

# Report

## **The Teachers and Witnesses of the Early Church: a common source of authority, variously received?**

1st-6th September 2008 in Cambridge, United Kingdom

Twenty four participants gathered at Westminster College in Cambridge to engage in the first of a series of consultations under the title of Tradition and traditions. The aim of the meeting was to build on the work begun by the WCC in the 1960s and, by paying particular attention to the teachers and witnesses of the early Church, to explore further the possibility of discovering, re-discovering or re-receiving some particular sources of authority which might help us together on the way to the unity of the Church.

We were glad to be made welcome at Westminster College, a centre for learning within the United Reformed Church and the home of many important historic documents and treasures, and also to explore the context of Cambridge itself in which theological education for ministry is carried out in a throughgoing ecumenical way.

The participants came from a wide diversity of tradition, of context and of background. We achieved a good balance of men and women, of lay and ordained, of language groups, continents and traditions. We were glad to welcome three younger theologians. We gathered to listen attentively to one another, to hear how the witnesses of the early Church are received within our different traditions and what kind of authority they have among each of us. We heard papers and responses in plenary and we spent time in small groups reflecting deeply on questions of authority and tradition.

It was said by many participants that this consultation had a remarkable quality, and that many were both moved and fascinated by the depth and openness of the discussion. We listened carefully. We reflected prayerfully. We believed that the Holy Spirit was with us and among us. It is important to note that some of the participants came to discuss a well-loved subject of which they had much experience and to which they came with a ready facility and affection. Others came with many questions and even reservations about discussions of the early witnesses of the Church, fearing to be discomforted, and fearing that their own reservations would not be heard. But, it would be no overstatement to say that, for many who attended, this consultation was a kind of critical moment, either in terms of ecumenical possibilities or of the rediscovery of rich sources of tradition. We could see that there were often gaps in understanding between us and a feeling sometimes of inhabiting different worlds, but there was much more often a sense of mutual recognition and affirmation and a growing awareness of the delight of exploring faith and theology ecumenically, rather than in our separated traditions. While we could name together the possible dangers inherent in studying texts from such times, we could also affirm together the significance of sharing together and listening carefully to texts which have shaped the life of the Church for centuries and through which God has been made known and the Scriptures illuminated. We urged each other to avoid the dangers of romanticising early witnesses and of reading them without a critical eye, but we also encouraged each other to believe that we cannot stand alone and in our own contemporary times in naming and living the faith. God has given us resources through the ages and we and the early witnesses to the faith belong together within the communion of saints.

We recognised that traditions of faith and witness are always being received and re-received among us, in all our churches, and that this is better done ecumenically as we grow in understanding of one another and in readiness both to receive and to give. We recognised that the creative, but often uncomfortable, question about the relationship between Tradition and traditions is not only one for us in the churches, but is also one which haunts our post-modern world in many places. In a world often made lonely and insecure as some simply turn from the

witnesses of earlier times, how is it possible for all people to draw from the deep wells of tradition, while also being open to the Holy Spirit in new times? In a world in which varieties of fundamentalism are sometimes a chosen response to the challenges of modernity, how can the Church bear witness to the strength and possibilities of early witnesses while also exercising a critical hospitality to new insights?

There were some moments at the conference where we all agreed on what we hope were significant insights. We affirmed that the kind of traditions which God gives us are best described and understood as Living Tradition, that they are not ossified and static but that the dynamic energy of the Holy Spirit inhabits them. We recognised that for some the very word `tradition` may imply something of the past, something conservative and static, but we wanted to affirm an understanding of tradition as that which has an eschatological dimension, and filled with the Spirit. We also affirmed that the kind of authority which we believe God gives the teachers and witnesses of the early Church is not an authority rooted in something like a form of political power (*potestas*) which imposes itself from outside, but the kind of authority rooted in integrity and authenticity (*auctoritas*) which is compelling and draws us from within itself. For all of us, the authority of the teachers and witnesses of the early Church comes from this second understanding rather than the first. We rejoiced to learn from one another that this was so among us all.

### **Tradition and traditions**

Our consultation stood in succession to the insights of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal (1963) and to their further elaborations at Bristol (1967). Thus we continued to affirm the insights made at those meetings and we sought to build on what has already been achieved. We continued to affirm Scripture as the pre-eminent source of and witness to our common faith. But we were also glad to celebrate the ways in which the Tradition is carried to us through traditions such as those of the teachers and witnesses of the early Church. While reference to 'sola Scriptura' carries a vital affirmation of the centrality of Scripture, it should not be used to limit the ways in which the traditions we have inherited may bear witness to the Gospel. Sometimes important theological insights, being used as slogans, have hidden from view important sources of hope and truth.

We celebrated and affirmed the way in which a variety of hermeneutical keys for the interpretation of Scripture (such as: the entirety of Scripture, the incarnation, atonement and redemption, justification by faith, the message of the nearness of the kingdom of God, the ethical teaching of Jesus, what Scripture says to the individual under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the mind of the church, the faith as guarded by the Church), remain important and moreover, are no longer exclusive to any one community. *All* these hermeneutical keys enable us to learn of Christ. It was also a strong theme of the consultation that the experience of reading the teachers and witnesses of the early Church together strengthened a conviction among many that Christ as Person is the most important key to liturgical and personal reading of the Scriptures.

It was emphasized that the historical-critical method and other hermeneutical tools remain vital for underpinning the ways in which we speak of Tradition or traditions. The academy is, in our times, often a centre of ecumenical *rapprochement* and there was agreement that academic research is important for its correction of sometimes naïve confessional standpoints in the process for handing on traditions.

We reflected on the difference between our own times and those in which earlier consultations on these themes did their work. The context in which we met has certainly changed radically since 1963, the year of the Montreal conference. In our times, as twin responses to the postmodern world, we face, on the one hand the rise of fundamentalist approaches to religious traditions (clinging on tight to traditions), but on the other the danger that we turn from

traditions altogether, let them go and forget our history and shared memory in a tragic kind of amnesia.

It was striking that, though we came from a wide range of traditions we found it possible to reach some unity, while resisting the temptations of either of these two dangers. Our Christian faith is found in the Scriptures received as Revelation and interpreted through our respective traditions. We diverge when we seek to judge whether any particular tradition preserves or develops the plenitude of the Tradition or orthodoxy of the faith. But we agree that the fathers and the mothers of the ancient Church were, each in their way and in the consensus which joins them together by the Tradition, at a given moment or throughout generations, the living witnesses of the faith in Christ lived within the Holy Spirit. It is in this way that they are for us teachers, elders, authorities or witness.

We have recognised that though most churches claim to pay attention to the authors of the patristic period this is not always carried through in practice. Further, in different periods of history such attention may signify different things, at one time being seen as a radical or reforming move, at another as a conservative one.

We noted that there is always a selectivity in the authors studied and the texts used by the churches. This led us to question the criteria by which we determine what in the texts has an authentic authority for the Church of all time. We have also noted that the work of the early teachers and witnesses has been received in a wide range of ways, not only in text but in oral tradition, liturgy, prayer and creed. These witnesses were formative in the understanding of the faith which has come down to us and whether we accept, modify or reject their work we should wrestle with it, critique it and to be challenged by it. We seek to hear within it the voice of the Holy Spirit which they heard and to which they bore witness not only in their words but in their lives.

Tradition is the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit leading us always back and towards the mind of Christ. “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” (Rev 4:8)

### **Hermeneutics of Ecumenical Re-reading**

In contemporary theological education there is a tendency to treat ‘the Fathers’ in courses on systematic or historic theology, and in relation to Christian doctrine. An important recovery would be also to read their preaching and teaching on the Scriptures. It is helpful to remind ourselves that the experience that there is a multitude of different ways to read the Scriptures lies deep within our commonly held traditions. Looking at how the early witnesses read Scripture helps us to see how very particular are the ways we have each learned to read. They help us to look again at what we are doing as we engage with a text. Their readings have an authority for us because of their earliness, and because of their strangeness to some of us. They do not so much interpret texts for us, but they may teach us how to read, and to read with faithfulness.

The early witnesses and teachers help us to understand our faith. If faith is not simply an individual affair, but shaped and shared within a community of understanding, then the early teachers are most definitely part of the community and, as first and early witnesses, even privileged members. They gave their lives often for their faith and gave us the traditions they inherited. So we should receive them, not uncritically, but with respect and desire. The church is the Body of Christ, a living community of earth and heaven. The early teachers and witnesses are part of that community. We must neither despise the past with the arrogance of modernity, nor ossify it as though nothing ever changes, but welcome our ancestors in the faith (our fathers and mothers in this sense) and listen to them. We are part of the body of Christ, which includes the early teachers as living members. They are important witnesses to God from times and situations very different from our own and their voices speak to us today.

For the understanding of who we are as Christians it is important to receive, re-receive and pass on the teachings of the Fathers with the faith of the early councils. This would shape an ecumenical Christian identity and contribute to a common vocabulary, grammar and syntax amongst the estranged churches, an essential prerequisite to bilateral and multilateral dialogue.

We were enabled to see, thanks to the study of the various routes of the patristic reception in our traditions, the new possibilities for understanding how the Holy Spirit has guided our churches and ecclesial communities. We know that the right teaching of the faith, a hermeneutical key making it possible to determine our fidelity to the gospel message, can take various forms according to the contexts and the levels of consciousness of Christian communities. This respect for the various ways in which the Spirit works encourages us to continue, each one where we are, the work of reception of the great doctrinal syntheses which made possible the living out of the evangelical kerygma.

There is not a single and synchronic reception of the Spirit in all places. Even inside each ecclesial tradition there can be a place for different practical applications of the apostolic and patristic heritage according to the various contexts in which different communities live. The ancient Church was conscious of this necessary diversity as the description of the various charisms of the Churches in the book of the Revelation shows. The richness of Christianity consists precisely in this exchange of gifts between communities living each in their own particular way their attachment to the Gospel. But, it is under this condition that the Church can also really actualize itself as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

### **Rediscovering Patristics as a Living Tradition**

The living Tradition is indeed a dynamic reception of the respective treasures of each confession. It is for each tradition to listen to the signs of the Spirit, in particular by a joint re-reading of certain teachers of the early Church, and initially those which we all esteem such as Irenaeus of Lyon, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom. But it would be advisable to widen this spectrum by integrating the great male and female figures of our respective traditions like John Wesley, Catherine Booth, Martin Luther King, or Thérèse of Lisieux. These figures are dear to us for many different reasons and in particular because they did not hesitate to engage with wisdom in popular debates or political issues concerning faith. This wider ecumenical reading would enable us to purify some accretions from the past unduly identified with the Tradition. This will also enable us to face together the challenges of our times. We understand, for example, that the ancient Church could not yet completely support the message of emancipation of slaves and the equal dignity of men and women brought by Jesus Christ.

We thoroughly discussed the issue of authority. We experience a crisis of authority in contemporary society and church. Many are seeking an authentic witness to the truth. Jesus taught “as one who had authority” (Matthew 7:29). The Christian tradition has always understood the authority of those who continue to teach and hand on his message as having authority – not in the sense of “power,” but in the sense of testifying with authenticity (*exousia*) and integrity. For this reason, the church has recognized as authoritative those early witnesses who teach in fidelity to the faith of the apostles, not only in their written works, but also through holiness of life. They are esteemed for their proclamation of the Word through the teaching of correct doctrine (*orthodoxy*) and the quality of their lives (*orthopraxis*). The harmony of their words and deeds allows them to speak even today with authority. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church has been led, at critical moments in the development of its understanding of the gospel, to recognize and receive their teaching as an expression of the common faith and mind of the church. Their insights, clarifications, and their penetration into the mystery of our common faith contribute to the authoritative action and proclamation of the people of God in the world today.

The authority of the mothers and fathers of the Church comes from their intimate

relationship with the scriptural witness, and is confirmed in their consensus with one another. Their very unity in diversity authenticates their authority. Behind, in and through this authority (*exousia*), we believe the Holy Spirit is active. The early authors were intimately connected with the life of the local churches as bishops, presbyters, and monastic women and men. As pastoral theologians, they offer to us a perspective on how to be rooted and faithful to the Gospel in times of crisis and transition. They demonstrate that biblical fidelity and authentic inculturation are not in opposition to one another.

A *consensus fidei* amongst divided Christians today will only be enhanced when we are in living consensus with our common parents in the faith from the earliest centuries. By listening to the Scriptures with our elders together, we learn to listen and speak to each other in our common heritage of language, grammar, and syntax. Such is part of the journey to the visible unity of the Church in one faith, and in one eucharistic fellowship, so that the world may believe. (cf. John 17:21)

A 're-discovery' of patristics as a truly living tradition will be a source of unity for the churches. We will need to listen carefully both to the authors themselves and to one another. We will need to read and rediscover patristic traditions which may be new or strange to some of us and not simply proof text them to defend our existing traditions. As living traditions are challenging and growing there is need to learn from those who have been accepted and affirmed by the *consensus fidei*, but also to listen again for the prophetic voices among the fathers and mothers. There is the need for re-reception and a critical reading of these authors and their texts. There is a place for both a 'hermeneutics of trust' and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.

The ancient authors and teachers of the faith remain a valuable source for understanding the meaning of the Word of God and for enlivening the life, prayer, and mission of the church today. At various times in history, each of our churches has lost sight of the rich treasure of their testimony for understanding our common faith and its potential to enliven our contemporary witness. Rather than translating the fathers into contemporary conceptions perhaps it is better to let them be strange for us first, so that they can speak their own wisdom to our times. What we do need to work at is what the study of the fathers has sometimes signalled to people in the church. At the time of the Reformation it meant renewal of the Church, going back to the sources and finding new life. For many now it implies an alignment with the past in order to conserve a static past today. We need to 'translate' what it means to study the Fathers and to revive a lively sense of the communion of saints. We also need to develop a confidence about engaging with early traditions and history which embraces honest, open and critical enquiry with a willingness to receive new things from what is old, a hermeneutic of suspicion as well as a hermeneutic of trust.

We identified two ways in which the early teachers of the church might be appropriated ecumenically today:

They speak to us of those things which are necessary for the existence and unity of the churches. In this sense we have to speak of "Tradition" with a capital "T" (*the paradosis, mashlmonutho*). They witness and testify to the unwritten tradition that even precedes the Christian scriptures. The canon of scriptures was itself delivered to us by early teachers of the church and they were those who formed the first Christian communities. They were also those who first engaged in the vital task of interpreting the Scriptures. We might differ among ourselves about some of the content of this oral Tradition, but we would all affirm that it was among the earliest of these teachers that it took shape.

We could find a greater sense of unity if we became more aware of and receptive to the collective memory of the early Christian communities, the memory that shaped the way these communities thought, lived, worshipped, and understood the Scriptures, the heart of the faith and the practice of the way of Christ.

### **Recommendations**

1. that in ecumenical gatherings whether at WCC or more locally, opportunities are taken when appropriate to read and study patristic texts together;
2. that there be an ongoing group for serious ecumenical study of major texts, communicating its conclusions to the churches.