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978-0-521-71917-9 - The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let us Keep the Feast

George Hunsinger

Excerpt

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## Introduction: Ecumenical theology

Ecumenical theology, as I understand it, differs from both enclave theology and academic theology. Although there are overlaps among these types, let me begin by differentiating them.

### **Three types of theology**

By “enclave theology,” I mean a theology based narrowly in a single tradition that seeks not to learn from other traditions and to enrich them, but instead to topple and defeat them, or at least to withstand them. Enclave theology is polemical theology even when it assumes an irenic façade. Its limited agenda makes it difficult for it to take other traditions seriously and deal with them with fairly. Whether openly or secretly, it is not really interested in dialogue but in recititude and hegemony. It harbors the attitude that the ecumenical movement will succeed only as other traditions abandon their fundamental convictions, where they are incompatible with those of the enclave, in order to embrace the enclave’s doctrinal purity. Because of its temptation to misrepresent or devalue traditions with which it disagrees, such theology is finally divisive and futile. With little chance of success beyond those already convinced, it mainly reinforces the ecumenical status quo. Enclave theology makes itself look good, at least in its own eyes, by making others look bad. It is in danger of what Paul rejected as “party spirit” or “works of the flesh,” namely, enmity, strife, and factionalism (Gal. 5:20). In the ecumenical churches no tradition or communion is immune from this kind of dogmatism.

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[More information](#)

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Ecumenical theology takes another approach. It presupposes that every tradition in the church has something valuable to contribute even if we cannot yet discern what it is. The ecumenical movement will succeed not when all other traditions capitulate to the one true church – whether centered in Geneva, Constantinople, Canterbury, Wittenberg or Rome – to say nothing of other symbolic locales like Lima, Cape Town, New Delhi, Canberra or Beijing. On the contrary, it will succeed only by a deeper conversion of all traditions to Christ. Ecumenical theology, though properly grounded in a single tradition, looks for what is best in traditions not its own. It seeks not to defeat them but to respect and learn from them. It earns the right to speak only by listening, and it listens much more than it speaks. When in the midst of intractable disagreements, it searches for unforeseen convergences. Its hope for ecumenical progress means that no tradition will get everything that it wants, each will get much that it wants, none will be required to capitulate to another, and none will be expected to make unacceptable compromises. Each will contribute to the richness of the whole, and all will be expected to stretch to accept some things that at first did not seem possible. Ecumenical theology, while unable to avoid speaking pointedly at times, seeks a charitable spirit which “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7).

Ecumenical theology must also differentiate itself from modern academic liberal theology. From an ecumenical point of view, perhaps the most striking aspect of this academic theology is its lack of allegiance to established confessional norms. Ecumenical councils like Nicaea and Chalcedon are written off as “definitive failures,” full of contradictions and absurdities.<sup>1</sup> Holy Scripture is interpreted from every conceivable point of view – historicist,

<sup>1</sup> This is the view of Paul Tillich, for example, in *Systematic Theology*, vol. 11 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 142. See also pp. 91, 94, 143–45.

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[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION: ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY

sociological, psychological, rationalist, metaphysical, etc. – except for the apostolic and the prophetic. Taking those latter viewpoints seriously would entail at least a *de iure* respect for their witness to something unanticipated, ineffable, and exclusively unique. It would mean respecting (if not necessarily embracing) the scandal of particularity – which, if true, would necessarily bring every modern secular method to its categorical limit. But that scandal – and with it the election of Israel and the bodily resurrection of Christ – is typically dismissed out of hand.

No real discussion is needed as long as modernist norms reign supreme. Unconditional allegiance to them is promulgated as ethical integrity. Theological discourse is said to be invalid if it does not conform to “common experience,” or if it does not exemplify certain favored “metaphysical categories.” Exclusive claims for the gospel are rejected as mythological, arbitrary and arrogant. Modern historical consciousness is said to require abandoning the claim to Christ’s uniqueness. The biblical view of reality, like all human views, is seen as just one more culturally conditioned artifact, and religion becomes principally a matter of inwardness. Pluralism, relativism, and naturalism become the coin of the realm. When Christianity is reduced, through the looking glass of modern criticism, to being an ancient patriarchal religion of obscure Mediterranean provenance, it is little wonder that academic religionists should see themselves as “alienated theologians,”<sup>2</sup> and that historians should describe modern liberal theology as having increasingly lost touch with the churches.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Van A. Harvey, “The Alienated Theologian,” *McCormack Quarterly* 23 (May 1970), pp. 234–65. This conflicted figure is described as an academic professor of religion who is “concerned with the articulation of the faith of the Christian community but who is himself as much a doubter as a believer” (p. 235). Cited by Peter C. Hodgson in his “Editor’s Introduction” to D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. xv.

<sup>3</sup> “Liberal theologians, having been pushed to the left by liberationist and postmodern movements, found themselves speaking a language that had little currency in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE EUCHARIST AND ECUMENISM

Ecumenical theology, at its best, has never discarded the norms and critical methods of modern academic theology. It has indeed affirmed them, while rejecting only their purported supremacy. It has regarded them as a good servant but a bad master. It has welcomed the many valuable fruits of their application while subordinating them to the authority of the ecumenical councils (especially the first four). It is the councils, creeds, and confessions, not modernity, that provide a normative framework for the ecumenical understanding of Holy Scripture. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed – commonly recited in eucharistic liturgies – is the most widely embraced standard in all of ecumenical Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Together with the Chalcedonian definition of Christ’s person, it has protected the ecumenical churches, again and again, from the dangers of Arianism, Modalism, Nestorianism, and Docetism (to mention only the most important).<sup>5</sup> In modern liberal theology Arian and Nestorian tendencies are particularly evident, though not always unambiguously; yet they indicate a serious risk of propounding views of revelation and salvation, and therefore of

congregations.” Gary J. Dorrien, “American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, Decline, Renewal, Ambiguity,” *Cross Currents* 55 (2005–6), p. 472. See now also Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity 1950–2005* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> As the only creed promulgated by any of the seven ecumenical councils, it is the only creed that is truly ecumenical and universal. In the Eastern Orthodox churches, it is simply the only creed, while in the Roman Catholic and other Western churches, it is often regarded, in effect, as the first among equals, alongside the Apostles’ Creed. (The controversy over the *filioque* clause is discussed briefly in Part III on “Eucharist and ministry.”) About half the world’s Christian population is Roman Catholic while another quarter is Eastern Orthodox. See *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It Is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* (381), Faith and Order Paper 153 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> If, as is arguably the case, the historic “Nestorian” and “Monophysite” churches have also by and large conformed to the intentions of Nicaea and Chalcedon, as understood in the West, then their differences with the rest of ecumenical Christianity would at bottom be largely semantic rather than substantive.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION: ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY

worship – including eucharistic worship – that the ecumenical churches can ill afford to abide.<sup>6</sup>

Although modern academic theology, in its more polemical vein, has sometimes created the impression that no theologian could reject the supremacy of its preferred critical norms without lapsing into intellectual dishonesty, the list of modern theologians who have remained unpersuaded is long and distinguished. Any selection is bound to be arbitrary, but among the Roman Catholics one thinks, for example, of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar and Monika Hellwig; among the Eastern Orthodox, of Georges Florovsky, John Meyendorff, and Nonna Verna Harrison; among the Anglicans of Benedicta Ward, Austin Farrer, and Rowan Williams; among the Lutherans, of Helmut Gollwitzer, Eberhard Jüngel, and Dorothea Wendebourg; among the Methodists, of E. Gordon Rupp, Georgia Harkness, and Geoffrey Wainwright; among the Baptists, of Nancey Murphy, Willie Jennings, and Timothy George; among the Reformed, of Heiko Oberman, J. Christine Janowski, and Karl Barth. The list, which is obviously selective, could be extended, but it should be enough to make the point. What these theologians – indeed this cloud of witnesses – have in common is a basic commitment to the historic standards of the ecumenical churches. While none of them disregarded modernity's critical norms, all of them, in one way or another, held Nicaea and Chalcedon to be superior. Over against the pressures of modernity, they refrained from absolutizing the relative and relativizing the absolute, as confessed by faith.

<sup>6</sup> Nicaea and Chalcedon are best understood, in Hans W. Frei's fine phrase, as "conceptual redescriptions of the narratives." They provide interpretive lenses through which the gospel narratives are to be read if their saving significance is to not to be missed. They offer second-order rules for reading, though they also make substantive claims. Most importantly, they are not replacements for the narratives, but attempts to make visible the deep structure within them, rendering explicit what is implicit. They bring out what is often depicted and assumed rather than stated in the New Testament witness to the uniqueness of Christ.

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[More information](#)

## THE EUCHARIST AND ECUMENISM

In practice the overlaps among enclave, academic, and ecumenical approaches to theology are of course untidy and complex. These distinctions are not meant as pigeonholes into which any one theologian's writings will neatly fit. They are rather categories of discernment by which trends and tendencies in any body of work can be picked out. There can obviously be enclave moments and modern-liberal-academic moments within an otherwise ecumenical theology as well as ecumenical moments within the other two types, and so forth.

Nor are these types necessarily exhaustive as though other schemes of classification were somehow superfluous. Enclave theology is perhaps best thought of as the shadow side of dogmatic or confessional theology, but confessional theology has an essential place in the churches that cannot be written off because of enclave abuses (which, if seen in the best light, are meant to uphold the integrity of the church). Dogmatic or confessional theology can advance the distinctive concerns of particular communions in ways that are often fruitful beyond them as well as for them.

Academic liberal theology, for its part, has done yeoman's service not only to save the ecumenical churches from fundamentalism and authoritarian ways of thinking, but also to advance the essential concerns of justice, freedom, and peace, and it has sometimes done so in circumstances where the rest of theology and church were asleep at the wheel.<sup>7</sup> It has also championed academic freedom in the study of theology, thus blocking the more stultifying effects of orthodoxy. It has evidenced a courageous openness to the new, even when not always doing justice to the old. In these and other respects its contribution has been essential.

<sup>7</sup> It will be a great day when liberation theologies are more fully developed within a Nicene and Chalcedonian framework. They will then have a better chance of breaking through the glass ceiling that tragically restricts their influence in the ecumenical churches. See my remarks in the "Introduction" to George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 1–4. Also "Karl Barth and Liberation Theology," in *Disruptive Grace*, pp. 42–59.

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[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION: ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY

In sum, the point of making these distinctions has not been to cover all the bases, but merely to highlight some of the distinctive aspects of ecumenical theology by using the other two types as a foil.

### **Promoting visible unity as a theological task**

From the standpoint of ecumenical theology, with its goal of promoting visible unity as a theological task, at least three points emerge from this analysis.

First, insofar as academic theology fails to respect Nicaea and Chalcedon, it is in danger of mere sectarianism. Whatever inroads modern skepticism may have made into the mind of the church over the last 250 years, no communion has renounced, nor is any communion at all likely to renounce, the trinitarian faith of the ecumenical churches. Modernity has brought many blessings to the church, and promises to bring more still, but they have not always been unmixed.<sup>8</sup> Despite all ambiguities, complexities, and cross-currents, the prospect that ecumenical churches – by which I mean the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Reformational, and anabaptist communions – will ever elevate “historical consciousness,” relativism, pluralism, and naturalism (thus exaggerating the significance of inwardness<sup>9</sup>) into a position of overriding normative superiority remains what it has always been: near to zero. For academic theology, heterodox bishops, and friends of gnosticism to suppose otherwise would surely be illusory. Over the long haul, either there will be an increasing parting of the ways between modern liberal theology and the life of actual churches (to the detriment of each), or else a more robust integration of modernity’s

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps I should mention that I regard “postmodernity,” whatever if anything it may be, as a pendulum swing within modernity rather than a clean break from it; old wine in new bottles, so to speak.

<sup>9</sup> “Inwardness” is here used as shorthand for “profound religious experiences,” etc., that supposedly remain untouched by modern critical inquiry.

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George Hunsinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE EUCHARIST AND ECUMENISM

contributions will take place within a normative theological framework viable for the church. (Some measure, though not an even measure, of both tendencies will probably be in evidence.) Ecumenical theology will continue to learn from academic theology, but whether the reverse is true remains to be seen.<sup>10</sup>

Second, ecumenical theology must cope not only with academic liberal theology to its left, but also with enclave theology to its right. Enclave theology confronts it with painful limits (as does academic theology when it adopts enclave-like behavior). Ecumenical theology can labor to turn contradictions into contrasts. It can search for possibilities where only impossibilities have prevailed. It can honor venerable convictions while striving toward a larger, more generous framework that might allow a new *modus vivendi* to emerge. It can untangle old misconceptions that have blocked the path to unity and challenge unnecessary exclusions. It can retrieve forgotten insights from the past to facilitate a more attractive future. It can dig for the truth embedded in error and for the error lurking in truth.

What it cannot do is uproot dogmatic attitudes that are deeply entrenched. It cannot, in and of itself, work as a solvent that loosens the deadlocked machinery of “theological correctness” (what the Germans call *Rechthaberei*).<sup>11</sup> If ecumenical theology has a role to play, it must work almost entirely at the level of ideas as opposed to attitudes. Among the barriers to eucharistic hospitality, for example,

<sup>10</sup> For an account of how world religions might be understood by ecumenical theology as here conceived, see my essay “Postliberal Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 42–57; on pp. 53–57. See also my essay “Secular Parables of the Truth” in Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 234–80. For a sketch of Christianity in relation to Judaism, see my “Introduction” to *For the Sake of the World*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 3–7.

<sup>11</sup> The term *Rechthaberei* loosely translates as the state of thinking and behaving as if one were in the right and everyone else in the wrong. It carries connotations of sanctimony, self-congratulation, and humorlessness, combined with passive-aggressive traits.



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George Hunsinger

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION: ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY

perhaps none is more intractable than the question of what counts as validity in eucharistic ministry. (A modest attempt to address this question appears in Part III.) A great work of the Holy Spirit will surely be needed, beyond all human theologizing, and for which all must ceaselessly pray, if the churches seeking unity are ever to overcome the injuries of the past while being led to a deeper level of discernment. Distinguishing the wheat from the chaff – and therefore integrity from intransigence, generosity from gullibility, and faithfulness from foolishness – is finally a spiritual task. But it is an imperative that must be met – in integrity, generosity, and faithfulness – if the great high-priestly prayer of Jesus to his Father is at last to be fulfilled, “that they may be one, as we are one” (Jn. 17:22).

Finally, “ecumenical theology,” as used here, has two senses, one broad, the other narrow. In the broad sense ecumenical theology is simply ecclesial theology, as beholden to norms grounded in Holy Scripture and clarified by conciliar and confessional traditions like Nicaea and Chalcedon. In the narrow sense, however, ecumenical theology involves a more specific set of goals and tasks. Since there is no such thing as a view from nowhere, ecumenical theology cannot be “ecumenical” in general, but will always be grounded in a particular tradition. It must think from a center in that tradition outward to an ecumenical circumference, and back again. On the divisive questions, it must weigh its own tradition in light of other traditions, and other traditions in light of its own. It must seek to preserve what is best and avoid what is worst while daring to be open to what is new. The most urgent and overriding goal, however, is not self-preservation but reunion.

Seven guidelines may be lifted up as informing ecumenical theology in its special vocation.

- Church-dividing views should be abandoned, especially in the form of false contrasts.
- No tradition, including one’s own, should be asked to compromise on essentials.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE EUCHARIST AND ECUMENISM

- Where possible, misunderstandings from the past should be identified and eliminated.
- Real differences should not be glossed over by resorting to ambiguity; they will only come back to haunt theology and church.
- The range of acceptable diversity should be expanded as fully as possible within the bounds of fundamental unity.
- All steps toward visible unity should be taken which can be taken without theological compromise.
- No one church should be expected to capitulate to another or be swallowed up into it.

The possible tensions among these guidelines are obvious. What they might mean can only be determined by seeking to apply them on a case-by-case basis. In general, if a tradition holds a minority position or an unshared position over against the rest of ecumenical Christianity, a certain presumption will exist against it, though not necessarily an absolute presumption.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it can be modified without essential compromise so as to become no longer church-dividing, and so to find a place within the scope of acceptable diversity, or even within a newly minted consensus. Candidates for this kind of ecumenical reconsideration might include the following (though drawing up such a list is risky): the primacy of the bishop of Rome, the *filioque* clause, the meaning of apostolic succession, the questions of married, female, and gay clergy, real presence in the eucharist, eucharistic sacrifice, the doctrine of justification by faith, believers' baptism, and Christian pacifism. This is not an exhaustive list, and it includes issues of different kinds. Some progress has been made on some of them over the course of the twentieth century, and more is still to be hoped for. But it is hard to see how future progress will be possible

<sup>12</sup> Of course it is not impossible that such a position may simply be correct and the rest of the churches flat-out wrong. It cannot be accepted, however, without the utmost scrutiny, and until every good-faith effort has been made to find a principled movement in the direction of ecumenical accommodation.