

Ecumenical Theological Education as a Practice of Peace

'We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.'¹

Clutching onto our gods and our Kingdoms is a significant feature of our contemporary world. Ironically Eliot's 'Kingdoms' has a capital K and his 'gods' a lower case g. Fundamentalism allied with nationalism, religion allied with power, and the alienation of 'god-clutching' peoples from one another deal out death everyday through the acts of governments, of resistance groups and of individuals.

Religion is complicit. In Britain, as I am sure in the US and Canada, strenuous efforts are made to distinguish between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims' – peace-loving citizens and terrorists – as there have been ever since I was a child in my community and church to distinguish between the 'Protestants' and 'Catholics' in N. Ireland and 'real Christians'. Given that I was brought up in a Protestant church that was easier to do with Catholics – the other dichotomy subtly turned into a more focused demonisation of Ian Paisley.

The bombings in London in July this year have raised the temperature of anti-Muslim feeling and rhetoric in Britain; they have also produced much 'anti-religious' rhetoric in our newspapers. Gary Day, on the faculty of English at De Montfort University, writes in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*

It's no good saying the terrorists were misguided about Islam because that implies there is a true interpretation of it. There isn't. The idea that there is a correct understanding of holy books has been a cause of wars over the centuries.²

¹ T.S. Eliot 'The Journey of the Magi' *Collected Poems 1909-1962* London: Faber and Faber 1963 p110

² Gary Day in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* London July 29th 2005 p13

The move which outlaws the violent understanding of religious texts is in essence the move which underpins that same understanding : 'we have the correct interpretation and we will exclude those who do not share it'. Exclusion itself by its very nature is part of the logic of violence.

Day's solution is that we should seek to understand more about religion and less about God. But that will not do. It is the same error in a different guise; it is to split that which cannot be split apart – the nature of the gods we believe in and the manner of our believing. A renewal of the Enlightenment project, for which Day explicitly calls, will not serve us well. Eliot is closer to the truth:

this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
...
I should be glad of another death.

Here the question of God is not sidestepped, but, in the reference to the death on the cross of the baby whom the Magi have made this difficult journey to see, the question of God is made central to the death of our own certainties and identities and to any possibility of rebirth. The kind of God we believe in is inextricably linked to how we will act, just as the actions we become involved with and committed to significantly determine what we believe about God. This paper offers a particular theological vision. It is a vision which embraces how we act as religious people, the kind of God witnessed to in those actions, and the contribution which ecumenical theological education can make to this vision.

The vision of God in Eliot's poem *The Journey of the Magi* is not of a God who is easy to understand. Indeed it is an account of the radical undermining of an easy understanding of God and of the cosy identification of God with our own 'Kingdoms'. This God, this Christ baby, open up the possibilities of new vision and new identity through the death of our comfort in the old dispensations.

Much religious belief and action in our contemporary world relies on the assertion of certainties and on retreat behind these, whether they be fundamentalist or liberal certainties. One alternative urged on us is to abandon religion and belief in God as altogether too dangerous and death dealing. A more sophisticated possibility involves various kinds of interreligious dialogue. It is in this last

context that I see ecumenical theological education as having a contribution to make to the practice of peace. The context of practice from which I write is predominantly intra Christian in its ecumenism. It is therefore a microcosmic practice of peace. It is no easier for that.

To travel with others in our search is uncomfortable and risky – our companions may seem as Eliot's camels 'galled, sore-footed, refractory'. To return to those who have not travelled with us brings unease and alienation. This is a parable of ecumenical theological education.

In my practice and writing I have developed the twin concepts of 'witness' and 'risk' to describe key elements of the journey. These indicate ways of living with one another and of giving voice to deeply held convictions, which do justice to provisionality as well as to conviction, and which value vulnerability as well as courage. They both reflect and nourish belief in a God who witnesses courageously to truth and who takes risks even unto death for love. (John 8: 13-20) In this spirit ecumenical theological education may be a

witness to a way of finding truth and justice in our contemporary world which is based on love and conflict resolution and not on mutual destruction. In other words, commitment to ecumenism is an outworking of a commitment to peace.³

As a teacher of pastoral and practical theology I am specifically interested in how we encourage these practices of witness and risk in our pedagogy, so that ecumenical theological education itself becomes a practice of peace.

Method

The core methodology of this paper is one of reflection on practice and performance in context. I will first lay out the key aspects of my context in which both pedagogical practice and reflection on that practice have recently taken place. I will then engage some of the important issues which arise out of this context and practice with theoretical perspectives which illumine them and which are illumined by them, while also locating the current state of reflection in relation to a vision for ecumenical theological education.

³ Zoë Bennett *Incorrigible Plurality: Teaching Pastoral Theology in an Ecumenical Context* Contact Pastoral Monograph No.14 2004 Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Trust p33

'Witness' and 'risk' are the themes which fire me. They are both core values of practice and core concepts of understanding. They are the lifeblood of the links I make between pedagogy, Christian action, and belief about God. Through these themes I will synthesise my reflections on ecumenical theological education as a practice of peace.

Context

The Cambridge Theological Federation, Cambridge UK, in which I have worked since 1990, comprises seven member institutions and two associate members: the Eastern Region Ministry Course (ecumenical), the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology (for Roman Catholic women), Ridley Hall (evangelical Anglican), Wesley House (Methodist), Westcott House (liberal-catholic Anglican), Westminster College (United Reformed Church), the Henry Martyn Centre (for the study of mission and world Christianity) and the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations. These institutions have been gradually coming together since 1972, the last one, the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, joined in 1997. A dominating dynamic of our working together is that the original participants were the four 'Protestant' residential colleges training people for ordained ministry and sponsored by their churches – Ridley, Westcott, Wesley and Westminster. As the Federation has come to include those who learn in a primarily dispersed mode, those who are lay and will remain so, and those who are Roman Catholic and Orthodox, our identity and our certainties have been changed and disturbed. As we have been certainties have been changed and disturbed. As we have been forced into new ways of learning and teaching, into new understandings of what Christian ministry and service may be about, and into facing the pain of no longer taking the Eucharist as a weekly sign of our 'unity' in Christian faith, we have had to ask in explicit ways what it is that holds us together at all. The painful realisation that it might in the end be pure pragmatism lurks uncomfortably and shamefully just beneath the surface.

'Learning Confidence in Difference': a consultation

As the Federation developed its vision over the past few years one of the tentative longer term possibilities which emerged was the hosting of an

international conference on a subject central to our life together. Out of this came the international consultation which was held in Cambridge under the auspices of the Federation in April 2005, entitled *Learning Confidence in Difference: Teaching Theology in an Ecumenical Context*. Forty five practitioners representing a wide range of ecclesial traditions and educational contexts came together for three days to share visions, practices and problems. I was deeply involved in this from start to finish as the chair of the organising committee.

Some of the most interesting questions concerning this consultation are to do with process. The history of its coming into being is germane to its significance; from conception to the final session process was integral to content. Who was there is as important as what they discussed. How they discussed it is as important as what conclusions they came to. I shall tell it, therefore, and reflect on it primarily as a process that happened, not as an account of conclusions and positions articulated. This reflects two important realities: the current state of the theoretical 'discipline' of ecumenical theological education, and the significance of process and reflection in its practice.

The title of the consultation was in itself a site of negotiation and potential conflict, and was seen as a public representation of what the Federation aims and stands for. As we have grown together as institutions, and particularly in the recent two years of intensive meetings between the Principals of our institutions to wrestle towards a common vision, those two words 'difference' and 'confidence' have become significant to us. We work on a model of both independence (sometimes fierce independence) and interdependence which is expressed in our vision statement as:

We value and respect both the independence and the interdependence of our constituent institutions.

In our life together we strive for both rootedness in our own tradition and experience and empathetic understanding of the traditions of others, characterised by mutual respect. Our vision is of 'roots down, walls down.

We see 'rooting ourselves firmly in our own traditions as a way of finding the security to be open with others'.⁴

Thus 'confidence in difference' expressed our positive valuation of our several identities, of our difference, and of the identities of others. It was quickly remarked, however, that this was an aspiration rather than an achieved ideal, and therefore that '*learning* confidence in difference' was a truer expression both of the Federation's life and of what we expected the consultation to address. The picture of a journey was embedded from the start. Difference, and the tension of difference, was also embedded from the start, as the question of what model of ecumenism we *ultimately* aspire to is already a contested issue among the ecclesial traditions represented in the Federation; do we prefer a model of visible, organic unity or a model of unity in reconciled diversity?⁵

As host to this consultation the Cambridge Theological Federation sought successfully to bring together representatives of all ecclesial traditions within its own body, not only from within itself but also from a wider constituency. There were Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Jewish, Methodist, Orthodox, Quaker and Reformed participants. This allowed us to develop, as one participant put it, a 'hermeneutic of ecumenical experience' as we worked on issues of theological education together. What we most desired was to gather together representatives who could articulate sensitively and creatively the inner dynamics and realities of their tradition in order to engage with one another at a deep and fruitful level. My own sense is that such people were indeed present but that we did not always engage in that way for at least two significant reasons. First, there are other dynamics and realities which affect us as well as those of our ecclesial traditions. Often contextual factors figured higher in our own consciousness as we had this opportunity to share with other practitioners. These concerned, for example, conflict of traditions, such as the significance of fundamentalisms to the ecumenical endeavour, or pedagogical issues, such as the tension between the educational context and the wider church environment. Second, we had not created an 'ideal speech situation'; there were dominant modes of discourse, the 'protestant' and the 'western' or 'northern', which did not allow everyone to speak

⁴ Bennett *Incorrigible Plurality* p5

⁵ See Michael Root 'Once More on the Unity We Seek: Testing Ecumenical Models', in J.Morris and N.Sagovsky (eds.) *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek* London: T&T Clark 2003

in the same way or to bring forth the inner realities of their tradition and context in the same way I quote with permission one participant who found herself in an 'alien' context: "My first response was to find myself very silent...I was drawn to a deep listening and a deep sense of sorrow...about the brokenness and pathologies of the body of Christ".

We decided from the outset to raise funds for bursaries to invite international participants, whom we selected via the World Council of Churches. The 'voices of the South' which we heard through our African participants became one of the most significant features of the consultation. Issues of economics, of poverty, of HIV/Aids and of interreligious violence raised our sights beyond the comparatively trivial obsessions of UK theological education – relationships with Higher Education and the Hind Report.⁶ We were, I believe in retrospect, not nearly bold enough or systematic enough in our attention to the need for such voices. Why, we were asked, did we have participants from Africa but not Asia? The answer is entirely pragmatic; those trusts which sponsored us specified the money was for African participants. If ecumenical theological education is to be a practice of peace we must pay much more systematic attention than we did to the global diversity of voices and contexts. To anticipate, one of the important future possibilities which we mooted at the end of our time together was a conference on the 'international trade in theological education'.

There is a sense in which this consultation 'Learning Confidence in Difference' was a marker of where commitment to and reflection on ecumenical theological education has arrived in the contemporary context. Much of the significant published work in this area has come through the context of the World Council of Churches. John Pobee's edited volume of conference proceedings, *Towards Viable Theological Education*⁷, is an important land mark in addressing within a global context financial and institutional issues as well as the place of those ecclesial traditions which may feel like 'outsiders' in the ecumenical movement, having a different relationship to the Enlightenment from mainstream western

⁶ A report on the structure and funding of ordination training in the Church of England, which has dominated the imaginations and working hours of many of us in theological education in the UK over the few years. *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* GS1496 London: Church House Publishing 2003

⁷ J. Pobee (ed.) *Towards Viable Theological Education* WCC: Geneva 1997

Protestantism.⁸ These issues are still hugely significant. Simon Oxley's *Creative Ecumenical Theological Education*⁹ has more recently helpfully addressed pedagogical issues in ecumenical theological education. He highlights the tension between learning *about* ecumenism, its principles and history, and the *ecumenical encounter* as a way of learning. Particularly important is his stress on reflection on our ecumenical encounters, without which they are merely exotic 'traveller's tales'. Ioan Sauca, of the WCC Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, who was sadly prevented by illness from attending the consultation, has written of the significance of 'the holistic and inclusive model of ecumenical formation' based on the interrelationship of academic study, research, life in community and shared spirituality at Bossey.¹⁰ WOCATI, the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions have also carried a torch for ecumenical theological education and at their conference in Chiangmai in 2002 addressed the issue of 'Theological education in a Post Modern Era'.¹¹

As we considered the part which the Cambridge Theological Federation could play in offering its experience into the debate and in hosting a conference on this topic, we at first aimed far too high. We aimed for a four day conference of up to a hundred and twenty participants. That conference never got off the ground, in spite of intense work and publicity. Our analysis of why this was so is instructive. Leaving aside organisational and operational issues, which were present, but not we believe determinative, we identified the following reasons for the failure of the larger enterprise: the difficulty of finding a constituency who were interested in all three issues - ecumenism, theology and education - the fact, confirmed by Nyambura Njoroge at the WCC, that there was no real network already in existence to draw on, the preoccupation in the UK of theological institutions in HE with survival and reorganisation, and the very ethos of the Federation itself in which primary loyalty and energy is in the main at institutional not federal level. These indicate the embryonic state of reflective work on ecumenical theological

⁸ See for example Cheryl Bridges-Johns' chapter in that volume, 'From Babel to Pentecost: The Renewal of Theological Education'.

⁹ S.Oxley *Creative Ecumenical Education: Learning From One Another* Geneva: WCC Publication 2002

¹⁰ I.Sauca 'The Holistic and Inclusive Model of Ecumenical Formation at Bossey: Academic Study and Research, Life in Community and Shared Spirituality', *Ecumenical Review* vol.57, no. 1 January 2005, pp66-81

¹¹ Proceedings of this conference may be accessed at <http://www.wocati.org>. See especially, for the theme of this paper, the papers by Jeremiah McCarthy and Hyacinthe Boone.

education. A large conference in which advanced work on ecumenical theological education is presented, representing 'theory, research approaches and educational practice'¹² is a dream for the future.

Reluctant to let go of our dream entirely, we reduced our time by a day, changed our programme to a more 'consultative' style and prepared to work with the twenty or so folk who had registered for the conference. We became, at the last minute, forty five, and so stretched our low key, conversational, open-agenda techniques of running the consultation to their limits.

In the event, the open-agenda, experientially-oriented, participant-centred method of proceeding worked extraordinarily well. Many adult educators who were present commented that they had benefited immensely from the bold embracing of precisely those adult education methods we so often extol and so rarely dare to use on ourselves in our professional gatherings. As we identified our agenda in consultation three key themes emerged – embedding ecumenicity, the internal and external challenges to ecumenicity, and the pedagogy of ecumenical theological education. We took these forward in discussion, weaving between small group conversations and plenary gatherings, with the committee staying behind for a long time each evening to pull together what had emerged from that day into a coherent way forward for the next. How the fruitfulness of this process, and its crucial role precisely in acting out the very processes of learning to live together which are at the heart of ecumenical theological education as a practice of peace, might relate to a conference of prepared papers developing theory and analysing practice, is a complex and vital question hanging over this work as we take it forward.

Some preliminary directions

For me this consultation was part of an ongoing process of thinking through what it means to teach theology, and in particular pastoral and practical theology, in an ecumenical context. I have been the Director of the Cambridge Theological

¹² Contrast Wiessner and Mezirow's description in Mezirow 2000 of the 'First National Conference on Transformative Learning' (p330) where the community of practice had become sufficiently sophisticated to aim for a 'continuing forum for a professional discourse on this topic', thus filling 'a void by providing a place for discourse among scholars and practitioners interested in transformative learning'.

Federation Masters Programme in Pastoral Theology since its inception in 1995, and through my teaching on this, especially of the core module in which we examine the history and methodology of pastoral and practical theology, have come face to face with the huge diversity in our pastoral practices and in our understanding of what counts as theology, let alone how to do it. This is represented by students and staff alike. The particular diversity of denominational or ecclesial tradition is interwoven with other diversities, for example of gender, ethnicity, nationality, language and liberal, radical or conservative theological commitment, so as to weave a complex pattern.

I began to explore some of these issues by giving a joint paper with a Romanian Orthodox student, Razvan Porumb, from my MA group, at the *British and Irish Association of Practical Theology* in July 2004. The occasion was as memorable for the uniqueness of the presence of an Orthodox at the gathering as it was for our paper. The paper itself explored the experience of the Orthodox coming into our Western mode of doing pastoral theology by critical correlation and conversation between theology and 'secular' disciplines, what we term so often 'theological reflection'. Memorably describing the module assignment as 'unsporting' Razvan examined critically both the assumptions of what was meant by pastoral and the taken-for-granted theological methodology.

In my monograph published in 2004 *'Incorrigible Plurality: Teaching Pastoral Theology in an Ecumenical Context'* I further examined this ecumenical diversity in the teaching context via a case study of a class-room conflict. It was here that the relevance of ecumenical theological education to practices of peace became increasingly apparent. The connections work at several levels. Foundational is the theological commitment to the priority of love.

At the heart of this is a belief that truth will come through the practices of charity. Truth is vital but always in this world provisional and eschatological. We seek it best together in the way of love in the here and now.¹³

From this follow for me two commitments. First, ecumenical working together is a way of witness in our contemporary world to truth, justice and peace; 'commitment

¹³ Bennett *Incorrigible Plurality* p33

to ecumenism is an outworking of commitment to peace.' (33) Second, if ecumenical learning is to be a practice of peace, the pedagogy of ecumenical theological education must be one in which diversity is valued, all voices are heard, in which therefore the skills of the educator include those of group work and conflict management, and which aims at transformative learning, the reshaping of premises, including *how* we know what we know,¹⁴ as part of understanding the other and living together in love.

In reflecting on what goes on in our ecumenically diverse class-rooms I have come to identify what I call 'the dialectic of trust and suspicion'. These are two modes of operation and attitude in respect of our inherited Christian traditions, corresponding to the twin poles of commitment and critique. Sometimes these are held in tension within one individual or group; sometimes one clearly has priority. In our context the evangelicals and the Orthodox display significant traits of commitment and trust towards their traditions, inhabiting and interpreting rather than embracing a hermeneutic of suspicion and critique. Liberal or radical Protestants gravitate more immediately towards suspicion, and the welcoming of secular disciplines which can critique the ideology of religion. Roman Catholics are more difficult to place, moving often between modes. All these are of course gross and highly contextual generalisations, but the reality of that dialectic between suspicion and trust, and its ability to polarise according to ecclesial tradition, is in practice a major feature of our class-rooms. It is given a powerful significance by the demands of the western Higher Education (or certainly the UK HE) establishment for criticality, analysis, evaluation and questioning. In the context of a higher education class-room in the UK the very structures of academic practice give greater value and power to the suspicion/critique pole. This is a serious challenge to ecumenical theological education as a practice of peace.

From this analysis of the dialectic of suspicion and trust, I have developed the concepts of 'witness' and risk' as key analytical tools, as well as key practical commitments, for ecumenical theological education.

Risk allows us to trust with due suspicion. It involves the kind of commitment and moving forward in faith which trust implies: an

¹⁴ See R.Kegan 'What "Form" Transforms? A Constructive-Developmental Approach to Transformative Learning', in J. Mezirow and Associates *Learning as Transformation*.

acknowledgement that all trust is fraught with the danger that we may have trusted inappropriately; that things may be more complicated than we at first believed.

Witness allows us to say what we have found to be the truth, to say it with personal conviction and commitment, but to say it without claiming that it is universal, full or incorrigible truth.¹⁵

In the year which has followed the publication of the monograph I have developed the thinking with two groups of practitioners: first, my own colleagues in teaching the MA, and second, my colleagues at the *Learning Confidence in Difference* consultation. For the remainder of this paper I want to pick up three themes which have in different ways figured in those discussions, and develop them further in the light of the commitment to witness and risk.

'Outside the Box'

The class-room does not exist in a vacuum. What is going on outside the 'box' of the class-room is enormously significant for what happens inside it. In relation to ecumenical theological education several particularly important factors can be identified.

There is the immediate institutional context. In the context of the Federation the pedagogical dynamics of any given class are affected by, for example, the fact that Anglicans comprise the greatest number of students and faculty, the international nature of the Orthodox student body, and the comparative scarcity of Catholic and Orthodox faculty, which is in itself connected to the wider question of how our institutions are financed.

Further there is the question of who is teaching and how the students may be differentially related to those teachers. My colleague Jane Leach has explored how as a Methodist presbyter she plays a particular role in relation to Methodist candidates for diaconal and presbyteral ministry – a role which brings power and authority as the possibility of being

¹⁵ Bennett *Incorrigible Plurality* p32

the focus for ambivalent feelings: heroine worship and over-identification with her is one response – “I want to be who you are.” Incredulity is another: “Who do you think you are?”.¹⁶

In the class room this relationship with the Methodist students is completely different from that with other students, who may not for example recognise her orders either because she is a woman, or a Methodist, or both. Factors strictly speaking extraneous to the class room ‘box’ determine significantly the learning which happens in it.

Ioan Sauca at Bossey has noted the crucial importance of the life of the Holy Spirit expressed through the unity of community, prayer and worship with learning, research and academic scholarship.

The Bossey academic model of ecumenical formation is particularly important today as it reaffirms the holistic nature of theology, rearticulates its intrinsic link with worship and spirituality and reintegrates it within the wider reality of the church as a whole and that of the world in which it lives.¹⁷

His argument is predicated on a holistic theology of the Spirit, rooted deeply in his own Orthodoxy in its expression but shared widely ecumenically. It is also confirmed by his experience working at Bossey, where the academic life is integrated with communal living and worship.

There is no doubt in my mind that this vision is also confirmed by both our experience in the Federation and by the experience brought and discussed by the participants at the consultation. We bring our wider ecclesial realities into the box of the class- room. Pedagogy in an ecumenical context can never ignore the pressures as well as the riches of our specific traditions which we bring into the class-room with us, and to which we will return, in some cases in capacities of authorised leadership and ministry. We are representatives as well as individuals.

¹⁶ J Leach and MS Paterson ‘Surfing the Waves: formation for ministry in the Christian Tradition revisited’ in *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 1.1 2004 p10

¹⁷ Sauca ‘The Holistic and Inclusive Model...’ p

It is interesting to me how quickly the question of 'how ecumenical theological education relates to the specific ecclesial contexts which people come from and go back to' very quickly becomes linked with the question of worshipping together and the inevitably related questions of ministry, Eucharist and ultimately visible unity. Sauca is clearly right pragmatically as well as theologically in his refusal to envisage an ecumenical pedagogy which bypasses the issues of worship. Here is a supremely important 'outside the box' question for would-be ecumenical educators.

These connections were made time and again from a wide diversity of contexts at the consultation. Liturgy and worship, along with issues of identity and of training, were the topics which emerged for treatment under our theme 'embedding ecumenicity'. Worship is the place where our identities are most at threat and most affirmed. The attempt to pray and worship together raises the most painful questions of boundaries, authority, our understanding of God, inclusion and exclusion. It is impossible to isolate our ecumenical pedagogy from these issues.

Furthermore, the question of our worship together, its frustrations, pain and possibilities, rapidly surfaced as a key item from the consultation to take forward into the Federation's agenda. Our class-rooms are constantly 'fraught with background' and in this freight our fortnightly attempts to worship together loom large.

That worship should be so integrally connected to our pedagogical practices of peace is supremely appropriate. I referred earlier to the words which became somewhat of a motto for the Federation as we struggled together to form our vision statement - 'roots down, walls down'. The consultation reaffirmed from a diversity of contexts the felt importance of security in our identity within our own ecclesial tradition as a basis for reaching out to others and for being challenged by the perspectives of others. I have found it helpful to view this through two of the models of learning articulated by Paul Nolan in his work on community relations education in Northern Ireland as part of the peace process there.¹⁸ 'Roots down' is represented by what he calls 'single identity work': 'before ethnic difference can be transcended it must first be asserted and legitimated - then and only then can the two cultures meet as equals'. 'Walls down' is represented by 'celebrating

¹⁸ P. Nolan 'Learning to Live Together: Community Relations in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* Vol 9 No 2 2003

cultural traditions', 'where each comes to appreciate the richness of each other's traditions'.

'Single identity work' enables us to 'face up to, inhabit and articulate responsibly our own identity' (Bennett 2004: 11). In short it enables us to take the risk of witnessing to that which has nourished, sustained and challenged us. 'Celebrating cultural diversity' becomes thus not a zero sum game in which celebration of one culture is the belittling of another, but a way of taking the risk of hearing the witness of others and rejoicing in it, and indeed taking the further risk of challenging it. There is a dialectical relationship between how the dynamics of this action of witness and risk are played out in the class-room and how they are played out in common prayer and worship together of which all ecumenical theological educators need to be aware.

In the foregoing discussion I have concentrated on the way in which our identities and our feelings which surface in worship are brought into the class-room. It may be argued, however, that the relationship between worship, learning and practices of peace is even more integral than such an analysis implies. If we take seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 5: 21-26 concerning leaving your gift at the altar and being reconciled, and in Matthew 18:15-20 concerning conflict resolution in the church, then we see that practices of peace are of the essence of ecclesial identity and worship, and the learning of them is of the essence of Christian discipleship.

Modes of discourse

Of the moments which stand out for me in the closing session of our consultation two pertain directly to how we speak with one another, to the modes of discourse appropriate to learning together ecumenically whether we are teachers or students of theology or both. In the first, a participant spoke of 'argument as a mode of love'. In the second, one of those asked to give concluding reflections began with a long silence and a deep sigh. Both moments visibly and audibly moved us.

a) 'argument as a mode of love'

Argument, our participant urged, is a mode of love. This is because it demonstrates our willingness to abide in conversation with one another and not to give up on one another or run away.

The creation of safe space was a theme which had emerged over and over again in the consultation, and does so indeed in our life in the Federation. We cannot hope to witness to our own identity and understanding, or to take risks in listening to and accepting what others have to show and say to us, if we do not feel safe. For argument to be a mode of love and not a mode of destruction safe spaces are essential.

As teachers we need to create such spaces, institutionally and pedagogically. If ecumenical theological education is to be a practice of peace we need to create them intentionally, systematically, and we need to be trained in the skills so to do. I have already mentioned the skills of groupwork and conflict resolution. Our pedagogical methods must be participative; we need to attend to emotional as well as cognitive intelligence.¹⁹ We need to create class-room spaces in which we may reflect on the realities and the discoveries of ecumenical encounter and argument. Above all we need to learn for ourselves what it is to abide in argument for the sake of love.

b) 'silence and a sigh'

If it is difficult to abide in argument it is just as difficult to abide in silence. Holding the silence together, hearing the sigh, and not knowing what would break it, was an unnerving experience. Silence is testimony to the end of the road of speech, what cannot be said. Silence may be a negative sign of confusion and breakdown; it may also be a sign of the threshold of something new and greater than we had previously imagined – as is the silence of apophatic theology. Requiring 'the affirmation of not-knowing, of darkness, and of contradiction as essential components of mature faith, rather than its negation.'²⁰ A sigh may indicate the

¹⁹ See the paper given by Alison LeCornu at REA:APPRRE Denver 2004 'People's Ways of Believing: Learning Processes and Faith Outcomes'.

²⁰ Nicola Slee 'Apophatic Faithing in Women's Spirituality' *British Journal of Theological Education* Vol.11.2 February 2001 p33

presence of pain, or of a need to communicate the incommunicable (Romans 8: 26), or of the sharing of deep feelings.

Such silence and such sighing are another mode of discourse in ecumenical learning. They are an expression of brokenness and of the current impossibility of speech. They are an expression of the willingness to abide in spite of that brokenness and speechlessness. They need to be an integral part of our class-room discourse. To sigh and to hold the silence is a witness and is a risk.

There is, however, another kind of silence which is neither a witness nor a risk, and which has a negative import for ecumenical theological education as a practice of peace. That is the silence of the silenced, the sigh which no one hears, the silence which no one notices. In the arguments of the class-room dominant voices are heard, in all their multiple reasons for being dominant – reasons of gender, numerical superiority, perceived educational or social superiority, teacher-relatedness, exoticism, ideological fashionability, and a thousand other reasons from 'outside the box' of the class-room. The unnoticed silence of others is not a mode of discourse but a suppression of it.

Transformative learning

Ecumenical theological education has the potential to be a transformative form of education, involving both subjective and objective reframing.²¹ To be so it must move beyond learning 'about' other traditions, and beyond responding in empathetic engagement with other traditions, to transforming the very premises on which we 'know what we know'. Two features of transformative learning are illustrated by comments made during the consultation. The first pertains to those features of transformative learning which involve disorienting dilemmas, or some form of discontent shame, fear or pain. It can be expressed in the words of one participant 'pain alerts us to the need for action'. The second pertains to that element of transformative learning which explores 'new roles, relationships and actions' and which involves 'a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective'. (Mezirow 2000:22) As we talked about what happens when we move from the transforming environment of ecumenical experience and learning back to the more monolithic and less critical

²¹ J.Mezirow 'Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory', in Mezirow and Associates *Learning as Transformation* p22

environment of our traditional ecclesial communities, we recognised the sense of feeling 'uneasy in the old dispensation' and the feeling that we can never again be totally uncritical of our own tradition.

a) 'pain alerts us to the need for action'

The consultation took place in the run up to the meeting of the G8 nations in Scotland, a time when in the UK a large coalition of charities was running a campaign called 'Make Poverty History'. Those of us who supported this were wearing white wristbands with those words on them. On the first day of the consultation I overheard an African delegate say, 'I don't know how they think they are going to make poverty history'. It shocked me right out of my self-righteousness, let alone my political naivete. In this case the pain of others alerted me to the inadequacy of my position, although it didn't stop me wearing the armband, just made me see its own poverty. If ecumenical theological education is to be a practice of peace it will not be so by avoiding pain, but rather by allowing pain to be the agent of transformation of perspectives and hence actions.

We identified the pain of racial, denominational and gender division, of division at the Eucharist, of division between religions, of the division which poverty makes. One particular set of divisions proved instrumental in shaping intentions for the future, although time will yet tell whether we were sufficiently transformed to transform intention into action. At the final session Nyambura Njoroge of the Ecumenical Theological Education desk at the World Council of Churches, spoke of how encouraged she was that this consultation had happened and how important it would be to take forward the work. She articulated clearly the connections between ecumenism and economics, pointing out how the resources of the West need to be employed at a global ecumenical level. We had identified already some of the historical problems associated with theologians from the South being uprooted and trained out of their own context in Western institutions, without those contexts from which they came being acknowledged or valued. We now looked towards the possibility of a conference on 'the international trade in ecumenical theological education' which would explore all these issues and their interrelatedness. To do this would require a transformation of perspective on the part of people and institutions in the West, through recognition of the profoundly unsatisfactory nature of the *status quo*, and specifically of our current contributions to it.

b) 'uneasy in the old dispensation'

It was the use of this expression at the consultation which first alerted me to the relevance of *The Journey of the Magi* to our theme. While there is witness and risk involved in the journey to see the new baby, the journey towards conversion with the strangers who challenge us, there is also witness and risk involved in returning home as different people, 'no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation'.

Transformative learning puts us into a new place with a new way of seeing. How can that transformed perspective in turn transform the ecclesial contexts to which we 'return', whether after a consultation, or after two years in the Federation, or even after a single class? Will those who practise ecumenical learning be for ever uneasy 'with an alien people clutching their Gods'?

Conclusion

The substance of this paper has ended with a question mark. That is entirely appropriate. Its purpose has been to raise questions from practice and reflection and to offer suggestions for fruitful avenues of further enquiry and practical research. Such enquiry is not neutral but is intentional for peace. In a world which is in thrall to the rhetoric and the actions of those who would use religious belief to divide and to deal death, I suggest that theological and religious educators need to embrace the texts and practices of peace which can be found at the heart of Christianity, and to take the risk of witnessing to these through the method and the content of their teaching.

