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The Body as a Barrier to Ecumenism

Christianity is by no means unique in using metaphors of the human body to put flesh on the bones of its skeletal structural framework. The idea of the 'body politic' emerges in a range of Classical and Hebrew sources and has retained its currency through the ages, even though its ideological complexion has been subject to subtle, and not so subtle, shifts at different moments in history.

The body imagery used in the Pauline letter to the Romans and first letter to the Corinthians might seem particularly relevant to contemporary ecumenical discussions, in that these texts present a call to Christian unity in the face of conflict and difference. In these letters the ideal Christian community is envisioned as a single body of diverse parts, a metaphoric portrayal which might, superficially at least, appear to articulate the aspirations of all who strive to manifest Christian unity as an actual and visible reality through participation in ecumenical activities and dialogue.

Yet the more I reflect on key issues at stake in contemporary ecumenical discourses, the more I reach the sobering conclusion that the most significant obstacles to genuine ecumenical encounter (surely a precursor to any meaningful unity) are embodied in the most basic grounds of our being. Today we are less divided by doctrine, tradition and spiritual practice than by race, class and gender.

One-to-one, or within hermetically-sealed religious communities, we can choose to overlook or try to overcome such crude markers of social status and agency, but to do so fails to acknowledge, much less challenge, the prevailing political and economic order in the wider world and the power it has to affect our lives. If our spiritual practices and insights are related in any way to real life in the material world (and not just a by-product of abstract thought or woolly delusion) human bodies and the ideological meanings and values invested in them are of the utmost relevance to the ecumenical project.

BODY SWERVES

European philosophical traditions tend to shy away from the implications of the incarnation. The Western churches, particularly, have tended to forget Christianity's origins as an incarnational movement. The Gospel, after all, centres around a person who is born, lives, loves, suffers and dies, a person who is human and divine. Whatever cosmic or spiritual significance we attach to that narrative is grounded in actual lived experience in the real world – our own, as well as that of Jesus and his followers. Yet, too often, throughout European secular and religious culture, we are encouraged to prefer the rational to the intuitive, the transcendent to the immanent, and to trust theoretical knowledge more than spiritual wisdom; in short, to appropriate the body metaphor, we privilege the head over the heart.

Early on, Western Christianity slipped into a comfort zone where our physical bodies became a poor relation to our lofty intellects and metaphysical souls. This vain attempt to evade the worst existential extremes of human suffering has hardly helped us avoid its physical excesses. Instead, our bodies are often made alien to us, and we fail to draw on our bodies' resources of knowledge, pleasure and power. Even where distrust and hatred of human physicality is less overt, or where lip-service is paid to the value of embodied spiritual expression, there is an underlying fear of the flesh evident throughout European culture that denigrates certain bodies more than others, to the ultimate detriment of all. A failure to love humanity in its carnality and rich variety is manifest in orchestrated and random acts of violence perpetrated against groups and individuals throughout Europe and the wider world.

BODIES OF EVIDENCE

But what does this mean for ecumenism? I want to share two stories from my own experience of involvement in ecumenical processes as a means of exemplifying in concrete terms ways in which bodies can act as a barrier to ecumenism. The incidents recounted took place at large international ecumenical events and involved participants at those events, so are particularly 'close to the bone' for those of us in WSCF who are part of those circles. The stories identify some deeply ingrained body-hating attitudes manifest within our Christian community, but frequently masked by institutional structures and processes. Nevertheless, the unconscious values and conscious attitudes that denigrate the bodies of certain people – certain parts of the body of Christ - become evident in other ways. I argue that in the contemporary era the 'body politic' obscures the 'politics of the body'. The systematic exclusion and sidelining of certain persons and categories of person within ecumenical processes is a disavowal of the vision "that all might be one" and reduces discussions to the status of mere inter-church dialogue. Such exclusions, I argue, not only infect our current ecumenical activities, but prevent us from establishing a basis for authentic, inclusive ecumenical dialogue in the first place.

In 1997 I travelled to Graz, Austria for the European Ecumenical Assembly taking place there. At one point during the Assembly, local Roman Catholic women organised a gathering outside the main plenary hall to highlight their *de facto* exclusion (because of their gender) from discussions they considered important. They wanted to make public the fact that their church spokesmen did not speak for everyone in the Catholic Church when insisting that demand for women's ordination was a non-issue and refusing to enter into any debate on the question. The Austrian women wanted to name honestly the actual political and theological divisions within their communities, rather than gloss over the reality.

It is a good-natured gathering with lots of noisy, joyful singing and a real festival atmosphere. It has attracted far more people, women and men, than the organisers anticipated. Passers-by linger longer than intended, joining in the

singing, supporting these women as they express their sense of injustice, and their hope that institutional intransigence might be softened through gentle persistence, wise deliberation, patience and loyalty. By now a big crowd has gathered, and there is no easy thoroughfare to the entrance of the building where the decision-makers are meeting. What happens next leaves me speechless.

I move aside to allow the passage through the throng of a man in clerical dress with a large ornamental cross around his neck who is pushing his way to the front impatiently. Unfortunately, the woman standing next to me is not so agile and fails to step out of his way quickly enough, so he shoves her, quite viciously and deliberately, out of his path. She loses her balance and falls, bruising and grazing herself. This woman (a Scottish Catholic I've met for the first time earlier in the week) happens to have physical disabilities that make her movements slow and painful; the priest who pushes her down does not acknowledge her for a single moment, and does not look back.

In 1998 I experienced a strange sense of déjà vu while attending morning worship in a church in Harare, Zimbabwe during the WCC Assemby. Venturing outside the international ecumenical compound was always going to be a delicate matter for a white tourist with a UK passport and a modicum of historical awareness and political consciousness. The churches in Southern Africa have played a pivotal role in the process of dismantling white supremacist regimes and ideologies, but it would be naïve to deny that Zimbabwe is anything other than a racially and economically divided society, and equally naïve to expect individual congregations to have overcome this historical legacy in a couple of decades.

However, a warm welcome was extended to the international guests at this predominantly white, bourgeois city church, regardless of our diverse ethnic, cultural and confessional backgrounds. The service was followed by the ubiquitous cup of tea and polite conversation – a mandatory part of any ecumenical encounter. I was reflecting wryly on my observation that across our great cultural and confessional divides there is at least one 'common cup' in the postcolonial Christian world when I witnessed a chilling episode that reminded me of my experience in Graz.

A young white priest snaps orders at the elderly black man who is making and serving the tea to the congregation. The older man attempts to follow the instructions he is given, but not nearly fast enough for the young priest who pushes him fiercely out of the way with a dismissive comment I do not catch, and takes over his post. The old man stumbles, but at least this time does not actually fall over; nevertheless, he has been publicly humiliated and rejected.

The problem? This old man has failed to make sufficient haste in the rather urgent and important task of bringing tea to a visiting Metropolitan. With the old fellow out of the way, a tray is duly presented with much ceremony and effusion to the eminent guest who seems blissfully unaware of the commotion staged on his behalf. The incident forces me to acknowledge openly to myself the extent to which the person serving the tea is not part of this' congregational family'; he is not engaged in the idle small-talk and is poorly dressed. The institutional racism implicit in the situation becomes naked in the priest's gesture; it is the manner in which he pushes the older person

aside and fawns over the distinguished visitor that reveals his true values and the cultural assumptions underpinning them. For me this is a wake-up call, alerting me to my own complicity with a cosy ecumencial process in which my ethnicity, class and education enable my privileged participation.

DISMEMBERED BODIES

I want to be clear that in sharing these anecdotes my purpose is not to suggest that one church tradition or denomination is more exclusionary or oppressive than any other. Rather, I want to encourage reflection on the extent to which *all* of us are implicated in harming or marginalizing those people who constitute the undervalued, expendable parts of 'the body of Christ'. (If we extend the Pauline metaphor, we might see them as the toenails or armpits... you can draw your own conclusions about the implications of that!). These are not comfortable stories and, personally, I think I emerge rather badly from both of them. Why did not I pursue the Priest in the first story, confront him with the consequences of his aggression and ask him to help me assist the woman to the First Aid tent? Why did not I intervene in the tea-making episode? Well, I was a guest too; it would have been embarrassing and impolite to make a scene. In both cases it was easier not to risk public confrontation. I cannot pretend to have anything other than the most flimsy and pathetic excuses for my own feeble responses to what I saw.

But these memories have haunted me and have taught me that hiding defensively behind confessional and institutional barricades helps us avoid confrontation with the less palatable realities of our own church contexts. It is also worth stating that I am not trying to catalogue a litany of clerical offences here either, nor to erect a hierarchy of oppressive practices exercised against certain groups of people, within and outwith church environs. It goes without saying that this is not the typical behaviour we expect or encounter from priests or laity of *any* tradition; but denying, trivialising or ignoring such behaviours when they do emerge is an evasion of our shared human frailty and responsibility to one another.

Instead I tell these sad, discomforting stories as I witnessed them because they illustrate deep-rooted attitudinal, structural and ideological barriers to ecumenism in a (literally) embodied way. In other words, what view do you have of yourself, of your church, of the divine, if your priest shoves you around? And what sort of Gospel do you understand and share? This is one reason why bodies are central to any authentic ecumenism. At one level these are isolated incidents, connected only by my perception and interpretation, yet they serve to illustrate how the ideologies of race and gender (as two examples) function in the real world to our shared detriment and injury. While scenes like these replicate dynamics depressingly familiar from my own cultural and church context (and could have happened anywhere) it is profoundly disillusioning to see them mirrored in an ecumenical environment which makes explicit outward commitments to 'honouring diversity'. Words like 'love', 'unity' and 'justice' get bandied about a lot in these situations, but come to seem pretty meaningless in practice.

These two disturbing incidents also demonstrate forcibly how easily those called to serve the church, even as priests, can absorb and perpetuate cultural value systems that see a disabled woman as a dangerous, annoying subversive to be crushed and cast aside, or see an elderly black man as an inconvenient, incompetent nuisance. Neither are viewed as a valued part of the 'body of Christ'.

This leaves us grappling with a dilemma. Can we really sustain the assertion that in Christ 'there can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female' (Galatians 3) in the face of such evidence to the contrary? We all do well to ask ourselves how heavily we invest, institutionally and individually, in dehumanising, self-aggrandising, mythologies that allow us to fear, marginalise or ignore those parts of the collective body that trouble and unsettle us. What will it take to shake us out of that complacency, wake us up to our own blind spots, inconsistencies and evasions? And is the contemporary church really up to the task? Let us not confuse our aspirations with our present reality, but rather, subject to thorough critique the implicit power relations that prefigure and underpin any ecumenical encounter.

BODY COUNT

I used to persuade myself that in an era of ruthless economic exploitation and militarism, the church could act as a reference point for counter-hegemonic currents affirming life, creativity, the value of human being, and the integrity of the planet. Over time I have found that hope impossible to sustain in the face of actual experience. When the chips are down, churches too often prefer to side with established authorities than with hard-pressed people, preferring to blame them for their own oppression, or telling them their suffering is a cross they should bear patiently. Churches will never be immune to prevailing social, political and cultural tides, but, for me, the scales have tipped too far. I can no longer avoid the conclusion that institutional Christianity in Europe is more part of our endemic, systemic problems than part of any solution.

By this I do not mean to demoralise those who ardently pursue the laudable goals of unity, who seek wisdom, who honour the prophetic call of justice, who strive for peace and healing in the world; but I do think we need to strip ourselves of some cherished illusions about the church and world as they actually exist. How can we even begin to talk about spiritual values or renewal divorced from the physical and social realities of the world we inhabit? The starting point for our ecumenical dialogue needs to change.

Becoming disillusioned need not imply becoming demoralised, but we need to acknowledge the barriers to ecumenism, and tell it like it is. The old metaphors of the body politic no longer serve us well in this process. Instead, to face the magnitude of this challenge we may need to acknowledge that our resources, our witnesses and prophets, are embodied in those on the front-line of our contemporary ideological and spiritual battlegrounds. By addressing the politics of the body we may yet find a way to circumvent some of the most stubborn obstacles to authentic ecumenical encounter.

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