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978-0-521-55304-9 - Method in Ecumenical Theology: The Lessons So Far

G. R. Evans

Excerpt

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In the late 1960s it began to look as though it would be possible to achieve within our lifetimes a definitive coming together in unity between a number of the existing separated communions. After the Second Vatican Council

rapid developments in the doctrinal dialogues initiated at the request of the protestant observers at Vatican II, and encouraged by Pope Paul VI, showed that substantial agreements could be reached in areas that had seemed to be insurmountable barriers . . . the progress of the bilateral doctrinal dialogues indicated that the Churches of the Reformation and the Roman Catholic Church could be reconciled at least to the extent that the reasons for the original division were resolvable . . . those involved in the dialogues began to hope that Christian unity might actually be achieved within a generation.²

But in many cases the churches which joined in this enterprise so eagerly at first are not proving able to make wholeheartedly their own the agreements arrived at through the dialogues; and consequently they cannot act out such agreements in actually moving towards union.³ When it comes to turning the (real enough) experience of mutual affection into ecclesial union, everything stops short and the parties tend to retreat towards the familiar ground of their life in division.⁴

Parallels with recent experience in the European Union irresistibly suggest themselves. All is goodwill and convergence until a point is

¹ *The Tablet*, Leader, 13 January 1990.

² J. C. Murray, 'Ecumenism: the next steps', *One in Christ*, 25 (1989), 163–8, p. 163.

³ Lukas Vischer suggests that 'one can speak with reason today of a growing discrepancy between the extensive agreement reached in the various dialogues and the actual situation of the Churches' . . . 'Consensus is not finding the open ears and hearts needed for reception.' L. Vischer, 'The reception of consensus in the ecumenical movement', *One in Christ*, 17 (1981), 294–305, pp. 294–5.

⁴ 'Today the Churches are once more laying renewed emphasis on their own identity and tradition'. L. Vischer, 'The reception of consensus in the ecumenical movement', *One in Christ*, 17 (1981), 294–305, pp. 294–5.

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reached (as with the Maastricht treaty of the early 1990s) where those who had made a commitment to come together begin to see themselves as perhaps having to sacrifice their identity and its distinctiveness – and with it perhaps their autonomy – to a common identity under a single administration. Then there is resistance and withdrawal. We are, in other words, facing ecumenically a problem with roots as deep as those which nourish entrenched nationalisms, with all their potential for warfare. But there is the difference that the Christian commitment to the search for unity is not prompted by expediency, or by economic or political interest. It is an imperative with the force of the very essence of Christianity behind it.

Vischer made the comments I began with in a footnote in 1981. They can be made a decade and a half later, with even more force and puzzlement. One author speaks of ‘disillusionment’, ‘profound scepticism’, ‘resignation’.⁵ But he can also suggest that some of this is in fact a sign of progress. ‘The ecumenical journey is like travelling along the road to Emmaus, sharing one another’s disillusionments and expectations. It is not insignificant where one is located on that road.’⁶ ‘Every ecumenical advance will unavoidably create tension and fermentation within the churches’,⁷ but that can be a useful tension, and in its turn creative of advance. J. M. R. Tillard argues that apparent failures are themselves a phenomenon of ecumenical theology which ought to be taken into account in discussion of its processes. ‘Wave upon wave rolling endlessly toward the shore, without ever producing the swell-tide that might break down the dykes of division . . . this state of affairs, has not yet been taken seriously enough in ecumenical theological discussions.’⁸ Failure or deferred success have their own dynamics. They not only change the course along which past events seemed to be leading; they also alter the direction of subsequent events.

But ecumenical problems solved create new ones.⁹ They are also

⁵ J. E. Vercauteren, ‘Prospects for Christian unity’, *One in Christ*, 26 (1990), 185–200, p. 185.

⁶ J. E. Vercauteren, ‘Prospects for Christian unity’, *One in Christ*, 26 (1990), 185–200, p. 186.

⁷ J. E. Vercauteren, ‘Prospects for Christian unity’, *One in Christ*, 26 (1990), 185–200, p. 188.

⁸ In his view, this is a warning that ‘organic, lasting unity cannot be effected simply by doctrinal consensus, no matter how profound this may be. It will not be realized by the declarations of official authority figures, no matter how representative these may be. Without what we may call “evangelical space”, deriving from the life of grace, the most promising ecumenical dialogues will peter out. Frequently, they will only contribute to a rebirth of hardened reactions’. J. M. R. Tillard, ‘Elements of unity in recent ecumenical discussion’, *One in Christ*, 14 (1978), 94–105, pp. 94–5.

⁹ ‘Ecumenical progress becomes harder, not easier, because it cannot be a mere linear progress in the negotiating of differences’. M–RC, *The Denver Report* (1971), 5; *Growth*, p. 308. See, too, John d’Arcy May, ‘Integral ecumenism’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 25 (1988), 573–91.

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harder ones. At best the going will get more difficult. The easy-to-resolve and merely 'apparent' differences have already for the most part been got out of the way. An analogy can be drawn with learning languages. 'After the first painful steps, we are delighted to find ourselves being understood and understanding other people.'¹⁰ Then we discover it is not so easy after all and that communication has run into difficulties. 'The ecumenical journey is sometimes compared to the ascent of a high and difficult mountain. In the early stages of such a climb, one makes rapid and relatively easy progress; then the going gets more difficult and in the final stages every move forward is the result of great effort combined with special technical skill.'¹¹

The ecumenical dialogues between churches have on the whole been confronting the now increasingly recognised 'difficult' questions squarely.¹² This has by now had the result of making it possible to list topics which have become recurrent issues, or perhaps it would be more exact to call them stubborn. These topics sometimes seem to the participants in a given conversation to have been resolved; but they can be expected always to cause recalcitrant movements when the time comes to consider seriously any move forward into unity. Making an analysis of the Responses to the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Lima) text of the World Council of Churches, Geoffrey Wainwright noticed such areas of repeated concern: about the meaning of 'the Word'; 'liturgical structures';¹³ 'Word and Spirit'; sacraments;¹⁴ signs and effects; symbols; *katabasis* and *anabasis*; the

¹⁰ M. Richards, 'Twenty-five years of Anglican–Roman Catholic dialogue – where do we go from here?', *One in Christ*, 18 (1992), 126–35, p. 127.

¹¹ 'The early stage, in which we sought to know each other better and to rid ourselves of the prejudices that had bedevilled our relationships, proved to be relatively easy. We discovered just how much we had in common . . . Our ascent of the ecumenical mountain has now entered a new stage and the going becomes more difficult, simply because the ground that we seek to conquer is all the more important for the successful outcome of our endeavours. Our journey is one of exploration . . . We know the destination that we seek to reach, yet there is much about it that is still a mystery for us.' Edward Cassidy, 'The uphill ecumenical journey', *Catholic International* 2 (July 1991), p. 653.

¹² Hans Küng describes his time as director of the Institute of Ecumenical Research at Tübingen in terms of a working 'systematically for the convergence of divergent theologies without attempting to avoid questions hitherto regarded as taboo.' Hans Küng, 'Why I remain a Catholic', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 17 (1980), 141–7, p. 143.

¹³ Here the problem concerns not the differences of rite, which have always tended to be relatively non-controversial, but the fact that 'most Protestant responses to *BEM* assert with some vigour the integrity of the preaching service. The Baptist Union of Scotland reports that "in many of our Churches the Lord's Supper is observed every Sunday as an additional service following a full worship service".' On variation in rites and ceremonies, see Thirty-Nine Articles, Article 34.

¹⁴ Where he notes Protestants tend to say that *BEM* places too much emphasis and Roman Catholics not enough on 'sacramentality'.

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presence of Christ in the Eucharist; ordination as a sacramental sign; episcopal succession as a sign; the mystery of the Church; the Kingdom of God.¹⁵

There is remarkable consistency of attitude in each community about these 'issues which will not lie down', because certain positions have come to be identified with its very ecclesial being. That is the most obvious reason why the old concerns often persist through dialogue to resurface again and again. In the Lima text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* itself some implicitly contradictory points are left standing side by side in tacit recognition of the existence of these intractables. 'Many differences of theology, liturgy and practice are connected with the varying frequency with which the Holy Communion is celebrated', comments the Eucharist text (30). On the reservation of the consecrated bread and wine, *BEM* can ask only that 'each church should respect the practices and piety of the others' and suggest that 'the primary intention of reserving the elements is their distribution among the sick and those who are absent' and that 'the best way of showing respect for the elements served in the eucharistic celebration is by their consumption, without excluding their use for communion of the sick' (32).

As a result of lingering difficulties of this sort there will sometimes be a call to go 'back to the drawing board'. Thus it is possible to go back on, or to reopen for question, or to betray, what had seemed a firm agreement not only about content but about the very method by which it has been arrived at. When after a decade Rome gave its official response to *The Final Report* of ARCIC it expressed disquiet about methodological fundamentals to a point where one commentator remarked that 'the Vatican Response will seem to many Anglicans to challenge the hitherto agreed method established and agreed by Paul VI and Michael Ramsey.'¹⁶ Again, this is not as discouraging as it might seem. It is now in fact impossible to go back to the situation of half a century ago precisely because the talking and the agreement have happened. But it is bound to create a sense of taking two steps forward and one back.

We are now entering a new phase. It is clear that we have to take a longer-term view and think again about methods of proceeding.

¹⁵ G. Wainwright, 'Word and sacrament in the Churches' response to the Lima text', *One in Christ*, 24 (1988), 304–27.

¹⁶ Which Christopher Hill identifies as 'founded upon the Gospels and on the ancient common traditions', *Catholic International*, 3 (1992).

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Several straightforward reasons can be suggested why ecumenical effort is apparently not getting the results of union which its solid achievements of agreement seemed to promise when they were arrived at, beyond this perhaps primary and very human one of the need to cling to a familiar identity when the alternative seems a leap into the unknown. Loss or dimming of hope, and withdrawal from commitment are both associated with fear. These two negative reactions manifest themselves respectively in the committed ecumenist who sees what looked promising prove to be, for the moment at least, not promising at all; and in the Christians who have not been involved in the process up to now, and who fear that rapprochement must 'constitute a threat to all that is distinctive and true in their own traditions'.¹⁷ There is an intimate relationship between these two negative responses, and it lies, paradoxically, in the very fact of the progress, which creates a changing and frightening scene, with a number of retreating figures upon it.

We might see all this in terms of barriers, standing between hope and fulfilment, which we have to identify and remove. Certainly such blockages are detectable from time to time.¹⁸ But it is helpful, I think, to pose the question differently. We ought to ask 'Why is ecumenism subject to repeating patterns of hope dashed, to the point where dispirited professional ecumenists are commonly heard to speak of "ecumenical gloom"?' Since the same ecumenists are not moved by this experience to give up – I know of no one who has once become committed to the ecumenical cause who has abandoned it – there must be a positive and constructive way of reading these events.¹⁹ Central here is the realisation, already referred to, that setbacks are still marks of progress, for they do not take us right back to the beginning. In fact, they reveal solid achievements still in place. Anyone who compares the ease of ecumenical intercourse today with the situation thirty years ago must be struck by that.

But a large part of the answer undoubtedly lies in taking our time and a long-term view. The ecumenical task is enormous and we have to adopt a timescale appropriate to the scale of the problems. On that

¹⁷ Conclusion to *The Final Report* of ARCIC I.

¹⁸ 'A point of view is not ecumenical because it naively believes that obstacles to unity are, after all, not a serious matter.' Elwyn A. Smith, Editorial, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 4 (1967), p. 301.

¹⁹ There can be no place for loss of hope or for complacency. 'Whoever thinks that the present state of ecumenical relations is either so bad that no decisive improvement is possible, or so good that no decisive improvement is necessary, is acting in opposition to hope.' L-RC, *Growth*, p. 220, para.28.

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proper scale, the setbacks look like small interruptions and not major disasters. It is rather like the problem which confronted Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century, when educated non-Christians asked him how, if Christians were right in their faith, their God could allow a Christian Roman Empire to fall into barbarism at the hands of pagan invaders. He wrote *The City of God* to answer the question and it obliged him, too, to learn to look at things on a sufficiently grand plan to see God's long-term purposes at work even at a time of profound discouragement.

If that is the way we should look at it, we also need to ask what positive purposes a delay is serving. Congar was optimistic that 'active' patience is not just marking time. 'In all great things delay is necessary for their maturation.'²⁰ There are things we come to see only because we have to persevere in order to grasp them, because we ourselves have to mature in perception before we can see. At present delay is visibly forcing ecumenical stocktaking, adjustment, learning-processes of great subtlety; and harder effort, deeper commitment. 'Ecumenism is mostly struggle.'²¹ 'We do not find cynicism. We find frustration and struggle, and we find commitment and faith, and we find profound insight and vision for what ought to be done.'²²

But there are also dangers in being held up, and seeing expectation frustrated. Fashions in ecumenical priorities change as delay makes us restless to be doing something which will get results, with a visibly desirable purpose and where progress can be seen. That can involve abandoning, or pushing away out of sight, the hope of attaining a more perfect union. One form of such 'giving up' is to decide to stop worrying about 'unity across doctrinal and structural barriers' and concentrate solely upon common action about 'concerns that press on Christians from the wider human community'.²³ In other words, it is argued that finding a shared theology and a shared order is not as important as was thought; and that energies ought now simply to concentrate on common action. This has been a strong temptation. It is obviously true that Christians ought to be loving their neighbours

²⁰ Congar, *Dialogue between Christians*, p. 44.

²¹ 'Ecumenism today. A survey by the RC/WCC Joint Working Group', *One in Christ*, 11 (1975), 30–87, p. 87.

²² 'Ecumenism today. A survey by the RC/WCC Joint Working Group', *One in Christ*, 11 (1975), 30–87, p. 87.

²³ G. Gassmann, 'The relations between bilateral and multilateral dialogues', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 23 (1986), 365–76, p. 380.

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and caring actively for the needs of the world. And this often proves to be something they can relatively easily do together without old divisions seeming to matter. But this is a temptation which ought to be resisted, because it involves settling for something much less than a common life. 'The greatest scandal . . . is not the lack of generosity of the People of God in its service of humanity.'²⁴ Tillard is vigorous on this point. 'It is easier here and now to *work* together than to *be* together the one communion of faith that Christ wills . . . Bilateral dialogues force Christian communities to go directly to their most demanding task. The doctrinal agreements they are preparing tend to prevent the Churches from reducing the Church of God on earth to a purely caritative body. To deal with problems such as justification, baptism, eucharist, ministry, and authority, amounts to a recognition of the essential importance of the inner being of the Church of God.'²⁵ They implicitly refuse to see it as an organisation so totally oriented toward the service of humanity as to be deprived of any serious internal finality.²⁶ 'If, at the end of the process, the kind of unity the dialogues help to produce is not rooted in these most demanding issues but is made of easy political compromises, ecumenism itself will have worked against the truth of the gospel . . . it will have been an instrument of evil.'²⁷

Method is linked to purpose. If we can see the end in view clearly, it becomes possible to begin to plan how to get there. A good deal is being written at present about the problem of the goal of unity. It is proving hard to agree what kind of 'one Church' there ought to be, whether visible or invisible, how structured, how served by its leadership, how embodying in its common life the life of Christ.²⁸ Any notion that 'one Church' must be a monolith of institutional uniformity to which all Christians must ultimately submit in obedience would now, and rightly, be unacceptable. The truth historically has been that a strong sense of the importance of unity has

²⁴ J. M. R. Tillard, 'The ecclesiological implications of bilateral dialogue', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 23 (1986), 412–23, p. 416.

²⁵ J. M. R. Tillard, 'The ecclesiological implications of bilateral dialogue', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 23 (1986), 412–23, p. 416.

²⁶ J. M. R. Tillard, 'The ecclesiological implications of bilateral dialogue', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 23 (1986), 412–23, p. 416.

²⁷ J. M. R. Tillard, 'The ecclesiological implications of bilateral dialogue', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 23 (1986), 412–23, p. 418.

²⁸ The visible signs and instruments we can already share can be seen as tokens of the reality of visible unity.

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not been incompatible with the presence of faults in a system of church-government which look rather like this.²⁹ But that does not mean that the 'one Church' exists, or should exist, solely as a mystical, spiritual or invisible unity. The concept of 'one Church' as a communion of mutual commitment as well as commitment to Christ; in which there is room for diversity; and which is an arena of freedom as well as of order, is ecumenically normative today. But that is much harder to define than the old models, and consequently much harder to grasp and much harder to trust.

For trust entails risk, and we have been acknowledging that groups of Christians prove unwilling to risk what they have (and love) ecclesially when it comes to making real ecumenical commitment. Even if the end in view were to seem secure, the entrusting would be a great matter because it would mean setting aside the old securities, which have usually included a degree of self-definition over against one another. Each community is asked not only to risk itself in the future united Church, but also to put itself in trust in the hands of others in entering into communion with them, and especially if that is going to involve, as it must, the establishment of common structures.

The lack of a clear end in view affects the processes by which any end might be arrived at. But it does not necessarily impede progress. Ecumenists have commonly had a sense of finding themselves engaged in a process of discovery of something as yet hidden but somehow already there. Commenting on the work of ARCIC I, William Purdy said, 'We were not like men sitting down to make some machine or piece of furniture in accordance with some blue-print or long-mastered craft. The report, we may say, is as much an act of discovery as of manufacture. The commission was doing something not quite like anything that had been done before.'³⁰ ARCIC found that 'we learned as we progressed'.³¹ This unexpectedness, this 'finding out as we go along' seems to me to be the most important experience of all in ecumenical theology, because it keeps before everyone's minds the dependency of the whole enterprise upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That does not mean that problems about structures go

²⁹ Döllinger's key point in *Kirche und Kirchen* 'is that the Churches which are without the Pope drift into many troubles, whereas the Church which energetically preserves the principle of unity has a vast superiority, which would prevail, but for its discrediting failure in civil government.' *The Church and the Churches*, tr. W. B. MacCabe (Hurst and Blackett, 1862). Cf. Alfred Plummer, *Conversations with Dr Döllinger, 1870-90*, ed. R. Boudens (Louvain, 1985), p. 259.

³⁰ William Purdy, 'Dialogue with the Anglican Communion', *One in Christ*, 18 (1982), 211-23, p. 211. ³¹ ARCIC I, *The Final Report*.

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away.³² But it does mean that problems about structures must not be allowed to dominate the enterprise.³³ The recognition that it is necessary to work to some degree 'blind' is beginning to encourage a healthy willingness to put the experience and discovery of the process in the forefront of things and to defer the making of plans.

This study is concerned with what we are beginning to learn, both from our successes and from our failures, about the methods by which ecumenists work within the process. I have tried not to beg the question where we are going, although I think a number of pointers become clear as we look at the methodological lessons. This has seemed an appropriate moment, when the early confidences of the ecumenical movement are now being so widely brought into question, to attempt this exercise of drawing the methodological threads together.

THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

The methodological issues with which this book is directly concerned have to do with learning to think and believe together rather than with the implications for what Christians can do together. In the present climate of thought that needs defending. Prayer together, active work together in the world, the prophetic³⁴ aspect of both these as witnesses to the world, are all important, and vividly so for many to whom the verbal theological dialogue is less attractive and perhaps seems less urgent than crying human need. There is in some quarters an awareness that talk may be misused, and that can seem a reason for being wary of it.³⁵

³² 'We really have almost no idea of what model we should have in mind . . . What is needed is a new ecumenical creativity but . . . it seems to be particularly [difficult] in this field, despite all our talk of the Holy Spirit's guidance, when in the end so much depends upon reconciling the hard requirements of existing establishments and doing this through a lengthy series of formal committee meetings.' Adrian Hastings, 'Anglican-Roman Catholic relations today', *One in Christ*, 28 (1992), 24-34, p. 25.

³³ That was a lesson already being learned in the 1970s. 'In the 70s the *process* of union became more important than the *plan* of union; and this is a first reason for being hopeful. Plans of union did not prosper in the [1960s] because they were geared too much to the reconciliation of systems of belief and structures of government, too little to the reconciliation of communities of believers.' M. Hurley, 'Christian unity by 2000?' *One in Christ*, 19 (1983), 2-13.

³⁴ For an early testimony to the prophetic power, ecumenically, of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, see G. Tavad, 'Tentative approaches to a mystique of unity', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 3 (1966), 503-18, p. 507, on Paul Couturier (1881-1953) as 'the prophetic person who did most to orientate the week of prayer for unity of January in a truly ecumenical direction'.

³⁵ 'The ecumenical problem . . . is a mystery, calling not for cleverness and strategy, but for contemplation, participation and obedience'. G. Tavad, Editorial, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 1 (1964), p. 100.

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Strong claims can be put forward for what might be called a ‘non-theological’ methodology, a methodology which tries above all to embrace the lived and practical realities of Christian life.³⁶ We have already touched on their presence in the debate, and noted the temptingness of the fact that ‘doing together’ is in some respects easier to achieve than ‘thinking together’, more direct, more immediately rewarding. Christ’s commands to love one’s neighbour, to care for the poor and afflicted are clear. To act on these orders for life together with other Christians can give a sense of gratifying ecumenical progress, where the more theoretical aspects of the theological endeavour may continue to frustrate.³⁷

But the question whether the theology is more, equally, or less important than the aspects loosely grouped in this way is not the one we should be asking. The issue is how the formal theology, the practice and everything else fit together into the whole picture.³⁸ In this study I have largely limited myself to topics which hang together technically, and of which there is a widely expressed current need for us now to engage in a systematic review. But I have assumed them to be intimately interconnected with the non-verbal, the informal, but still in the deepest sense ‘theological’ branches of ecumenical endeavour. It is important never to lose sight of the fact that spiritual life, worship, practice, and everything else in the Christian life imply, depend on, and express a theology.³⁹

Nevertheless, there have been calls for ‘a reorientation of the ecumenical problematic as a whole’,⁴⁰ in various directions which

³⁶ The idea of ‘non theological factors’ affecting both division and unification was mentioned in the WCC at Edinburgh, 1937 and debated at Lund in 1952. See John May, ‘From ecumenical theology to fundamental ecumenics’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 14 (1977), 304–12, p. 306.

³⁷ J. M. R. Tillard, ‘The ecclesiological implications of bilateral dialogue’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 23 (1986), 412–23 makes this point strongly.

³⁸ Stephanopoulos comments that ‘deliberately to collapse the tension by... establishing communion where there is not real consensus or by busily attending to the affairs of the “world” without radically exposing the terms of real salvation through the existential understanding of the mystery of the Church is to compromise the entire ecumenical enterprise.’ Robert G. Stephanopoulos, ‘Denominational loyalties and ecumenical commitment: a personal view’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 17 (1980), 636–46, p. 640.

³⁹ ‘This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and can rightly be called “spiritual ecumenism”’, A. C. Outler, ‘Strangers within the gates’, in Stacpoole, p. 180, quoting *UR*, 8.

⁴⁰ New Valamo Orthodox Conference, Statement, *The New Valamo Consultation: The Ecumenical Nature of the Orthodox Witness* (Geneva, 1977), p. 20. See too Robert G. Stephanopoulos, ‘Denominational loyalties and ecumenical commitment: a personal view’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 17 (1980), 636–46.