary message. Questions about the value and the strength of non-western cultures as a medium for the expression of the faith of non-western Christians did not emerge until the sixties and seventies, and then these questions acquired decisively anti-western overtones.

The term *contextuality* is related to the choice of position of non-western theologians over against traditional approaches which interpret the non-western world on the basis of preconceived images of the 'other' culture. The non-western theologian tries to free him/herself from the defining, judging and also somewhat disparaging look that comes from a theological tradition established over centuries. In these discussions, the concept of context acquires polemical features. The concept does not refer simply to social and cultural conditioning, but rather to a junction of religious, social and cultural histories which becomes the breeding ground for a conscious faithful choice of position by Christians. In this process, traditional ways of theological thinking are criticized in a fundamental way. However, contextual theology in no way denies the universal scope of the Christian message. One might say: contextual theologies raise the question of the universality of the Christian message in a different way. The several forms of 'contextual theology' – all of which, not by accident, saw the light around the same time, at the beginning of the 1970's – exposed critically, each in their own way, the intertwining of the missionary and ecumenical thrust with the rationality of Western expansion - an intertwining which for Christians in the Third World often implied a deep alienation from their own culture and history. Contextual theology, therefore, is polemical theology: 'with passion and compassion' it defends the right to read the biblical narratives critically in the light of a particular historical and existential experience.

In this respect it does not make an essential difference whether the term *inculturation* or the notion of contextuality is central. In theological schemes that prefer to use the term contextuality, the discussion is about liberation or justice in situations of racism, sexism or economic and political oppression. Where the originally Roman-Catholic concept of inculturation is preferred, the focus is not only on the permanent transformation of cultures, but also on the struggle against 'anthropological poverty' – the expression comes from the late African priest, poet and artist Engelbert Mveng – of people who have been robbed of their culture and history and are in search of a new identity. In both cases - contextuality or inculturation - the main question is: given the glaring asymmetrical global conditions (the reality behind 'pluralism'), what exactly do we mean by 'universal', when we speak about the universal meaning of the Gospel?

One might say: contextual theology highlights the tension between the present globalisation and the eschatological reality of a reconciled creation.The hermeneutical challenge, therefore, is not to incorporate non-Western elements into established theological traditions. When a particular religious, cultural and social setting is called a context, this setting is introduced as a factor with its own significance and its own function into the project of the 'trans-contextual' practice of a global theology. There is, in fact, a third concept of plurality at work here: a plurality that is determined by the problems and promises of global intercultural communication and by the challenge of cultural and religious pluralism. The world-wide pluralization of Christianity reflects, in other words, the plurality of humankind as such. Put more strongly: the question of the possibility of the unity and reconciliation of humankind has become part of the self-definition of Christianity.

There is another aspect of this new, radical plurality that requires attention. It is a well-known fact that the variety of Christianity that expands most rapidly in the non-western world is the 'charismatic' variety, with its strong emphasis on immediate experience, healing and miracles. It mixes easily with forms of local popular religion and nurses a strong 'post-colonial' suspicion towards taming and defining efforts by higher ecclesial bodies or by modern rational discourse. It obviously does not share the ecclesiological interest of western ecumenical Christianity, and it does not value the link with the Enlightenment which has always been so essential to the self-understanding of the ecumenical movement. It moves beyond the typically western context of the emergence of modernity and the shaping of a specific modern-western culture, and with that beyond the preoccupation with the church-world distinction and the relation between church, mission and (social) ethics. Its focus is eschatological rather than ecclesiological, also in its tendency to be concerned with life, freedom to move and grow, health and permanent happiness, rather than with a clear delineation of the boundaries between church and world. It subordinates the definition and defence of churches as institutional-confessional bodies to the experience of spontaneous creation of community in the direct confrontation of faith and life.

With these characteristics, the new radical plurality reminds us of the fact that the Christianity of westward expansion in its time also created and provoked specific Christian anti-establishment movements, often called – in a generalizing way – 'evangelical and charismatic Christianity'. These movements were – and still are – also characterized by a strong suspicion of institutional churches and unity projects, and by a strong eschatological spirituality. We suggested before, that the eschatological function of pre-modern ecclesiology was at least in part relinquished to the project of modernity, which conceived of world and history as a continuing narrative of human knowledge and progress with a beginning and an end. In reality, of course, this was a much more complicated process, in which pre-modern millennial movements and their continuation into modern times played an important part. The 'evangelical and charismatic movements' arose partly out of this process. And they never became part of the quest for unity that was alive in large parts of Christianity in the twentieth century. In the non-western world of today, and also in the migrant churches in the big European cities, they come back with a vengeance, one might say, to confront the 'regular' ecumenical movement with the weaving mistakes of the beginnings of the unity project – mistakes that led again and again to the taming of plurality and the loss of eschatology.

Obviously, the new radical plurality, together with its historical precedents, profoundly challenges the settings and presuppositions of the discourse on unity as it has developed in the

ecumenical movement. And implicitly, by becoming co-extensive with global plurality, it makes the unity of humankind central to the agenda of Christianity, instead of considering this ultimate unity as a mere postulate of a project of visible church unity.

The problem of Christian identity

Specifying visible church unity as the central concern of the ecumenical movement implied, as we have argued, taming of plurality and loss of eschatology. It was to a large extent the advent of modernity that brought this about. The self-understanding of Christianity in a secularising world became apologetic. The enlightened world with its particular brand of rationality became the point of reference for this self-understanding. Western-European Christianity began to understand its tradition(s) and its identity over against and in terms of the presumptions of modernity. As a result of this, at least two things happened. First of all: Christianity was understood as a community with a given identity among other institutions with their own 'mission' and identity. And secondly: Christian tradition(s) had to be defended and explained in terms of modern rationality – Christianity became 'a thinking religion', to use Adolf von Harnack's phrase.

Consensus ecumenism can to a large extent be interpreted as an outgrowth of this new phenomenon of the rationalisation of tradition. Tradition began to be conceived as a process in which a *traditum*, a given content, is handed down to following generations. In this perspective, the content of what is to be handed down is rationalised, and thus objectified and regarded as a package of beliefs and doctrinal rules. Tradition is like a container or a vehicle which conveys a particular load: a cargo of religious, doctrinal or ethical norms and values.

In reality, however, traditions are ongoing adventures in the construction of meaning. They comprise much more than can be expressed in the rational process of doctrinal formulation and dispute. Christian traditions are not, and never have been, systematically developed bodies of knowledge handed down in institutions of learning. 'Tradition' always means struggling and seeking, feeling and thinking, encountering and sharing, hoping and despairing, praying and acting, empowering and repenting, listening and speaking, remembrance and commemoration, lifestyle and narrative, festivities and rituals. Whatever is handed down in religious tradition is not a neat package of rules and norms, but a colourful collection of texts, narratives, rites, practices and institutions. In this permanent process of handing down and receiving, nothing ever remains the same. Whenever a tradition is summarized as a body of reified truths, the living dynamic is lost. In one of his articles, Anton Houtepen follows Paul Ricoeur in pointing out that all our historical traditions of faith can be regarded as historical configurations: 'as a mosaic of memories, practices, rituals, confessions, social networks, as an amalgam of spiritualities, emotions, festivals, world views, in short of diverse *cultures*'.

If this is taken seriously, Christian tradition can never be looked upon as something given once and for all. Looking for the one given Tradition in order to present it to the world in a convincing way is bound to fail. Tradition, as a contextual and cultural chain of practices,

creates a space with various dimensions, with shifting boundaries, a kaleidoscopic totality of narrative, symbolic and liturgical expressions, of fractures, conflicts, of mutual recognition and reconciliation. In all this, a permanent (re-)orientation takes place on the beginnings of Christianity: on its complex but highly significant links with Judaism, on its early scriptures and on the apostolic tradition. This (re-)orientation – interpreting, testing and explaining the sources – is, however, only one of the elements of Christian tradition. It remains indispensable, but it should not be confused with tradition itself. Interpreting, testing and explaining is always a second step, that follows the life stream of tradition itself. Therefore, the idea that 'visible unity' could be a matter of formulations and concepts is highly misleading. The uniting process leading to what is now called the Protestant Church in the Netherlands has abundantly demonstrated that formal agreements, however necessary, only touch the intellectual surface of religious traditions in their diverse and complex functioning.

Every rite, every symbol, narrative, confession or celebration, we suggest, refers to an eschatological or messianic dimension that does not become full reality as long as we live in an unreconciled world. Christian tradition points beyond itself; it contains a *surplus* that cannot be adequately defined by rational thinking or evoked by radical action. If this essential messianic dimension is taken seriously, tradition becomes a space of encounter, of discovery, curiosity and amazement. Tradition then becomes what it always was: a space for adventure, for new discoveries, on the basis of what the past has to offer.

These considerations are relevant when we speak about Christian identity. As the one Tradition is never 'given', neither can Christian identity be objectified and reified. Confronted with a modern, secularized world, churches have tried to safeguard and maintain their own existence. In the process, 'identity' was implicitly conceived as something of the past that had to be defended against the dangers of secular society. Identity, however, is not a biblical concept; it is not even a biblical concern. The concept stems from an ancient philosophical tradition that goes back to the pre-Socratics. Although the expression 'philosophy of identity' in the strict sense is used for the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, in a certain way the whole tradition of metaphysics can be interpreted as a 'philosophy of identity', in which, in the final instance, *otherness* is reduced to *oneness*.

Since the calamities of the twentieth century this tradition of metaphysics is under attack. The work of philosophers such as Levinas, Lyotard and Derrida can be understood as an attempt to expose the violent nature of Western metaphysics of identification. By introducing 'difference', 'otherness' and 'alterity' as irreducible categories, they dissociate themselves from the history of this tradition. Their aim is to resist, with the aid of these categories, the tendency of metaphysics to become totalizing – that is: to reduce all phenomena to the identity of the One. This also implicates Christian theology. For the history of this theology is deeply marked by the identification of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with the God of the Greek philosophers, the Highest Being, the source of all that exists – as reflected in the translation of God's name (in the story of the burning bush, Exodus 3:14) with the phrase 'I am who I am' (*ego sum qui sum).*

Our analysis sofar suggests that the ecumenical quest for visible unity is associated with the great tradition of the 'philosophy (and theology) of identity'. For it was widely believed in the 'ecumenical century' that visible unity can only allow for a certain plurality if there is a commonly agreed and visible 'identity' that ultimately transcends all conflicts, oppositions and differences. The crisis of the ecumenical movement and of the quest for visible unity is

obviously associated with the crisis of this great tradition. In the light of all this one is tempted to conclude that the quest for a common identity and unity is no longer valid. However, dropping the concern altogether would mean allowing free play to fragmentation, individualism and relativism. How to deal with this dilemma?

To begin with, we need to recall that Christians do not have a monopoly on the crisis of identity. On the contrary, disintegration of identity is rampant at every level of society. More and more individuals need therapeutic treatment because of identity problems, but also political parties, labour unions and many other organisations suffer from a loss of identity. In contemporary cultural analysis spatial metaphors are used to clarify the permanent movement and change that people experience. One such metaphor is the word *displacement* which refers to the permanent change as well as to the homelessness that is characteristic of a globalized world. Another example is a spatial metaphor that speaks for itself: *runaway world*. A third example is the term *diaspora*, which originally referred to the dispersion of the Jewish people: it is now frequently used for the fate of all people of African descent all around the Atlantic Ocean. *Spatializing* is another telling metaphor, expressing the paradox that 'global' and 'local' no longer exclude each other. In globalisation the local becomes an aspect of the global and vice versa.

What does this mean for the problem of identity? The 'global' and the 'local' are so intertwined that sociologist Roland Robertson coined the term 'glocalisation' to do justice to this phenomenon. Cultural symbols such as clothing and music that characterize the identity of an individual of a group all bear the signature of the 'glocal'. To mention just one example: the music of African-American people - spirituals, blues, soul, and rap – has become an essential factor in creating the identity of large groups in the world who feel that this music is part of their identity; and yet they do not know anything about the historical experience of slavery and racism that brought this music into existence. Today, this whole context of 'glocalization' determines one's identity, including one's religious identity and tradition. In our media-culture the rites, symbols and narratives which give meaning and create identity (and which have been handed down from the past by means of transmission of tradition) are absorbed into a maelstrom of rival narratives that go around the world market. That is also true for the concept of Christian identity. As a result, its meaning and significance are constantly subject to change. Permanent change does not support fixed identities. Identity has become fluid, pluralistic, fragmentary and syncretistic. In a world full of conflicting interests and loyalties, it is no longer possible to see oneself as an autonomous subject with a clear and stable identity. Pluralism is not only something outside oneself. Whether we like it or not, the antagonisms of pluralism have become part of our innermost individual self.

These 'post-modern' features might seem threatening for the churches. What remains of their historical identity? In our view, post-modernism offers a chance for the churches and the ecumenical movement to rediscover a vital aspect of their own tradition. We refer to the fact that according to the apostolic witness our identity, including our Christian identity, remains a promise and a mystery, even a riddle, for we only know in part (1 Cor.13: 12). Identity is, from the point of view of biblical theology, an eschatological notion. In the history of Christianity there has always been the notion that, although Christians are loyal citizens, they are at the same time somehow 'strangers and sojourners' in this world. As strangers and migrants, Christians live between remembrance and expectation. That is what they celebrate in the Eucharist. Their identity is not to be found somewhere in the depth of their souls, but

outside themselves, hidden in Christ. They are set free by their faith in order not to worry too much about their own identity.

The unity project in retrospect

Our sketchy review of the unity discussions of the 'ecumenical century' suggested that the reality of Christian plurality has always stayed ahead of the efforts to bring this reality into some kind of manageable and conceptually definable framework. The plurality of expansion largely remained aloof from disputes about the 'one tradition'. The integration of the missionary and social-ethical branches of the ecumenical movement with the concern for churchly unity never really succeeded. The catholic option, although convincing in many respects, could not really liberate the ecumenical movement from a narrow concern with ecclesiology. The new plurality, finally, could not and cannot be contained within the limits of the presuppositions of the older ecumenical discourse. In the proposed analysis, the major problem is the *church focus* of the unity project, and the origin of this church focus lies in the advent of modernity, when church and world acquired new definitions in relation to each other and ecclesiology and eschatology were separated. Ignoring these problematic aspects of the alliance of the ecumenical movement with modernity, and concentrating only on the positive impulses of this alliance, has resulted in a failure to do justice to all relevant phenomena of modern Christianity in the concern for unity.

Can the 'catholic option' be of any help here? Obviously, its integrating and (re-)defining power is very tempting to an ecumenical movement that has lost its grip on 'real' Christianity and has reached the limits of its unity project. It remains a question, however, whether plurality and eschatology are really safe in this option. As long as the last word is 'unity' in the sense of a prior givenness that only needs to be applied in local situations, and as long as there are strong defining centres that keep the 'tradition' within certain limits, there is room for serious doubts. At the other end of the spectrum, the option is to create a leading theological model out of the globally expanding 'evangelical and charismatic Christianity' (this designation is still too much bound to western church history to be applicable on a wide scale) and to suggest that the balance of ecclesiology and eschatology that is found there will cure the ills of the ecumenical unity project. This option, too, is tempting: it capitalizes not on an over-arching world-wide unity of given communion (like the catholic option) but on the strength of local religion and the life-searching dynamics that are found there. However, here too serious questions can be raised. Is this model of unity not in danger of losing contact with the substance of the tradition(s) of Christianity and with the struggles of previous generations? Does it not run the risk of substituting emotional pressure for lucid consideration of the content of the Gospel; or of substituting the repetition of religious slogans for critical reflection on inherited doctrines?

It cannot be emphasized enough, that the quest for unity is not as such a peculiarly modern or western phenomenon; and it certainly is not foreign to Christianity. In other words: constant reflection on the question as to how the oneness that is promised with the coming of Christ and with the expectation of the kingdom of God can be made visible remains important and necessary. In this respect the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century has been of inestimable value. At the same time, we need to learn from its mistakes. We are gradually learning to appreciate that no limits can be set on the generous acceptance of plurality; that all

efforts to tame it are doomed to result in loss of communication or, worse, in violent repression. In addition: there is no historical anchor for the establishment of manageable unity. Neither (recollections of) pre-modern establishments nor modern definitions of churches as confessional communities constitute a viable option. Christian tradition is not something given which only waits to be properly received; it is a chaotic process of handing down symbols, rituals, narratives. The liberating content of these symbols, rituals and narratives needs to be rediscovered again and again.

Learning from mistakes can be the first step in the direction of the creation of an open ecumenical space to encounter the challenges of today. The creation of 'open ecumenical space' could mean: the establishment of networks of critical memory and expectation across the ever-increasing diversity of faith and witness; and the unceasing effort of locally rooted Christians or Christian communities to engage each other in the construction of a common memory and a common hope. Along this way it becomes possible to avoid the pitfalls of self-justification and complacency on the one hand, and relativism on the other hand. Ecumenism is a difficult but promising exercise in crossing boundaries in the encounter with the other and with otherness; it is losing oneself in order to encounter the self and the other in a new way.