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978-0-521-09053-7 - Ecumenism, Christian Origins and the Practice of Communion

Nicholas Sagovsky

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

The common life

The theme of this book is the life of God. It is about the shared life that God engenders and the God whose very being is a sharing. Christians are used to speaking of the life that God engenders within the Church as ‘*communion*’, of the Christian life as a *participation* in the life of God, and of the life that is God as *love*. There is one Greek word that can be used for all three: *koinonia*, of which the Latin translation is *communio*. This book is an exploration of *koinonia/communio* as the terms have been used in current ecumenical discussion and in the formation of the Christian tradition. There has in recent years been a groundswell of interest in ‘community’ and in society as a ‘community of communities’. An exploration of what it means for the Church to be that unique human community which is explicitly constituted by its communion in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is potentially a resource for the renewal of secular social thought, and the insights of secular social thought of the greatest value in renewing our understanding of the common life of the Christian Church.

In much ecumenical literature, the Latinate *communio* or *communio* is used interchangeably with the Greek *koinonia*.¹ These two words do, however, have differing resonances because of their differing provenance: the very different history and understanding of the churches and societies in East and West. One of the central points at issue in this book will be the losses and gains in translating Christianity, which first took institutional form in the Greek-speaking Hellenistic world, into

¹ See, for example, *Communio/Koinonia*, A Study by the Institute for Ecumenical Research (Strasburg, 1990).

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the institutional forms and language of the Latin-speaking West. It will be important to explore in depth the conceptuality associated with the Greek term *koinonia*, a term which is prominent in both Plato and Aristotle. It will also be necessary to explore Jewish conceptuality that fed into the use of *koinonia* and associated terms in the New Testament. The thread of the specific use of the word *koinonia* leads on to Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and particularly to the Cappadocians. The thread of *communio* leads by various routes to Augustine and to Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin, the Vulgate. In the chapters that follow it will be possible only to take soundings, to suggest a range of uses and some of the questions they raise for contemporary theology and ecumenical discussion. The wider aim, though, will be to demonstrate *communio* as the central reality of the Christian life, indeed of all life.

This approach raises a serious methodological issue, of which I have been acutely aware in writing this book. The first research was a word-study, using articles in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, and other standard sources.² The exposition that follows is marked by this approach, which has its uses and its dangers. One major use is the careful tracing of linguistic links that have been lost in translation. It is simply not possible from any of the standard English translations of the Bible to discern where words of the root 'koin-' are used and so to pick up some of the allusive links offered to the Greek reader of the New Testament. Nor is it possible to pick up, behind identically translated words or words with associated English roots, differences in the original Greek vocabulary, which may have suggested shades of meaning that have been lost in translation.

The dangers of word-studies are as great as the benefits. We

² *TDNT*, vol. 3 (article by F. Hauck), pp. 789–809; *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (17 vols., Paris: Beauchesne, 1937–95) vol. 8, 'Koinonia', cols. 1743–69. Other general studies which remain valuable include: H. Seesemann, *Der Begriff Koinonia im Neuen Testament* (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1933); J. Y. Campbell, 'Koinonia and its cognates in the New Testament', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51 (1932), 352–82, reprinted in *Three New Testament Studies* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), pp. 1–28; J. Reumann, 'Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts' in T. F. Best and G. Gassmann eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper 166 (Geneva: WCC, 1994), pp. 36–69. Reumann's article and comprehensive bibliography are particularly useful.

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may think that because we have studied a word or group of cognate words, we have understood a concept, when we ought to take into consideration the broader linguistic context, the phrases or sentences in which words are used; the semantic field, the broader conceptuality, to which words contribute; and the actual social context in which they are used.³ For this study, it was necessary to decide how the focus could extend to ‘communion’ as a semantic field and a theological reality. The intention is to use linguistic study as a way into the latter. Hans-Georg Gadamer, to whose thought I am greatly indebted, once remarked, ‘The history of concepts seems to me a precondition for responsible critical philosophising in our time, and it is only along the route of the history of words that the history of concepts can move forward.’⁴ This book is intended to be an exercise in ‘critical theologising’ along the lines sketched by Gadamer.

The need for such a study is generated by the widespread use of *koinonia* and *communion* in recent ecumenical discussion, often without sufficient regard for the history of these concepts and these words in the communities from which, over a thousand years, Christianity was formed. It is striking how often these words are used in their Greek or Latin form: there is no English word that translates them adequately. In a whole range of ecumenical documents it is the theology and the ecclesiology of ‘*koinonia/communio*’ which is offered as a way forward. This book is written in the conviction that there is indeed a way forward in this ecclesiology and that we can tread it confidently. It is a way, as far as this study is concerned, that has led by a narrow and specific linguistic path through broader semantic fields, which reflect experience of community as a fundamental Christian, Jewish, and human reality. Though we may deal with a word, and with words, these words are the precipitate of life in

³ These points are trenchantly made by James Barr in his critique of Kittel’s *TWNT*. See *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), especially pp. 210, 231–4, 281.

⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1985), p. 148.

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community and a stimulus to the deepening of communion within and between contemporary Christian communities.

Since 1965, when the Second Vatican Council concluded, there has been a striking ecumenical convergence around certain basic notions of what it is to be 'Church'. More than that, there is widespread agreement that this understanding of what it is to be 'Church' is at the heart of the Christian faith. This consensus has been expressed through some of the key documents of the Second Vatican Council, through official statements and reports of various Christian traditions, through the reports of bi-lateral ecumenical discussions, and through the multi-lateral statements of the World Council of Churches. At the centre of all these documents is an understanding of the Church as communion, of this communion as a sharing or participation in the life of the Trinity, and of the vital contribution this understanding can make to the ecumenical goal of 'visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in the common life of Christ'.⁵ With this emerging consensus has gone a consensus about method: that we must build on the communion Christians already experience by virtue of shared participation in Christ, a shared participation that can be made explicit by 'going behind disagreements' or finding from the tradition reconciling language in which both parties can recognise their own faith.⁶ Central to this understanding and this method is the theory and practice of communion – or, to use the Greek term, *koinonia*.

It will be clear from what follows that I warmly support the ecumenical rapprochements that have taken place in recent years and wish to promote genuine consensus amongst Christians who are working for visible unity. I am thus concerned to prevent the term *koinonia* being used in a slovenly and over-general fashion to paper over ecumenical cracks, and wish to sound a note of warning against this or similar terms being used

⁵ Statement of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Nairobi, 1975). See N. Lossky *et al.* eds., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC; London: CCBI, 1991), p. 1085.

⁶ See G. R. Evans, *Method in Ecumenical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially pp. 102, 134ff, 177ff.

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ideologically to promote (and conceal) the very opposite of true communion. *Koinonia* is a term which, used with care, can be of immense power and suggestiveness, an invaluable ecumenical resource. Words, however, relate to human living and the use of a word like *koinonia* must be tested against the realities of human life. Though my approach will be in part through a discussion of language, tracing continuities in translation and usage, my concern remains equally and fundamentally the concrete life of communities from the past which have struggled with the problems of unity and diversity, and communities which do so today. Throughout this book I shall, I hope, be developing grounds for a critique of the way in which the language and ideology of *koinonia* is properly used to sustain the unity and to promote the reconciliation of the Christian churches.

Ecumenical theological discussion does not usually make much of the extensive use of the term *koinonia* in pre-Christian Greek literature, especially that of Plato and Aristotle, which was so influential for the early formation of Christian theology and for its development in the Middle Ages and at the Reformation.⁷ Nor does this literature usually reflect upon the actual life of communities, whether Hellenistic, Jewish, avowedly Christian, or a mixture of all three. Though much discussion of communion relates this explicitly to Trinitarian theology, it does not do so by reference to early Christian experience of *koinonia* (both the powerful experience of the Spirit and the intense struggles for unity and fidelity to tradition).⁸ Closer reflection upon actual Christian experience within actual Christian communities is vitally important if ecumenical theology is

⁷ Discussion of the influence of Plato on the formation of Christian theology can be found in A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981); of Plato and Aristotle in A. H. Armstrong ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); for the fresh infusion of Aristotelian and Platonic texts to the scholarly life of the West, especially in the twelfth and fifteenth centuries respectively, and for their dissemination by translation see R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), especially pp. 161–74, 277–88.

⁸ A striking and creative exception is *The Niagara Report* of the Anglican–Lutheran Consultation on Episcopacy (London: Anglican Consultative Council; Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1987).

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not to remain at a level of high abstraction remote from the concerns of believing Christians in their local churches.

Attention to such issues has led me to identify five themes, each of which is implicit in all that follows. The first is *translation*. Christianity is from beginning to end an exercise in translation as the Word of God is heard afresh in new ways and in new situations.⁹ In following the progress of the Gospel towards the English-speaking world, we must trace a linguistic trajectory from Hebrew and Greek to Latin to various forms of English. These linguistic shifts have been necessary to present the unchanging Word of God faithfully, in such a way that people can hear it as addressed directly to them, and to sustain Church life as a living expression of contemporary faith, not a museum piece. However, just as there are norms of fidelity in linguistic translation, so there are norms of fidelity in the development of the life of the Church. The linguistic norm is the text of Scripture itself, where (in the New Testament) the word *koinonia* and its cognates are to be found extensively. What one might call the 'living norm' is the actual life, the actual *koinonia*, of the apostolic communities of which the words of Scripture are the precipitate that is left to us. It is clear from the linguistic norm of Scripture that continuities can be traced from the life of the synagogue, from the household and the *polis* within the Hellenistic world, to this 'living norm' of Christian community.¹⁰ As for those early Christian writers known as 'The Fathers', they 'made their own the categories in which the Greeks habitually interpreted their own experience'.¹¹ They did so because the life of the local church, the life of the Christian household, was itself both a translation and a transformation of whatever went before. The community was newly formed about Christ, but the experience of *koinonia* was not new: to the Hellenistic and the Christian mind it was a condition of being human. In the writings of Plato and Aristotle and their followers, and in Jewish

⁹ Barr (*The Semantics of Biblical Language*, p. 4) rightly talks of the problem 'not only of translation but of transculturation'.

¹⁰ *The Niagara Report*, para. 46, speaks of the way that 'Churches increasingly found that political or quasi-political terminology expressed their sense of their own identity.'

¹¹ Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage*, p. 26.

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sources, both those which were translated into Greek and those which were not, there is a rich tradition of reflection on the experience of *koinonia* and on the social conditions under which humans flourish. As we consider these traditions, we shall discover they have important lessons to teach us about the functioning of human communities, including churches. It is, after all, from such sources as these that we have drawn again and again in theological reflection, and we need to investigate them afresh as resources for critical reflection on the ecumenical effort to translate the Gospel and the life of the Church for the cultures of our time.¹²

The second theme is *politics*. I have tried to bear in mind throughout that the texts with which we have to deal are the precipitate of life in historical communities. Certainly, the texts, both scriptural and non-scriptural, are formed by and bear witness to the life of communities in many different ways, but it is important to remember that they are not theoretical treatises composed in abstraction from the abrasions and the conflicts of everyday life. Wherever there are communities of human beings, power is deployed and conflict is either contained or it tears the community apart. Issues of leadership, representation, communication, education, division of resources, justice, fidelity are integral to the life of every human community. In negotiating these issues, whether in a local church or a local community, in an ecumenical encounter or as citizens of a modern state, we engage in politics. Politics and *koinonia* are interwoven. One outstanding teacher of the importance of recognising the proper role of politics in every human community has been Bernard Crick, who writes with characteristic economy:

¹² My position would differ sharply from that of Alan J. Torrance, who writes in *Persons in Communion* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1996), pp. 254–5: ‘There is absolutely no conceptual or ontological connection between the Greek interpretation of participation conceived as *methexis* and the New Testament interpretation as *koinonia*.’ This claim, which he reiterates frequently, drives a wedge between the language and conceptuality of the New Testament and the Hellenistic culture to *and from* which it spoke. For cognates of *methexis* and *koinonia* used within the NT as synonyms, see Luke 5:7–10, 1 Cor. 10:16–17. Reumann finds in his survey of biblical texts (*‘Koinonia in Scripture’* p. 43) that *metechein* emphasises ‘have a share in’, but concludes that ‘it is difficult to establish a clear distinction from *koinonia*’.

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A political doctrine is . . . just an attempt to strike a particular harmony in an actual political situation, one harmony out of many possible different (temporary) resolutions of the basic problem of unity and diversity in a society with complex and entrenched rival social interests.¹³

The point must be spelt out with care if it is to be applied ecclesologically, for the issue of temporary or permanent resolution of disputes and the constraints upon diversity if unity is to be maintained must appear in a distinctive light within the Christian Church, but the ‘attempt to strike a particular harmony’ and the ‘basic problem of unity and diversity in a society with complex and entrenched rival social interests’ goes to the heart both of Church life within particular traditions and of the ecumenical enterprise.

The third theme is a development of the second: it is that of *conflict*. Implicit in the notion of politics is the recognition that conflict is integral to life in community. It is not the presence of conflict that is unhealthy for communal life, but the premature suppression of conflict in the interests of an inauthentic unity. Serious, impassioned conflict, where the protagonists are committed to apparently irreconcilable positions, is characteristic of humans living in community. The Church is not immune from this fundamental datum of human sociality. On the contrary, where Christians have a proper depth of conviction, it is inevitable that those convictions will clash. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right to put this point starkly: ‘Conflict as such is not the consequence of the fall, but arises on the basis of common love for God.’¹⁴ The issue for Christians within the Church is not whether such conflict is present but how it is handled within the Body of Christ. Where Christians remain in communion, there is potentially a security to face disagreement and a resource to sustain debate in a climate of trust until there is some resolution which is

¹³ B. Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (fourth edition, London: Penguin, 1992), p. 33.

¹⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (London: Collins, 1963), p. 41. Stephen Sykes argues from the evidence of the New Testament for the ‘inevitability of conflict in Christianity’ in *The Identity of Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 13–26. Compare his *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (London: Mowbrays, 1978), p. 89: ‘A dispersed authority implies recognition of the probability of conflict.’

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satisfactory to all.¹⁵ Where trust and communion have broken down, but there is the desire for reconciliation, there can only be a more cautious handling of contentious issues. Serious conflict is a much more dangerous threat to the unity of those who are not bound in communion. This is why a change in perception whereby communion is seen as taking many forms within the life of the Church, and the recognition of other Christians as truly bound in that communion, has revolutionised the basis for ecumenical discussion. Recognition of a fundamental unity in Christ, though that unity is not yet made explicit in eucharistic communion, has made it possible to handle old conflicts in a new light – even to see the protagonists of contrary views, and those views themselves, as contained within the diversity that goes to make up the variegated unity of the Church.

A fourth theme is *dialogue*. This will be addressed explicitly in the chapter on Plato, but it is implicit in both the discussion of ecumenism and the use that I have made of my sources. Plato above all teaches us that to read is to enter into dialogue with the text, that reading is a participatory activity. It is an emphasis reinforced by hermeneutic practitioners of the stature of H.-G. Gadamer¹⁶ and George

¹⁵ For a powerful description of such decision-making among the Thembu people of South Africa, see N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Abacus, 1995), pp. 24–5: ‘The meetings would continue until some kind of consensus was reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all.’

¹⁶ H.-G. Gadamer consistently stresses the importance of dialectic for shared understanding, taking as his model Plato’s Socratic dialogues. This insight, which he often expresses in terms of Heidegger’s fundamental notion of *Dasein* (‘Being as manifest in the world’) revealing itself in dialectic, is applied to reading and the ‘experience’ of ‘understanding’ between text and reader (see *Truth and Method*, second, revised edition, London: Sheed and Ward, 1989, pp. 163–4 (German, *Wahrheit und Methode*, revised edition, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986, pp. 168–9), pp. 367–8 (*WM*, pp. 373–4), pp. 378–9 (*WM*, p. 384)). R. E. Palmer builds on a fine study of Gadamer when he writes, ‘An interpretative “act” must not be a forcible seizure, a “rape” of the text, but a loving union that brings to stand the full potential of interpreter and text, the partners in the hermeneutical dialogue’ (*Hermeneutics*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969, p. 244). Gadamer’s concern with the ontology of the experience of understanding meets with a central concern of this book: the ontology of communion (compare the English title of J. Zizioulas’ *Being as Communion*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985). Furthermore, Gadamer’s concern for the actuality of dialogue is splendidly relevant to the *praxis* of ecumenical dialogue: ‘In a successful conversation [the partners] come under the influence of the truth of the

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Steiner.¹⁷ I would go beyond Gadamer (on theological grounds) to say that the construing of a text brings about a dialogue between the reader *and the writer*, in which there is a kind of meeting, a communion. The text of this book for me represents a kind of communion with Plato and Aristotle, the biblical writers, the Cappadocians and Augustine, though their words and thought as interpreted here may be as historically inauthentic as, in all probability, are the words of the participants at Plato's banquet. The dialogues we sustain with and through classic texts take their place among the many conversations that we sustain with other people and other sources. To exist in such a network of communication is in one mode to exist in communion, or in community. This dialogue, or these dialogues, with classic texts, principally but not exclusively the Scriptures, is one means by which the life of the Church continues as a life in dialogue. To identify my methodological indebtedness a little further: the discussion at Plato's banquet moves from individual statement towards an exposition of the way of love in communion with God and so, I hope, does this book.

A fifth theme is *symbols*. This is particularly important in a study of *koinonia* because of the tendency to think that communion or communication takes place at a level above or behind the physical (at the 'spiritual' level). *Koinonia* as 'mutual sharing' or as 'fellowship' is often spoken of in this way. The position taken here is that there can be no *koinonia* without shared participation in symbols and that such participation is a corrective to any 'spiritualising' which overlooks or excludes the place of the physical in communion.¹⁸ For Plato, objects in the world

object and are thus bound to one another in a new community (*Gemeinsamkeit*). To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion (*Gemeinsam*) in which we do not remain what we were' (p. 379; *WM*, p. 384). See also 'Conversation and the Way we come to Shared Understanding' in *Plato's Dialectical Ethics* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 17–65.

¹⁷ See especially 'The Uncommon Reader' in *No Passion Spent, Essays 1978–96* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 1–19; *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989). Also relevant is Steiner's essay on translation, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), especially pp. 296–413.

¹⁸ I have dealt with this briefly in *Liturgy and Symbolism* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1978).