

**Gillian Kingston**

**Auditing Ireland's Religious Diversity – a theological response**

**October 21, 2009.**

I want to

- commend the research team on a fascinating and timely piece of research which will bear fruit for some time to come
- confess that I am not an academic theologian, but I do have, thanks to the Irish School of Ecumenics, some insights into some of the issues!

Where to start...?! It is all fascinating stuff!

There are some things here which I simply don't recognize...

*In the Republic of Ireland there is a great deal of buried hatred disguised as tolerance. The churches of all denominations need to learn to work together and stop stereotyping each other. There is a marked level of division between different Protestant groupings in the Republic of Ireland that is not as marked in Northern Ireland (Presbyterian from Co. Offaly)*

I have lived in the Republic of Ireland for most of my life and now live in Co. Offaly and, for the life of me, I can't see where this is coming from!

However, there are things with which I totally concur...

*It is best, pastorally and missiologically, to avoid generalised statements about groups. (Presbyterian from Co Kildare)*

### **The words we use...**

Words can get in the way of communication....we need to watch our language

It is clear that, though respondents may have had a fairly good idea about what was intended by the terms 'diversity' and 'reconciliation,' they were rather less clear about 'ecumenism.'

Are we talking about

- ecumenism as unity among the Christian churches?
- uniformity or something more like reconciled diversity?
- ecumenism as embracing the whole inhabited earth and as having implication for justice peace and the integrity of creation, to use an old WCC phrase?
- ecumenism as reaching out to persons of other world faiths and of none?
- ecumenism as something opposed to evangelism?

What actually *is* ecumenism – and *does* it matter?

It *is* a critical issue – if the Christian churches can't achieve something of an integrated act as we encounter peoples of other world faiths and people of no faith, we lose any credibility we may have. In terms of mission and witness, what are we saying about the message we profess to proclaim and about ourselves as followers of the teacher from Nazareth? The one prayed that we might be one that the world might believe (John 17). These are not new questions, of course.

*Can* there be a working definition of ecumenism and a case for the ecumenical endeavour which is accessible to the so-called ordinary person?

Clearly too the term 'evangelical' needs examination. Strict criteria or self-identification? Some self-confessed evangelicals might not recognise each other as such, I suspect!

The old polarity perceived between ecumenism and evangelism seems still to be alive and well – and shows a fundamental misunderstanding of both concepts!

And there are the all-too-familiar misuses of the words 'faith', 'religion' and 'denomination'.

### **Ecumenism - it has to be local?**

*If it doesn't happen at local level, it isn't happening* – true, but only up to a point

For ecumenism at all levels to advance, there needs to be movement on three related fronts: at local level, within church structures and among theologians.

These are clearly related

- ecumenical relations at local level are eventually stifled unless there is progress both structurally and in theological thinking;
- structural change is cosmetic if nothing is happening among the people in the churches and if there is no theological back-up;
- theological progress remains in the ivory tower if it is not implemented in the structures of the Churches and among the faithful.

It remains a fact that people in the different church traditions know relatively little about each other, perhaps even about themselves, in terms of worship, history, church teaching, church 'organisation (for want of a better word). This clearly gives rise to negative attitudes. Forty years after Vatican 2, and one hundred years after the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, there is still a long way to go!

It would appear that, to a significant extent, people still retain pre-conceived notions about each other, often out-of-date and bearing no resemblance to the real state of affairs in the twenty first century. Caricatures are destructive of real relationship for we take one feature and magnify it out of all proportion and fail to see each other as we really are. While each church tradition has a right, and sometimes even a duty, to make individual decisions, there appears to be an unfortunate tendency to believe that it is preferable to 'go it alone', without too much concern either for other traditions or how actions are likely to affect them and relationships with them.

There are clearly implications here for ministerial training. Whether we like it or not, the main, though not exclusive, source of leadership comes from the ordained ministry /priesthood /whatever in our church traditions. How men and women called to ministry are trained, how they are *in-formed*, is of critical importance. Now, there are many claims for inclusion on theological college programmes, but it seems to me (it would, wouldn't it?) that this is priority as there are implications here for other areas such as development studies, peace studies and so forth.

### **Reconciliation issues**

The Bible has more verses on justice and related issues like reconciliation and integration than it has on sex! Not that you would know from how some people speak – morality might appear sometimes to be a three-letter word!

[cf *The Poverty and Justice Bible* in which there are some 2,000 verses referring to issues of justice]

From some eleven years experience of writing notes on the lections of the Revised Common Lectionary, two things are clear, at least to me...

- the conscientious preacher cannot avoid dealing with issues concerning the stranger, the marginalised, the somehow different
- the impulse of Scripture is towards reconciliation and being as one.
- Desmond Tutu has said that people say the Bible isn't political, but 'I don't know what Bible they are reading!'

Quotation from *What the Bible says about the stranger* Kieran O'Mahony OSA  
[Biblical perspectives on racism, migration, asylum and cross-community issues]

This short book has recently been re-issued, taking account of the changes in Irish society over the last ten years or so.

What *does* the Bible have to say about the way foreigners and refugees are treated? What does the Bible have to say about cross-cultural and cross-community issues? Given that the Bible is both a reflection of human experience (static fact) and a resource for

profound change (dynamic ideal), we find in the Bible both the *fact* of discrimination and ethical *ideals* which challenge and eventually undermine any abuse of our fellow human beings on the grounds of race, religion, gender and so forth. Thus we may find for today material in the Bible which helps us to recognise discrimination and arms us in the struggle against it.

He continues...

For our Irish context, where discrimination on the basis of religion has not been unknown, it seems important to add that, while here we are dealing primarily with racism, immigration and asylum seekers and therefore, in the first instance, with foreigners who come to our shores, cross-community issues are not at all to be excluded. It is often the case that the near neighbour is a greater stranger than the (safely) distant foreigner.

There were those who considered it more important to engage with other ethnicities and nationalities than with different expressions of the same (ie.Christian) faith. While on one level there is no problem, on another level it can be a 'distancing' technique as Father O'Mahony indicates. We are good at letting the more exotic and foreign distract us from the often much more painful task of examining where we stand in relation to those nearest to us.

Perhaps, in a real sense, reconciliation needs to start within each of us as we encounter difference of any kind

I am leaving this open-ended – you must draw the conclusions!

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