

*Dialogue inside-out: Ecumenism encounters the religions. Report on the 17<sup>th</sup> Academic Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica 2012*

## **Ecumenism in a multi-religious context**

“Dialogue inside-out: Ecumenism encounters the religious” was the topic of the 17<sup>th</sup> Academic Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica, which took place from 23<sup>rd</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2012, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Societas Oecumenica is an academic association of ecumenical institutes and theologians of all denominations engaged with the theory and practice of ecumenics. It holds consultations biannually in different places in Europe.

The impetus for this year’s topic came from the social context of the churches in Europe: In a globalised world it is no longer necessary to travel to foreign countries to meet members of other religions. Encounters between the religions occur in everyday life and on our doorsteps. Interfaith marriages, a shared concern for peace and respect, or occasions in which people from different religions tragically die, are some of many examples of encounters between religions and of the potential for common action. Furthermore, Christianity is no longer taken for granted in a secularized and pluralized society. Amid a changed context, the churches are challenged to reflect on their own plausibility and positions, and, therefore, to take up dialogue with the civil society and the other religions.

It has always been the basic intention of the ecumenical movement to enter into dialogue with Christians from other denominations and different cultural background, and thereby to broaden one’s own horizon. Today, as members from other religions appear in that horizon, so the churches need to explore how they might approach them. How could we assess this new quest for dialogue? What is the theological foundation of such an interfaith dialogue and does it bear any similarity to inter-church dialogue? What are the aims and boundaries of such an endeavour? Could proven ecumenical methods and approaches be helpful in this new situation? The 17<sup>th</sup> Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica dealt with those quite fundamental questions.

The host town Belfast, with its religious and political topography, itself contributed to the Consultation. A guided Coach Tour of Belfast lead participants to the hot spots of the conflict and the peace process in Northern Ireland. In the areas of the Falls and Shankill Road, a “Peace Wall” separates the Catholic Nationalists, who strive for a united Ireland, from the Protestant Unionists, who seek to remain part of the United Kingdom. The extremely complex conflict focuses on the issue of identity, part of which is formed in opposition to the other group. The centrality of identity and the related need for dialogue served to link the host town Belfast and the topic of the Consultation.

The map of conflict also consisted of places where peaceful encounters were made possible and where people are committed to overcome violence and hatred, e.g. the 174 Trust (an interdenominational community centre), or the Roman Catholic Clonard monastery and the Presbyterian Fitzroy Church, which were the first to organize informal meetings between the leaders of the Unionist and Nationalist groups. The Fitzroy Church, located close to Belfast Queen’s University, hosted the Consultation’s plenary sessions.

The Irish School of Ecumenics, an Institute of Trinity College, Dublin, hosted the Belfast Consultation. It is historically rooted in the peace process and with its two locations in Dublin and Belfast committed to academic research in the field of religion and conflict. The Irish School of Ecumenics contributed significantly to the conference both through presentations and because it

operates institutionally with a wider notion of ecumenism, one that encompasses interdenominational dialogue, interfaith dialogue and contains a commitment to peace and justice.

## Mapping inter-religious dialogue

The exploration of the theme included deep theological analysis and the personal stories of the contributors.

The well-known models of Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism provided a basis for describing the relationship between the religions. In the exclusivist model, one's own religion is regarded to be true, whereas the other religions, by contrast, are not considered to be true (e.g., “Only through Christ one can be saved. Without Christ one is lost”). The inclusivist model regards the other religions through the lens of one's own religious system (e.g., “Through Christ all human beings are saved, whether they believe it or not”). The pluralist model concedes that all religions possess part of the truth, but none of them the whole truth (e.g., “Some are saved through Christ, some through their faithfulness to Mohammed, others through the teachings of Buddhism”).

The second day of the consultation dealt with “Ecumenical and Inter-religious Realities: Points of Departure.

Prof. John D'Arcy May (Melbourne) introduced the topic by way of an autobiographical reflection about his own path from a Roman-Catholic background in Melbourne to Rome, Münster, and then to the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin. Right at the beginning of the consultation, it became clear how much the personal backgrounds and experiences influenced the approach to the topic.

The lectures by Dr. PD Annemarie Mayer (Geneva) and Prof. Mika Vähäkangas (Lund) were concerned with the present situation of the Church, yet coming to different conclusions. Annemarie Mayer regarded the present strive for individuality as a *horror unitatis*, a fear of unity, and underlined the importance of ecumenical dialogue with regard to the encounter of the religions. She contrasted the described models of Inclusivism, Exclusivism and Pluralism with a model of comparative theology. Mika Vähäkangas looked at the changed circumstances for inner-Christian ecumenical dialogue. Describing the shift of the centre of Christianity from the North to the South, and the tensions between conservative and liberal currents, which are present both in the churches in the North and in the South, he developed a possible positive view of secularization, regarding it as a blessing. The very critical questioning of a secular society forces the religions to act responsibly and explain their motives.

The next day, dealing with the theme “Approaches and Methods in Ecumenical Dialogue and Inter-religious Encounters,” was characterized by a similarly broad range of interpretations.

Dr. Oliver Schuegraf (Hanover) viewed the topic from a clearly inner-Christian ecumenical stance and asked which methods would have to be employed in an encounter between the inner-Christian ecumenism and the other religions. The dialogue with other religions, Schuegraf stated, was distinctly different from the inner-Christian Dialogue, as the sought for commonality lay not in a common believe but in a common striving for peace, justice and coexistence on a basis of mutual respect and tolerance.

Gillian Kingston pointed to her own experience in a situation of crisis, where a common prayer of Christians and Muslims was asked for and offered.

Dr. Jude Lal Fernando (Dublin) and Inderjit Bhogal too began from their personal experiences and reflected upon them theologically. In this context, the above stated exclusivist/inclusivist/pluralist model reappeared. Jude Lal Fernando expressed, out of a strong christological basis, his preference for

the inclusivist model and the pluralist model, while Inderjit Bhogal preferred the pluralist model as a basis for inter-religious encounter.

The third topic, “Unity and Plurality amid contested Identities,” showed further the variety of ways for dealing with the overall theme.

According to Prof. Geraldine Smyth (Dublin), while focussing on the boundary markers of one's own identity might serve to underline such boundaries and inhibit dialogue, it is also the case that a concentration on the contents of one's own identity might enrich the encounter with other identities. Regarding the specific situation in Northern Ireland, she proposed a more comprehensive view of the communal life of different ethnic and social groups, taking into account also ecological and architectural factors. Any encounter of different religious identities would, thus, have to be regarded within the wider socio-cultural context.

In her lecture, Prof. Johanna Rahner (Bamberg) dealt with the issue of vanishing confessional identities within Christianity. She recommended focussing on the particular strengths of one's own identity, and to regard the relation between the denominations/confessions as complementary. Such complementarity would balance out the others' weaknesses with one's own strengths through brotherly correction, and in that way enabling a true reconciled diversity.

Referring to Buber and Levinas' models of dialogue, the Russian-orthodox theologian Dr. George Zavershinsky (Glasgow) outlined a trinitarian model for inter-religious dialogue.

Prof. Hans-Peter Großhans (Münster) reflected on the extent to which the encounter of Christian ecumenism with the religions influences the Christian identity. Referring to Schleiermacher, Großhans started off phenomenologically, stating that every religious practice grows out of a common human feeling of absolute dependence. The founders of the religions determine the shape of the respective pious self-consciousness. Großhans argued that Jesus Christ fundamentally forms Christian consciousness and identity. Therefore, the other religions will always remain an opposite “other”. Inter-religious encounters might take place in so-called inter-medial spaces, but that does not indicate a real influence on the Christian identity.

## **Dialogue as a matter of personal experience and context.**

In their closing statements, Prof. John D'Arcy May and Prof. Konrad Raiser (Berlin), along with the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin Michael Jackson, stressed that the context of dialogue has changed and that ecumenism is challenged to respond to that new situation. Encounters between religions take place and thus dialogue becomes necessary.

Yet, the various discussions reflected quite different perceptions and assessments of these changed contexts and the challenges that arise from them. Some regarded interfaith encounter as a space of its own, one not necessarily connected to ecumenical dialogue and its goal of church unity. Others argued for the widening of the ecumenical horizon and for the possible reception of new impulses. The hoped for ancillary effect is that inter-church dialogue, which has seemed to stagnate at central issues, would become revitalized. The quest for truth in interfaith dialogue remained a controversial issue along with the question of whether and how interfaith encounter influences Christian identity.

Generally, the different perceptions of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue were not so much shaped by denominational issues, but by individual ecumenical, cultural and interfaith experience in dialogue. Beyond the Consultation's central question concerning how ecumenical dialogue could be widened

“inside-out,” it provided a forum to explore the very different contexts of interfaith encounters in Europe and the different assessments and approaches to dialogue. It became quite clear that the hermeneutical challenge of Christian encounters with other religions was one of dealing with the very different social and cultural contexts in which ecumenism and interfaith dialogue take place.

Besides the main speakers and plenary sessions, the Societas Oecumenica offered young academic fellows an opportunity to present their research projects to an expert international audience. Discussions in smaller groups and conversations over a cup of tea or at meals brought ecumenists from all over Europe closer together, and fostered and deepened friendship and exchange over ecumenical matters of current and of personal interest.

The 18<sup>th</sup> Academic Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica will take place in Budapest, Hungary, in 2014.

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