

"TOWARDS <sup>COMMONNESS</sup> KOINONIA IN FAITH, LIFE AND WITNESS"

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I've been asked to comment on this Apr/92 "Draft of Working Document" of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order looking toward the 3-14 Aug 93 Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order

1 My copy is in English. Long experience of such documents has made me aware that it's an advantage to work on the original. I don't have the French, Spanish, or German texts, & don't know which was the original (so, which three are translations). Of course the Commission approved all four texts, as usual. But critical commentation requires working on the original text.

Why is that important? Because a document's original language-world was the mind-set of the original author. Eg, I don't know what "koinonia" means in the original author's language-world. Note:

2 The English text (p.9 & passim) has "koinonia, i.e. participation, partaking, sharing, fellowship, community, communion." While all these words are within the semantic sphere of the N.T.'s use of *κοινωνία*, all of them, because of their connotations, miss expressing the word's semantic center, which I've printed above the word in this Thinksheet's title....The English text could have included these other words on the stem "commun-" (a Latinism meaning "a gift or service [shared] together"), but for various reasons none of them can compete with the semantic-center word "commonness": *commonty* (obsolete), *commonalty*, *commonality*, & *commonwealth*.

The earliest record of "commonness" is 1530, and for 1657 OED gives this instance: "Commonness is a communion between God and man." "-ness" is a low-key converter of the adj. "common" to an abstract noun, & the correspondingly low-key "-ia" gives us the abstract noun "koinonia," which the document tries unsuccessfully not to translate (as it's a loanword in English, as in rabb. Heb.-Aram.). Problem: "Koinonia" is technical loanword as difficult to make common as is, from Hebrew, "shalom." We'd like important words from the biblical languages to catch on more among Christian folk, but unfortunately they serve more to impede than to enrich communication. Obviously, I'd like "commonness" to catch on more as the basic tr. of "koinonia." I mustn't take time-space to illustrate its value in translating many passages in early Christian Greek, but I must remark that the lexicons do not help my cause: English-language custom has been to use other words than the semantic-center word "commonness." Custom, however, is no excuse when it's possible, with a well-understood word, to come closer to the Bible's own word. But of course I'm not pushing literalism: often, depending on context, the word is best translated by "sharing,"\* "association," "communion," "fellowship," "close relationship," "generosity," "fellow-feeling," "altruism," "participation," "gift," "contribution," "cooperation," "companionship," "union," "society."....Both passive ("having a share") & active ("giving a share")....We should note also (eg, in Phil.4.15 & Gal.6.6) "reciprocity," "mutuality."

My **suggestion** is that the tonic (musical sense) of commonness be heard always inwardly, & often outwardly, as the WCC '93 theme is considered.

3 Why keep it ringing in inner/outer ear? Primarily because it reminds us of a passive fact (viz, that we have, by divine gift & inheritance, a commonness in faith, life, & witness) as we goal-oriented believers actively strive to increase our *Mitdasein*, our "being there together" with God in Christ in the Spirit in the church & in the world. This parallels an experience I sharply remember at WCC Oberlin '57 on the theme "The Nature of the Unity We Seek." By conference end we'd concluded we should first have conferenced on "The Nature of the Unity We Have." No matter the consequences & sequels, every ecumenical gathering at any level (local, county, state, nation, world) is a Christian experience in lived commonness & as such is a success from the first gavel. In moving from the elan of the common spirit to the complexities of the common tasks, we've all been always chastened. But also energized by the bracing experience of lived commonness, which is both the base line & the bottom line of any additional ecumenical achievements.

As the document is marked "Draft," I'll resist the temptation to edit....#s below are \$s.

¶2 of Preface: "the movement towards visible unity." When last summer my mother-in-law's tribe gathered for the first time in 40 years, that was visible unity: every WCC conference is visible unity, as every meeting of the UC general assembly is visible unity. The Spirit's centripetal force draws (1) the world together by general grace & (2) the church together by special grace....The document fails (1) to spell out "visible unity" & (2) to interdefine "koinonia" & "visible unity" (with the result that each expands variously to engulf the other, a poetic dynamic that leaves the heart at peace & the mind confused).

That poetic dynamic delights ecumenists (tightrope walkers avoiding nonbiblical abstraction & postbiblical precision), & I'm somewhat sympathetic with their linguistic-political task: they must speak/write in **ecumene**. But as a genre of literature, their stuff--unlike risk-taking theological writing--has a soporific effect on me.

ILLUSTRATION: In a WCC gathering (Oberlin '57), Gene Blake (Jim Pike being the other founder of COCU), in plenum called my local-ecumene design ("Unity Through Community," 8 May 57 CHRISTIAN CENTURY) a "monstrosity." When I confronted him after the meeting, he scaled down his statement: "I meant," he said, "an administrative monstrosity," meaning that denominational execs would have trouble with the emerging local forms of unity.

You'll not miss the IRONY here: Gene & Jim wanted visible unity, but top down (which always & unavoidably coerces to uniformity by the inner logic of the catholicizing tendency), not bottom up. As acting president of the Illinois Council of Churches, & as the International Council of Community Churches' representative to the conference, I was preaching the **local ecumene**, viz that the ecumenical focus should be on (to use a familiar ecumenical phrase) "all God's people in one place": God's preferential option for the local. While this localism has limitations & needs checks, they are easier to manage than those of top-down globalism.

Gene & Jim's original merger pipedream had to be surrendered as (yes) a monstrosity, & taking its place is COCU's new definition of unity as organic-emerging (not organizational-designed), signaled by the phrase "covenant communion" (CHURCHES IN COVENANT COMMUNION: THE CHURCH OF CHRIST UNITING [COCU/89]). The essence of my argument was & is that we can more easily & fruitfully, & less dangerously, act our way locally, than think our way translocally, into unity: when we will to be together in local mission & come together to pray that the Spirit purify & empower our vision, theology & ministry will take form from, & help shape, the local mission, which in turn will provide heuristic processes & forms toward translocal commonness (koinonia). I was happy to note that the revised version of COCU does take the local more seriously; eg CCC.31: "to live and act as one covenant communion in that place."

5. Vat.II's Decree on Ecumenism is a huge new ecumenical fact. Jn.XXIII appointed Cardinal Bea as his man for the widening meaning of "catholic," & a few weeks later B. showed me his almost bare new office & said "This is what the Pope thinks of ecumenism!" But one of the resulting HOT BUTTONS is the substantive conflict between WCC's "integrity of creation" & the RCC's official condemnation of barrier (mechanical or chemical) contraception & abortion. Yes, population decreases as prosperity increases. But this statistical fact is small comfort: (1) the biosphere would be irreparably damaged during the long wait till the whole world is materially prosperous; (2) earth's resources are inadequate to make every culture prosperous enough for the shut-off valve to function. Conclusion: In the name of God, humanity, & the creation, the **RCC** must be condemned for refusing to see that "time has made ancient good uncouth." As many churches as will should join with secular forces in this condemnation. If any significant numbers of WCC churches have the wisdom & courage to do this, what will become of Jn.XXIII's ecumenical initiative? It's a double matter of life & d., viz of the fetus & of the biosphere. The defense of the fetus against the biosphere is not just wrong, it's evil. We who so believe are right & should pray that they who disagree with us will repent. But we/they is ecumenical poison! Too bad, then, for ecumenicity: there are more important things. And the more important things have a direct bearing on whether the world believes: if Christians are united on something wrong, it reverses Jn.17.21: the more we are together, the less inclined will the world be to believe!

7. Our Faith's vitality, psychosocially viewed, derives from the **homeostasis** of two complementary principles, viz systolic-contractive-"catholic"-unitive taking institutional forms & diastolic - expansive-"protestant"-divisive outbreaks of spirit from form. (Eg, the ever growing pentecostalism vs. RCC in Iberian America.) The more "visible unity" the ecumenical movement manages, the more will be the compensatory outbreaks which RCC theology traditionally called "enthusiasm." Ya can't win fur losin'. If "visible unity" were to win, the result would not be "that the world believe" but that the church die. I'm for commonness (koinonia), but "visible unity" is a crock of bureaucratic ecumaniacs.

8. Yes, let's have less of the WCC as a sort of UN at prayer. It's politicization has been self-defeating. It does indeed need to "refocus...around a renewed ecumenical vision." And the document is a step in that direction--faithful to the Tradition & open to the Lord's call through the cries & joys of our radically altered world.

10. Drop "entirely" in "entirely respectful of the diversity of persons, races and cultures." There's so much out there I can't respect. Eg, Black-African female circumcision. I need a single-line veto.

17. "Katholou" (which should not be capitalized) is an adv. & does not mean "fulness." Greek words for fulness are based on two other stems (πληρ- & περισσ-).

33. "uncontrolled diversity"? A coercive-catholicizing participle! Let the Spirit control!

39 & 43. The sacraments do not "actualize," they only "realize," make real to the believers.

45. "the ordination of women." HOT BUTTON! I can't accommodate resistance to this early Christian practice. The arguments against women's ordination are only of the traditions, not of the Tradition; & their undertone is the denigration of women that corrupts sex & the family.

51. "differently abled" is a bad joke we disabled resent. I'm blind in one eye: that's not just different!

62. "illegitimate diversity." Watch that!

66. "evangelism together." How many churches should there be? When soon after WWII I asked Bp. (of Berlin-Brandenburg) Kurt Scharf how many Germanies there should be, he said "Never fewer than three."

94. "so that the world may believe": purpose or result? Ecumenism is tempted to overread Jn.17.21, as though there was only one Christianity in the NT under the one Lord.