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# Collapse and Recovery

*Why Denominational Identities are Becoming Precarious*
*... and why too much Pragmatism won't Help*

Kassel, the city I come from, is by no means one of the most vibrant cities in Germany ... frankly speaking it's something between unspectcular and boring. But every five years, for a hundred days only, everything changes. The city is buzzing. Pilgrims from all over the world go ›DOCUMENTA‹. They come to see one of the most prestigious exhibitions of contemporary art. The title for ›DOCUMENTA 13‹/2012 is ›collapse and recovery‹. It conjures up the deep incalculable layers of every crisis phenomenon, which are beyond our influence and gradually reduce us to mere passive onlookers of events that cannot be controlled. The topic of ›crisis and the strategies of how to deal with it‹ comes at no great surprise. Today it seems to reflect an almost universal experience. And Ecumenism is no exception to this. It finds itself in a crisis, with turbulences and losses that can easily be compared with those of the global financial markets. Here, too, forces are at work, which, because they are either unknown or unnamed, greatly shake up any denominational identity, both within the Christian communities and in their public perception. And while academic theology is increasingly given the role of a bystander, ecumenical pragmatists and high-minded defenders of principles fight for an adequate response. Let's look at this systematically and start with a brief glance back at history.

## 1 »Proddy Woddy ring your Bell. Not for Heaven but for Hell«

> On Sunday mornings in Limerick I watch them go to church, the Protestants, and I feel sorry for them, especially the girls, who are so lovely, they have such beautiful white teeth. I feel sorry for the beautiful Protestant girls they're doomed. That's what the priests tell us. Outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation. Outside the Catholic Church there is nothing but doom. And I want to save them. Protestant girl, come with me to the True Church. You'll be saved and you won't have the doom. After Mass on Sunday I go with my friend Bill Campbell to watch them play croquet on the lovely lawn beside their church on Barrington Street. Croquet is a Protestant game. They hit the ball with the mallet, pock and pock again, and laugh. I wonder how they can laugh or don't they even know they're doomed? I feel sorry for them and I say, Billy, what's the use playing croquet when you're doomed? He says, Frankie, what's the use of not playing croquet when you're doomed?[1]

Frank McCourt's novel ›Angela's Ashes‹, from which, as many of you will have recognized, this quotation is taken, made me both laugh and weep. For me it was, in its own peculiar way, a key to recent Irish history and all its social, economic, and denominational drama. One thing stands out for me: denominational differences are not to be taken as a purely theological phenomenon, but they are to do with cultural milieux. They derive their power less from theological than social or ethnic identities, and are most efficiently stabilised by mechanisms of exclusion. Of course, they will very rarely be quite as black and white as McCourt's novel suggests, but it is surprising how coherent and persistent the stereotypes they produce can become. Those notorious ›non-theological factors‹ give them a longevity that far outlasts any theological controversy and that make the business of ecumenism so difficult. Those non-theological factors, their growing impact on ecumenism, and the problem of meeting these challenges with an adequate hermeneutics of ecumenism are what interests us today. Ecumenism will no longer be able to ignore the social and political dynamics involved, which are neither caused by it nor can effectively be controlled by it – but which have a massive impact on it and will greatly determine, and thus change, the future topics, debates and actions of the ecumenical movement. I would like to demonstrate this in the light of

[1] FRANK *McCourt,* Angela's Ashes. A Memoir, New York 1996, 114.

three observations that have already influenced the ecumenical movement greatly and might turn out to be fatal stumbling blocks for the future of the movement.

## 2 *Denominational Identities under pressure*

### 2.1 *Back to the future? – Between re-confessionalisation and structural anti-modernism*

There is a tendency of falling back into confessionalism – not only in the Roman Catholic Church. And there are many causes for this. I would like to have a closer look at two of them, i.e, for one, the pressures of a globalised market of religious choices and, secondly, the late modern tendency towards an antimodernism imbued by religion.

From a purely economic point of view, the unity of the church(es) must be considered a total failure. From a consumer's perspective and under the law of market economy, a pluralism of denominations certainly makes more sense than any ›unity project‹. A denominational pluralism combined with clearly shaped profiles caters much more for the needs of a late modern era, that is entirely based on economic strategies, like competition, sales opportunities, trademark marketing, recognition value, and consumer acceptance. It is a simple truth that only »competing church agents offer all Christian products«.[2] And whoever can successfully shape his denominational identity in terms of a ›brand‹ will certainly have an advantage on the marketplace of possibilities. Let's have a closer look, though.

The Roman Catholic Church as the only internationally recognized global player, for example, has over the centuries acquired a remarkable competence for rites and media presence. In face of this Protestantism is left with but one possible counter strategy, i.e., developing the profile of its own ›brand‹ and thus become recognizable on the market. In Germany this has been tried by using the term ›Church of Freedom‹ as a market label and by stylising the longing for freedom and individualism to be the basic signature of Protestantism in a postmodern, i.e. plural and multicultural society. In return, a generous concession to Roman Catholicism was the ›undoubtedly more media-

[2] Cf. FRIEDRICH-WILHELM GRAF, Ökumenische Selbstaufhebung des Protestantismus? In: ID. (ed.), Jenseits der Einheit. Protestantische Ansichten der Ökumene, Hannover 2001, 181–207, here 206.

oriented and colourfully‹ wrapped-up strategy of an event-culture that is, however, marked both by heteronomism and clericalism.

One thing, however, is crucial here: to be recognizable in the market one needs a unique selling-point. Thereby the spectrum of offers by the denominations is reduced to significantly unique aspects. At the same time, the powers of the market are catering only for needs that they themselves have aroused. What those needs, created by the market and most willingly met by it, actually are, I will show by looking at the second set of problems, the attitude of antimodernism. Please allow me to draw from the experience of my own local church.

The Roman Catholic Church in Germany is today characterised by a great rupture. And the argument about who best represents the Catholic idea is carried out openly and effectively in the media. In the post-Vatican II era, all groups were faced with the same problem: the central idea of the Council, i.e., acting in the world and with the world has pulled down the old bastions of Catholicism and thus again forced the question of identity upon the Church. As a reaction to this bewilderment, one side re-establishes the difference between Church and World as the blue-print of true Catholicity. That side consciously styles itself in sharp contrast to the other possible option (i.e., the opening up of Catholicism in a critical, but basically friendly acceptance of modernity) by brandishing this option as sycophancy *vis-à-vis* modernism and the menacing self-destruction of the Catholic principle. Behind the frequently re-iterated rhetoric of a strong confessionalism an anti-modernist stance is quite visible.

Over the last couple of years this anti-modernist attitude has not only gained influence in the Roman Catholic Church but has also infected other denominations. Its manifestations are manifold and reach from fundamentalist biblicism, that denounces all attempts of reading Scripture historically as a betrayal of the Christian truth and simply puts the Bible and the modern age in one, to a, politically speaking, pre-enlightenment nationalism that confuses the *proprium christianum* with political and national interest and sometimes mistakes natural law with prejudice, right up to an institutional anti-modernism which gives theological justification to anti-democratic structures, placing them high up as metaphysically legitimated sacred institutions which will then passionately be surrounded with the incense of a sacred and excluding mystical cult.

The anti-modernist religious programme does not shy away from denouncing the secular world as a culture of untruth and relativism and suspecting it of being filled with decay and destruction. Looking at it

more closely, though, it proves itself to be the child of precisely the mentality of modernism to which it is so violently opposed. One implicitly imbibes what one formally opposes. Religious identities that draw on mechanisms of exclusion do not only prove masterly in playing the instruments of late-modern, consumer-oriented profile marketing, they also ideally generate a form of relativism. For both, anti-modern fundamentalism and late-modern relativism, refuse any rational reflection and foundation of their own ideas. One side does so because it considers such rationality as (no longer) possible, the other side still rejects it as unnecessary. Ideas, however, that cannot be based on reasoning degenerate into mere opinions, regardless of whoever holds them. Those, then, tend to dismiss totally the quest for truth, making it a matter of ›taste‹. Yet, it becomes clear quite soon: wherever that happens, a purely instrumental, i.e. economic ratio reigns supreme. If such opinions can be maintained only within a ›tribalized context‹ (that is to say, in a trusted group of like-minded people) a strategic political alliance will prove to be a necessary and ideal means to keep and enforce one's own interests. And one will not be too choosy in finding such strategic allies.

### *2.2 Moral Dissonances and post-denominational strategic alliances*

The search for common Christian responses to the challenges of our modern times brings forth very strange phenomena. They make possible some totally new coalitions across the denominational spectrum, which will not only surprise those sensitive to the ecumenical endeavour, but will have never been thought possible until recently. They reach from the attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to embrace Anglicans, to the strange alliance between the fundamentalist evangelical groups of the Protestant Right with national conservative circles within (Russian) Orthodoxy – the latter particularly having its field day when it comes to ethical or moral debates. Of course, political rather than religiously motivated mentalities and cultural disparities have always influenced and delineated denominational identities.[3] However, it seems to be a new, and thus newly to be discussed development that, faced with certain ethical questions a coalition beyond or rather across the traditional confines seems to be developing – the most provoking of

[3] Cf. HELMUT RICHARD NIEBUHR, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, New York 1957 (Orig. 1929).

these questions are surely those of the ordination of women and attitudes towards homosexuality. As usual, such extremes force us to pay attention to the decisive problems: on what basis are we acting together? And what are the reasons for it?

What is important here is this observation[4]: in the late modern age, autonomy and self-determination, the two unquestioned basic values of a pluralistic and secular society, have proved themselves to be ambivalent. Freedom seems to drift into a doing away with any values, and we look in vain for a durable basis for anything new. The alienation caused by this makes people look for new certainties. Reducing complexity is the given aim. Against the complexity of a life full of risks, the ideal of a community of the likeminded is established. Thus potential points of friction are widely reduced in favour of a firm and clearly delineated ideal of unity, i.e. uniformity! Thus quite necessarily even open and plural societies above all become polarised with regards to certain questions. The ›values‹ that generate a feeling of solidarity and identity here are usually the result of opinions, not convictions, and they tend towards the extreme because they are thus more easily communicated. Insights of a socio-political nature, especially, achieve a criteriological function for establishing new identities. Interestingly, denominational identities are also no longer achieved via denominational idiosyncrasy, but through socio-political data, including their black and white logic, i.e. *liberal* vs. *conservative*, *for us* vs. *against us*, *outside* vs. *inside*, and therefore follow the rifts in society.

Such post-denominational identities, for one, mirror the breaks in mentality and incongruities of societies and help to consolidate them instead of critically examining them. Such sociological distinctions, however, are much more difficult to handle in ecumenical dealings than used to be the case with theological differentiations. How, and from which point, could the common ground be defined from which all this should be evaluated? I want to emphasize this: not a single denomination so far has found a key to solve this problem. And even if we had, this would not automatically provide us with an ecumenical pattern of hermeneutics to achieve common ethical judgements.

Moreover, such post-denominational identities define their convictions by way of exclusion, interpreting, and thus defining, the named differences not with a view to unity but with a view to establishing dif-

[4] For this cf. esp.: TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, What is the Point of Being a Christian?, London 2005, 171ff.

ferences. That which distinguishes us is declared to be the essential. Any attempt at relativizing this would be considered as an attack on the roots of identity and must therefore be banned from the outset. A firm and clear standpoint is what is demanded! The ›exclusive‹ identity marker therefore knows only one alternative; ›true‹ or ›false‹, Christian, or, for that matter, un-Christian! The chosen post-denominational identity markers and criteria of distinction become much more distinctive and segregating than previous theological differences have ever been.

### *2.3 The limitations of pragmatism – or: How it could happen that the ecumenical movement fails because of its success*

As early as 1972, Karl Rahner[5] critically examined the influence of socio-political factors on denominational identities. He claimed that, with the modern age, they were changing dramatically:

> Modern pluralistic, secularised and largely atheistical society [...] no longer offers the Christian Churches any support by means of public opinion, or state religion, or accepted models of individual and social life. [...] Under the influence of this situation, earlier assumptions belonging to a particular stage in the history of thought, earlier ways of living and of looking at life, all of which led to, or were connected with, confessional doctrinal differences, are, of course, also receding into an ever more remote past, in the awareness of modern men and women.[6]

Rahner continues even more bluntly: denominational differences in doctrine will widely be

> no longer realised at all, so that the modern Christian can hardly enter into the problems of controversial theology that used to exist, or feel in any way personally touched by them; and so he is bound to remain largely uninterested in the settlement of these questions. [...] What we have called the ›third Church‹ can now be seen against this background. These are people who, in what they see Christianity to be, in their style of living and their interpretation of themselves, hardly differ from one another; and

5 Cf. KARL RAHNER, Third Church?, in: ID., Theological Investigations, vol. 17, New York 1981, 215–227 [Germ.: KARL RAHNER, SW 27, 135–145].

6 Ibid., 217 [136].

moreover they do not want to be distinguished from one another, in spite of their religio-sociological adherence to this or that denomination.[7]

What Rahner, under the heading of a ›third church‹, regarded as the challenge for the ecumenical dialogue of the future has today become a decisive achievement of the ecumenical movement and of the dialogue of past decades. The new situation is the fruit of an ecumenism of consensus and dialogue as the denominations no longer recognize each other as opponents but as partners. Ecumenical theory is still struggling to define more clearly the place in life and practice of what has been achieved and incorporate it in its hermeneutics. At the same time, the practice of ecumenical togetherness, the ecumenism of those of goodwill (or the ›ecumenism of life‹) has long created facts that, in return, challenge ecumenical theory. A basic practice of acting together which shapes ecumenism today creates a new reality that makes denominational barriers all but disappear. So far, so good. But in these late modern days the difficult aspect of this success story becomes apparent.

A kind of »trivialised lay ecumenism« – as the German sociologist Winfried Gebhardt puts it[8] – is gaining influence and gradually dominates the ecumenical mainstream. Here, an increasingly fading denominational identity (it has virtually evaporated in the process of departing from tradition in the modern era) joins forces with an aggressive, at best spiritually legitimated, anti-intellectualism. It agitated against denominational lines of definition or theologically founded lines of separation, because it considers theological reasoning to be remote from life and narrow in outlook. Instead, it legitimises itself by recurring to personal experience, personal needs and forms of expression based on specific situations in life and by a pragmatism that springs from the power of the factual. However, this detachment from theology based on an acquired incompetence does not automatically lead to a more shared identity and a real ecumenical progress. Disinformation and ignorance have always been the real enemies of tolerance, if one doesn't want to see it as an attitude of ›oh, aren't we all somehow right, anyway‹. Precisely because one now thinks one is exempt from the burden of really getting to know, and thus learning to

7 Ibid., 217f [136f].

8 Cf. WINFRIED GEBHARDT, Christentum light. Über das Dominantwerden eines trivialisierten Laienkatholizismus, in: JOHANN EV. HAFNER/MARTIN HAILER (ed.), Binnendifferenzierung und Verbindlichkeit in den Konfessionen, Frankfurt 2010, 50–66.

appreciate, the other, one lacks a proper acceptance of differences. Thus one can easily enjoy one's prejudices because they can no longer be distinguished from proper judgement, as both become a matter of taste due to lack of real knowledge. At the same time the seemingly o-so-plausible priority of action underestimates the persistence, and thus the subtle efficiency, of denominational identities as well as of cultural mentalities and their relevance in ethical and practical problems.

Ecumenism has never been a mere question of an adequate theological discourse, but has always been a much more complex approach, referring to many sources. The impression I have however is, that these other, non-theological factors will in future determine the business of ecumenism to a far greater extent than up to now. The problems thus created, though, reach more deeply as they not only make the ecumenical field much more confusing, but also freshly pose the question of an adequate hermeneutics.

## 3 *What are we left with? Ecumenical hermeneutics as a re-discovery of Catholicity*

What Karl Rahner valued in the idea of a ›third church‹ was its ability to relativize denominational differences in the light of shared challenges and thus crystalize principles – and that is where he saw its future potential for ecumenism. For him that meant not laying aside the quest for truth and the search for a foundation, but, while sharing a common ground, digging even deeper, thus trying to uncover the real essence of Christianity:

> In this situation, we may expect and hope, the question about the traditional points of controversy between the different denominations can be raised in a much more relaxed manner, freed from a great many emotionally laden factors; for it will be raised by people who are searching together in a totally new way for the innermost centre of the Christian faith, which at heart is no longer the self-evident presupposition of all Christians but is common to them all as their real task, their burden and their salvation.[9]

[9] KARL RAHNER, The one Church and the Many Churches: in: ID., Theological Investigations, vol. 17, New York 1981, 183–196, here 193 [Germ.: KARL RAHNER, SW 27, 93–104, here 101f.].

What Rahner did not, or perhaps could not see, was the question of whether denominational differences, insofar as they have proven themselves constructive, could actually contribute to better meeting the challenges of the late modern age and thus arrive at the actual task of all Christians. Is there, then, such a thing as an ecumenical hermeneutics of the specifically denominational, which will be able to deal with the differences while avoiding the trap of ossifying all presently diagnosed distinctions? I would like to examine this question again from my own denominational background.

In the introduction to Reformation: Europe's House Divided, Diarmaid MacCulloch writes,

> Who or what is a Catholic? This Greek word has become one of the chief battlegrounds in western Latin Christianity, for it is used in different ways which outside observers of Christian foibles find thoroughly confusing. The word ›Catholic‹ is the linguistic equivalent of a Russian doll. It may describe the whole Christian Church founded two thousand years ago in Palestine, or the western half of the Church which split from mainstream eastern Christianity a thousand years ago, or that part of the western half which remained loyal to the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) after the sixteenth century, or a Protestant European Christian who thought that the Bishop of Rome was Antichrist, or a modern ›Anglo-Catholic‹ faction within the Anglican Communion. How can the word describe all of these things and still have any meaning? [...] The Reformation introduced many more complications to the word; in fact there were very many different Reformations, nearly all of which would have said that they were simply aimed at recreating authentic Catholic Christianity.[10]

MacCulloch notes that »›Catholic‹ is clearly a word which a lot of people want to possess«.[11] So what does it mean to be ›Catholic‹?

A first step towards an ecumenical hermeneutics of Catholicity would consist in defining the Catholic principle as an inclusion of diversity and not as a kind of monotonous exclusiveness. The loss of diversity within Catholicism came about with the Denominational Age and has gradually obscured the aspect of a legitimate diversity of truth since ›pluralism‹ was styled to be a sign of the ›other‹, the non-Catholic.

10 DIARMAID MACCULLOCH, Reformation. Europe's House Divided 1490–1700, London, 2003, xix.

11 Ibid.

Acknowledging and celebrating the many varieties of Catholicism would only take away from the power of finding one's identity in oversimplified terms of black and white. In contrast, a broad understanding of Catholicity would give new dynamics to the idea of being Catholic. An identity delineated in this way would not be something static, something written in stone for all eternity but rather something flowing and multifaceted. The boundaries of Catholicism would become fluent.

The concept of an Ecumenical identity of Catholicity would go even one step further: only if denominational identities are acknowledged as legitimate varieties of the same basic principle, will they become relevant for a truly *ecumenical* hermeneutics. The crucial point is that without different varieties the whole would lack something. The ecumenical methodology necessary here depends on a criteriology, which can adequately grasp different ways of thinking, interpreting them as complementary.[12] A hermeneutics of complementarity would cherish doctrines of other denominations in a special way, because it would feel itself to be enriched by such differences. It would also take into consideration the situated, historical, linguistic and cultural differences, both within its own and in other denominations. As an heuristic point of departure it would refer not only to what has always been held in common. Instead, varieties in development would be recognized as legitimate and in accordance with the origin and these could be seen as critical counterfoils for one's own specificity. Learning from each other is what counts here. Therefore differences are necessary in order to arrive at true fruition. In this context, then, it is, according to Ottmar Fuchs, »not only inevitable but necessary that the experience of otherness also leaves room for a slight connotation that one's own specificity is possibly partly or on the whole the truer or better thing«.[13]

A hermeneutics of complementarity would activate two basic dialectic impulses: an awareness of the advantages and the beauty of one's own peculiarity and, at the same time, a sense of competition for the better when faced with the attractiveness of the other. The first is the basic conviction which starts from the experience of having kept or developed certain aspects in a better way, while the dynamics of com-

12 Cf. WOLFGANG KLAUSNITZER, Kirche, Kirchen, Ökumene, Regensburg 2010, 273–282.

13 OTTMAR FUCHS, Die Trennung ist der Skandal. Diakonie und Liturgie überbieten den Dissens, in: Herder Korrespondenz Spezial ›Versöhnt verschieden?‹ 2010, 21–24, here 22.

petition take seriously the insight that John Paul II[14] describes by the observation that »certain aspects of the Christian mystery« can shine forth »more effectively« in other communities (*UUS* 14) and that established the idea of an »ecumenism of gifts«.

Only the two impulses taken together will prevent us from confusing the feeling of ›this is better for me‹ with a feeling of superiority over the others, or substituting genuine acceptance of the other with a kind of »dismissive tolerance« which »couldn't care less about what others think and how they lead their lives«.[15] Only the two movements taken together can help us to discover our shortcomings. They can be dealt with in the light of the practice of others. Only this double progress in insight would be the basis of a real ecumenical learning process and would open up opportunities to understand the various denominational ways of thinking as a complementary gain, a fraternal correction and real reconciled diversity. At the end of the ecumenical journey there seems to be one central insight: there is no ecumenical identity without denominational identity.

## 4 *Are you a Catholic or a Protestant atheist? – A brief glance*

I started with a story from Ireland and would like to end with another one: a pedestrian, unfamiliar with his surroundings, one day crosses the line of separation between the Catholic and the Protestant quarter in a Northern Irish town and is promptly stopped, threatened with a rifle and asked about his denomination. Quickly he answers:, ›Atheist‹, only to be questioned again, ›Protestant or Catholic atheist?‹

Let me use this short story to bring my observations to a close. The sociologists of religion tell us that there is a statistically relevant connection between denomination and the tendency towards certain values. Their rather general attributions are well known to you: Protestants tend to stress freedom and individualism, Catholics are more into equality and fairness. But there is also an interesting result of sociological research into secularisation and its reasons: this self-styling along the denominational lines has proved to be more lasting in shaping our mentalities than one would have thought. According to

[14] POPE JOHN PAUL II., Encyclical Letter ›Ut unum sint‹. On Commitment to Ecumenism, Rome 1995.

[15] FUCHS, Trennung, 22.

Hans Joas[16] one can indeed distinguish between Protestant and Catholic atheists. For even in secularised views of the world the former religious origins are often retained, unknowingly. Differences that shaped denominations are much more rooted in the structures of mentality and the constructions of identity than a society that sees itself as secularised and enlightened is prepared to notice.[17] There is such a thing as the »persistence of fundamental structures of morally relevant concepts« which remain, and »even under the conditions of secular society« shape moral imagination.[18] You may resent, deny or ignore denominational identities – but you will not be able to get rid of them completely.

16 Cf. HANS JOAS, Glaube als Option, Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums, Freiburg ²2013.

17 Cf. ibid., 53.

18 Cf. ibid., 54.