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IN A DIFFERENT VIEW: FEMINIST CONTRIBUTION TO ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract

In ecumenical dialogue, we are witnessing a blurring of distinctions or crossing of boundaries. Ecumenical dialogue relates with the complex narratives of community life of the different churches in the world. This paper deals with the problematic of ecumenical dialogue by deriving ideas from feminist theories. Feminist theories have explored and proposed ideas on identity which we can use in ecumenical dialogue as a guidepost in relating with other churches or faiths. The discourse on identity is useful in positioning oneself in a dialogue that respects the difference or particularity of each church of faith. Churches should always recognize the limits of their reason and welcome self-critique in their knowledge. *Reflective solidarity* can be proposed as an appropriate way of dealing with the tension posed by ecumenical dialogue. Reflective solidarity is defined as a mutual expectation of the churches' responsible orientation to ecumenical movement. In line with hermeneutics of difference, reflective solidarity builds from ties created by difference.

Keywords: Dialogue, Diversity, Ecclesiology, Ecumenism, Feminism, Hermeneutics of Differences, Reflective Solidarity, Unity, World Council of Churches

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Introduction

*“Judgments must be made about differences, about whether, and how they might matter, but such judgments are temporary, fragile, even mad.”*¹

There has been an increasing interest in ecumenical dialogue. Even in the Catholic Church, the Vatican II documents have recognized the urgency of ecumenism in the life of the church.² Ecumenism has been considered a common calling of all the Christian churches. This calling is premised on God’s design for unity.³ From this viewpoint, ecumenism is goal-directed or end-oriented because of that purposive pursuit for unity. Its goal is the “visible unity of the churches” and “the ultimate unity of all [peoples]” in this one world.⁴ The “unity remains the formality in whose light other orientations are received and read.”⁵ Thus, the ‘essence’ of ecumenism is unity.

There has been a distinction made between the so-called “ad intra” and the ad extra” in ecumenism. As far as I am concerned, this simplistic distinction has been accepted and seldom been questioned. The assumption is that we can clearly demarcate the sphere of the essentially ecumenical and the essentially non-ecumenical. However, if we look closely at what are discussed in the ecumenical dialogue, we can hardly delineate between these two separate spheres since they intersect or overlap. In the Philippine ecumenical movements, for example, people gather not just for ecumenical prayers but also to pursue social justice. In this case, we interweave these two spheres. In other words, in ecumenical dialogue, we are witnessing a blurring of distinctions or crossing of boundaries. Ecumenical dialogue relates with the complex narratives of community life of the different churches in the world. This is an inevitable problematic in the present social condition of human life.

¹ Sara Ahmed, *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 197.

² Peter Huising & Knunt Wale, ed., “The Ecumenical Council - Its Significance in the Constitution of the Church,” *Religion in the Eighties*, in *Concilium*, no. 2 (1983).

³ Ecumenism has been linked with interreligious dialogue. This is known as “wider ecumenism.” According to Ariarajah, “the call for a wider-ecumenism is provoked, among other factors, by the impact of the several decades of interreligious relations. It is not a cry, as I have said, against Christian ecumenism, but a call for the recovery of the scope and the depth of what should really be encompassed in the term ecumenism.” Wesley Ariarajah, “Ecumenical Impact of Inter-religious Dialogue,” *The Ecumenical Review* 49, 2 (1997) 220.

⁴ Kuncheria Pathil, *Models in Ecumenical Dialogue*, Banglaore: Dharmaram Publications, 1981, 434.

⁵ Thomas Hughson, “Common Understanding of Ecumenism: A Present Need,” *The Ecumenical Review* 46, 3 (1993) 349.

In this paper, I shall deal with the problematic of ecumenical dialogue by deriving ideas from feminist theories. Feminist theories have explored and proposed ideas on identity which we can use in ecumenical dialogue as a guidepost in relating with other churches or faiths. The discourse on identity is useful in positioning oneself in a dialogue that respects the difference or particularity of each church of faith. Before we delve into the feminist alternative, we shall lay down the problematic aspects of the existing dominant ecumenism and discuss the hermeneutics of difference expounded by feminist theories. Thus, I shall concentrate on 1) the literalization of ecumenism, 2) the tension of the "one" and the "many" in ecumenical movement, 3) an alternative proposal of the "hermeneutics of difference," and 4) finally, a conclusion on reflective solidarity.

1. Literalization of Ecumenism

The goal of ecumenism is derived from the literal rendering of the root word of ecumenism – *oikos*. The *oikos* refers to the household or even to the whole-inhabited world. However, there are limits to 'literalization.' Along with B. Anderson's logic, I would say that this 'oikos' is rather an "imagined community."⁶ We imagine that the *oikos* means visible unity. However, we know that the members of the *oikos* would never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, not only because of geographical, but also because of sociological reasons. Yet, in the minds of the members of the ecumenical movement live the image of their visible unity.⁶ This is more of an ideal, that real; and that fully visible unity may be 'unpresentable.' In short, the *oikos* imagines itself to encompass the whole humankind, but, in fact, it is always limited and finite.

Furthermore, ecumenism may carry the traces of its patriarchal origin. In the biblical tradition, the *oikos* is under "the control of the father/husband/master."⁷ The man rules the whole household or even the whole-inhabited world. The *oikos* has been interpreted as "kyriarchal."⁸ Literalizing ecumenism can privilege men and legitimize the subordination of women. Ecumenism would then be counter-productive to women's quest for liberation. Furthermore, this literalization tends to move towards universalization. Universalization is a drive for 'identity.' Its effect has been the

⁶Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1991, 6-7.

⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6-7.

⁷Mary Rose D'Angelo, "'Abba' and 'Father': Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 3, 4 (1992) 625-6.

⁸Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1999.

subordination, elimination or dissolution of difference.⁹ Women are not just equal to men, but, more importantly, they are irreducibly different from them. In literalization, ecumenism tends to be caught within its restrictive 'religious vocabulary' that it can hardly be freed from it.

2. "One and Many" Tension

Ecumenism has confronted the ancient problem of the 'one and the many.' The one and the many has been the source of tension in ecumenical dialogue. Black aptly describes this tension: "just as it is difficult to reach consensus of what is meant by 'church unity' or 'Christian unity,' so it is also difficult to obtain agreement on what shall count as legitimate diversity within the church or the wider society."¹⁰ Attempts have been tried to reconcile the tension at least linguistically, by using expressions such as "unity amidst diversity," "diversity reconciled in unity," "full ecumenism and contextual ecumenism," etc. Considering this prevailing tension, ecumenical members have felt the need to confront it in the ecumenical movement. In the past, the ecumenical 'methods' employed were heavily theological, particularly, Christological. Christology seems to be the converging point of ecumenism. The reason is that all Christians confess Jesus Christ, the Lord. This common confession of Jesus Christ is called 'Tradition.'¹¹

However, there is still a problem with the notion of Tradition. Granted that all Christians confess Jesus Christ, there are still different "significances" of it. Considering the different social contexts where Christians are located, there are different reflections to this confession around the world. These reflections are expressed in their various theologies and practices. The problem has been remedied by making a distinction, at least in the Catholic circle, such as 'expression' (linguistic formulation) and 'substance' (the confession of faith) of Tradition. This distinction is traceable from a metaphysical dichotomy between 'substance' and 'accident' in

⁹We have ample historic events here. Modernity contributed significantly to the "Shoah." With its drive to universality, it eventually eliminated the Jews who represent alterity or otherness. Furthermore, globalization is a global hegemony of the west. Global Information is creating a dominant culture that would eventually destroy local cultures, especially the third world societies.

¹⁰Allan Black, "Ironies of Ecumenism," *The Ecumenical Review* 45, 4 (1993) 479.

¹¹For further reading, see, Alan Falconer, ed., "Towards a Hermeneutics for a Growing Koinonia, Appendix 2," in *Faith and Order in Moshi*, the 1996 Commission Meeting, Faith and Order Paper no. 177, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998, 264-282.

scholastic philosophy. Such distinction may be accepted and work temporarily, but we cannot remain in the metaphysical level. In the everyday ecclesial practices, such distinction is problematic and futile. The reason is not only because the distinction is artificial, but more significantly, because we cannot dissociate language (expression) from the interpretation of faith (substance). Language and faith implicate or even constitute each other.

Furthermore, the 'significances' of our faith can change. Historical exigencies compel these changes. For instance, due to the increasing underdevelopment in the Third World societies in 1960's, Christians began to engage in a theological reflection and came up with liberation theologies. Moreover, there may be some aspects of our confession that were overlooked, relegated or suppressed. Historical exigencies can challenge our dominant theologies. For example, in the 1980's, women became 'radically conscious' of their subordination in society, including in the church. Feminists began to challenge the dominant androcentric theologies. They started to be suspicious of the presuppositions of traditional theologies, and hence, they came up with feminist theologies.

Bearing this tension in mind, J.B. Banawiratma recognizes the different existing contexts around the world. Coming from Asian context, he favours a 'contextual ecumenism.' He argues that we should develop a "contextual unity," rather than "full unity."¹² However, he fails to clarify his notion about context. I conjecture that context is taken in its socio-geographical meaning. In this sense, context can mean the 'knowledge of the particular situation.' With contextual background, we can engage in a critical reflection by applying a reading to the situation.¹³ Thus, ecumenism is no longer goal-oriented towards full unity, but cognizant of the different contexts of the churches. However, context should not be imagined as harmoniously unified and integrated. Within a particular context, we still find multiple or even contradictory interpretations and we cannot just impose our particular reading or ideology. In fact, context is a site of contestation and struggle in various societies. Thus, there is always a need for openness to other interpretations and viewpoints. Interpretations are not innocent or neutral; they are coloured according to the lens used by the person. Privileging one

¹²J.B. Banawiratma, "A Vision of Ecumenical Unity and Mission," *Voices from the Third World* XX, 1 (June 1997) 115.

¹³For a detailed discussion of the different meanings of context, see Helen Longino, *Feminist Epistemology*, John Greco and Ernest Sosa, ed., Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, 339-41.

reading of a context would lead to the dogmatism of a dominant reading of the situation. We have to admit that these differences are, in many cases, irreducible. There is always a need for a mechanism for self-critique. We have to understand that whatever be that context, it is still discursively constituted. In short, the context is read from a particular ideology and we have to be suspicious of our presupposition and be open to a critique of ideology.¹⁴

In his paper "Hermeneutics of Unity," K. Raiser attempts to deal with the problem of the "one and the many."¹⁵ I summarize here his salient points. First, Raiser defines hermeneutics "as the recollection of meaning, and the constructing of coherence."¹⁶ He argues that "an hermeneutical effort is needed to show the underlying connection."¹⁷ Reading this part, the image that immediately comes to my mind is the 'puzzle-game.' In the puzzle-game, the player picks up the scattered pieces one by one, and fits them together in a configuration. Applied to ecumenism, the problem with 'coherence' is that, at the outset, it is already assumed, and therefore it is just discovered in the process. It seems to me that his argument is still linked with literalization because coherence is *a priori* represented in the mind. Going back to the analogy of the puzzle-game, coherence can be assumed by playing the rule of the game. The player knows that, by following the rules of the game, s/he can fit together the scattered pieces and form a complete unity.

Second, Raiser advocates "constructive dialogue" that "aims at increased understanding of the integrity of the other," without "having to dissolve the difference."¹⁸ He does not however elaborate how integrity and difference can be maintained. A crucial issue in ecumenical dialogue is the notion of 'self-identity' of each church. Self-identity has been considered as a social construction.¹⁹ According to this understanding, traditions of the institutional churches construct self-identity. This is, I think, a valid point. However, we should not end with the construction of self-identity. To confine

¹⁴I have in mind here the critical theories of the Frankfurt School of Ideology-critique, the post-structuralist deconstruction and the radical feminist hermeneutics of suspicion.

¹⁵Konrad Raiser, "Hermeneutics of Unity," in *Faith and Order in Moshi*, the 1996 Commission Meeting, Faith and Order Paper no. 177, Alan Falconer, ed., Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998, 115-124.

¹⁶Raiser, "Hermeneutics of Unity," 117.

¹⁷Raiser, "Hermeneutics of Unity," 124.

¹⁸Raiser, "Hermeneutics of Unity," 115.

¹⁹Reinhard Groscurth, "Conversion and Identity, The United Churches: Origins, Progress, Relationships," *The Ecumenical Review* 47, 4 (1995) 447.

oneself to social construction would make self-identity of the church a mere performance of traditions. By performance, we mean church members only reproduce their respective traditions. The institutional church expects each member to recite or mimic these traditions accordingly. Adopting this notion of self-identity would restrict our notion of self-identity. This particular understanding hinders the inspiration of the Spirit to each church and the human creativity of God's people. We should note that each church could also recreate or reinvent itself according to what it deems proper to itself. A church can resist some forms of traditions because according to its assessment they can retard or hinder the diversity of charisms in the churches. Furthermore, there is no single unified definition of self-identity of each church. In fact, there are multiple self-identity-conferring factors, such as religion, race, ethnicity, class, sex, lifestyle, language and ideology that can co-exist together in a single church. No one single factor is privileged among them. For example, A.M. Aagaard believes that one can be a Pentecostal and, at the same time, Evangelical. "But for me to say that I am an Evangelical is to say something different from saying that I am a Pentecostal."²⁰ She concludes that "while these worlds do intersect at points, they are not synonymous."²¹ With this realization, self-identity "makes us live with ambiguities."²²

Third, Raiser points out that the community has a "mutual accountability among the churches as together they verify the truth of their proclamation of the Gospel." In the World Council of Churches (WCC), the key issue is, in fact, ecclesiology.²³ Integral part of this accountability is the faithfulness to the gospel and commitment to renewal of each church. "Many of the most painful and perplexing matters that challenge us to clarify all ecumenical hermeneutics in the first place have to do with matters internal to churches."²⁴ Each church should recognize that a major obstacle to ecumenical dialogue has been its undemocratic structures. Thus, the urgent challenge to each church is to democratize its structures. We should understand that "church structures, including ecumenical structures, are

²⁰Anna Marie Aagaard, "Pluralism, Ambiguity and Dialogue," in *The Living Tradition, Towards an Ecumenical Hermeneutics of the Christian Tradition*, Anton Houtepen, ed., Utrecht: Interuniversitair Instituut voor Missiologie en Oecumenica, 1995, 172.

²¹Aagaard, "Pluralism, Ambiguity and Dialogue," 172.

²²Aagaard, "Pluralism, Ambiguity and Dialogue," 172.

²³Marlin Van Elderen, "Towards a Common Understanding and Vision," *The Ecumenical Review* 43, 1 (1991) 145.

²⁴Melanie May, "Ecumenical Hermeneutics: Working Principles Pondered," in *Faith and Order in Moshi*, the 1996 Commission Meeting, Faith and Order Paper no. 177, Alan Falconer, ed., Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998, 134.

provisional and relative."²⁵ We can change these structures conducive and relevant to ecumenical dialogue.

3. Hermeneutics of Difference

Christian unity has been likened to a *pilgrimage*. Like a pilgrimage, "churches in the ecumenical movement have joined together in an act of commitment (covenant) and are still seeking in faith the goal of visible unity of the church of Jesus Christ."²⁶ However, Black observes that "ecumenism has various inherent ironical or paradoxical aspects."²⁷ He argues that "the most fundamental irony of ecumenism is that although so many churches or denominations have professed a desire for Christian unity, so few have actually succeeded in overcoming the barriers to union."²⁸ With these ironies in ecumenism, I think we need to rethink the monolithic metaphor of a pilgrimage. Pilgrimage has been an ancient 'religious' practice in history. In our contemporary world, we cannot categorize each member of the ecumenical movement solely with the metaphor of a pilgrimage. We cannot impose an over-arching and all-encompassing metaphor for all the churches regardless of their existing differences. We need to expand our understanding of various situations of the churches on the globe. Due to the impact of globalization, in particular, the progress of science and technology, there co-exist multiple or, even, contradictory metaphors for the different churches in the world. Thus, aside from the pilgrim, we can add the metaphors of the *native*, the *nomad*, the *stranger*, the *tourist* and the *vagabond* together.²⁹ These metaphors express the different situations of churches in the world. In general, they imply the idea of a degree of mobility of the churches in a global scale unparalleled in history. Moreover, they imply an idiosyncratic and transient condition of the churches in the 'global village.' Different churches scattered around the globe occupy an unfixed location and flexible condition. Various social forces around, which are beyond any human or institutional control, affect the situations of the churches. The vast information or

²⁵Ans Van Der Bent, "A Renewed Ecumenical Movement," *The Ecumenical Review* 43, 2 (1991) 176.

²⁶Janet Crawford, "Pilgrimage: Towards an Ecumenical Understanding," *The Ecumenical Review* 45, 2 (1993) 207.

²⁷Alan Black, "Ironies of Ecumenism," *The Ecumenical Review* 45, 4 (1993) 479.

²⁸Black, "Ironies of Ecumenism," 479.

²⁹Zygmunt Bauman employs various metaphors in characterizing our postmodern social condition. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991; *Postmodernity and its Discontent*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997; *Globalization*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

communication technology defies any contextual, national or institutional borders of the churches. Unlike the situations of traditional churches, churches today are always on the move and never to arrive. The boundaries of each church and its ecumenical concern are being blurred, intersecting or even erased in the global situation.

However, these differences of the churches do not mean to say that each church becomes impenetrable and incommensurable. We always want to discover and to create relationship with the other. However, in the global village, each church can experience some sense of ambivalence or incongruence. Each church is neither a complete outsider, nor a complete insider in the ecumenical movement. There is always a feeling of estrangement in the midst of an ever-changing world. In the same manner, in an ecumenical dialogue, each church is neither a complete insider, nor a complete outsider. When each church becomes a complete insider, ecumenism becomes superfluous; or when each church becomes a complete outsider, it becomes impenetrable. Ecumenism becomes pointless. We need to recognize the enigma of the different churches, that would always keep us engaging into dialogue.

In the hermeneutics of difference, the starting point is not identity, but difference, not oneself, but the other. When our starting point is identity or oneself, we tend to look for our sameness or similarity, which is, in turn, our point of convergence and commonality. This particular understanding would put much pressure on people to forge convergence and commonality at all cost, which would subtly violate their existing differences. In the hermeneutics of difference, we are trying to move out from this ecumenical paradigm because we are avoiding a goal-orientation toward full unity. An important requirement is that each church is open and critical to each other. Churches come together to know each other, to discover one another, to converse with one another, to create relationship together. In the hermeneutics of difference, "to be ecumenical is to be permanently open to others in dialogue."³⁰ Churches use language in dialogue, and they come to listen to one another and learn from each other. Furthermore, they endeavour to enter into the world of the other. They will discover that the world of the other is replete with complex meaning. And "meaning is a matter of on-going negotiation, is struggled for and clarified in continuing dialogue."³¹

³⁰May, "Ecumenical Hermeneutics: Working Principles Pondered," 132.

³¹May, "Ecumenical Hermeneutics: Working Principles Pondered," 132.

4. Feminist Theories Applied in Ecumenism

There are numerous proposals from feminist scholars who have delved on the question of identity that we can apply in ecumenism. Contemporary feminist scholars generally endorse an identity equipped with an open and mobile subjectivity, not having a fixated or closed system defined by patriarchy, that provides them with an open space for transformation and allows them to imagine their possibilities. These feminist ideas can be used in ecumenism as we relate with other faiths or churches and engage in the world. In this sense, ecumenism is a continuing, not a finished, project of people who open themselves to the reality of relationship in the unfolding of the world.

4.1. Situated Knowledges³²

In ecumenical dialogue, ecumenical persons begin from the recognition that every church is different from each other. Each member acknowledges the fact that it is not completely familiar with the situation of other churches. There is always something to discover of the other. However, this is not to say that to engage in a dialogue, each member should leave behind his/her particular background; s/he still brings it along in dialogue. Each church does not lose or dissolve its particular self-identity. Without a background, a church cannot meaningfully interact with the other. Its being 'tabula rasa' hinders it to share itself with the other.

However, its openness to the other allows itself to learn from the experiences of the other. A church expands its horizons. When each church listens to the other, it comes to discover its difference, so that the interaction becomes mutually enriching. Each church becomes familiarized to one another. However, this familiarity is affinity, not identity. Furthermore, this opening does not merely mean expansion of horizon. Listening to the other can also interrogate other churches. When each church listens to the other, its own experience can be questioned. The question can come implicitly or explicitly. When a church compares itself with the other, it tends to weigh or evaluate itself. Each church reflects on its particular background. The interrogation can even be disturbing. Interrogation is important for self-critique. Each church discovers that its vision of reality is only partial and limited. This is precisely *situated knowledges*. Its being

³²Donna Haraway advances the epistemological notion of "situated knowledges." Situated knowledges emphasizes the embodiment of the knowing person. See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books, 1991, 183-202.

situated in a particular context limits its vision of reality. Each church realizes that it is not self-sufficient and all-knowing. It discovers that objectivity is not something “out there to see,” but rather it rests on its faithfulness and accountability in its subjective and inter-subjective relationship with the other. Each church has a standpoint. This standpoint is not something detached or separated from a church; it is inevitably attached or linked to a particular church. Owning this standpoint makes each church responsible or accountable to its partial or limited knowledge.

4.2. Mobile Subjectivities³³

Situatedness makes each church accept its location. Location is always finite and limited. Due to this location, vision is always partial and fragmented. The acceptance of this ‘situatedness’ allows itself to place and relate to the community. Each church realizes that within the community, it shares its partialities and limitations. It is in the intersubjective sharing of itself that it can enlarge or transcend its partial knowledge of reality. It discovers that there are many faces of reality or perspectives about a reality. It becomes humble in its disposition to the other and more open to the other. There are many things that each church can discover about the other and also recognize itself in relation with the other. Hence, “we do not make a wholesale absolutizing of our own” and, thereby, “making an idol out of our identity.”³⁴

Thus, when the different churches come together to relate their stories to one another, they actually listen and respond to ‘multiple voices.’ These multiple voices come “from outside the circle of one’s own identity, voices calling one to cross over the boundaries of one’s own experiences.”³⁵ Listening to multiple voices does not mean that each church also assumes multiple self-identities. It is only saying that each church can move from one standpoint to another. It does not stick to one and remains there. This would be self-defeating and counterproductive in ecumenical dialogue. By *mobile subjectivities*, the churches become flexible and willing to learn from one another, and, at the same time, unlearn their biases and prejudices inimical to

³³Kathy Ferguson theorizes the “mobile subjectivity.” Her basic notion is that subjectivity can relate and empathize with other subjectivities. See Kathy Ferguson, *The Woman Question, Feminist Theory, Vision of Subjectivity*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1993, 153-181.

³⁴Aagaard, “Pluralism, Ambiguity and Dialogue,” 174.

³⁵Dale Irvin, “Towards a Hermeneutics of Difference at the Crossroad of Ecumenics,” *The Ecumenical Review* 47, 4 (1995) 490.

ecumenical dialogue. Each church relates to multiple voices around it empathetically.

The hermeneutics of difference wants 'to address the imperative of the other.' Each church can enter into the other without being absorbed or imprisoned by it. It can enter into and move out from the other. It is capable of being moved, affected or touched by the other. Mobile subjectivities therefore compel

communities and persons of faith to be accountable to others beyond their own identities. Ecumenical persons are conscious of the multiple communities of Christian faith and identity that exist in the world today. They demonstrate a willingness to abandon the false security of their own self-identity, in order to cross over the boundaries of difference in a movement of metanoia.³⁶

4.3. Provisional Consensus³⁷

Ecumenical dialogue is not just about conversation where churches can talk and then part their ways. Members of an ecumenical dialogue can enter into convergence or consensus. The hermeneutics of difference accepts convergence or consensus. Churches may come together and agree on a particular issue. The point is that the convergence or consensus agreed upon does not assume a dogmatic status. In hermeneutics of difference, we avoid dogmatism. Dogmatism is the 'archenemy' of a genuine dialogue. Convergence or consensus is binding, but not forever. The reason is that the convergence or consensus arrived at happened or defined at a particular time. It means therefore that the arguments or evidences are based on the available or accessible reasons at that specific time. The consensus is impelled by that time and fixed on that time. The consensus arrived at is the best thing at that time. However, history continues to unfold, and its unfolding is unpredictable in many ways. It is possible that there are aspects that are overlooked, forgotten or suppressed at that time. The time will come when those overlooked, forgotten or suppressed are raised and people begin to question the convergence or consensus altogether. Thus, the *convergence* or *consensus is always provisional* in the sense that it can be recalled, revised, or amended.

³⁶Irvin, "Towards a Hermeneutics of Difference at the Crossroad of Ecumenics," 490.

³⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard speaks about "provisional consensus." His idea is postmodern since he rejects a grand narrative in our postmodern condition. Instead of a grand narrative, he favours a local narrative. People can still enter into a consensus, but the consensus agreed upon remains to be provisional. See Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition, Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

Churches are all affected by historical exigencies. Theological positions may emerge and become relevant. For example, the challenge of liberation theologies has affected many aspects of Christian praxis. Liberation theologies may have affected these convergence or consensus. The time will come when liberation theologies will be questioned. For instance, cosmic theologies have questioned the presuppositions and limitations of liberation theologies. Liberation theologies may have overlooked or side-tracked ecological consciousness because it has been heavily anthropocentric. Then the challenge of cosmic theologies may have a repercussion to the convergence or consensus. So, churches revise their convergence or consensus or even change it altogether. Thus, convergence or consensus is never final or conclusive. It will remain in so far as it is not yet falsified.

4.4. Contingent Foundations³⁸

The churches agree on a provisional consensus because they only have *contingent foundations*. Modernity is based on a stable foundation. This stable foundation compels people to anchor their positions on a fixed and unchanging ground. In modernity, the disengaged or autonomous reason is its stable foundation. The project of enlightenment is the emancipation of people from the grips of ignorance. However, evaluating the project of modernity, people have questioned this stable foundation. Its 'metanarrative' has created a totalizing and universalizing reason that eventually excludes and subjugates local and fragmented narratives. For example, postmodernist thinkers have questioned Marxism. Marxism rests on stable foundation of 'progress.' It privileges the communist party who is alleged to be working for the emancipation of the proletariat. Its vision is a utopia where the split between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is finally overcome with the triumph of the proletariat at the end. Furthermore, feminist thinkers have mounted their frontal attack to this stable foundation. They charge that the stable foundation is heavily androcentric. Androcentrism has privileged men and subordinated women.

³⁸Judith Butler reacts to both the modern and the postmodern discourses. She argues that we still need a foundation (modern discourse), we cannot allow the foundation to disappear (postmodern discourse). However, the foundation should be contingent because we need to subject the foundation to constant critique. See Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler & Joan W. Scott, ed., New York: Routledge, 1992.

Distinguishing 'Tradition' from 'traditions' does not settle the problematic tension. This distinction has been questioned because the boundaries between Tradition and traditions are intertwining and overlapping. As K.S. Lee points out, "Tradition cannot be captured by one theology."³⁹ Moreover, "[t]raditions are in the flux."⁴⁰ The differences contribute to the understanding of this Tradition. Churches have to consider these changes which are going on around them. What contingent foundation is avoiding is dogmatism. Dogmatism is not only applicable to the so-called 'deposit of truth,' but also to worldviews that are considered unquestionably 'objective.' In this sense, dogmatism is normative and even exclusionary. When there is a permanent stable foundation, churches become dogmatic in their thinking. Dogmatism excludes the diversity of differences. It makes the churches secured with the past and complacent with the present. Contingent foundation is always open to critique because churches are all prone to ideological interests. I take ideology here to mean our particular standpoint. Churches have their presuppositions and interests to defend. Churches cannot move out from this ideology. What the churches should be aware is the sacralization of ideology. Sacralization petrifies convergence and consensus. Churches should therefore desacralize the traditions of the churches.⁴¹ In contingent foundation, churches neither reify nor eradicate foundation. They are just subjecting this foundation to constant critique so that foundation will not hinder them to be receptive to the Spirit, and to the creative power of each church. "True dialogue, which is not joined to a practice of domination, enables the transformation of all [churches]."⁴² Churches should devise programs that deal with people in their actual life situations in their respective churches. These programs "should be simple, transparent, dynamic and flexible enough to be able to respond to new challenges and realities."⁴³

Conclusion: Reflective Solidarity

My conclusion would be provisional because my proposal relies on a contingent foundation. Churches should always recognize the

³⁹Kyung Sook Lee, "Ecumenical Hermeneutics: An Asian Response," in *Faith and Order in Moshi*, the 1996 Commission Meeting, Faith and Order Paper no. 177, Alan Falconer, ed., Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998, 130.

⁴⁰Aagaard, "Pluralism, Ambiguity and Dialogue," 171.

⁴¹Banawiratma, "A Vision of Ecumenical Unity and Mission," 119.

⁴²Dale Irvin, "The Banquet of Ecumenism," *The Ecumenical Review* 43, 1 (1991) 77.

⁴³Aram Keshishian, "Towards a Self-Understanding of the WCC," *The Ecumenical Review* 43, 1 (1991) 21.

limits of their reason and welcome self-critique in their knowledge. They should avoid the Cartesian temptation of a transcendental ego. Having the Archimedean eye will only lead the churches to detachment and irresponsibility to their particular realities. The Archimedean eye considers itself to be all-knowing and error-free, which is, in fact, a disguise of "god trick." Furthermore, churches should recognize that there are various sources of religion. Derrida points out that there are two sources of our religion, namely, *faith* and *knowledge*.⁴⁴ As in the past, as it is made clear by history, there are always two temptations that haunt human beings. The first is a theological temptation where God is absolute, while human beings are annihilated. The second is a philosophical temptation where human beings become absolute, while God is denied. Churches should avoid this one-sided view. Ecumenical dialogue should make the churches more open and critical. They should realize that no single church could claim the Archimedean eyes. "Therefore every church is submitted to the criticism of other churches and church leaders."⁴⁵

There has been a recognizable crisis in the ecumenical movement brought about by the many transformations happening in the world. Some are alarmed by this looming crisis for it is considered the 'losing of integrity' of ecumenical movement. However, this 'ecumenical crossroad' should be welcome for it can usher in a 'paradigm shift' in ecumenical movement. As pointed out by I. Aram, this crossroad is a sign that "the movement is searching for a new identity, a new self-expression, a new orientation."⁴⁶ Churches should always explore new possibilities. I agree with the analysis of D. Irvin who says that "the fullness of the meaning of the ecumenical movement remains unrealizable, for ecumenics is, by definition, that dimension of history, which is open-ended and unfinalizable. Ecumenical history proves to be polyphonic and thus incapable of being reduced to a single narrative."⁴⁷

⁴⁴Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattino, ed., Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, 1-35.

⁴⁵Aukje Westra, "Ecumenical Hermeneutics: Criteria for Truth and Justice," in *The Living Tradition: Towards an Ecumenical Hermeneutics of the Christian Tradition*, Anton Houtepen, ed., Utrecht: Interuniversitair Instituut voor Missiologie en Oecumenia, 1995, 84.

⁴⁶I. Aram, "The Ecumenical Movement at a Crossroad," *The Ecumenical Review* 47, 4 (1995) 472.

⁴⁷Irvin, "Towards a Hermeneutics of Difference," 500.

What I am suggesting as an appropriate way of dealing with the tension posed by ecumenical dialogue is what we call *reflective solidarity*. Since our starting point is difference and the other, churches should keep on engaging in constant dialogue and reflection. The other should always provoke us to engage in a reflective thinking. In line with hermeneutics of difference, reflective solidarity builds from ties created by difference. Reflective solidarity is defined as a mutual expectation of the churches' responsible orientation to ecumenical movement. It is a solidarity that arises out of disagreement and difference. In ecumenical dialogue, ecumenism refers not to homogenous churches, but rather to heterogeneous churches in the ecumenical movement. We have to recognize the differences that exist among the ecumenical members because this recognition enriches us. Each church is responsible to each other. Responsibility stresses accountability because the orientation is always the imperative of the other. Thus, ecumenical dialogue should shift from identity (sameness) to otherness (alterity). Total and totalizing unity can be dehumanizing and terrorizing to people of difference. The focus towards the other will make the churches realize that they are not the norm for the other. Each church has an irreducible difference. Compassion and respect are the appropriate responses to the imperative of the other. The ecumenical 'foundation' is never restrictive or exclusionary. It is always contingent, critical and creative. "Reflective solidarity conceives of the ties connecting us as communicative and open."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Judi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after Identity Politics*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1996, 28.