

Conference: The World is my neighbour: Bossey and a New Ecumenism

Overview

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I. Bossey Ecumenical Institute: laboratory and avant-garde of the Ecumenical Movement

The World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute at Bossey was created in 1946, that is two years before the foundation of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Initially, the vision of its founders, in particular that of Visser't Hooft, who became the first General Secretary of the WCC, was to create a Centre for Reconciliation and Healing, a platform for meeting and encounter to discuss and confront the pains and divisions that separated people and churches following the Second World War. Though the content of its programmes developed over the years, Bossey has kept its initial vocation of providing a free academic platform and ecumenical laboratory where people from different parts of the world, often from antagonistic camps can come for studies and ecumenical formation, for reconciliation, healing of memories and growth into a new ecumenical identity.

During its 68 years of existence, the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey has been fulfilling its mission of ecumenical theological formation and education. With its holistic way of education - which combines academic research, cross-cultural learning through life in community, spiritual experience, exposure to and encounter with other faith communities as well as practical formation in eco-theology and sustainable development - Bossey continues to have a special place and vocation in ecumenical formation today.

How is Bossey unique?

The Ecumenical Institute is a place that strengthens, transforms and enhances identities. Considered as part of the 'avant-garde' and 'laboratory' of the ecumenical movement, the Institute offers an academic platform of rigorous study guided by a world class faculty where acute and complex challenges confronting the churches are debated and analysed.

Thousands of women and men from all over the world and every Christian tradition have come to Bossey for academic studies. Many have testified to life-changing experiences in this pioneering centre, or 'ecumenical laboratory'. Research done on the occasion of its 50th anniversary has shown that there are more than 5000 Bossey alumni and more than 20,000 people who have attended shorter term courses in Bossey over the years. The Bossey alumni can be found all over the world, on the six continents. Once they returned home, most of them were promoted to high and key leadership positions in their Churches: patriarchs, cardinals, bishops, president of synods, professors of theology, ecumenical officers or even to leadership in cultural, political and business fields. In many parts of the world Bossey has become much more than a place in the Swiss countryside: it is a symbol, a brand of excellence in ecumenical formation.

The unique learning experience at Bossey is the intensive community life where, in common worship, group and individual studies and many personal encounters, the participants learn from one another.

Often unconscious cultural and confessional prejudices are questioned and struggled with. Deep convictions of faith confront each other and are tested. Gradually, through pain and shared joys a learning community grows in the search for a fuller truth, and glimpses the unity to which Christians aspire.

The programme

The Bossey Ecumenical Institute has worked in cooperation with the University of Geneva since 1952. Over the years, a small number of students have continued their studies at the University of Geneva and got accredited certificates after graduation from the Bossey courses. However, the Bossey courses themselves were not academically accredited in the beginning. A new era started in 2000. A new Masters programme accredited by Geneva University was established. In the following years, the Master of Advanced Ecumenical Studies was set up and the PhD in Ecumenical Studies was revived. The old and well known Graduate School has now become an accredited course leading to a 'Complimentary certificate' with 30 ECTS credits.

In February 2011, in front of the Central Committee of the WCC, the Rector of Geneva University, together with the General Secretary of the WCC, the dean of the Faculty of Theology from the University of Geneva and the Director of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute signed a new Convention which was referred to as a historical event. Consequently, all studies undertaken in Bossey will be academically accredited. For the students coming from schools that are not internationally accredited (in particular those coming from Church Schools of the South) a course on Continuing Education has been set up and the students that will successfully follow those courses will also be granted an accredited certificate on continuing education from the University of Geneva. This new step means a lot for many churches from the Global South, opening the way for preparing teachers and professors for their own theological schools in their regions.

The Institute receives about 35 students each year from around the world who desire to undertake graduate level coursework for five months to five years through the above mentioned programmes.

The new Bossey

The more recent period after the year 2000 is often referred to as the 'new Bossey'. A short summary on what is new in Bossey, apart from academic accreditation by the University of Geneva, includes the following:

- A strong faculty of seven professors, coming from the main Christian confessions and representing the major regions of the world;
- the decision to accept for studies in Bossey even students coming from non-WCC member churches or even from churches which are openly against the ecumenical movement such as Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Orthodox withdrawn from WCC membership etc;
- the inclusion in the curriculum of ecumenical formation of subjects on other faiths with scholars from other faith communities teaching in Bossey;
- the decision to expand the curriculum in the near future with subjects on eco-theology, sustainable development, overcoming poverty etc.;
- emphasis on ecumenical spirituality

Knowledge makes all the difference. There is an ever-increasing demand from young people today to learn more about Christian unity in relation to articulating afresh the Christian identity in multicultural and multi-faith contexts. And there is an on-going search for ways of witnessing and working together in response to the contemporary challenges facing different churches.

As a result of these new developments, the students at Bossey have to meet a process of careful selection, as three times more applications are received than can be accepted. The Institute offers scholarship support to more than 95% of its students, mostly from the global south. The Institute has set up several student scholarship funds thanks to generous donations from individuals, local congregations, specialised ministries, foundations, and other organizations.

The last WCC Assembly in Busan brought about new changes which both affirmed the importance of Ecumenical Formation for the future of the ecumenical movement and strengthened it by the creation of a new WCC programmatic area that brings together all the aspects and dimensions of formation: Bossey Ecumenical Institute, Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) and the newly formed project on 'Continuing Formation'. Two other 'transversal' projects are hosted in the programme on Ecumenical Formation, as well: Youth and Spiritual Life.

The new project on Continuing Formation continues the traditions of the Bossey seminars and offers short term courses on cutting edge issues relevant for the churches today such as religion and violence, human sexuality and Christian anthropology, the new age and the mission of the Church, economic injustice and feminist theology, migrant churches, etc. During the summer, the one month long course on *Building an Interfaith Community* brings together 25-30 young people from Christian, Muslim and Jewish backgrounds to live together in order to learn about each other and to challenge and overcome stereotypes.

Some of these are envisaged to become accredited courses through the University of Geneva. They are organised by WCC programme colleagues and by Bossey teachers but also partners from all over the world.

II. Contemporary challenges to the concept of ecumenism and Christian unity and the need for fresh and forward looking paradigms

Institutional ecumenism under crisis today. An overview

The present day realities present all the churches with new challenges. After half a century of Christian collaboration and search for Christian unity, signs of tendencies towards strengthening of confessional identities, dogmatic integrism, and close traditionalism are experienced in all churches.

I will mention some of those evident signs: Ecumenical enthusiasm and commitment has decreased in many places while the strengthening of confessional identity is being emphasised; From the 60s to the early 90s ecumenism has been a reality that penetrated the whole life of the churches - theology, theological formation, liturgical life. Nowadays, it has become in most of the churches a strategic and diplomatic function dealt with from a specialised office based in their overseas affairs departments; Satisfaction with a 'lukewarm' understanding of ecumenical fellowship - co-habitation, cooperation rather than advancement towards greater koinonia in faith, worship and Eucharistic fellowship; Ecumenical institutes in many places have been closed or transformed into interfaith institutes; National Council of Churches lost their importance and impact and in some places Consultative Council of religions are preferred; The term 'ecumenism' has become a sensitive and problematic word. In some contexts it is equated with an ideological movement of the past. While in some cases ecumenism is questioned or even condemned, the great majority of Christians will still accept the need for inter-Christian cooperation and dialogue.

A. The debate on the concept of 'unity' as purpose and goal of the ecumenical movement

Historical developments: Once widely accepted, the paradigms on unity as developed within the World Council of Churches are seriously questioned today not only by Christians from churches which are not members of the WCC (such as Pentecostal churches) but also by the younger generation of theologians and faithful coming from churches which have been members of WCC since its foundation.

The contextual realities are very important in order to understand where we come from, where we are and where we should go if we desire to strengthen and give a future to the ecumenical dream and vision. There is a need for contextual analysis and reflection on the shaping of the operative paradigms within the context of the 20th century.

As an expressed concern coming from the Missionary Movement (Edinburgh 1910) it was expressed as the need for *unity in witness* to overcome the hindrances of Christian divisions that affected the impact of the Gospel on the world and on its final goal of bringing the whole world to Christ, or 'evangelisation of the world in this generation'.

Faith and Order brought its emphasis on *ecclesial unity*, faith and Eucharistic sharing and the Life and Work with its paradigm of *unity in action*. These 'ecumenical initiatives' were developed in a context when the need for 'bringing the whole world together' was thought to be the solution to all the problems of the time (League of Nations, UN, international organisations, Magna Carta, internationalism etc). Consequently, paradigms which reflected the concerns of all these initial movements were coined and had their evolution over the years: organic unity, conciliar unity, unity of reconciled diversities, unity of humankind, unity of the whole of creation, macro-ecumenism (including the relationship with the people of other faiths).

Theologically, while coining the new paradigms there were proposals and attempts to depart from the Christocentric basis of the earlier ecumenical movement which was criticised as an arrogant western missionary approach of Christocentric universalism which had the dream of bringing the whole world to Christ in their generation. This earlier strong Christological basis came to be critiqued as being exclusivist and new proposals were made for more Trinitarian and pneumatological basis which gives space for a new paradigm that can better express the vision and goal of the ecumenical movement in our time, such as that of the household of life. (Konrad Raiser and Leslie Newbegin).

There was also an evident attempt to depart from an ecclesial centred ecumenism to a more world centred approach. That shift became evident especially after the Fourth WCC Assembly in 1968 in Uppsala: many churches from the South became members, social and political issues entered the ecumenical agenda, and the famous programme to combat racism was founded. So, the common action in serving the world became in some circles an alternative to the emphasis on unity of the Church. While Faith and Order and Life and Work, with their specific concerns, have equally contributed to the foundation of the WCC and to its vision and goals, the two approaches came to be presented as somehow mutually exclusive in an 'either or' discourse.

Much closer to our times, critical remarks on the initial vision and goal of Christian unity started to be expressed and proposals for new paradigms are now being made. According to the well-known Dutch theologians (Witvliet and Hoedemaker) the old dream of unity as the goal of the ecumenical movement died in 1988/1989. In their view, the initial concept of unity as developed within the WCC was an imperialistic view inherited from the Roman Empire and came to be perceived as a straight-

jacket that controlled and limited diversities. Consequently both were arguing in favour of affirming diversities rather than that type of imperial unity.

On the other hand, the new trends within the ecumenical movement and the proposal for a new paradigm were strongly criticised, and pertinent reactions made by others who continued to defend and argue for the old ecumenical paradigms that had a clear Christological basis and clear statement on unity as the main vision and goal of the ecumenical movement (The Strasbourg Statement in 1993; The Princeton Proposal of 2003; Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and how it has been impoverished by its friends*, 2003).

B. The contextual situation of our time and the need for new ecumenical paradigms

Today's world marked by post-modern concerns brings new challenges to the older ecumenical paradigms which were coined in a different historical and contextual situation. Some of those challenges could be summarised as follows: there is no one truth but many truths; there is no unity which makes ONE but there is a cohabitation of different identities; the institutional expressions of any kind of ideas are challenged and rejected (all international institutions face serious challenges, the institution of the family included. Even the idea of universal human rights was deeply challenged and questioned as an example of 'western' values imposed on the whole world and the term human dignity preferred instead); international or global was replaced with bilateral; Councils of Churches replaced with the 'churches together' concept; platforms and forums were preferred to councils and other official institutionalised structures.

In conclusion: the older paradigms of Christian unity as promoted by the WCC since its beginning in relation to the major political and social trends of the time are considered by the younger generation today as arrogant, imperialistic, centralised unity which expects the dilution of identities and differences. The need to look afresh and reflect upon our faith and theology in an attempt to find adequate and meaningful answers and paradigms for the people of our time constitutes therefore a vital priority.

The concept of unity is referred to in the Biblical texts and in the very experience of the early Christian communities. But at least in the first four centuries it was not seen as ONENESS but as KOINONIA, of diversity in harmony, a reflection of the very existence of the Trinity. There were many 'confessions of faith' or creeds (Apostles, St. Athanasius, St. Kirill of Jerusalem etc) and each of them were Orthodox in their content though not identical; there were many liturgies, and each local church had its own liturgy. There were different dates for the celebration of Christian feasts as well as different practices of living out the faith and those were not seen as reasons for division and schism (the debate between Polycarp of Smyrna and Pope Anicetas on the celebration of Easter; the case of Augustine's mother on differences on fasting in Milan and Rome and the explanation of St Ambrosius etc). There were many theological expressions of the faith both in the NT and in the Fathers and they have all co-existed in that Koinonia which the understanding on unity had represented. Later, after the 4th century, the need for a more formal, ONE expression of faith came about and one cannot deny that this was done very much under the push, initiative and support of the Emperor in Byzantium and by the Roman Pontiff in the Roman/Western Church.

After that period, the decisions of the "Ecumenical Councils" became mandatory and the only ones acceptable. The NICENE CREED 'replaced' all the previous local expressions of faith. The liturgies which were many at the beginning were replaced by the liturgies of the capital of the Empire as in the case of Byzantium and by the Roman Liturgy as in the case of the Western Church. Though no one questioned the Orthodoxy of those conciliar expressions and their wide ecumenical value until

today, one cannot avoid seeing their dimension of 'imperial' centralised expression of unity. Though good from many points of view, they created problems. Those who did not accept the given 'formulas' and terminologies were put out of the Koinonia and thus precipitated the schisms in the early Church (the Calcedonian case and others). We are still making attempts to recover from those unfortunate events and an intense dialogue is going on though all parts accept the difference only in formulas and terminologies but not in the content of faith.

Conclusion and way forward. The role of ecumenical formation in response to contemporary challenges

In the light of the many challenges we are faced with today, the search for a new articulation of appropriate paradigms for the ecumenical movement and understanding of unity becomes an imperative. From my point of view, the common sources of our faith coming from the experience of the early Church could bring fresh possibilities for new paradigms in pursuit of the search for the unity that Christ prayed for and was given to us as a mandatory commandment. From the Bible, I will use two powerful images and will try to interpret them in relation to Pneumatology and its eschatological significance and meaning as 'already and not yet':

- In Acts, chapter 2 shows clearly that the Holy Spirit came on the diversity of the Apostles not as a ONE cover but as diverse tongues of fires, giving each of them a diverse gift of language. The descent of the Holy Spirit did not make the Apostles ONE in a kind of One 'spiritual Kolkhoz' but a koinonia of diverse gifts. That diversity of gifts and of their koinonia in unity are expressed clearly in the ancient Christian prayer of invocation to the Holy Spirit that is used to this day in the Orthodox Church: 'who are everywhere present and fills ALL THINGS'.
- In Revelation, chapter 22 which speaks about ONE river which feeds the tree of life which is found on either side of the river and having 12 kind of different fruits (crops) every month.

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In the light of the above reflections, the following conclusions could be drawn:

- a) The call to unity is not an option; it is imperative and a vocation. It is the very desire of Christ and the heart of the Gospel's message. Either we like it or not. It is not a historical imperialistic view, it is not an arrogant desire of uniting the world by force, but a spiritual search of bringing together in harmony and koinonia God's creation and His people.
- b) I will fully endorse the Trinitarian basis of any theological approach and a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit and its work in the whole world. I will go further in agreeing with those that an arrogant Christocentrism which limits God's work and care to the limits of the Christian community could be an exclusivist approach. But I would dare to say that I am open to the Trinitarian approach because of my Christocentric lenses and perspective. I will see the Holy Spirit working in the whole of God's creation because of the Christocentric basis. I would continue to say that I am open to dialogue with people of other faiths and with other people of God and see their whole value because of my Christocentric perspective. In affirming all these things we cannot depart from our Christological foundations which give us meaning and identity as the community created around the Risen Christ.
- c) The Church and the world cannot be described in antagonistic terms or in terms of priority. The Church is God's creation as the world is God's creation too. The Church has no finality in itself. It is not or should not be seen as a human institution. Rather it is that community filled and empowered with God's Spirit towards the service and the transformation of the world. Diakonia to the world is an expression of one faith and spirituality. It is not an extra and optional good action. In the Church, the vertical should meet with the horizontal realities. Keeping the cross together gives balance and stability to the ecumenical movement.

- d) The last WCC Assembly in Busan offered a renewed statement on unity that attempted to bring together all these dynamics and approaches and proposed a new ecumenical paradigm for the future that has been widely embraced in all churches : 'pilgrimage of justice and peace' - a spiritual journey with other fellow Christians as well as with all people of good will, together affirming and cooperating in the implementation of the signs of the Kingdom in today's world. Unity in doctrine and commonly agreed theological statements leading to unity in faith and full communion among Christians remains a great desire and goal but that is not a condition of walking together on the pilgrimage of justice and peace. Despite differences, by walking and serving together, unity and koinonia may be strengthened on the way.

Nicholas Berdiaev has said: 'If I have no bread it is an economic crisis; but if my neighbour has no bread it is a spiritual crisis'. For this reason, the concern for the dialogue with people of other faiths and for affirming religions as instruments of peace, eco-theology, sustainable development, overcoming poverty etc. should also be sine qua non issues in the search for a new ecumenical paradigm that look for the unity God intends for the world.

But to achieve all these desiderata there is need for education, information and most of all of *Formation*. Ecumenical formation of the future generation of Church leaders and of the people in the pews is the only key to assuring the stability and strengthening of our faith and communities. As always, but in particular in our day, ecumenical formation should be a solid pillar in our churches, with a strong biblical and theological base and while remaining holistic be imbued with meaningful ecumenical spirituality.