

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs: Hermeneutics of Intertraditional Dialogue

The common language, the already existing communication, the shared truth and the same purpose constitute and build up a real community. *Dialogue* can even be defined as a face-to-face encounter with one's neighbour, in *community*.⁴⁴

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Martin CONWAY

Christian Unity and Discipleship in WSCF

Over the past one hundred years the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) has contributed, in different degrees, significant impulses to the exploration of Christian unity in at least three distinct contexts: that of its own movement, that of Christ's world-wide Church, and that of the total human community. I cannot try here to do more than recall some of the key elements in this path of discovery.

I. Unity in and of a World-wide Student Christian Movement

1. Guiding Principles of the WSCF

In regard to its own movement – the unity of this “world” movement brought into being by six men in the attic of an ancient castle, which within three years had members in twenty-two countries of Asia, Australasia, Africa, Europe and the Americas – it is often forgotten just how creatively John R. MOTT secured its freedom alike from undue North American domination and from the model of the student association within the YMCA in which he had himself been formed. Looking back in 1920, he defined the “guiding principles” of the WSCF in eight points¹:

A. The cornerstone principle of the whole construction is the “*recognition of the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ* and of his work as the only sufficient Saviour.” Any compromising of this principle has had immediate consequences for the whole life of the movement concerned.

B. The second is that of the *interdenominational and interconfessional* character of the Federation (note: not *un-*denominational, for it would never call its members to reduce

¹ MOTT John R., *The World's Student Christian Federation: Origin, Achievements, Forecast*. Genève, 1920.

themselves to the lowest common denominator, but rather to co-operation in which each affirms the fullness of one's own faith). The Federation does not stand for uniformity but for unity in diversity.

C. The third is that of the *independence, individuality and autonomy of each national movement*. Each strikes its roots deep in its own soil, and thus each tends to be a true expression of a particular culture and tradition. The extent to which it achieves this determines the richness which it brings to the whole.

D. The fourth is the complement of the third: the *interdependence of the national movements* and the mutual obligations which link them together. The stronger and more self-sufficient movements must have a sense of responsibility for the weaker groups; on the other hand, some of the smallest movements have been unusually productive of new ideas and methods.

E. The Federation does not seek to control the internal policies of the national movements. The role of the international secretaries is purely *advisory and inspirational*.

F. The Federation is "*non-political*," that is, it refuses to take part in politics as such. On the other hand, it has been constantly concerned with developing in its members a sense of responsibility for social, international and racial affairs, and to subordinate all human relations to Christian obedience.

G. The Federation seeks to be truly *democratic* in its methods of government and in its emphasis on the initiative of students. "If in any country the movement is permitted to drift out of the control of the undergraduates into the hands of professors or graduates, or of the paid professionals, or of any autocratic group even of students, it will cease to grow and fulfil its peculiar function."

H. Finally, everything in the Federation, its entire programme and all of its activities, must be looked at from a *global point of view*. It is difficult to accustom national leaders to think in global terms, but it is precisely to widen their horizons that the Federation exists.

In the final chapter of her book on the Federation's first fifty years, Suzanne DE DIÉTRICH reflected on precisely this often fragile but all-important practice of unity:

"The Federation is a body whose members are the national movements. The life of the body depends on that of its members.

... The great flexibility of the Federation has permitted each national movement to develop its own characteristics. In a student federation, where the cultural element necessarily plays a large role, this liberty of expression is an extraordinary source of mutual enrichment. The Christian associations of Japan are truly Japanese, just as those of France are typically French. The unity of the Federation is the complete opposite of uniformity. This is why it must be constantly re-affirmed and re-covered. This unity consists in obedience to the same Christ. We know well that the same God 'works in all and for all,' but everywhere this work comes up against national and confessional boundaries, and the resistance of our spirits which are slow to grasp the thoughts of God. So unity is often an *act of faith*, a slow and painful effort to discern the Christian in someone who is so different by tradition, concept and outlook. We also must learn as movements to recognize the diversity of gifts and spiritualities.

"These different movements also work in a world which is growing smaller, where currents of thought are exchanged and diffused with astonishing speed. It is interesting to see that certain questions are being raised at the same time by movements in two different parts of the world which have had no direct contact and would never have suspected their commonality of interests if the General Secretary of the WSCF had not been there to tell them, and to raise these questions in the next issue of *The Student World* or the next conference. ... In the final analysis, what really links the movements to one another is not so much what has been done as what remains to be done. *Each generation* must discover anew what constitutes its own task."²

Diversity, not uniformity; unity shaped by obedience to the same Christ; unity as an act of faith by which to discern that of Christ in very different traditions from one's own; a world which is growing rapidly smaller; unity given in what remains to be done, so that each group in each generation must discover anew its own distinctive obedience.

These remain just as true and challenging for the life of the WSCF today and tomorrow as at any other point in these hundred years. Indeed they are pointers to what WSCF people – with many others – have been discovering no less in the search for the unity of Christian churches, for which the WSCF has supplied so many

² DE DIÉTRICH Suzanne, *Fifty Years of History* (tr. ABRICHT Audrey). Genève, 1993. 85.

leaders; also in the more diffuse but no less urgent movement in favour of an adequate unity of the human family which the United Nations Organisation (UNO) exists to serve.

2. Actual Experiences in the SCMs

Before we move on to those other levels of contribution, a word on both the national and local dimensions of the challenge that the SCM has discovered in its characteristic commitment to unity in Christ. At the national level, the WSCF has long expected and insisted that there should be no more than *one* movement per country; in cases where there were insurmountable reasons for two (or more) distinct movements which sought membership in the international body, they were encouraged to form a co-ordinating body which could take out WSCF membership for them both or all.

This worked better in some cases than others; it required a significant measure of mutual respect and agreement between the different groups at the national level, which has by no means always been achievable. South Africa for many years provided an unusually clear, if sensitive, test-case. If the “separate” movements (divided along racial lines, yet which all too often depended on the leaders of the “white” ones for financial support) could work together in a genuine co-ordinating body that allowed them each and all to have a proper place in national affairs, then that body could be recognised as the “national SCM.”

But if this was more appearance than reality, WSCF would feel an obligation to try and help them into a better arrangement – and the various attempts towards something of that sort easily became occasions of offence in one direction or another. To judge by the witness of Vasco SELEOANE, things in that country in respect of the internal unity in Christ of the previously “separate” movements have still a long way to go.

So also at the local level, SCMs have all too often had to struggle for a form of relationships and organisation that corresponded to the truth of the Gospel they were discovering. At one time attention had to be given to what became the split between the “conservative evangelicals” organised in the “Christian Unions” and those who followed the more “open” or “ecumenical” policy that the SCM had already espoused at the national level.

In the British SCM the decisive steps were taken just before and after the First World War, while in Finland this was still a dominant issue in the sixties. Long before my generation this struggle had been lost in Britain, with both SCMs and CUs not expecting anything other than a permanent rivalry that could range between sheer indifference and bitter quarrelling – at neither end of the spectrum doing much good for the cause of the Gospel!

At other times the dominant issue has been that of relations between the SCM and one or more “denominational societies,” often with the role of chaplains appointed by one or more denominations as an extra complication. At the international level, these were the questions underlying the paper on *The Christian Presence in the University* adopted by WSCF at its General Committee in Argentina in 1964.

At the local level, the spectrum of response has stretched from more or less outright competition to attempts to engineer some twin-track or “joint” pattern(s), even arrangements by which a “Joint Christian Societies” took over the membership in the National SCM – arrangements which seldom proved very satisfactory or stable.

One can hardly point to any lasting “successes” in achieving a visible unity. Not surprising, considering that the underlying theological questions (e.g. between “evangelicals” and “ecumenicals”) have not gone away, and the wider denominations have all too seldom found a practicable unity by which they could move beyond tearing student relations apart.

At the same time, the SCM tradition continues to witness not only to the inescapability of the calling to unity for the sake of effective witness to a Gospel claiming to be *true*; but also to the value of seeking unity in an active process of search and experiment as infinitely preferable to sheer indifference to it, or in acquiescence to inherited divisions that actively harm the cause of the Gospel.

Undoubtedly these struggles have absorbed a good deal of time and energy in inward-facing directions that could have gone into much more important and worthwhile missionary efforts on a wider canvas. On the British scene this was the burden of the decisive turn in policy agreed by the SCM General Council in April 1963, soon after Bishop Ambrose REEVES had become General Secretary.

He had found student groups hopelessly bogged down in arguments with chaplains and denominational societies, and had called for a freedom and boldness in facing up to the great questions of the contemporary world as the heart of student Christian obedience. At the time it seemed indisputably right, and surely both attractive and exciting.

Yet with hindsight one is aware that the nitty-gritty questions of organisation and relationships never go away; the net effect was that the SCM groups rapidly shrunk to small coteries of “radical” third-years and postgraduates, who lost touch with the more elementary needs and interests of the younger year-groups, and lost such standing with the chaplains and churches as they had earlier, in part, enjoyed. The ground “lost” at that time has never yet been convincingly “regained.” But the importance of such stories for the long-term health of the total Christian community is high.

Here the vital discovery, which came early on in the history of several, if not all, SCMs towards the end of the XIXth century, was that these movements, and WSCF with them, needed – in contrast to the approach of evangelists of the stamp of MOODY and the STUDDS, as of the Keswick Convention and other such evangelical rallies – to see themselves as *interdenominational* rather than *non-denominational* bodies.

That is, they saw the need to accept, indeed take seriously, the many different denominational traditions, cultures and particularities in which their various members had grown up, and in which they had discovered and inherited Christian faith, all of which would no doubt have their own specific contributions to make to the life of the “coming great Church.”

II. The Continuing Witness of Younger Generations

What then of the contribution of the SCMs and WSCF into all this? That is hardly a question someone as old as me either *can* answer: my contacts with the student movement in this country, let alone across the world, are no more than occasional; or *should* answer: let the younger generation speak for themselves, as they no doubt will! But it is surely vital that any of us now in the older generations should be watching out for their contribution, and reworking our own in the light of it.

For now, here are four pointers from the tradition of WSCF that have always meant a lot to me, and which I trust will continue to function – no doubt in ways I can hardly imagine – in the hearts and experience of the new generations, with results that will continue to stir, trouble, provoke and enrich groups and communities well beyond those you and I can have in mind today! I expect the WSCF to go on demonstrating:

1. Adventure into Unknown Territory

A readiness to heed calls to *adventure into unknown territory*, confident that there is more of God to be learned than anyone yet knows, and that it will be by going and experiencing that the learning can best be begun.

The going may now not primarily be geographic; Emilio CASTRO spoke at Canberra of a “new mission to the structures”;³ SCMs from, say, Chile or China who can get study placements and eventual jobs in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) could perhaps help to open up the policies and pressures of such world “powers” to the kind of scrutiny and critique that will let economic institutions rediscover their true function as servants of humanity.

On quite another side there is surely a key missionary task to be discerned in bridge-building, with quite new and testing qualifications, between the “indigenous peoples” of Australia, Canada, Siberia – and wherever such as those have had to suffer the incursion of powerful outsiders, driving the earlier cultures into poverty and oblivion – and the successors of the invaders whose “world” is called in question by the continuing cry of the earlier “owners.” Our ecological explorations, for one, would benefit enormously from intercultural learning at depth in those situations.

2. Inheritance and Integrity

A *spirituality* by which one (group as much as person) can unassumingly live from one’s own *inheritance and integrity*, without fixed judgments or assumptions about those of the other, yet *so as to enter into friendship and learn from the other*. Yes, much in this learning will lead to a radical self-critique where the modern West is concerned. We who are Westerners can and must

³ KINNAMON Michael (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit. Official Report of the 7th Assembly of the WCC, Canberra, Australia, 1991*. Genève, 1991.

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witness to that from within, and as a function of much in precisely the best traditions of our culture.

Let others say what they need to learn; and then we can all together consider what will be for the good of humanity as a whole. Meanwhile, a Western Christian can gladly witness that the Christian faith tells us *not* that Christians are likely to get things right, but that when, as all too often, we blunder into getting them wrong, God has shown in Jesus Christ that forgiveness is available to those who open themselves in repentance.

3. Good Relationships with Fellow-Adventurers

A steady concern for *good relationships with fellow-adventurers*, whatever their background, culture or indeed faith. One of the best features of WSCF has been its willingness to hold consultative meetings with groups of very different outlooks but which had similar interests to our own.

In my years in Genève, for instance, with both Pax Romana (which now sounds obvious, but I cannot forget being scolded ferociously, c. 1965, by no less than Willem VISSER T'HOOF for committing WSCF too far to some joint project) and the International Union of Students (IUS) based in Praha and widely suspect in the West (rightly so!) as a largely Communist-run outfit. Tomorrow's adventure partners will be very different, but probably no less contested.

4. Belief in God the Holy Spirit

Above all, *a lively and steady belief in God the Holy Spirit*; not of course as above Her partners in the Trinity, yet never overlooking the dynamic, contemporary, unpredictable character of the God who willed the universe into being in the first place and has showed us the essential clue to the divine nature and purpose in the human Jesus.

In the human family, "religion" is often – and with good reason – seen as backward-looking. The WSCF tradition, without denying what comes from history, has sought to be at least as vividly open to God's purposes for the future, and not just to the future for Christians, but to that future which in the risen Christ and by the leading of the Spirit God is holding open for all humanity.

Gentle Theology

Suggested Reading

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