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Ecumenical Theology and the Societas Oecumenica

Some theses and reflexions*

Let me start with a statement, the truism of which cannot be doubted: *Ecumenical Theology analyses churchly events, and develops theological reflexion, in regard to things ecumenical.* I should like to dwell a little more on this for a while, since what is truistic is not necessarily well thought through, and a primary task in this Society is precisely to discuss together the self-evidences, i. e. the pretended self-evidences, of our own field of study, teaching, and research.

Our *task in the Societas Oecumenica* is, to my opinion, *to help one another to develop a critical/constructive theology in relation to Christian churches and ecumenical organisations in their dimensions of OIKOUMENE.* The OIKOUMENE is a fact, and it belongs to this period of Church history, that this fact is being reacted to, and taken into serious theological consideration. The fact has always been there, but we as ecumenical theologians depend upon the working factor of ecumenical conscientization, and we are ourselves part of that conscientization. Therefore, our relationship to the churches and to the ecumenical organisations cannot be but critical/constructive. «Critical» because we are a part of theology as a critical discipline, and «constructive» because our work as ecumenical theologians participates in the process of conscientization itself.

* The Chairman's introduction to the 2nd scholarly Consultation of the *Societas Oecumenica* on the theme «The Holy Spirit and the Unity of the Church» at Sandbjerg Castle, Denmark, August 28 – September 1, 1982.

Referring to that statement of principle, I now want to present to you some reflexions on our common task as ecumenical theologians in Europe. In this my effort I am most obliged to the insights, mediated to me through the study of the Münster Institute *Ökumenische Theologie. Ein Arbeitsbuch,* edited by Professor Peter Lengsfeld. For future reflexion upon the task of ecumenical theology, that book, whether one agrees with it or not, constitutes a critical but creative starting-point, that cannot be neglected.

I will develop my reflexions under 4 subtitles (or subsidiary themes):

I. The inter-relatedness of Ecumenical Theology with other theological disciplines;
II. The particularities of Ecumenical Theology;
III. The *Societas Oecumenica* as constituting a field of co-operation;
IV. The Working of the Holy Spirit as a theme of co-ordination, evaluation and self-criticism within Ecumenical Theology.

I. The Inter-relatedness of Ecumenical Theology with Other Theological Disciplines

At this point I can be rather short. For anyone working in the field of Ecumenical Theology, it becomes quickly obvious that what we represent is more a dimension of all theological disciplines than a speciality *sui generis.* As much as the OIKOUMENE is a dimension of the life of the Churches, Ecumenical Theology is a dimension of any theological work. That fact constitutes our humility as well as our pride as ecumenical theologians. All the classical disciplines of Theology: Fundamental Theology, Exegetical Theology, Church History, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology have to be put in the perspective of their ecumenical dimension. Our task, then, is to help these other disciplines to realize and evaluate this and to put it into practice. Here, our special commitment should be to recall, (an *anamnetic* call, indeed!) before the representatives of these disciplines, that this ecumenical dimension does exist. Our weakness is that we are no experts in these fields; our strength is that we represent an unavoidable dimension of their work.

The problems of method are, as usual, of importance, but perhaps not of a primary importance. To what extent we specialize in theologi-

cal method ought to be an open question. Our task is rather to be servants than to be specialists, yet there may be certain aspects of methodology that are our obligation. It is part of our task, precisely in this Society, to discuss the methodological impact of this preliminary insight of Ecumenical Theology. The tension/relationship e. g. between unity and plurality (of perspective as well as institutional reality) is a special concern of ours, and if that tension/relationship does not become clear, or is avoided, in the respective disciplines, it may be the task of Ecumenical Theology to actualize methodological questions which can help to manifest that ecumenical dimension of these disciplines. I cannot go into details here, I just want to indicate the problem.

But the problem should be seen, let me underline this, still within the context of each discipline as part of its own methodology.

In this respect, Ecumenical Theology may also be in the position to render some service through its own experience of co-operation with help disciplines within the humanistic and social sciences. At the same time, reminding our colleagues of this, we should thus remain within the frame-work of these theological disciplines themselves, not pretending to have access to insights which are closed to them.

II. The Particularities of Ecumenical Theology

What I have now said, necessarily brings to the fore, what the peculiarities of Ecumenical Theology might be. Are there special fields of interest and research, which constitute the proper task of Ecumenical Theology? Let me indicate at least 4 points, which might mark this *proprium* of Ecumenical Theology.

a. Ecumenical Theology is working in a context of the OIKOUMENE dimension of Christendom, which it is its particular task to analyse and to visualize, theologically, historically and systematically.

Professor Lengsfeld's theory of *collusion* (from *col-ludere,* playing together) is at this point of special relevance. Ecclesiastical reality, as we know it, is a divided, a fragmented reality. Yet at the same time, it has to be considered in its ecumenical dimension. The systematic question of *Truth* collides with the question of ecclesiastical (and personal Christian) *Identity* and it does so within a field of secular/worldly *Sociality*. (I am referring to Lengfeld's distinctions). Now, sociality is restricted by

the factors of historical development and social fragmentation, but it obeys, at the same time, rules of development and change, and development and change in this case are due both to the inner mecanisms of self-expansion (any movement tends to expand within the boundaries of its own conditions and self-understanding), and to the broader dimension of the OIKOUMENE (identity can be enlarged, relationships can be, and are unavoidably, established across self-defined boundaries). For this reason we must observe, equally and in parallel studies, both what we call the *confessionality* of Churches and their ecumenical *movement*. In other words, the fact that Churches develop both within the dimension of their own given and confirmed limited identity and within the dimension of the OIKOUMENE must be considered as a primary task of Ecumenical Theology. This observation can, of course, be undertaken within other disciplines of Theology, too, but it remains a special task of Ecumenical Theology.

b. Secondly, this leads to *the historical aspect* of Ecumenical Theology. Churches certainly have a *historicity* of their own, but they have also (consciously or unconsciously) an *ecumenical historicity,* and it is the obvious task of Ecumenical Theology to map out that ecumenical history of theirs. Now again, churches have a tendency to include their ecumenical historicity in their own historical manifestations (all churches not only confess but pretend to manifest the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church), but it is the special task of Ecumenical Theology to analyse and conscientisize the tension between *the ecumenical historicity which churches include and that which they exclude from their own historical awareness* (and from their understanding of the historical identity proper to them).

Here, *the ecumenical movement,* as a movement of the churches, comes into the picture. Today most churches have an official relationship to that movement, but at the same time (and here the Münster book helps us to see more clearly) they tend to include that relationship in their own ecclesiastical life and awareness. I.e. they tend to ignore the tension. Thus, it is a task of Ecumenical Theology to make this tension clear and to exert a critical/analytical influence upon the churches in their particularity.

c. Here I should like to draw the attention particularly to what we – not least in Aarhus – use to call the *Third Ecumenical Movement*. I regard this concept, not as a working concept of the Ecumenical Movement

itself in the first instance, but as a *concept of observation*. The Third Ecumenical Movement is represented by trans-confessional efforts and tendencies, which, critically challengeing – existing ecclesiastical structures, try to materialize the reality of the OIKOUMENE in respect to spheres of our common Christian existence, which are particularly pertinent in our time, or which have a special proximity to legitimate general movements and aspirations of people in and around the Church. Here, the ecumenical aspect, in the strictest sense, is always secondary – from a systematic or intentional point of view, but the very force of commitment on the part of Christians is, indeed, ecumenical, in the sense of a common feeling of what obedience to the cause of Christ in the world may mean.

The task of Ecumenical Theology in this field is, obviously, to observe and, to some extent, to evaluate these phenomena, not in terms of the present confessional situation, but in terms of the «unity that we seek» (to quote a concern that was particularly relevant by the time of the WCC General Assembly of New Delhi in 1961).

The task of ecumenical theologians to be *attentive* is here of utmost importance, and should not be hampered by ecclesio-strategical considerations. (It may be, in good circumstances, that ecumenical theologians may serve another cause of ecclesiastical strategy, an ecumenical one, as Prof. Lengsfeld has pointed out in his introduction to the *«Arbeitsbuch»* from Münster! For Ecumenical Theology is not destructive, even though it may sometimes be regarded as subversive!)

d. Ecumenical Theology has a particular difficulty and a particular privilege in being *dialogical in nature*. The particular difficulty lies in the fact, that Ecumenical Theology language cannot be identified with particularistic confessional language.

Certainly, we must distinguish between ecumenical texts and the commentaries of ecumenical theologians on these texts. But as a matter of fact, the critical/analytical commentaries upon these texts, which are due to Ecumenical Theology, cannot be effective and applicable, unless they themselves use *an extended code of ecclesiastical language,* characteristic (although feable) of the ecumenical texts that they are working with.

We might transform this experience of Ecumenical Theology into a thesis: *Ecumenical documents are analysable and commentable only through a non-restricted code of interpretation, homogenous with their own.* And that code is *dialogical in character.*

This observation is, to me at least, very important. It means, that *the linguistic code of analytical operation of Ecumenical Theology is not identical with the codes of the existing ecclesiastical units which operate in the field of ecumenical relations*. Thus, the ecumenical theologian must exert a kind of *trans-confessional loyalty,* which is, at the same time, very difficult to motivate, because it relies upon the very results of the dialogue which it analyses. The circle of communication and consent is very fragile, but that is the condition of Ecumenical Theology (!)

Let me add here, however, that this fact is, really, of utmost importance to Ecumenical Theology. It cannot let itself be neglected or put aside. It is comparatively easy for Ecumenical Theology to be aligned to different kinds of ecclesiastical solidarity causes, but to make itself acknowledged in its peculiarity, Ecumenical Theology must be brave enough, sometimes, to concentrate its attention upon the trans-confessional character of its own task.

1. This is, primarily, a matter of its own independence. Ecumenical Theology cannot serve the churches, unless it is independent enough to develop its own codes of analysis and understanding. And these codes must be derived, not from the traditionality of confessional identities, but from *the common language of confessions in dialogue* – be it multi-lateral or bi-lateral.

That is to say, that Ecumenical Theology must defend its *proprium,* precisely in defending and developing the *«Sprachraum»* (linguistic space) of trans-confessional and inter-confessional dialogue. The value of Ecumenical Theology as a special discipline lies precisely here: It is not to be identified with any confessional position, but only with the position that emerges out of the dialogue between the confessions in their dialogue with one another, and which, transcending their boundaries, arrives at a common language that is not only the sum of their separate experiences, but a new articulation of their common experience, critically evaluated in the perspective of their common task *to go beyond,* eschatologically understood. The *matter proper* of Ecumenical Theology is, thus, something that emerges out of its own work, and cannot be domesticated by any of the existing confessional identities, – nor, for that matter, by the hitherto achieved ecumenical consensuses.

2. Secondarily, this is alos a matter of *the proper concern of the churches themselves,* namely as committed to *the cause of unity*. Ecumenical

Theology should be regarded as the servant of the Churches, not as they are, but in regard to their call to ecumenical manifestation. The Churches have manifested their commitment to unity in terms of the Ecumenical Movement as we know it, with all the limitations which lie therein. The task of Ecumenical Theology is to follow the manifestations of that commitment critically, in the service of the Churches themselves, in as far as they are – and should be – committed to the cause – not of their consensus in an absolute sense, but of the *Una Sancta Catholica and Apostolica Ecclesia*. Here, it seems to me, it is important to underline, that Ecumenical Theology has no other access to the mystery of the manifestation of the *Una Sancta,* than that which the Churches have, but only that it is obliged to see to it, i. e. analyse critically, that the churches use constructively what they have – and that they do it in constant dialogue in between themselves. To serve the Churches is for Ecumenical Theology, as for any other theological discipline, to do it *critically, but without pretending to have insights that the Churches have not already,* although they have them in common.

III. The Societas Oecumenica as a field of co-operation

In this respect, very much is still to be done. We must make our structure of co-operation far more effective. We rely upon each other, but we have not yet realized that to the full, or we have been unable/ or unwilling to put into practice our mutual weakness's demand for co-operation. It is astonishing, how little contacts we have, how few demands for exchange of information there are, etc. You might certainly say, that the resources of the *Societas Oecumenica* are too small, but the demand itself for support and service should be able to raise the amount of economic support that is needed. The rule is: The more you expect, the more you are willing to contribute. (Judging from that rule, in the last period, the expectations have been rather low, I must say!)

Sharing the results is, we must realize, a complicated matter. It is not enough to tell somebody in the centre of the organisation, that this and this has been done (and even that occurs only occasionally), but the main point is to make it known to others in the field, that the results have been achieved under those and those presuppositions and reservations, and thus to indicate the limitations of the results, their problems of method, their call for other research, be it in the same field or in

neighbouring fields. The Bulletin, that we have hoped for and only realized to a very humble extent, could be a real means of co-operation, if we were only willing to give the support to it that it needs, and to develop our Society to a functioning network of information and sharing.

Sharing of the results is also, to a very great extent, a matter of mutual confidence. Only if we trust one another fully, within our fellowship of research and common concern, will we be able to do a fruitful job together. Let us not let eccleciastical interests of a particularistic nature interfere with our openness to one anothers's contributions. All of them, certainly, are exposing a limited horizon, but this fact does not in itself diminish their value beyond the limitations of our own perspectives. Let us be grateful to one another's results! This gratefulness is perhaps one of the most stimulating factors of developing our *Societas*.

Sharing the results is, finally and perhaps above all, a matter of *sharing a common contextual horizon*. This is, indeed, very difficult, since there are several horizons proposed, each emerging from the different confessional backgrounds. Nevertheless, the question of a common horizon is of utmost importance. (In indicating that, to my opinion, the Münster group has rendered us a most helpful service, whatever we may think of its results!) If Ecumenical Theology – in all its service to and cooperation with other disciplines of theology – is ever to establish itself as a particular field of research, study and teaching, it must be able to define its own frame of reference, its own horizon of understanding, and with that its own hermeneutics. Here a considerable field of work lies before us, and we have only started to investigate it.

But sharing of results in an analytical sense is only one part of our task as ecumenical theologians. Another part is that of *observation of ecclesiastical praxis*. Third world theologies, particularly s. c. Liberation theology, has taught us something of the importance of *praxis* as a hermeneutical principle. We know today, better than before in the history of the Church, that *praxis* is an integral part of the theological universe. Without a *praxis* that is an equivalent to theory, theological reflexion will lack in trustworthiness. Let us take it as a real challenge, that so little of the Third World theologies are concerned with *our* theories.

We must observe here *a creative tension between a deductive theory construction* (such as we know it in all our confessional theological

traditions) *and the process itself of the realization of the call to become the OIKOUMENE.* It is precisely at this point of tension that Ecumenical Theology should thrive. Perhaps, this is the proper *Sitz im Leben* of Ecumenical Theology. Thus, we cannot avoid to go ourselves to the sources, to interfere with exegetes and church historians in their own fields, to search in our own right for the proper incitaments to ecumenical action. We should not do this, pretending to be isolated or as those who know better, but we should do it confidently on our own premises. As much as we represent only a dimension (but an important one) of other disciplines, we should accept the pain of doing our own work of digging into the sources, not because we are alone, but because we are acting – as our colleagues – on behalf of the cause of Theology general.

This is true also in regard to the relationship to other religions. Classical theology is very often turned in upon itself, obsessed by its own internal problems. Ecumenical Theology's concern for the whole of Christian theology invites it to be more open to the challenge of non-Christian theologies, be they of classical religious background or those emerging from the s. c. New religious movements. The dialogical character of Ecumenical Theology should make it competent to deal with these challenges in a more constructive way than some of the classical disciplines of theology.

However, this cannot be undertaken in a vacuum. Ecumenical Theology is always a discipline in co-operation with others, helping others itself and being helped by others. But not only that, and this pertains to the theme of this very consultation:

IV. The Working of the Holy Spirit as a theme of co-ordination

We are well aware of the fact, that our theme might seem a pious and an «unscientific» one. But when we have chosen it, we have done so for two reasons, that have appeared to us in the board as particularly relevant for Ecumenical Theology today. The first reason is, of course, that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is today put in the foreground of much systematic theology: The theology of hope, and the charismatic movement testify to that. We have felt that precisely these tendencies reveal in a particular way the ecumenical dimension of any theology.

But, secondly, and that is perhaps our main reason, questions of pneumatology put before Ecumenical Theology a particular challenge.

The late Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov would have a lot to say to this, as would the Roumanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae, had he been here. For these two persons, it is precisely their concern with pneumatology which makes them into ecumenical theologians. Ecclesiology, being the field of operation of the Holy Spirit in classical theology, is not an isolated matter, but primarily a question of the universality of the Church in its relationship to God's created world. The workings of the Spirit and the workings of God's Wisdom in the created world convene. The Holy Spirit is sent to the world as well as to the Church. It is the *Spiritus Creator* that fulfills the will of God in the Church.

And the will of God is universal, ecumenical. The OIKOUMENE is the world finally becoming the Church, the Body of Christ, and the world finally becoming what it is called to be: «the world of God's Kingdom». Ecumenical Theology is by its very nature a world-related theology, and at the same time ecclesiology. Again, we have here a meeting-place, where Ecumenical Theology is a its own. In the concerns of the world and for the world, Ecumenical Theology senses its *proprium*.

Thus, pneumatology cannot possibly be treated in a confessionally restricted way. Pneumatology is by its very definition ecumenical in character. To what extent we shall be able to deal with it in this universal way here, remains to be seen, but the intention is clear. We cannot avoid it.

At the same time, then, the theme of our conference must invite to a critical evaluation, precisely of our own versions of Ecumenical Theology. The theme co-ordinates that work, but it distinguishes also between what is genuine and what is not. It invites to our self-criticism, and I should be glad, if that note of self-criticism could be felt throughout our consultation and discussions. We are not here to criticize one another but to be self-critical before one another, in the presence of one another, for the sake of our common cause: *Ecumenical Theology*.