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Diversity and "Intrinsic Koinonia" *all the norms.*

A Model of Unity based on 'Biodiversity'

Terry Wall, Auckland, New Zealand

Is culture the final category?

Abstract

This paper does not address the question of the limits of diversity. It explores the place of diversity within the church and proposes a model that may assist the understanding of unity, that of "intrinsic koinonia" drawn from John Zizioulas. Being is based on relationship, and relationship on the acceptance of diversity. Diversity is wealth, and ecumenism is the commitment that no treasure be lost.

The twentieth century has been the century of ecumenism. The quest for the visible unity of the church has absorbed energy of both theologians and church leaders. Great progress has been achieved in mutual understanding between the churches, in the movement towards recognition and acceptance that each is a member of the Body of Christ. Frustration at the difficulty of finding a way ahead often blinds us to the real accomplishments that have been secured.

Many factors have contributed to this search for visible unity. The renewal of biblical studies provided a common foundation in which all the churches shared. Scholars in theology came to draw on the findings and approaches of their colleagues in different communities. Increasing contact between the nations as a result of the revolution in transport meant that Christians from different traditions found themselves in contact with one another.

It was the modern mission movement that convicted many of the need for the churches to have a common witness. As the churches of Europe took seriously the challenge of evangelism in Africa, Asia and the Pacific it came to be appreciated, especially by missionaries that the divided church was an impediment to their outreach. Proclamation of the gospel was undermined by competing parties and churches. Theologies formulated in the context of European struggles that were as often political as much as spiritual, had no place in these lands and among these people.

At the heart of ecumenism has been a concern "that the world may believe". A strong theological base has been established to support this. The incarnation has played its part. Following Athanasius, God has shared our humanity and raised humanity to share the divine nature. Because of this, this world has been sanctified. As a consequence "unity" cannot remain an ideal or stay at a spiritual level: "unity" must become visible, real, incarnate. Communion needs to be made manifest, as God's love was manifest in Christ.

As a result of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God, the unity of the Church is to serve the New Creation. Ecumenism is in the prophetic tradition calling the Church to face the world in mission, to serve God's purposes of shalom and

justice. In Rome recently, in a meeting with the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked, "Are we serious enough about the need for unity in God's world to want to make our church relationships a prefigurement of that unity?" [Church Times 6th December 1996]

Through the cross of Christ the dividing walls have been broken down between male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free. The persistence of a divided church has raised the question of the credibility of its witness. The divisions that exist so publicly within the churches have been held to deny the power of the gospel to reconcile and make new.

Further it is held that because God is known and revealed not as Almighty Father, but rather as Trinity, those who are drawn into a relationship with Christ are called to share a similar relationship of communion with their sisters and brothers. Through baptism believers are called into relationship with the Triune God, and into a particular set of relationships of love, giving and joy, with all the baptised. This is the New Testament understanding of koinonia, a communion of recognition and acceptance, of footwashing and freedom.

Recently, however, this consensus, which seemed to be emerging, has come under question from a variety of quarters. Those who belong to small Christian communities have experienced the call for unity as a threat, for they have seen their distinctive identity as being in danger of being swallowed up in a great unity. Frequently the preoccupation with unity is seen as the ideology of the powerful whose influential theologies serve their vested interest to retain control of a process. Christian feminist writers have questioned whether unity does not entail a uniformity that would not allow freedom for women's priorities.

Clearly the new reality that the ecumenical movement is challenged by is the reality of a new diversity, a diversity far deeper than that encountered at any previous time. This diversity relates to voices that are being heard in the world church for the first time. The development of contextual theologies has contributed toward this, along with the recognition of the importance of inculturation. Indigenous communities are cautious of grand schemes of union that would perpetuate their minority status, with all the prospects of powerlessness associated with that. No longer can it be assumed that those who do theology, share the same assumptions, will adopt the same methods, or seek the same ends.

A tension is emerging between the local and the universal, between the classic formulations of theology and the contextual. Our New Zealand experience of ecumenism has reflected this tension. In 1971 a Plan for Union, the result of many years of negotiation between the Anglican Church, the Associated Churches of Christ, the Congregational Union, and the Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches, was considered and voted upon. It envisaged an episcopal form of Church government. Though one might have thought this sufficient safeguard for Anglicans, in the end it was the Anglicans who were finally unable to say 'yes' strongly enough, with a 58% vote in favour. The word we heard from them, interestingly, the numerically strongest church, was that a percentage of their membership was alarmed that riches from their tradition may be lost.

Something similar has emerged among Maori Christians in Aotearoa, New Zealand in the face of conversations related to unity. They have wanted to help “pakeha Christians” to move away from a monocultural church and society toward a bicultural church and society. This process has entailed power sharing by the “settler church” so that a genuine partnership of equals can emerge. Maori Christians, given their minority status, are often alarmed by what ‘unity’ might require of them. Does this mean seeking to preserve their identity in an ever larger and more Western community? Certainly there has been a clear word from Maori that there can be no meaningful unity without justice, no genuine unity without the ability and freedom to be truly oneself in a relationship of shalom.

It is equally important to insist that there is no essential contradiction between unity and justice. Tumuaki of the Methodist Church, Reverend Rua Rakana, observed that it was at the first meeting of the Maori Council of Church Union in 1975 that: “ we heard the deep sense of grievance which Maori have about injustice, rejection and paternalism in the New Zealand society of which the church is a part..... a part of the marae experience this has been the beginning of real understanding.” (Search for Unity p48)

In the light of this it seems germane to stress that genuine koinonia is not served by concealing injustice within a community of faith. Genuine koinonia is not present when pain and hurt are ignored. Unity and justice are both essential ingredients of God’s shalom. As there cannot be unity without justice, neither can there be justice without a lively awareness of interdependence. If unity and justice are both aspects of the truth of God there can be no fundamental conflict between the two.

As diversity within the Christian community becomes more evident, a more robust and flexible notion of unity will be needed to hold together increasing complexity. It will need to be a unity that is capable of honouring gender difference, inculturated theologies, and contextual expressions of theology and liturgy. But it will need to go beyond that. In his presentation to the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela 1993, John Zizioulas made a suggestive comment that he did not develop:

“This relationality of mission should not be limited to human beings, it must be extended to include creation also in its non-human form. Sensitivity to the integrity of creation has not been traditionally part of the Christian mission. We now realise that it ought to be. The Church as koinonia relates also to the animal and the material world as a whole. Perhaps the most urgent mission of the Church today is to become conscious of and proclaim in the strongest possible terms the fact that there is an intrinsic koinonia between the human being and its natural environment, a koinonia that must be brought into the Church’s very being in order to receive its fullness.” (The Church as Communion p8.)

This paper seeks to explore this fruitful comment especially as it relates to diversity and ecclesial koinonia in the light of this “intrinsic koinonia” referred to by John Zizioulas. Could it be that a model exists that goes beyond St Paul’s image of the Body and its members?

Our view of the universe is undergoing radical transformation. The inherited

scientific conceptuality, articulated by Newton, that the universe is like a machine, has been found to be dangerous. It treats the universe in terms of mechanistic laws which drains the reality of wonder. No room is left for the sacred, for providence, for 'miracle'. We have simply resources to be exploited, nature to be controlled. Humanity in this view has privileges free of responsibilities.

Warnings of the results of such a paradigm have become insistent. The damage consequent upon adopting an anthropocentric model has become increasingly evident. Industrial society has produced pollution despoliation, and the problem of the disposal of radio-active nuclear waste. The future of the planet has been placed in jeopardy: its ability to sustain life is being impaired.

The new science of ecology has exposed a deep pathology in the human community which has progressed from "such evils as suicide, homicide and genocide, to biocide and geocide, the killing of the life systems of the planet and the severe degradation if not the killing of the planet itself." (Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, The Universe Story p 247) Swimme and Berry are convinced that there is an urgent need to reject a salvation based on the chemical - saturated consequences of technocratic society and adopt a more humble relationship to other species and the environment itself. "What we have gained by controlling the world as a collection of objects we have lost in our capacity for intimacy in the communion of subjects." (p 249)

What Swimme and Berry are advocating is precisely the recognition of this "intrinsic koinonia" that John Zizioulas calls attention to. The new science of ecology appreciates that life on this planet is composed of an intricate and complex set of relationships characterized by both dependence and interdependence. Unless there is health in the basic systems and structures of relationship, there cannot be health in the human community.

A new wisdom is being born which is in effect the rebirth of an ancient wisdom frequently appreciated by indigenous peoples: "There is no way to attain human well-being apart from the well-being of the ecosystems of the earth." (p 254)

A key insight of the environmentalist and ecologist is to contend that there is a biophysical community that the human community must see itself as a part of, and not superior to, or over against. Swimme and Berry do not hesitate to employ the term "communion". "A species within this biophysical community finds its place and fits into the great complexity, or else the unpleadable necessity eliminates it and all its descendants forever. We can see in this activity the cosmological ordering of communion. Here in the life and death realities of the natural world we see the bite of ultimacy where communion is a central reality of life. "Fit into the community and become a fully functioning participant or else you will be left out for good." (p 133)

Swimme and Berry go on to demonstrate this principle by clarifying the nature of the demand. The illustration they give demonstrates the inescapable nature of the community of relationships, "intrinsic koinonia."

“A population of woodpeckers wanders wildly into a mountain community. Everywhere they turn they find demands shouted at them. ‘Your wings are too stubby; if you want to stay here, fit into our world.’ ‘Your beaks are too fat for the crevices in our trees; if you wish to stay here, change yourself.’ ‘Your neck musculature is too feeble for our grasses; if you are interested in entering our community you must pay attention to all of us here and live in this awareness.

Each member of the community makes ultimately the same demands on the new population: ‘If you are to stay, we must become related, and not just externally related. We must become kin, internally related. We live here. Our meaning is here. Our identity comes out of this place of togetherness; if you wish to join us we will work to provide everything you might need.” [p 133]

Here “intrinsic koinonia” is understood as being a set of relationships which do not endanger the viability of other species, a set of relationships that preserves diversity and allows diversity to flourish. “Intrinsic koinonia” speaks of an harmonious set of relationships in which each contributes to the whole and receives nurture from the communion.

If such “intrinsic koinonia” is a matter of life and death for the variety of species on the planet, human beings have a special responsibility in the service of preserving the diversity. Swimme and Berry speak of the inheritance that we have received in the planet as a “one-time endowment.” [p 133] While we may be surprised at the earth’s capacity to repair itself, its resilience is not infinite. There can be no controlled experiments with this planet. We have one chance to pray and act with wisdom. Because we belong to one world, “we have a common destiny. Not simply a common human destiny, but a common destiny for all the components of the planetary community.” [p 251] Swimme and Berry put this in a different form, “We do not have separate futures: there is only a shared future, a common destiny for the entire company of nations as well as for the larger Earth community itself. [p 254]

In his recent work The Diversity of Life, the eminent biologist E.O.Wilson explains the importance of biodiversity for the well-being of the planet. At present the loss of species of both flora and fauna is accelerating. He makes a case for surveying the existing fauna and flora so that we can become familiar with the extent of diversity that remains. Wilson identifies three forms of wealth that each nation possesses: material, cultural and biological. He is particularly concerned about the latter. He advocates ‘chemical prospecting’, among the remaining plant diversity for medicines that could one day be forever lost.

Our ignorance of the delicate balance and role that each species plays in the ecological web of relationships should warn us away from cavalier attitudes. Wilson argues that if we appreciate that biodiversity means wealth, we will be willing to devote energy to preserving what remains. It seems that diversity is not simply a reality to be tolerated, but rather a positive good, part of the very structure of “intrinsic koinonia”.

In the struggle to discover ways of assessing the new diversity, both spiritual and theological, within the church, in the context of ecumenism, this new

cosmology could shed some important light. There has been a tendency in the past to fear diversity and to see it as a threat to the unity of the Church. If, however, diversity is seen to be an inescapable dimension to our life in this world, we might be able to appreciate it in a positive manner.

What this suggests is that we need a spirituality that affirms diversity. This might well begin with recognising the integrity of each species, of each tradition and of discovering its place in the life-giving network or web of relationships. If we were to accept diversity in this spirit, there could be a flowering of security, and diversity would not be regarded as a threat.

Insights related to our model of “intrinsic koinonia” would confirm that being has no meaning outside of relationship, that being is always in communion. The new cosmology underlines the conviction that there is a profound interdependence that characterizes all life and that this might lead to the renewal of attitudes of wonder and gratitude, of reverence and gentleness.

In terms of the unity of the Church our model of “intrinsic koinonia” would suggest that there is a common future and that isolation is not sustainable. Just as each species needs each other, so too does each Christian community need each other. No one holds a monopoly of truth or wisdom. The new cosmology requires an awareness and a living out of a dynamic interdependence, in which there is a commitment to protect the diversity because it is a source of wealth. Indeed just as biodiversity constitutes biological wealth, ecclesial diversity constitutes spiritual wealth, commonwealth.

Biologists and ecologists are alarmed at the threat to biodiversity through the loss of species, especially rain forests. This loss of species they see as an impoverishment of the quality of life on this planet. A new ecumenical wisdom in terms of one model of “intrinsic koinonia” would claim that ecclesial diversity constitutes wealth of a spiritual nature. I am wanting to suggest that an understanding of ecumenism be constructed around the priority that diversity provides wealth and that this wealth be preserved.

At the centre of this concern would be a passionate commitment that no treasure be lost. This would entail that no treasure be lost from the rich and complex diversity that constitutes the koinonia, thereby securing the vigour and durability of the relationships. The ecumenist would then be the one who believed that no treasure be lost: that no person be lost, that no spiritual heritage be lost, that no beauty be lost, that no wisdom be lost, that no hope be lost, that no love be lost, or trampled on, or despised, or be regarded as expendable.

This commitment, called for in the light of what John Zizioulas calls our “intrinsic koinonia” will not be joined without struggle. Not all are convinced of the desirability of preserving biodiversity let alone ecclesial diversity. Some insist that some traditions have a central and privileged place in the communion of relatedness and would push others to the margins. But these fail to recognise that each shares a dependence upon the other.

Nor does the priority “that no treasure be lost” in the ecumenical vision simply arise out of a desire for survival. Rather the concern is for wholeness and that

no future possibilities be closed. The process would operate in the following way: each tradition would identify its treasures, and aware of their vulnerability would offer them to the wider Christian community. Each would say, "Out of commitment to the vision that no treasure be lost we resolve to cherish your place in the communion and commit ourselves to value and preserve your treasures."

Trinity speaks finally of the conviction; the faith that reality is at its deepest when it is relational in character. The mystery that life is to be lived in relatedness is honoured by the doctrine. It is wise to be cautious about what we claim to know of the inner life of God. It is easy to claim too much and engage in speculation without grounding it in scripture or experience.

What can be deduced from an understanding of God as Trinity is that fulfilment comes through relationships. The aspiration to be self-sufficient is not the highest goal that we encounter, either in revelation or in the life of the planet. Rather both attest to communion being the structure that supports and is essential to the fulfilment of life. There can be no authentic being outside of communion.

In Christ we have seen the reaching out for relationship. Indeed Jesus may be best understood as the one who reaches out to those who were denied the life-giving experience of relationship. Gospel accounts of Jesus' encounter with women, Samaritans, lepers and tax collectors confirm that at the heart of his ministry was a commitment to recover communion. The treasures that each has to offer to enrich the spiritual commonwealth are irreplaceable. Refusal to accept and welcome diversity is to fail in justice.

Swimme and Berry conclude their work by claiming that "We are discovering anew our human capacity for entering into the larger community of life, something that we have not experienced in any adequate manner since our Neolithic origins." [p 268] As the Spirit of God is the Lord and Giver of Life, the Spirit is at the same time the author of "intrinsic koinonia", the fundamental structure that characterizes reality at every level.

In the light of this, it is the particular mission of the Church to recognise and appreciate the fundamental structure of being, the "cosmological ordering of communion." In the Eucharist the Church celebrates its experience of Christ as the one who focuses this communion through the paschal mystery. The koinonia celebrated is the Church's anticipation of the recovery of the radiance and joy to be found in diversity welcomed and accepted.

Where relatedness and relationality are denied, communion is rejected and there is the judgement of God. The commonwealth of diversity can thrive only when there is freedom from fear and suspicion. The ecumenical vision looks to the day when all relationships will be restored in Christ, and this will necessarily include the relationship of humankind with the material world. Meanwhile the structures uncovered by ecologists can provide a compelling model for the nature of the unity of the Church.

