

# One Church – Three Confessions

## Similarities, particularities and complementarity

*A sketchy essay by Peter P. J. Beyerhaus*

Our three principal confessions have emerged from a common trunk, namely the primordial Church of the New Testament. Aside from the pre-Chalcedonian separation of the so-called oriental orthodox churches, which for various, mostly external reasons did not adopt the teaching of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D., essentially there existed one undivided Church until the year 1054. From the teaching and spiritual heritage of this common stem the three principal confessions continue to live to this day, so that the *Orthodox* Eastern Churches, the *Roman-Catholic* Church, and the various denominations of the *Protestant* Reformation born in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century share a broad spectrum of common teaching and practice. Moreover, even with regard to the particularity which each seeks to preserve and to cultivate, it is possible to identify correspondences to elements within the other traditions, albeit with different accents, dosage and amalgamation.

Granted, the recognition of this communality does not contest the fact that there exist still unresolved differences in doctrine, which must continue to be the object of conscientious theological dialogue. By the same token, however, such differences do not justify ecumenical resignation.

On the contrary, many confessing Christians in the separated churches are convinced that, in the face of the critical times in which we live, and in which the Christian fundamentals are threatened from within and without by anti-Christian forces, it is necessary to do all in our power to recognize the perspectivity of what separates us and as far as possible to overcome such divisions. This recognition has given rise to the *Ecumenical Movement*, though everywhere it runs up against anachronistic opposition of ultra-traditionalists and ultra-fundamentalists, who think and act only in terms of alternatives and oppositions. In this respect, our *International Christian Network* (\*1978 in London) faces today an important task, which we perceive to be just as important these days as the traditional *defensio fidei* (defence of the faith), which has been the principal occupation until now. At our I. European Ecumenical Confession Congress, which met in Freudenstadt in October 2004, we attempted to bring together both tasks, defence and rapprochement.

What then is the specific contribution which each of the three confessions can make to confessional ecumenism, assuming that each has preserved their particularity without perverting it? I believe that Vladimir Soloviev was following a genial intuition when in his “*A Short tale of the Antichrist*” (1899) he put the three pillar apostles, **Peter**, **John** and **Paul**, in place as archetypes and representatives of the three confessions, though each of these disciples of Christ belongs to all the churches. One could even, albeit rather daringly, associate the three confessions with the three persons of the Holy Trinity: the **Father**, in His creative authority, stands of the Catholic element; the **Son** in His vicarious self-sacrifice stands for the Protestant element; and the **Holy Spirit**, in His life-giving, linking love, stands for the Orthodox element.

## 1. Let us begin thankfully and self-critically with our own *Protestant* tradition, which preferentially recalls Paul the Apostle.

To properly appreciate the Protestant tradition, it is important to proceed from its twofold indivisible principle: the material principle “*sola fidei propter Christum*”, i.e. our redemption takes place alone through faith based on Christ’s merits, and the formal principle “*sola Scriptura*”, i.e. the Bible is the sole theological basis for knowing, in which the Triune God revealed Himself once and for all in a manner appropriate to our recognition of our salvation and in which He continues to speak to us today with a living voice.

St. Paul was the man who became a witness to the liberating Gospel on the basis of his own deep personal experience of judgment and pardon, and who became the principal theologian of the Gospel on the basis of his deep knowledge of the Scripture. Paul had thus had a deep affinity to Martin Luther, whose whole theology circled existentially around the question; “how do I get a merciful God?” The answer, which he found in Holy Scripture, lies in the cross of Christ, “*theologia crucis*”. **Good Friday**, therefore (at least theoretically) is the most important Protestant feast.

This perspective is hardly found in this depth and radicalness in the two other confessions, where the soteriological question with regard to sinful man’s capacity for salvation is resolved considerably more harmoniously. For this reason the Protestant reformers remained unsatisfied by the answers presented by the Tradition, the Magisterium or the ecclesial consensus. Paul, Augustine and Luther were astonishingly “modern thinkers”, inasmuch as they were independent theologians reflecting on their personal experience of salvation. Decisive for Protestant Christians is the personal “certainty of salvation”, a phrase having no real Catholic counterpart. Grace in the Protestant view is understood primarily as the encounter between God and the human being, an encounter which involves God’s judgment, in a word, “justification by faith”. Faith is thus an attitude of trust, conviction and submission to God. Out of this attitude, the believer strives to live in a way pleasing to God but ever conscious of his abiding sinfulness under God’s merciful judgment consummated on the Cross. One of the profoundest and at the same time critical interpretations of Luther is Paul Hacker’s book «The role of the ego in faith according to Martin Luther». (Das Ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther”, Graz-Wien-Köln 1966).

The spiritual self-awareness generated by the personal study of the Holy Scripture can give rise to authentic faith, but it can also call forth division and *schism* within the Church and can indeed, when individual Bible texts are made absolute, give rise to *heresy*. Protestants recognize no overriding authority in questions of faith. However they easily forget that they are not called as individuals and that the Bible is not to be interpreted by persons in isolation. We stand in a grand history of faith and are surrounded by an enormous cloud of witnesses, who confirm but also correct our interpretations.

In keeping with the central role of faith, which comes by hearing, the word is traditionally the primary focus of Protestant worship. In the reading of the Bible and the preaching of the minister, the gathered community listens to the Word of God and is called to faith. It is the word that makes the sacrament.

However, in this perspective lies the danger of reducing the sacrament to a secondary (and often dispensable) adjunct to the worship service. The rise of a liturgical movement in the churches of the Reformation has done much to correct this deficiency.

**Pietism** further developed Protestant individualism by emphasizing the need for personal conversion and by promoting intensive study of the Bible and personal free prayer. The personal experience of salvation, the personal loving relationship to Jesus, the personal testimony to the faith as the motive for evangelization and deaconary service — all this is in the best sense Pauline and Protestant. At the same time they recall elements of Catholic spirituality.

Historically, however, evangelical religiosity has time and again been exposed to the dangers of *isolation* and *separation*: excessive emphasis on spiritual spontaneity, free association of believers with similar experiences of salvation as the foundation for establishing churches, common priesthood of the faithful in self-conscious opposition to the ministry of the Church, emphasis on the invisible church in resistance to the institutional church, spontaneous formulation of personal faith convictions, autonomy of the free conscience.

For this reason, the “rediscovery of the Church” which began in the 1920’s and the High Church Movement among Anglicans and Lutherans mark significant correctives to Protestant subjectivism.

## **II. As the archetypical representative of the Roman Catholic Church stands Peter, the first among the Apostles**

Constitutive for the Catholic notion of the Church is Jesus’ declaration that Peter is the rock of the Church and His subsequent handing over to Peter the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt. 16:18-20), i.e. the power to teach and to absolve as the vicar of Christ on earth. Peter is the first, indeed the prince among the 12 Apostles. Out of this conception arose the *hierarchical apostolic principle*. Typical for Catholic theology is the delegated power to teach and to act in the name of Christ, to which corresponds the duty of the faithful to obey. Catholic is the solidity and continuity of the teaching, which does not need to be constantly reconstructed and reformed *ab ova* by individual study of the Bible. *Roma locuta est ... causa finita est*.

On the other hand, the fundamental unquestionability of the decisions of church officials is open to the danger of paternalizing the laity and releasing them from the responsibility for their own decisions of conscience, in particular when their spiritual powers of judgment are not biblically schooled.

The belief that the Pope is the vicar of Christ on earth then becomes dangerous, when, as with Peter, the attempt to erect the Kingdom of God in this world and with earthly means, circumventing the Cross, is not recognized for what it is, namely a satanic temptation (Mt 16:21-23). In the face of such beguiling self-secularization of the Church, reform movements from within the Church and sometimes in schism with it have time and again called Roman Catholicism to penance and conversion.

Typically Catholic is the biblically grounded esteem for the Body of Christ as symbol for the Church. From this attitude emerges the awareness of the *sacramental real presence* of Christ in the Church, not only in the Eucharistic sacrifice, but also in the Church as such. The Church is thus seen as the post-incarnation of the Son of God, so that among the three major feasts of the Church **Christmas** is celebrated by the Catholics as the greatest.

Grace, in the Catholic view, is a reality which God produces in the saved person. This reality takes the form of ontological qualities which God communicates sacramentally to the person, empowering her to respond in faith, hope and love to get the gift of justification, to live virtuously and to exercise specific functions in the Church. Thus the Catholic view distinguishes sanctifying grace, sacramental character, actual grace, special gifts. Grace as encounter, so important for the Protestant, plays a secondary role in Catholic soteriology, though it is central to Catholic spirituality. Faith is primarily assent to the truths of revelation as presented by the Bible and by the living Tradition of the Church and thus needs to be complemented by the gifts of hope and charity and the moral virtues.

In the Catholic tradition, the *sacraments* play a central role in communicating grace. The ministerial priesthood acts *in persona Christi* and thus stands over against the common priesthood of all the baptized, enjoying their loving reverence. Corresponding to this position, the liturgy is celebrated with special dignity. In material objects and ritual words and gestures of the priest the power of God is present and active. Thus the central act of worship is the eucharistic sacrifice which re-presents Jesus' self-offering on the Cross; the word is ordered to the sacrament.

The danger here is, of course, the reduction of ritual to magic and to the priestly spectacle performed before a passive audience. The liturgical reforms of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century provide an important corrective to such tendencies.

Integral to Catholic Christianity is the *Marian element*: Mary, the Mother of God, is also the Mother of all the faithful. "Full of grace", she exemplifies the real transformation of the person by divine grace and thus she is the archetype of the Church as the recipient of grace. In the communion of saints which spans the chasm between the living and the dead, she lives with God and intervenes for men much as we here on earth intervene for each other in prayer. With all the saints in heaven she is the object of veneration as the fruit of God's work

Here the danger exists, however, that an exaggerated Marian devotion can overshadow the relationship to the living and ever-present person of Jesus Christ. Such exaggerations are in no small measure responsible for the mariological deficit on the Protestant side. Here too, mutual criticism and completion can be fruitful for all parties.

A fundamental aspect of Roman Catholicism is its consciousness of having a worldwide mission, which flows out of Catholicity and which is directed to bringing all nations and peoples together in the maternal bosom of the Church. This position stands in striking contrast to a radical evangelical ecclesiology of the "congregation of Jesus" as the small remnant waiting to be raptured to Jesus in heaven. In Catholic understanding, the *church militant* here on earth is linked here and now to both the *church suffering* in purgatory and the *church triumphant* in heaven.

An important step in the direction of reconciling Protestant and Catholic views is marked by the rise of the Bible Movement in Catholicism since the 1930s inspired by Romano Guardini and others. Equally important is the re-evaluation of Luther and the evangelical foundations of the Reformation by Joseph Lortz and his students.

### III. With good reason, Vladimir Soloviev regards John the Apostle as the congenial representative of the Orthodox tradition

Orthodox faith is characterized by its mystical depths, which are the goal of an ascetic spirituality, which, however, is fully realized mainly by monks and nuns, often living as hermits rather than in communities. For this reason, Soloviev presents John as a *starets*, a monastic spiritual father, of the sort familiar from the novels of *Fyodor Dostoevsky*. The *starets* has acquired the gift of depth vision, enabling him to see through the empirical world to the divine reality, which surrounds and mysteriously penetrates the world of ordinary experience.

The leitmotiv of Orthodox Christianity is the testimony of John's Gospel (1: 14 and 16): "... *we have beheld His glory, ... And from His fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.*" **Grace** is understood here not so much in the sense of pardon and forgiveness but rather in the sense of the communication of grace as a gift conferring on the recipient a sharing in the divine nature. Orthodox soteriology defines itself in terms of "**theosis**" (= "divinisation" or "deification", a term which to Protestant (and many Catholic) ears sounds like blasphemy, though it has biblical warrant: "... *that you may ... become partakers of the divine nature*" (2 Peter 1:4).

The otherworldly orientation of Orthodox Christianity also has its **dangers**. The disdain for earthly reality can easily lead to a neglect of the social-diaconal task of the Church, a deficit that proved to be a negative precursor of Marxist-Leninism. Furthermore, the insufficient autonomy of the Orthodox structure of church office promoted the devolution of ecclesiastical governance to the secular power, giving rise to the so-called caesaropapism, which in Russia in the wake of the October Revolution in 1917 flipped over into the brutal rape of the Church. Today, the linking of the principle of *autocephaly* (independence of external ecclesiastical authority) with ethnic nationalism serves as a serious impediment for the Orthodox churches to realize ecumenical union on the confessional and a fortiori on the worldwide plane.

In Orthodox religiosity, the central event of saving history is *the resurrection of Christ*, the first-born of the new creation, an event made present liturgically in every Sunday celebration, but above all in the feast of **Easter**. Not only human beings, but also the whole cosmos is destined for sharing in the divine nature, the transfiguration wrought by the penetrating power of God's glory.

For this transfiguration, human beings as the *imago Dei* are endowed with a prerequisite capacity, which is not fully destroyed by sin, though it has been and is frequently impaired. Orthodox theology and cure of souls see in the sinner not so much the guilty person worthy of damnation in God's judgment, but rather the sick invalid, who by reason of his natural weakness is in need of God's healing. This healing takes place through compassionate spiritual direction and through grace communicating sacraments.

Orthodox spirituality is marked by the awareness of creation's transparency for the divine. The **icon**, which plays a central role in worship, is like a window through which the heavenly reality shines through and becomes visible. Orthodox believers live with their icons as with really present cohabitants of their home and their church.

The Orthodox *Jesus-Prayer* breaks through the boundaries of empirical consciousness and leads to mystical union with the transcendental divine light.

In the Orthodox liturgy, which can be drawn out for hours without becoming boring, the earthly ritual community becomes united with the heavenly community of the angels and saints. No wonder, then, that the Russian envoys of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century visiting the Divine Liturgy in Constantinople reported back to Prince Vladimir: “We no longer knew whether we were still on earth or already in heaven”.

Especially since the Bolshevik Revolution, Russian-Orthodox exiles in Europe and North America have done much to communicate to Western Christians an appreciation of Orthodox theology, spirituality and liturgy.

### **The upshot of the discussion**

So much for this account of the specific differences of the three major confessions. Admittedly this is only a sketchy and simplified account. Within the confines of this brief presentation, I have hardly been able to pursue the topic of complementarity, which I postulated at the beginning of this article, the ability of the three confessions to correct and complete each other. At best I adumbrated some examples in my critical remarks about the confession specific weaknesses and deficiencies, which call for mutual ecumenical correction.

In earlier times, such a presentation would have been interpreted as establishing the irreconcilability of the three major confessions “Ultra-Evangelicals” and “Ultra-Traditionalists” will see themselves confirmed in their traditional prejudices. But for considerable time now, within the Ecumenical Movement one can observe a growing willingness to regard the faith convictions and experience of other churches as an expression of the manifoldness of biblically authentic Christianity and a willingness to retrieve, by way of experiment, elements from other traditions and to integrate them into ones own tradition

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