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Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning
Receiving Gifts for Our Needs

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Abstract. — *Staff of the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University and its recently established Centre for Catholic Studies in particular – in collaboration with ecclesiologists, ecumenists, senior ecclesiastics, social scientists and local practitioners from across the Christian traditions and from academic and ecclesial contexts stretching from Australia, North America, and Europe – have been hosting a series of research projects devoted to developing and modelling a distinctive new strategy in Christian ecumenism which is being referred to as "Receptive Ecumenism" and which has already been attracting considerable attention. This essay provides a short introduction to the key principles, convictions and assumptions at issue in Receptive Ecumenism and describes the projects currently underway that seek to test and model its potential.*

Introduction

Intra-Christian ecumenical concern now finds itself frequently if variously written-off as futile, washed up, log-jammed, – irrelevant even – in the light of the even more complex interfaith issues that currently loom larger in popular consciousness, together with the whole raft of issues pertaining to what it means to be Christian in a globalised, multipolar world wherein real and radical difference lives in close if frequently fragile and unstable proximity.[1] In this context, some view the relatively cooler waters of Christian ecumenism as representing an issue belonging to a former age; a piece of now irrelevant domestic housekeeping eclipsed by the larger issues of the present day. In contrast, the conviction behind a major series of projects organised and hosted by Durham University's *Centre for Catholic Studies*, which are collectively intended to model a fresh approach for contemporary ecumenism – "Receptive Ecumenism"

1. In the latter regard, for an initial discussion see Paul D. Murray, "Redeeming Catholicity for a Globalising Age," *Exchanges of Grace: Essays in Honour of Ann Loades*, ed. Natalie K. Watson and Stephen Burns (London: SCM Press, 2008).

– is that it is precisely the specificities of the current situation that give renewed and particular importance to the intra-Christian ecumenical endeavour.[2]

The key question of our age is as to whether we can live difference for mutual flourishing rather than mutually assured destruction. In this regard, the simple point vis-à-vis Christian ecumenism is that if the Christian churches cannot show signs of this in their relations with their close but nevertheless separated brothers and sisters in Christ then what chance is there of them showing it with any credibility in relation to their more distant cousins in the human family? Or putting this in more explicitly theological terms, the point is that the Church of Christ and, therefore, the churches individually and collectively, existing in and from the communion of the Trinity, are called in their very living and working together to be sacramental of – a living witness to – difference well-lived in the conviction that difference well-lived is of the very essence of the Trinitarian being of God. In this purview, far from intra-Christian ecumenism being an irrelevance in the contemporary context, it goes to the very heart of the abiding mission of the Church.

This initial exploration of the thinking at issue in Receptive Ecumenism is structured around five questions: What is the central idea? What are the supporting assumptions? Is there actually anything that new about Receptive Ecumenism? Does Receptive Ecumenism imply a critical judgement on other ecumenical strategies? Where to now with Receptive Ecumenism?[3]

2. For some of the attention thus far given to these projects, see Elena Curti and Michael Hirst, "Amid the Cold, Signs of a Thaw," *The Tablet* (21st January 2006) 12-13; Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., "Saving Ecumenism from Itself," *First Things* (December 2007); Ladislas Orsy, S.J., "A Time to Ponder: A Reflection on the Spiritual Mystery of the Ecumenical Movement," *America* 196 (5th February 2007) 14-19, at 18-19. Following the originating January 2006 international research colloquium at Ushaw College, Durham at which the notion of Receptive Ecumenism was first presented and explored, there have been conferences independently organised on the theme in Worcester Cathedral in October 2006 and in London, by the Society for Ecumenical Studies, in November 2007. In turn, the publication of the major volume of essays deriving from the January 2006 colloquium, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), is to be marked by a launch celebration hosted by the Centro Pro Unione in Rome on 23rd October 2008 in the presence of Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

3. For a lengthier account, see Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 7 (2007) 279-301; also Murray (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*.

1. What is the Central Idea?

The central aim of Receptive Ecumenism is to take seriously both the reality of the contemporary ecumenical moment – wherein the once widely held hope for structural unification in the short-medium term is, in general, now widely recognised as being unrealistic – and the abiding need for the Christian churches precisely in this situation to walk the way of conversion towards more visible structural and sacramental unity. The aim is to seek after an appropriate ecumenical ethic and strategy for living between the times; for living now orientated upon the promise of and calling to being made one in the Trinitarian life of God.

In service of this aim, Receptive Ecumenism represents a remarkably simple but far reaching strategy which essentially seeks to draw out a value that has been at work, to some degree at least, in all good ecumenical encounter and to place it centre-stage as the appropriate organising principle for contemporary ecumenism. The basic principle is that considerable further ecumenical progress is indeed possible but only if each of the traditions, both singly and jointly, makes a clear, programmatic shift from prioritising the question, "What do our various others first need to learn from us?" to asking instead, "What do *we* need to learn and what can *we* learn – or receive – with integrity from *our* others?" Alternatively stated, the John F. Kennedy style reversal that is in view here (cf. "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country") is from asking "How might *they* become more like us so that divisions might be eased?" to asking "How might *we* become more like them in diverse particular ways so that any specific difficulties we experience in our own thought and practice might be eased?" As this suggests, Receptive Ecumenism is about each tradition taking responsibility at every level of its life for its own continued learning and potential further flourishing in the face of the other.

Accordingly, reflecting both this self-critical principle of responsible initiative and the specificity of the host tradition, the first project in Receptive Ecumenism in January 2006 – jointly organised by the then nascent *Centre for Catholic Studies* of Durham University and Ushaw College, the Roman Catholic seminary for the north of England, to mark the conferral by Durham University of a Doctorate of Divinity *honoris causa* on Cardinal Walter Kasper – was focussed throughout on exploring how Roman Catholicism might, with integrity, be fruitfully re-imagined in the light of its own ecumenical others.

More generally, the underlying conviction is that if all were acting on this principle, even relatively independently of each other, then change

would happen on many fronts, albeit somewhat unpredictably. With this, the conviction also is that for all the tremendous gains in increased mutual understanding that have derived from the more common bilateral and multilateral ecumenical strategy of problem solving and theological mediation, that strategy alone is incapable of delivering the self-critical openness to practical conversion, growth and development upon which all real ecumenical progress depends. Here the desire is to see ecumenism move forward into action and not simply the action of shared mission, or of problem-solving and incremental agreement but the long-term action of a programme of individual, communal and structural conversion driven, like the Gospel that inspires it, by the promise of conversion into greater life and flourishing. In accordance with this, the aim is for each of the Christian traditions, singly and jointly, to become more, not less, than they currently are by recognising their own respective sticking points and correlatively learning from and receiving of each other's particular gifts.

This is to view ecumenical encounter, ecumenical responsibility and calling as privileged contexts for promoting the process of personal and ecclesial growth that lies at the very heart of Christian ecclesial existence. Indeed, here the capacity for receptive ecumenical learning *across* traditions is regarded as holding the key for unlocking the potential for transformation *within* traditions. As Thomas Reese, S.J., put it at the January 2006 colloquium, whilst we used to consider ecclesial reform as the essential prerequisite for ecumenical progress, today we see that "The reverse is also true: ecumenism is an essential path to church reform."[4]

In all that has been said thus far, the resonance between Receptive Ecumenism and the call for a "Spiritual Ecumenism" expressed by Cardinal Walter Kasper and Archbishop Rowan Williams will be clear;[5] as it will also that Receptive Ecumenism seeks to extend this call more explicitly beyond the level of individual learning and growth alone to include also the even more challenging levels of necessary communal, structural, and ecclesial conversion.

4. Thomas J. Reese, S.J., "Organizational Factors Inhibiting Receptive Catholic Learning," *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, 346-356, at 354.

5. See Walter Kasper, "Spiritual Ecumenism," *That They May All Be One: The Call To Unity Today* (London: Burns & Oates, 2004) 155-172; also "The Current Situation in Ecumenical Theology," *ibid.*, 14-32, at 16-17; *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006); and Rowan Williams, "Keynote Address," *May They All Be One...* But How? *Proceedings of the Conference Held in St Albans Cathedral on 17th May 2003* (St Albans: The St Albans Centre for Christian Studies, 2003) 5-10, at 6-8.

2. What Are the Supporting Assumptions?

From amongst a number of others alluded to earlier, we might fruitfully focus briefly here on two key assumptions – what the philosopher of science, Imre Lakatos, would refer to as auxiliary hypotheses – that play particularly strongly in supporting the core idea of Receptive Ecumenism.[6] These are: (1) a conviction, in accordance with Catholic instinct, as to the abiding and permanent significance of the call to organic, structural ecclesial unity regardless of the changed ecumenical situation in which we find ourselves, and (2) a related conviction that ecumenical theology must today be a matter of praxis – of transformative reflection on and therapeutic diagnosis and analysis of practice – and not simply a matter, important though it be, of theoretical, conceptual, doctrinal clarification and re-imagining.

1. The Abiding Significance of the Call to Organic, Structural Unity

All would acknowledge that there has been a very definite shift from the high octane ecumenical optimism, now frequently regarded as somewhat premature, of the 1960's and 1970's to the current generally held recognition that the aspiration for programmed structural unity in the short to medium-term is, in most cases at least, unrealistic; a situation frequently referred to with the over-used metaphor of our living through an "ecumenical winter" and associated with significantly decreased levels of interest in and commitment to the ecumenical cause across the traditions.

Various factors have contributed to this situation. Amongst these has been a sense of frustration experienced by many at the slow pace of formal processes of agreement relative to the urgent desire for more rapid progress on the ground, leading some simply to view the need for formal resolution as an irrelevance. With this has been a tendency in many quarters, not least the World Council of Churches under the leadership of Konrad Raiser, to prioritise "Life and Works" style ecumenism over

6. For the notion of auxiliary hypotheses and their role in an overall research programme, see Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, London, 1965*, 4, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 91-196 *passim*. For discussion, see Murray, "Truth and Reason in Science and Theology: Points of Tension, Correlation and Compatibility," *God, Humanity and the Cosmos: A Companion to the Science-Religion Debate*, rev. 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Southgate (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 82-115 at 102-107.

"Faith and Order" style ecumenism in the belief that ecumenical engagement is easiest and most fruitful when it focuses on collaboration in practical matters of service and mission rather than seeking to resolve arcane matters of doctrinal and ecclesiological difference. Also both feeding into and itself fed by these previous two factors has been the rise of the phenomenon of post-denominational Christianity whereby many younger and early middle-aged Christians no longer conceive of themselves as belonging to any specific denomination but as moving fluidly between without formal belonging. In turn, pulling in the somewhat different direction of reinforcing denominational differences rather than relativising them, whilst nevertheless also serving to diminish energy for the ecumenical endeavour, has been the reassertion in some quarters of the situated distinctiveness of denominational traditions; the correlate in the churches of the reactive post-modern heightening of the particularity of identity over against any easily assumed commonality.[7]

It is, perhaps, understandable – even if, from the perspective of Receptive Ecumenism, fundamentally mistaken – that against this backdrop, the traditional ecumenical concern to work towards appropriately structured unity between currently distinct traditions has for many receded from proximate view and concern and become regarded simply as an eschatological aspiration, replaced in the immediate with the more achievable goals of relational reconciliation and cooperation. In contrast, whilst certainly valuing and sharing a commitment to the practical realisation of such tangible goals, Receptive Ecumenism firmly resists the relinquishing too often associated with them of any practically and strategically significant aspiration for full visible structural and sacramental unity and the correlative commitment to walking the way of ecclesial conversion that this requires. Moreover, this resistance, it should be noted, is driven neither by any detached, impractical idealism, doggedly holding out for unrealisable standards, nor by any basic disagreement with the claim that the full realisation of the appropriately configured communion of all things in Christ and the Spirit is an eschatological reality, *the* eschatological reality. Rather, it is driven by a fundamental conviction about what it means to live, precisely in the nit and grit particularities of the here and now, the eschatological calling that defines Christian existence.

As a considerable body of modern scholarship has maintained, Christian eschatology performs not as futurology but as explicative of

7. See *In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 12.

the context within which Christian existence presently lives, moves and has its being.[8] In authentic Christian understanding, experience and practice, eschatological reality refuses to be confined to a future that is of no relevance to the present. It is, literally, the foreground of the present. As such, whilst the Christian vocation might not be to construct this elusive yet in-breaking reality, it is to lean into its coming and to be shaped in accordance with it so as to become channels for its anticipatory realisation and showing in the world. In this perspective, resigning to accepting the existing structural divisions between the churches as the permanent state of things can simply never be an adequate ecumenical ethic; an adequate way of living out of and towards the eschatological reality of the unity and Catholicity of the Church. The point is to live *now* orientated upon this promise and calling, disposed to the challenge of conversion that it entails and open to the possibilities of greater flourishing that it represents. It is precisely such an ethic that Receptive Ecumenism articulates. It views the present ecumenical moment – post-euphoric optimism and pre-realisation of the hopes there ignited – as opening into a space of real ecclesial learning; a long-term learning opportunity in which the churches might progress towards their calling and destiny in the only way possible – by slow and difficult growth in maturity.

2. Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Praxis

The recurrent challenge of Christian existence is to recognise that Christianity is not primarily a belief system but a practice – the practice of discipleship. At its heart is a life lived; indeed, a life – the life of Christ in the Spirit – that is lived into and lived out of. Similarly, the Church is not primarily a concept but a life-world; a living, breathing organizational reality. As such, a second key supporting assumption in Receptive Ecumenism is that the ecclesial learning that is at issue here must ultimately be practical and not simply theoretical, or purely doctrinal in character.

Here the conviction, shared with Nicholas M. Healy, is that too much ecclesiology operates at the level purely of articulating an idea of the Church, a vision or "blueprint" for how it should be, but in a way that does not engage sufficiently with the lived, empirical, organizational

8. For just two indicative and highly influential examples, see Jürgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, ²1967 [1965]); also Karl Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions" (1960), *Theological Investigations*, 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (London/Baltimore, MD: Darton, Longman & Todd / Helicon, 1966) 323-346.

reality of the Church and the significant obstacles that are to be found there to the incarnation or embodiment of the vision articulated.[9] Similarly, whilst ecumenism has made remarkable progress over the past forty years unpicking complex knots of doctrinal disagreement through a combination of clarifying and correcting historical and conceptual misunderstandings and demonstrating the deep compatibility of differing grammars and conceptual frameworks – indeed, shelves are groaning under the weight of tomes doing just this – the amount of actual change in the lives of the churches, the amount of actual effective ecclesial learning that has taken place at more than a notional or theoretical level, might be thought to be rather slim.

Hence it is that a key assumption at issue in Receptive Ecumenism concerns the need to go beyond asking the question as to what the traditions may with integrity theoretically learn from each other to asking as to what it is that prevents such learning actually taking place? In 1985 John Hull, Professor (now Emeritus) of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham, posed the question as to "What Prevents Adult Christians From Learning?"[10] Here the question is as to what prevents Christian churches from learning? What are the organizational, psychological, sociological and cultural bars to effective receptive learning taking place and how might these debilitating factors best be negotiated and navigated?

The associated image is of Receptive Ecumenism not simply as a matter of conceptual, theoretical re-imagining and re-description alone – vital though these be – but of transformative therapeutic diagnosis, analysis and ameliorative address. It is for this reason that alongside the predictable tranche of ecclesiologists, ecumenists and ecclesiastics, the originating January 2006 project in Receptive Ecumenism and the subsequent related major volume, included many with expertise in the aforementioned other disciplines. Following studies exploring, in turn, the basic strategy of Receptive Ecumenism and the fruitful possibilities for "Catholic Learning" from Catholicism's ecumenical others (ways in which Catholicism might be ecumenically re-imagined), were studies concerned to subject the cultural-organizational reality of Catholicism to the kind of rounded analysis here regarded as being required so that Receptive Ecumenism can indeed become the kind of genuinely transformative learning process envisaged.

9. See Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 25, 32-49.

10. John M. Hull, *What Prevents Adult Christians from Learning?* (London: SCM, 1985).

3. Is There Actually Anything that New about Receptive Ecumenism?

For all this trumpeting of Receptive Ecumenism as a distinctive new strategy for contemporary ecumenism, picking up a comment made *en passant* in the context of presenting the central idea – to the effect that Receptive Ecumenism "essentially seeks to draw out a value that has been at work, to some degree at least, in all good ecumenical encounter" – the question needs to be asked as to whether there is actually anything that new here and, if so, what exactly? After all, has not the idea of being open to learning and receiving from the separated Christian other been a feature of ecumenical thought and practice throughout? Was it not at the heart of Abbé Paul Courturier's visionary work?[11] Is it not presupposed in the bilateral and multilateral processes and the relationships of trust and mutual openness that makes their work possible?[12] Indeed, do not some of the more recent bilateral documents explicitly acknowledge the need for a mutual receptive learning that goes beyond the concern to bring differing languages into reconciled conversation, most notably *The Gift of Authority* of the second phase of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission and the most recent document of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, *The Grace Given You in Christ*?[13] Again, are the priorities of Receptive Ecumenism not in evidence in exemplary form in Pope John Paul II's remarkable call in his 1995 encyclical letter, *Ut Unum Sint*, for theologians and leaders in other traditions to help re-imagine the papacy so that it might once again be

11. See *The Unity of Christians: the Vision of Paul Couturier. A Special Edition of* The Messenger of the Catholic League, ed. Mark Woodruff (London: The Catholic League, 2003); Geoffrey Curtis, C.R., *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ* (London: SCM, 1964); *Oecuménisme Spirituel, les écrits de l'Abbé Paul Couturier*, présentation et commentaire de Maurice Villain, Église vivante (Tournai: Casterman, 1963).

12. See Mary Tanner, OBE, "From Vatican II to Mississauga: Lessons in Receptive Ecumenical Learning from the Anglican-Roman Catholic Bilateral Dialogue Process," *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 258-270; also Donald Bolen, "Receptive Ecumenism and Recent Initiatives in the Catholic Church's Dialogues with the Anglican Communion and the World Methodist Council," *ibid.*, 271-284.

13. ARCIC II, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III* (London: Church House Publishing/CTS, 1999 [1998]); Joint International Commission for Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church* (Lake Junaluska, NC: World Methodist Council, 2006).

the focus of communion rather than the continuing cause of division it currently is?[14] And similarly, as already noted, does it not resonate with the call expressed by Cardinal Walter Kasper and Archbishop Rowan Williams for a "Spiritual Ecumenism"?

All of this is true but the distinctiveness of Receptive Ecumenism lies not in its having developed the basic idea of ecumenical learning and receptiveness *de nuovo* but in the way in which it takes this admirable disposition and accords a strategic, programmatic priority to it in the hope of releasing its potential and shaping influence in ways previously not achieved. Here the concern is less to suggest that alongside the more familiar concerns for increased understanding, clarification of misunderstandings and the unpicking of historic knots of disagreement, ecumenists should also be receptive to what they and their tradition might learn from the other. Rather more, it is to suggest that the first and dominant concern in the current phase of ecumenical engagement should be to ask after how the difficulties in one's own tradition might, with integrity, be creatively addressed and one's tradition accordingly re-imagined in the light of learning from one's significant ecumenical others. The conviction is that this is an ecumenically significant question with great transformative potential that can continue to be asked even when there is no realistic chance of coming to closer, programmed agreement with the other on particular points.

That is, somewhat in contrast both to Faith and Order and Life and Works forms of ecumenism, the primary aim of Receptive Ecumenism is to ask neither how the churches might work more effectively together (the traditional Life and Works concern), nor how they might come to a common mind on disputed matters (the traditional Faith and Order concern). Whilst each of these might be viewed as potential happy by-products of Receptive Ecumenism, here the primary aim is about promoting growth *within* each of the traditions rather than, directly at least, *between* them. As such, Receptive Ecumenism represents a strategy aimed not, in the first instance at least, at *overcoming* difference, nor at finding common middle ground *between* the traditions, but at seeking to promote learning precisely *in face of* and *across* continuing difference (continuing for the medium-term at least) and in such a way as implies not the forsaking and diminishing of diverse particular identities but their intensification and enrichment. With this, as the previous section sought to express, Receptive Ecumenism is also distinguished by the level of

14. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint: Encyclical Letter on Commitment to Ecumenism* (25th May 1995) (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1995) §§95-96.

diagnostic, therapeutic attention accorded to the various non-explicitly theological factors that militate against real receptive learning being achieved in any given context.

4. Does Receptive Ecumenism Imply a Criticism of Other Ecumenical Strategies?

Having established that there is something distinctive about Receptive Ecumenism, the question now needs to be turned around and it be asked whether Receptive Ecumenism implies a critical judgement on other ecumenical strategies? This is particularly the classical bilateral and multilateral Faith and Order style strategy of seeking to overcome historic divisions by: (a) correcting misunderstandings and false perceptions; (b) clarifying how diverse conceptual and doctrinal frameworks – to alter the image, diverse doctrinal languages – are to be correctly understood in their respective contexts; and (c) indicating how such variant frameworks, or languages, can be compatible even when non-reducible to each other.

In response, let it be stated clearly that, in itself, no basic criticism at all is implied of this strategy. On the contrary, the quite remarkable gains in improved mutual understanding that have been thereby achieved over the past forty years, together with the transformed quality of relationships between the traditions that has been able to grow up alongside such developments are here recognised as being necessary pre-conditions for Receptive Ecumenism. Whilst Receptive Ecumenism neither requires nor aims at, in the first instance at least, agreement between the traditions, it does at least presuppose that the receiving tradition is well disposed to take the other seriously and is not labouring under debilitating and perception narrowing misunderstandings of the alternative cultural-linguistic system that is here being engaged.[15] So, there is no criticism implied here of the more familiar bilateral strategy of problem-solving and attempted resolution in itself; simply appreciation for all that it has achieved. Where criticism might be implied is in relation to the possible assumption that this is a total strategy, good for all times and complete unto itself.

In contrast, the undoubtedly highly successful problem-solving and agreement-building strategy of the bilaterals – still to run its course in many respects – is here regarded as limited in two key ways. Firstly, its undoubted timeliness and appropriateness for the period in which the separated traditions were moving from isolation and miscomprehension to attentive and charitable engagement is not taken to imply that it is equally fitting for all situations, particularly one wherein significantly increased levels of mutual understanding *of* the other, such as we now enjoy, have not led to commensurate increase in levels of real, practical learning *from* the other. Secondly, for all that is valuable about its clarity, significance and achievements, the characteristic bilateral aim for increased mutual understanding is regarded here as properly limited. The point is, as has been indicated, this is essentially a strategy for mediating and translating between differing, apparently conflicting, cultural-linguistic systems rather than, in itself, a strategy for self-consciously exploring how one such system might be enriched through creative appropriation of relevant aspects of another. Indeed, whilst this strategy has made great gains in overcoming prejudices and historic disagreements, if pursued in isolation it is in danger of simply leaving each tradition's own language and practice effectively unchanged even whilst promoting recognition that they do not need to be viewed as being utterly incommensurable with and contrary to those of other significant traditions.

In contrast, the strategy at issue in Receptive Ecumenism of a somewhat *ad hoc* yet systematically tested receptive learning process has, it is assumed, the potential to take each tradition with integrity to a different place than at present; one resulting from the creative expansion of current logic rather than its mere clarification, extrapolation and repetition. The point, for example, is not simply for Catholics and Lutherans to come to see that their own respective grammars of grace can be reconciled, even whilst allowing for differences of emphasis and perspective, but for each to be creatively challenged precisely by these significant differences; for each to go beyond satisfaction at being able to translate and transpose between their differing languages to asking what it might mean for various aspects of their own thought and practice more generally really to take seriously the depth grammar and deep implications of the other's differing perspective.

5. Where to Now with Receptive Ecumenism?

As has been noted, the originating project in Receptive Ecumenism associated with the Ushaw College colloquium in January 2006 and the

15. For the discussion of doctrinal systems in social-anthropological, cultural-linguistic categories – a discussion itself shaped by and in dialogue with a professional lifetime of ecumenical engagment – see, George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984).

subsequent related volume essentially had two aims: firstly, to introduce, test and assess the basic proposed strategy; secondly, reflecting both the self-critical principle of responsible initiative that lies at the heart of Receptive Ecumenism and the specificity of the host tradition, to illustrate and further test this general proposed strategy specifically in relation to the question as to what Roman Catholicism might for its own part fruitfully learn, with integrity, from its ecumenical others. As regards the way ahead beyond that first, deliberately contained, pilot project: quite apart from the aforementioned volume, the various launch events that are being organised to mark its publication, and the various other conferences and publications that have been stimulated by this originating project, including a good number of the essays in this volume,[16] there are effectively two formal successor projects currently running that seek to take the work of Receptive Ecumenism forwards in complementary ways.

The first is focussed on a second international conference that will take place from 11th-15th January 2009, again at Ushaw College, Durham and again jointly organised and hosted by Durham University's *Centre for Catholic Studies* and Ushaw College but in clear partnership with a number of ecclesial traditions, the Society for Ecumenical Studies and Churches Together in England. Where the first international conference was focussed on introducing the basic idea of Receptive Ecumenism and applying this strategy specifically in Catholicism's regard, the core twin aims of the 2009 international conference, reflected in the title, *Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Learning to Be Church Together*, are: firstly, to focus further attention on the work achieved in the first Receptive Ecumenism project in order to discuss, challenge and develop further the thinking it represents; (2) to move from a focus on "Catholic Learning" specifically (as in the January 2006 pilot project) to one on "Ecclesial Learning" more generally by inviting representatives of a broad range of ecclesial traditions to engage in the exercise of self-critical receptive ecclesial learning from their significant ecumenical others. Reflecting again the concern not just to theorise about Church but to diagnose and address problems in the actual lived structures, systems and practices of the churches, the total participant body will, as in January 2006, reflect a creative mix of ecclesiologists, ecumenists, ecclesiastics, social scientists, organizational experts and local church practitioners.

In turn, if the January 2006 project showed the need to move beyond inviting others to help re-imagine Catholicism through receptive

16. See n. 2 here.

ecumenical learning, to inviting them into the challenge and potential of their own receptive ecumenical learning (the key focus of the January 2009 international conference), it also highlighted the need for a subsequent, much more practically focussed and empirically driven project that would examine the actual relevance, viability and on-the-ground implications of Receptive Ecumenism at the level of local church life.[17] That is, for all the concern to engage with the Church as a living, breathing organizational reality, a life-world and not simply an idea, the analyses that were conducted at the January 2006 international colloquium inevitably operated at a somewhat academic and theorised level. To complement this, what was seen to be needed was a means of really testing this thinking in practice by getting into the life-blood and complex living realities of the local church.

The idea was accordingly born of a three-year (October 2007-October 2010) comparative research project involving as many of the churches of the North East of England as possible, in partnership with staff of Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion (both theologians and sociologists/anthropologists of religion), Durham Business School (organizational, human resource and financial experts), St John's College (practical theologians), the North East Institute for Christian Education (NEICE) and the various regional ecumenical officers and other local church practitioners. The purpose would be: (a) to identify and describe the diverse particular organizational and ecclesial cultures and practices of the participant traditions, and (b) to examine how respective specific difficulties in these various cultures and practices might fruitfully be addressed by learning from, or receiving of, examples of "best practice" in the other traditions. That is, continuing with the emphasis placed in the first project on the actual lived structures, systems and practices of the churches, the intention would be to use the practical and the organizational as portals into the theological rather than the other way around.

More specifically, it was envisaged that this *Regional Comparative Research Project in Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church*, as it came to be called, would unfold along three key trajectories of research, each with its own research team working in a co-ordinated yet relatively distinct fashion under the leadership of a recognised expert in the field.

17. "Local church" is here understood as embracing both the regional level of diocese, district or synod (as in Anglican and Catholic terminology) and the more immediate level of parish or congregation (as in Congregationalist terminology), together with the intermediate level of deanery or circuit (as is the focus of local Methodist ecclesial practice).

These trajectories and related research teams have become referred to as: *Governance and Finance*, *Leadership and Ministry*, and *Learning and Formation*. Where the first asks directly after the organizational cultures and systems of authority, accountability, strategic planning and finance operative in each tradition, the second asks after how these are administered, enabled, disabled and shaped by their cultures and practices of leadership. In turn, the third asks how the respective cultures and identities of the churches are nurtured, transmitted and shaped through the habits, practices, structures and strategies operative at various levels.

Following an initial mapping, on the basis of pertinent regional, national and, where relevant, international documentation and semi-formal conversations, of what is, at least in theory, currently happening in each of the participant traditions against these trajectories (Phase 1), the second phase of the project has, as from September 2008, been pursuing both a round of closer yet still generic "listening-in" exercises in each of the research teams,[18] combined with a series of more focussed case-study explorations in relation to specific issues, concerned to identify where the respective points of ability and dysfunction lie and, therefore, the potential loci for real receptive learning. Finally, this will be complemented by a series of generic case-studies in which the issue of declining numbers of clergy and associated alterations in the shape and patterns of ministry will be taken as a means explicitly to examine issues pertaining to all three research teams in concert (e.g. how are these emerging realities requiring fresh learning in relation to understandings and practices of ministry? How are they requiring fresh learning around decision making processes and shared responsibility? How are these processes of learning themselves being effected?).

The proposal rapidly won the firm support and full participation of: the Diocese of Durham, the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle, the Diocese of Newcastle, the Northern Baptist Association, the Northern Division of the Salvation Army, and the Northern Synod of the United Reformed Church. Reflecting this, North East Christian Churches Together (NECCT) hosted the public launch of the project in November 2007. This range and level of church partnership and access, combined with the range and level of expertise involved (three teams of 8-10 members, each including a mix of theologians, sociologists/anthropologists of religion, organizational, human resource and financial experts, ecumenical officers and local church personnel) make for a project with very great potential.

18. Where the Learning and Formation research team will do this through a "group listening audit" involving a representative number of group listening exercises in each tradition, the Governance and Finance team will do this through a representative number of formally structured and transcribed interviews. In turn, the Ministry and Leadership team will do this through questionnaire. Whilst each team will major on their own concerns, they will also include questions relating to the work of the other two teams in their own respective listening-in exercises. Given the variety of methodologies that are to be used, this will allow for significant triangulation and control checking across diverse modes of information gathering and diverse representative groups within any given tradition.

In terms of projected outcomes, academically it is anticipated that the project will contribute fresh knowledge and understanding in the fields of practical ecclesiology, ecumenism, and organisational studies more generally (through academic conference papers, published essays and two further major volumes deriving from the project). Ecclesially and perhaps more importantly, it is hoped that the project will identify a range of well thought-through and tested specific practical proposals for real receptive learning within the participant traditions (through a report) and, thereby, model a particular, creative way of living the contemporary ecumenical challenge that can be offered to the wider church through popular level articles, public talks, church conferences, and a proposed practical handbook for *Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church*.[19]

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19. For further information on the Receptive Ecumenism projects, see www.centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk.