

10-1-1976

## Confessional Identity and Christian Unity

Harding Meyer

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Meyer, Harding (1976) "Confessional Identity and Christian Unity," *Consensus*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol2/iss4/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# **CONFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

**AND**

# **CHRISTIAN UNITY**

*Harding Meyer*

It should not surprise us that an anti-confessional element played a dominant role in the origin and early development of the ecumenical movement, as also in the origin of the World Council of Churches. The existence of confessional churches, not only different but polemically separated from one another, constituted the scandal to be overcome. For many, confessionalism was the opposite of ecumenism or ecumenical fellowship. The suggestion of North American Lutherans to construct the World Council of Churches on the principle of confessional rather than geographical representation was like setting the fox to watch the geese on the ecumenical farm.

Although a formal compromise emerged at the founding of the WCC in Amsterdam, the anti- and transconfessional tendencies remained clearly evident

and revealed the difficulty of avoiding an antagonistic relationship between confessionalism and ecumenism. An issue of the magazine *Risk*, issued by the Youth Department of the WCC in 1966, clearly illustrates this tension. The cover picture shows the ecumenical ship enclosed in a firmly corked bottle. The inscription reads: "Confessional loyalty at any price?" The point clearly is: The ecumenical movement is to be freed by breaking confessional ties.

To be sure, there were always voices which clearly rejected this view of the issue as false, or at least as a fatal over-simplification. Already at the first World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne (1927), there were strong groups of participants who protested against this view. In opposition to it, it was asserted that confessionalism and ecumenism, confessional identity and Christian unity, are not mutually exclusive; that they are able to and in fact must work together.

This view, however, appeared by and large at the fringes of the ecumenical movement as manifested within the framework of the WCC; and this in spite of the fact that, e.g., Visser't Hooft in his report to the first WCC Assembly in Amsterdam had made the memorable statement: "The World Council can only be a living reality if it really expresses spiritual realities, and these are to be found, on the one hand, in the fidelity to the various confessions and, on the other, in the fidelity to the history, language or task of the churches in a particular nation or continent."

Only very recently, i.e., at the Nairobi Assembly, have the validity and legitimacy of both convictions been more or less officially recognized. The Report of Section V stated that, "Within the common commitment to unity, one can speak broadly of two tendencies which are not mutually exclusive. There are on the one hand those whose primary stress is upon the necessity for faithfulness to the truth as it has been confessed in the past and as it is embodied in the received traditions . . . There are others whose primary stress is upon faithfulness to the calling of the Church to be the sign, instrument, and foretaste of Christ's purpose to draw all people to himself . . . In many places united churches have been formed by the action of separated churches in surrendering their separate identities in order to become one. This surrender has been costly, but those who have experienced it testify that it has been the way to new life . . . These two ways of approaching unity must be complementary and not competitive."

The fact that within the WCC both tendencies or approaches are now being recognized as legitimate and not mutually exclusive is evidently due to some fundamental changes and to a learning process within the broader ecumenical movement. Several factors and insights have contributed to these changes of attitude and to this learning process. The most important factor is the greatly intensified ecumenical activity on the part of the world confessional families, including the Roman Catholic Church. In recent years a constantly broadening and deepening network, primarily of bilateral interconfessional dialogues, has developed. An abundance of results and voluminous documentation from these dialogues is already available. Some of these results represent ecumenical milestones for the relationship of confessional bodies to each other. Thus the

world confessional families and their member churches have taken over a prominent and, in some respects, a leading role in the ecumenical movement. This development was not only unexpected but previously regarded by many as unthinkable. Today confessional bodies have become an integral part of the ecumenical movement.

## CONFESSIONS AND THEIR ECUMENICAL AMBIVALENCE

In order to arrive at a constructive view of the relationship between confession and *ecumene* it is necessary to have a clear picture of what confessions are, and how they arose. Although a complete description cannot be given here, some pointed observations can open up certain perspectives and thus be of further help.

One must start with the realization that although not every church family possesses certain confessions in the sense of doctrinal confessional texts, they do possess a certain confessionality. That is to say, every church family lives with specific convictions which it maintains and confesses and which comprise the special features of its profile, the fundamental elements of its identity. For the sake of precision, one might call these convictions confessional assertions.

It is precisely in these confessional convictions or assertions that one finds the real problem for the development of a constructive relationship between confession and *ecumene*. Thus, the effort to bring confession and *ecumene* together will have to focus on these assertions.

In doing so, it becomes clear that these confessional assertions are in no way simply an ecumenical hindrance that must be eliminated. Rather, they reflect an unusual but very clear ecumenical ambivalence. On the one hand, because of their diversity, they seem to be a problem for Christian unity and to make it more difficult. On the other hand, they promote and demand Christian unity and community.

To explore this matter more fully, one should ask two questions:

1. What specifically constitutes the ecumenical barrier within the confessional assertions, and how can one properly overcome it?
2. To what extent do confessional assertions promote and demand Christian unity, and how can one properly make use of their ecumenical impetus?

## THE ECUMENICAL BARRIER IN CONFESSIONAL ASSERTIONS

First, regarding the divisive element within confessional assertions, there can be no doubt that at the origin of confessions and confessional assertions there is a

negative, delineating, even polemical motif at work. It is important, however, to identify and recognize more precisely the character, the meaning, the importance of these negations. It is of decisive importance that one differentiates between implicit demarcation and explicit condemnation. It is one thing if a confessional assertion includes a negative aspect. It is something quite different if this negative aspect is developed to the point of actual condemnation.

Confessional assertions are problematic for ecumenism precisely at this point. It is not that these assertions, as they were historically necessitated, have their negative side. The problem for ecumenism arises at the point where this negative side is developed into explicit condemnations and rejections. For at that point a crucial change occurs. A confessional difference is raised to the level where it separates churches from one another.

Explicit condemnations have, as we know, played a decisive role in the development and formation of the confessions, their identities, and their specific assertions. Assertions and corresponding condemnations, *affirmatio* and *condemnatio* often appear in such a close symbiosis that it seems as though the positive assertions cannot exist and continue without the negative condemnations. The central question is thus: Do confessional assertions and explicit condemnations belong together so inseparably that to preserve the assertion one must also hold to the corresponding condemnation? Or, can confessional assertions be freed from formal doctrinal condemnations without surrendering their confessional convictions? A connection between ecumenism and confessionalism is possible only if the latter is held. If the first position is maintained, ecumenical community would be possible only with the surrender of confessional assertion and identity.

To open up avenues for a possible solution, one could approach this problem from various perspectives. At this point, however, let me concentrate only on one argument, which seems to me to be the most important. It is important to realize that assertion on the one hand and condemnation on the other have different degrees of validity or application and to that extent are, in principle, on two different levels.

What is a condemnation as it is expressed in a formal *anathema sit* or a *demnamus*? As distinguished from a confessional assertion it is not an independent affirmation or conviction which can stand on its own, but has the character of an additional value judgement. It expresses the judgement that the difference between one's own assertion and a differing assertion is significant enough to divide the church or to break off fellowship. The condemnation, therefore, is an additional judgement concerning the divisive significance of the conflict between two assertions, a judgement that can change even if the assertions remain.

Furthermore, inasmuch as the actual intention of a condemnation is concerned with the question of church fellowship or separation, it is ultimately concerned with the concrete supporter or advocate of the false conviction or assertion. But if the ultimate concern of condemnations is the supporter and advocate of the false assertion, then the present-day validity of a condemnation depends on whether a

supporter of this false assertion exists today. An explicit condemnation expressed yesterday can be an irrelevant condemnation today. In this sense there can be no such thing as a doctrinal condemnation which is permanently valid, no *condemnatio perennis*. It is, rather, a matter of continually testing whether the other party still, in fact, maintains the rejected assertions or whether those rejected assertions have undergone corrections or interpretations which would make it impossible to repeat the former *anathema sit* or *damnamus*.

Thus the first problem is solved. We can hold to our confessional assertions and at the same time defuse or even retract the divisive condemnations connected with them. We can do it if we evaluate the conflict of the assertions differently than in the past, or if we recognize that the other party either no longer hold the rejected opinion or does so in a different manner than before. If this occurs, the confessional assertions even in their diversity no longer preclude church fellowship. That these are no sense purely theoretical and hypothetical considerations can be seen in the altered relationship between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches or between the Reformed and Lutheran Churches in Europe.

## UNITY EMPHASIS IN CONFSSIONAL ASSERTIONS

As stated earlier, the second aspect of ecumenical ambivalence of confessional assertions is that confessional assertions even in their diversity promote and demand Christian unity and ecumenical sharing. To what extent is this true and how can one properly make use of this ecumenical impetus of confessional assertions?

This question cannot be answered without asking about the origin of the various Christian confessions with their specific assertions. The origin of the confessions can be viewed from the different perspectives -- the historical and the theological.

Seen from an historical perspective, the confessions have been primarily conditioned, shaped, and created in the diversity of their assertions by the historical horizon and context. This means that confessional diversity -- in theology, worship, church order, piety, ethos -- corresponds to the diversity present in the created order and in historical phenomena -- the respective national, racial, or cultural environment, the epochs of intellectual history, the various basic types of human logic and mentality, the social and political circumstances, and other factors. The confessional differences would then ultimately be understood as constructions and manifestations of Christian faith conditioned by this historical environment.

It is certainly correct that the confessions have in large part an origin that can be dated and localized, and that they are influenced by this special situation of origin, by historical factors such as culture, race, *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age), politics, society, philosophy, etc. Nevertheless, an historical interpretation is at very important points not adequate to give a full understanding of the confessional phenomenon. Why? For the simple reason that such an interpretation is incapable of explaining convincingly why the confessions did not

remain limited to their original place and time of origin, but transcended them. For example, Roman Catholicism, the Anglican movement, the Reformation of Wittenberg or Geneva have not remained limited to Rome, England, Wittenberg, or Geneva respectively. Instead, they have been accepted in completely different historical, geographical, cultural, and national situations and relationships and have proved themselves relevant and valid.

We are thus brought back to the theological interpretation of the confessional phenomenon. Here also there are various forms of interpretation with different accents. Yet they all have in common the attempt to understand the number and variety of the confessions primarily from the perspective of the gospel, the revelation, the content of faith itself. One could refer, for example, to the richness of the experience of faith incapable of being captured in a single form already in the New Testament. Or, one could compare the variety of the confessions with the variety of gifts of the Spirit (*charismata*). Or, one could note that from the very beginning the revealed faith became incarnate in several so-called archetypal forms so that one has a pauline, a petrine, and a johannine form, or an abrahamic and a mosaic form.

Undoubtedly the theological attempts at interpretation do greater justice to the phenomenon of confessional diversity than any attempts which are historically or situationally determined. At least in principle, one could go along with these interpretations. The only disadvantage or shortcoming of these interpretative attempts is that they tend to see the existing variety of confessions too much as a variety disposed toward a constructive synthesis and harmonious interpretation. Thus they neglect the element of dynamic contrast and of mutual questioning F correction and challenge.

A proper attempt to anchor the differences between the confessions in the gospel itself has to proceed more strongly on the assumption that in the Christian faith, in the Christian message, and in Christian existence there are tensions that cannot be resolved unilaterally or be absorbed totally into a synthesis. Some of the basic tensions inherent to Christian faith itself are, e.g., the tension in the christological assertion "true God and true man," between God's Word as Law and Gospel, between faith and works, salvation and well-being, nature and grace, indicative and imperative, being justified and being sinner (*simul justus et peccator*), Spirit and Scripture, between church as an institution and as a pneumatic event.

Christian faith and Christian existence are not beyond but rather in the middle of these and other elemental tensions. And there can be no doubt that the differences between the confessions are intimately connected with the above named or similar elemental tensions within the Christian faith itself. It is not simply a case of the individual confessions being located at just one of the two juxtapositions and knowing nothing about or having eliminated the other. The confessional differences emerge within these fields of tension. They result from the fact that the two positions are related to one another in different ways. Insofar as the confessional differences emerge in the area between the positions, however, they will somehow be bracketed by them.

More thought needs to be given to such an interpretation of confessional differences. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the only truly satisfactory

interpretation of the confessions with their diverse assertions is one which is primarily theological.

Only a theological interpretation is able to explain why the confessions, originally bound to a specific time and place, could be accepted and affirmed in completely different times and places. Only a theological interpretation does justice to the universal and ecumenical impulse of the confessions; for only when the confessions, with their specific assertions, are anchored in the fundamentals of faith, in the gospel itself -- and not in past and limited historical situations -- can they justly make a universal and ecumenical claim and, as is clearly evident, actually realize this claim.

## CHRISTIAN UNITY AS CONFessionALLY STRUCTURED ECUMENICAL FELLOWSHIP

To summarize briefly the preceding and to carry the argument directly to the concluding point of this paper,

1. if confessional assertions can be freed from the usually concomitant divisive condemnations, and
2. if the various confessional assertions are rooted in the gospel itself, thereby possessing a universal-Christian impetus so that they promote and demand ecumenical fellowship,

then we must understand Christian fellowship in such a way that it includes confessional identities rather than abandoning them or melting them down; then it is valid to develop a concept of Christian unity which orients itself around this concept of fellowship. In fact, significant currents within the ecumenical movement today are clearly moving toward just such a view of Christian unity.

## CONCILIAR FELLOWSHIP

There is, for example, a concept of conciliar fellowship of churches, as has been recently evolved in the WCC, especially within the Commission on Faith and Order. This vision of a united church is characterized by its avoidance of a mono-lithic unity (Nairobi, Sect. II, Nr. 4) and its effort to combine unity and diversity. It would thus be conceivable that Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Lutheran, in short, all confessional churches could find their place in this conciliar fellowship.

On the other hand, one must recognize that this concept of unity, as described by the Commission on Faith and Order and now in Nairobi, seems precisely not to provide for this. Those churches that constitute the conciliar fellowship are local churches which are themselves truly unified. Or, as was stated at the meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order in Accra (1974), "Conciliar fellowship presupposes organic union."<sup>1</sup> Thus conciliar fellowship is possible only where confessional identities at the local level are already transcended and nullified by the creation of church unions and there are no longer any confessional churches. The concept of conciliar fellowship thus seems in essence

1. Accra 1974 (Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 27), page 67.

still to be influenced by the old anti-confessional view which tends to exclude any confessional structure from the envisioned ecumenical fellowship.

## RECONCILED DIVERSITY

The concept of unity or church fellowship worked out in the European Lutheran-Reformed conversations and in the "Leuenberger Konkordie" (Leuenberg Agreement), is quite a different matter. There one finds a concept of ecumenical fellowship in which the churches retain their confessional identity. Nevertheless, on the basis of a newly-won agreement in the understanding of the gospel and of the removal of earlier condemnations, they commit themselves to complete fellowship in proclamation, in eucharist, in the ecclesiastical office, in witness, and in service. One may still have significant reservations and questions about the "Leuenberg Agreement" and the "church fellowship" envisioned there. Yet here is a concept of Christian unity that seeks to hold together confessional identities and Christian unity, and it attempts to realize this in actual practice.

In the area of Catholic ecumenical thought and effort, a concept of unity is crystallizing which is also essentially along these lines. A resolution of the diocesan synod in the Federal Republic of Germany in December 1974 on the theme "Unity of the Church: The Ecumenical Goal" stated: "From the very beginning in the Church it has become clear that the fullness of the one faith will be developed in a variety of witnesses to faith." "Only where the unity of faith is understood and affirmed together with its diversity does the possibility arise of adequately positing the unity of the Church." Under the title "Diversity in Unity," the text states more precisely that in "an approaching and unifying of the churches and church families that have been separated up till now . . . it is possible not only to preserve their own traditions and richness but also to bring them into a greater whole . . . It is . . . justifiable to recognize in the variety of the many confessions a legitimate diversity, and to evaluate this positively. The synod hopes for a development in which previously divisive statements of opposition can be reduced and overcome and previously separated churches . . . can become representatives of this diversity in the one Church of Jesus Christ."

There has also been a strong echo to the remarks of Cardinal Willebrands, in which he took up and developed the thought that the various churches represent particular *typoi* which should not be abandoned but preserved in the community of the one church. He defines the concept *typos* as follows: "Where there is a long coherent tradition commanding men's love and loyalty, creating and sustaining a harmonious and organic whole out of complementary elements, each of which supports and strengthens the other, there you have the reality of a *typos*."<sup>2</sup> Elements which constitute a *typos* are: a characteristic theological method and approach, a characteristic liturgical expression, a specific spiritual and devotional tradition, a characteristic canonical discipline. "The life of the Church," says Willebrands, "needs a variety of *typoi* which would manifest the full Catholic and apostolic character of the one and holy Church."

The "Discussion paper on the ecumenical role of the World Confessional Families," worked out by the Conference of the Secretaries of the World

2. Cardinal Willebrands' address in Cambridge, England, January 18, 1970, in: *Documents on Anglican--Roman Catholic Relations*, 1972, page 39f.

Confessional Families in 1974, offers the most pregnant concept to date for characterizing a Christian unity in which the confessional identities are neither abandoned nor melted down, but rather remain preserved and standing in full fellowship with one another. It is the concept of reconciled diversity.

The concept of reconciled diversity has been welcomed as well as criticized. The critics see in this concept (for example during the meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order in Accra, 1974) nothing other than the "description of a continuing co-existence of separated confessional groups." Although this is a complete misunderstanding, it could serve to define the concept of reconciled diversity more clearly than was done in the Discussion Paper of the World Confessional Families.

## NATURE OF RECONCILED DIVERSITY

In defining more clearly what reconciled diversity should be, it is of primary importance to strengthen and emphasize the element of true reconciliation. Although this point needs to be developed further, the World Confessional Families' Discussion Paper does not neglect this aspect. It demands, e.g., fundamental acts of reconciliation such as: a covenant in which the partners bind themselves to each other, the mutual recognition of baptism, the establishment of eucharistic fellowship, the mutual recognition of ministries, the common witness and service to the world.

These classic acts of reconciliation belong to real and committed church fellowship and are also constitutive of a community of reconciled diversity.

But more important for the proper understanding of the concept of reconciled diversity is the discussion paper's strong emphasis that a reconciliation of the divided confessions is unthinkable without renewal and change in the various confessional identities themselves. Dialogue between the confessions which aims at reconciling them cannot leave them untouched. Reconciled diversity does not serve to further sanction the *status quo ante*. It is the fruit of a real renewal and change, which takes place not only "between" but, above all, "within" the individual confessions themselves.

What is involved here? Certainly not a simple levelling of confessional diversities. A reciprocal integration of the respective confessional peculiarities and convictions is also not involved. Neither corresponds to the idea of reconciled diversity. The concept involves a different approach than a process of progressive melting down.

Instead, the demand for change and renewal of confessional identity implied in the concept of reconciled diversity involves a process that one could paraphrase a redefinition of the confessions through dialogue. This redefinition would have a double thrust. It would be directed toward overcoming all those elements which distort, narrow, and exaggerate and which thereby make confessional diversities into divisive differences because they glossed over their legitimate and authentic form. It is precisely in the change and renewal realized in dialogue that the confessions recover their authentic form and become for each other legitimate

expressions of Christian faith, witness and life. This effects the reconciliation of divergences. It is not a reconciliation and fellowship gained through abandoning confessional identity or through mutual integration of confessional convictions. It is even less a case of togetherness based on mutual toleration or passive co-existence, which would not deserve the name of "reconciliation" or "fellowship." Rather, it is a matter of reconciliation and fellowship through a vigorous affirmation of the other party, precisely in his redefined and thus legitimate otherness.

If such reconciliation and fellowship are to attain concrete form in the life of the churches, they must be supported by particular acts of reconciliation, to which the classic acts of reconciliation mentioned in the World Confessional Families' Discussion Paper certainly belong. At the same time, however, acts of reconciliation will be necessary which are more specifically directed towards a fellowship of reconciled diversity and which correspond to this form. Among these I see the following as most important:

1. an affirmation that this fellowship is anchored in a common understanding of the gospel, thus making clear that the divergencies rest on a common and solid basis;
2. a theological explanation of why the existing divergencies represent legitimate expressions of Christian faith and church order and must therefore be held together in fellowship;
3. a statement that the condemnations expressed in the past no longer apply to the partner in his redefined identity; and finally
4. the creation in whatever form of an office or ministry with the special duty of maintaining this fellowship in diversity.

This concept of reconciled diversity which allows for diversity of confessional traditions and the respective ecclesiastical communities as bearers of these traditions should not be set as an alternative to the concept of conciliar fellowship. The difference between the two concepts will disappear to the degree that the idea of conciliar fellowship leaves room also for a diversity of confessional traditions and for ecclesiastic communities as bearers of such traditions. The result would be a vision of Christian unity in which the two tendencies within the ecumenical movement, referred to in the Nairobi Report, could well unite.