

# Denominational Christianity: towards a vindication of pluralism

JOHN H. MORGAN

As Barth<sup>1</sup> has so cogently pointed out and as Feuerbach<sup>2</sup> and Comte<sup>3</sup> have so unwittingly and graphically illustrated, whenever man's talk of God has degenerated into pathetic musings about man himself, the church has gone miserably awry. But if Ritschl's<sup>4</sup> corruption of Schleiermacher's theology of culture<sup>5</sup> necessarily led the church along the dangerous footpath of an inordinately anthropocentric fascination with culture, Barth<sup>6</sup> and company might likewise be corrected for having so successfully devastated the humanness of the theological enterprise as to make God's humanity virtually inconceivable and human culture despicably irrelevant. With Barth<sup>7</sup> himself having taken corrective steps later in his work, much headway has surely been made toward a dialogic convergence of both liberals and evangelicals on the complexities of the relationships which exist between church and society,<sup>8</sup> religion and culture,<sup>9</sup> institution and personality.<sup>10</sup>

If theologians have learned little from sociologists,<sup>11</sup> the reverse must be even more accurate. That each has something to learn from the other, most of us within the church and academy may amiably concede,<sup>12</sup> but that such learning has begun, or once existed, or is soon to begin, we are justifiably reticent to acknowledge.<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, though happily, an occasional bona fide exception occurs and usually to the benefit of the recalcitrant majorities on either side of the disciplines. Robin Nixon<sup>14</sup> has recently risked the danger of pending infamy reserved for the 'interdisciplinary' by addressing the current literature on interpretive models in ecumenical theology. Following an insightful summary of the literature, he concludes with the solemn caution that the 'biggest challenge to the ecumenical movement today' might perhaps be, in an effort to rediscover the unified authority today of Bible, church, and Spirit, the construction of 'a proper modern confession . . .' This caution and challenge must not be ignored nor patronized but neither must it be taken for more than it really is. We must not construe a caution and a challenge to constitute a battle-cry around which all ecumenical enthusiasts should rally, but rather as a call for all genuinely concerned Christians not to lose sight of both ecumenism and unity as we each in our own encampments envision how 'they' can unite with 'us'.

Far be it from this sociologist to take in hand to correct the Reverend Robin Nixon, for his instruction of me in the complexities of ecumenical theology is sorely needed if stubbornly resisted. However, if I might take a deacon's prerogative to 'interpret to the church . . . the world',<sup>15</sup> I would like to supplement Nixon's theological review and comment with some general observations from a sociological perspective.<sup>16</sup> These sociological remarks in no way purport to offer an alternative interpretive model to currently vogue theological efforts, but merely are put forth in an humble attempt to contribute something from the social sciences to the broadening of the perimeters for theological discussions,<sup>17</sup> not just of *ideas about faith* but of the *behaviour of the faithful*.<sup>18</sup>

### Common-sense realism

Assuming that no social or behavioural science can be truly objective—for human persons are subjects and not objects<sup>19</sup>—I therefore will state three assumptions which will not here be defended. (1) The sociological phenomenon of denominationalism is genuinely and authentically Christian. (2) The Holy Spirit in some way works through this sociological phenomenon to fulfill God's purpose for his church. (3) Denominationalism is not incongruous with church unity but is a legitimate manifestation of it. Furthermore, my perspectives toward denominationalism are those of a common-sense realism, i.e., taking as actually existing those social phenomena that do appear to be and that of 'popular' religion,<sup>20</sup> i.e., religion as actually expressed in the behaviour and attitudes of people *vis-à-vis* strictly ideational and creedal expressions of belief-formulas. Of course, to any theologian, the limitations resulting from these assumptions and perspectives strictly evidence an incompleteness in sociology's assessment of religious life, and happily so.<sup>21</sup> A genuine sociology of religion does not confuse either behaviour or attitudes with revealed truth.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, sociology is in no position to make judgements about the truth of the Christian faith, and when it inadvisedly ventures a judgement it does an injustice to science and brings disrepute down upon the discipline.<sup>23</sup> A sociologist can assume any philosophical position he chooses—Christian, Marxist, etc.—but his scientific task holds him close to a systematic analysis of behaviour as expressive of attitudes.<sup>24</sup> At this very juncture of attitudes, it seems to me the theologian and the sociologist come face to face.<sup>25</sup>

Attitudes are simultaneously ideological and behavioural: *ideological* in the sense that a particular piece of information *per se* constitutes a precursory dimension to attitude formation (in this instance, creedal information about Christian truth) and *behavioural* in the sense that an inevitable action results from this information.<sup>26</sup> Where information, i.e. an idea-formation, and action, i.e. an inevitably resulting behaviour, converge, at this point sociology and

theology confront the same phenomenon, (that is, attitude) though admittedly from opposite though not opposing perspectives, i.e. sociology of behaviour and theology of ideation.<sup>27</sup>

All of this, of course, is immediately relevant to any serious consideration of ecumenism: for if the ecumenical movement is something more than an exercise in theological acrobatics where ideas are relegated to mere objects to be moved about on a board having no functional relationship to the reality of lived faith in a religious community, then honest cognizance must be taken, not only of the genuine and theologically significant creedal conflicts, but also of the human dynamics of individual personality and community ethos.<sup>28</sup> Ecumenism is not only theological in nature; it is fundamentally psycho-social and cultural as well.<sup>29</sup>

### **Three responses to denominationalism**

Let me suggest, therefore, that as we face honestly the sometimes untidy business of 'popular' religion,<sup>30</sup> i.e. that morass of theological snippets and superstitious vestiges which make up a web of faith and fear among members of all Christian communities, or more pastorally, those possessing an uncluttered 'simple abiding faith', we witness three categorically interpretive responses to Christian denominationalism (and since Greeley<sup>31</sup> considers Roman Catholicism a functional denomination at least in American society, here we are meaning any and all Christian bodies). Though time and space limitations preclude a substantive treatise on each, we should at least list and briefly explain the interpretative options employed by Christian laymen as means of explaining why and responding to the diversity of faith and practice amongst Christian folk.<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly enough, unlike the theologians' proclivities to think readily in terms of catholic, protestant, and sometimes charismatic categories, popular religionists employ other not so ideological but much more immediately socio-cultural categories—a sort of labelling phenomenon. The first labelling category is 'fundamentalism', an emotionally charged 'we-are-right-and-all-others-are-wrong' attitude bespeaking an unadulterated in-group/out-group syndrome. Not only is fundamentalism radically exclusivistic; it is also socio-culturally homogeneous, allowing for hardly any discernible variations in social class and ethnic origins, and where such variations exist each group of x class and y race hover together in self-righteous in-groupishness. By and large, the non-Roman brand of sectarian fundamentalists are biblical literalists, i.e. 'the-Bible-means-what-it-says-and-says-what-it-means' attitude; and also a-historical, i.e. infantile attempts to 'restore' the church of the apostles in defiance of 1,900 years of recorded church history. The Roman Catholic variety of fundamentalism, though certainly not characterizing all Roman Catholics or even a large majority, accent-

uates the quest for an unrestrained authoritarian autocracy nurturing a theological pre-disposition which might appropriately be labelled 'Tridentine maximalism',<sup>33</sup> i.e. the church's attempt to spell out and draw a circle around every conceivable doctrine and doctrinal ramification and implication—the 'I-don't-understand-what-the-church-teaches-but-I-believe-it-is-right' attitude. Tridentine maximalism I use as an alternative notion to Patristic minimalism, i.e. the early Fathers' disinclination to 'maximally' defend all theological possibilities in deference to a restrictive enterprise of 'minimally' defining the faith.<sup>34</sup> The former, i.e. Tridentine maximalism, bespeaks a socio-political proclivity to authoritarian control,<sup>35</sup> whereas the latter, i.e. Patristic minimalism, exemplifies a temperamental predisposition to contiguous diversity—a contiguity in the Spirit and a diversity of socio-cultural modes of experiential expression of the faith.<sup>36</sup>

The second labelling category employed by popular religionists in their attempt to understand the denominational phenomenon of the Christian faith is what might be called '*laissez-faire* provincialism', a 'we-can't-all-agree-and-just-as-well' attitude which grows from and is nurtured by a socio-cultural *status quo*.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the literalistic, exclusivistic, and in-group defensiveness of fundamentalism, *laissez-faire* provincialism is perpetuated by a humanitarian tolerance which falls short of any genuine commitment to 'sharing differences'.<sup>38</sup> Rather, this phenomenon favours the *status quo* of religious life and is ill-prepared to face the possibilities of change which denominational sharing might suggest.<sup>39</sup> Emphasis is placed upon the integrity, authenticity, and completeness of 'our way' without necessarily implying the wrongfulness of 'their way', but simply observing that their way is different. If pressed, *laissez-faire* provincialists would suggest that 'our way' is better though 'their way' is adequate. The effort on the part of this worshipping community is to avoid both 'exclusivity' and 'sharing differences'. This type of community, as counterposed to fundamentalists, does affirm the legitimacy of any and all communities of faith who confess Christ as Lord without in any way implying by this affirmation that they would consider changing the *status quo* expressions of their faith and practice.

The third category might be called 'ecumenical liberalism', as defined and employed by popular religionists. This 'we'll-all-eventually-be-amalgamated-into-one-and-the-same-church' attitude is predicated upon an historically naive futuristic homogenization of all Christian communities. This attitude necessarily ignores or denigrates the authenticity of genuinely different modes of experience and expressions of the 'faith once delivered to the saints' in favour of an anthropologically naive presumption that 'down deep' all Christian peoples are 'the same'. If by 'the same' is meant that we are 'lost and in need of salvation', 'alienated and in need of recon-

ciliation', or 'of God and thus destined to be with God', then all Christians, indeed all peoples, are the same. But when ecumenical liberals suggest this eventual homogenization of Christian communities, they necessarily fail to perceive the magnitude of the socio-cultural and psychological diversification of religious experience and expression. In a sense, ecumenical liberalism is as guilty of in-groupishness and exclusivity as is fundamentalism; for whereas the latter would have all believers conform to their belief system, the former would have all believers destined for a homogenized community deterministically realized through historical eventualities. And if both fundamentalism and ecumenical liberalism are faulted for narrow-minded determinism, then *laissez-faire* provincialism is equally censured for its passive non-participation in the church's sincere efforts to explore and vindicate all aspects of her diversified life.

### **Suggestions for dialogue**

Now that I have somewhat identified popular attitudes about religious differences and in some preliminary way suggested how these are each unjustifiable attitudes, my sociologist's inclination is to terminate this assessment. However, I feel led to go a bit further before closing. And, though my effort here is to make some sociological observations upon a theological problem, I am far from wishing to attempt to construct a 'solution' to the dilemmas of the ecumenical movement. Therefore, let me be the first to point to the incompleteness of my comments upon denominational Christianity by way of calling attention to the subtitle of this paper. For if 'towards' implies nothing else, it certainly suggests the 'not-having-yet-arrived' nature of this discussed problem.

Let me now point to some language constructs which might offer some complementing perspectives on ecumenical attitudes as both ideological and behavioural phenomena. Then, let me suggest how a recitation of the church's mission through ministries might offer a hopeful direction for ecumenical dialogue. Since we have suggested that ideology and behaviour converge in attitudes—having correlated idea-formation with theology and behaviour-analysis with sociology<sup>40</sup>—let me identify two sets of attitudes which, if understood and utilized, might contribute to a more refined sensitivity to the human quality of ecumenical encounter for the Christian laymen, i.e. doctrinal attitudes and community attitudes. In evaluating ecumenical efforts towards church unity, the concept of the doctrinal polarity of Patristic minimalism and Tridentine maximalism is important to grasp. In the former, attitudes toward doctrine are characteristically non-restrictive, pastoral, and pluralistic;<sup>41</sup> whereas in the latter, attitudes towards doctrine are characteristically delimiting, autocratic, and authoritarian.<sup>42</sup> The point of genuine difference is the manner in

which the enterprise of doctrine-formulation is conceptualized, i.e. either as an effort on the part of the church to preserve the truth by minimally circumscribing the doctrinal perimeters acceptable to orthodoxy, or by maximally defining every conceivable implication and ramification of doctrine in an attempt to control and monitor compliance with orthodox interpretation. Ecumenical discussions at the theological conference table, as well as ecumenical sensibilities in the parish church pew, are profoundly affected by the choice in attitudes toward doctrine, irrespective of any particular doctrine under consideration.

The second set of attitudes relates to the worshipping community's life itself: those attitudes that grow from and nurture experiential participation in an actual body of believers. The psycho-social alternatives to fundamentalism, *laissez-faire* provincialism, and ecumenical liberalism in understanding the nature of the relationship which exists between different Christian communities are 'contiguous diversity' and 'unitive pluralism'. The former concept<sup>43</sup> accentuates 'being in actual contact with' and 'the touching along a boundary' which exists in all bodies of believers infused with Divine Presence—a touching in the Spirit—while affirming the authentic 'condition of being different':<sup>44</sup> in other words, an internal touching in faith and an external expressing in practice, or many gifts but one Giver. By 'unitive pluralism'<sup>45</sup> is meant the 'tendency to produce union' while taking full cognizance of the socio-cultural and psychological differences of peoples and time-periods. Unitive pluralism exemplifies an anticipation or an expectation of sharing the experiential source of faith while differing in the expressional mode of that faith. Such a term as communion (come-union) captures this notion of anticipation. In these sets of doctrinal and community attitudes we hopefully can detect some guidelines for further discussion between theologians and sociologists as we wrestle with the issues of ecumenism.

Let me conclude with some quick and dangerously breezy remarks about the church's mission as expressed through its ministries.<sup>46</sup> The church's mission the Lord has made clear; and the ministries which, each in their own way, respond to this mission are also easily identified in Scripture.<sup>47</sup> The church's ministerial *collegium* consists of four components: the *ecclesia* as the 'called out', the *koinonia* as the 'community', the *charisma* as the 'gifts' of the called-out community, and the *diakonia* as the church's 'service' to the world for which it exists as a gifted community called out. The integrity of this ministerial *collegium* which constitutes the church's mission *par excellence* is affronted if any component is absent or is denigrated.<sup>48</sup> Yet, a perception of the church catholic educated to an attitude of Patristic minimalism and unitive pluralism can easily justify some Christian communities concentrating upon some components more than upon others so long as the church in all her indivisible unity is

discharging the Great Commission epitomized in this ministerial *collegium*.

**JOHN H. MORGAN** is a deacon in the Episcopal Church of the USA. He is currently Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Behavioural Studies at Jarvis Christian College in Hawkins, Texas.

## NOTES

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- 1 Karl Barth, *Evangelische Theologie in 19. Jahrhundert*, in the 'Theologische Studien' series (Evangelischer Verlag A. G.: Zollikon-Zurich 1960).
- 2 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (trans.) (Harper Torchbooks : New York 1957).
- 3 August Comte, *Cours de Philosophie* 6 Vols. (1930-1942), especially his chapters on 'positive religion'.
- 4 Albrecht Ritschl, *Theologie Und Metaphysik* (Marcus : Bonn 1881).
- 5 Frederick Schleiermacher, *On Religion : Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (trans.) (Harper Torchbooks : New York 1958).
- 6 Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought : From Rousseau to Ritschl* (Simon and Schuster : New York 1964), chapter VIII on Schleiermacher.
- 7 Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (John Knox Press : Richmond, Virginia 1972).
- 8 Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Doubleday Anchor: Garden City, New York 1969).
- 9 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper Torchbooks : New York 1956).
- 10 Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Culture and Personality* (Random House : New York 1970); and Gordon W. Allport, *Personality and Social Encounter* (Beacon Press : Boston 1960).
- 11 For example, not one single reference to the social sciences is made in an otherwise fine treatise by Ronald Gregor Smith, *The Whole Man: Studies in Christian Anthropology* (Westminster Press : Philadelphia 1969).
- 12 Gibson Winter, 'Theology and the Social Science' in Daniel T. Jenkins, *The Scope of Theology* (World Publ. : New York 1965).
- 13 A better example of this dialogue is found in Paul L. Holmer, *Theology and the Scientific Study of Religion* (T. S. Denison : Minneapolis 1961).
- 14 Robin Nixon, 'Ecumenism, Models of the Church and Styles of Authority', *Churchman* Vol. 91:3, July 1977.
- 15 'Ordination of a Deacon', *The Book of Common Prayer* (The Episcopal Church of America, 1977).
- 16 See my 'Religion and Culture as Meaning Systems', *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 57, No. 4, October 1977.
- 17 See my 'Theology and Symbol', *Journal of Religious Thought* Vol. 30, No. 2, Fall 1974.
- 18 Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion* (Macmillan : New York 1969).
- 19 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Doubleday Anchor : Garden City, New York 1966).

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- 20 Jeffrey K. Hadden, 'The Religious Beliefs of Protestant Laity' in Patrick H. McNamara, ed., *Religion American Style* (Harper and Row : New York 1974).
- 21 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (World Publ. : New York 1967).
- 22 See for example, Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday Anchor : Garden City, New York 1969); Gerhard Lenski, *The Religious Factor: A Sociologist's Inquiry* (Doubleday : Garden City, New York 1961); and Susan Budd, *Sociologists and Religion* (Collier-Macmillan : London 1973).
- 23 Cf. David Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion* (Basic Books : New York 1967); and Samuel S. Hill, Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis* (Beacon Press : Boston 1966).
- 24 J. Milton Yinger, *Sociology Looks at Religion* (Macmillan : New York 1969); and Barbara W. Hargrove, *Reformation of the Holy: A Sociology of Religion* (F. A. Davis : Philadelphia 1971).
- 25 For example, cf. Peter L. Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies: Christian Commitment and the Religious Establishment* (Doubleday : Garden City, New York 1961); Gibson Winter, *The New Creation as Metropolis: A Design for the Church's Task in the Urban World* (Macmillan : New York 1966); and Samuel S. Hill, Jr., ed., *Religion and the Solid South* (Abingdon Press : Nashville 1972).
- 26 Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System' in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Tavistock : London 1966).
- 27 See my 'Pastoral Ecstasy and the Authentic Self: Theological Meanings in Symbolic Distance' *Pastoral Psychology* Vol. 25, No. 2, Winter 1976.
- 28 James A. Kelly, 'Attitudes Toward Ecumenism: An Empirical Investigation' in McNamara, op. cit.
- 29 Ronald L. Jonstone, *Religion and Society in Interaction: The Sociology of Religion* (Prentice-Hall : Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1975).
- 30 Andrew M. Greeley, 'Superstition, Ecstasy, and Tribal Consciousness' in McNamara, op. cit.
- 31 William C. McCready and Andrew M. Greeley, 'The End of American Catholicism?' in McNamara, *ibid.*
- 32 Hadden, op. cit.
- 33 See for example, Heiko A. Oberman, 'The Tridentine Decree on Justification in the Light of Late Medieval Theology' in Ernst Kasemann, et. al., *Distinctive Protestant and Catholic Themes Reconsidered* (Harper Torchbooks : New York 1967).
- 34 For illustrations, cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Harper and Row : New York 1960) chapter IX; Leighton Pullan, *The History of the Book of Common Prayer* (Longmans, Green : London 1900) chapter I; and Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Dacre Press : Westminster 1945) chapter VI.
- 35 See, for example, John L. McKenzie, *Authority in the Church* (Doubleday Image : Garden City, New York 1971); and Avery Dulles, S. J., *The Survival of Dogma* (Doubleday Image : Garden City, New York 1973).
- 36 For ethnographic illustrations of this, see my 'The Sacramental Meaning of the Eucharist: A Study of Quaker Communal Experience' *North American Quarterly* Vol. I, No. 1, January 1972, and my 'Religious Communism: The Shaker Experiment in Christian Community' *The Shaker Quarterly* Vol. 13, No. 4, Winter 1973.
- 37 Peter L. Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, op. cit.
- 38 Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (Macmillan : New York 1962).
- 39 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (Macmillan : New York 1965).
- 40 See Floyd W. Matson, *Without/Within: Behaviourism and Humanism* (Brooks/Cole Publ. : Monterey 1973); and Severyn T. Bruyn, *The Human Perspective in Sociology* (Prentice-Hall : Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1966).
- 41 Cf. Hans Küng, *Structures of the Church* (University of Notre Dame Press : London 1968); Trutz Rendtorff, *Church and Theology* (trans.) (Westminster



- Press : Philadelphia 1966); and J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (Westminster Press : Philadelphia 1964).
- 42 E.g., cf. Peter Hebblethwaite, S.J., *The Theology of the Church* (Fides Publ. : Notre Dame, Indiana 1969); and James Gaffney, *Focus on Doctrine* (Paulist Press : New York 1964).
  - 43 John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* (SCM Press : London 1975).
  - 44 'Contiguity' and 'diversity' in the OED.
  - 45 See, e.g., Robley Edward Whitson, *The Coming Convergence of World Religions* (Newman Press : New York 1971), who is a Roman Catholic theological anthropologist exploring new language constructions relevant to ecumenism.
  - 46 For widely varying views on the subject, cf. Charles Gore, *Orders and Unity* (John Murray : London 1909); R. C. Moberly, *Ministerial Priesthood* (John Murray : London 1910) (2nd ed.); H. Richard Niebuhr, et. al., *The Church Against the World* (Willett, Clark : New York 1935); and Hendrik Kraemer, *The Communication of the Christian Faith* (Westminster Press : Philadelphia 1966).
  - 47 Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (Abingdon Press : Nashville 1961).
  - 48 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (Harper & Row : New York 1956); and H. Richard Niebuhr, ed., *The Ministry in Historical Perspective* (Harper and Bros. : New York 1956).