



## Global Godliness?

Timothy Radcliffe OP

What does our belief in 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church', which we profess in the Nicene Creed, really mean? It expresses a desire for unity across space and time, which is what God wills for humanity, says Timothy Radcliffe OP. 'At the heart of the Catholic tradition is a profound longing for a Church that is one and universal.'

We live in a society in which competition is omnipresent. Competition fuels progress and keeps us on our toes. Political parties, supermarkets, car manufacturers and football teams compete with each other. And there are various Christian denominations competing for congregations. Of course, in these ecumenical days people deny that we would wish to lure worshippers from another Church. Surely Catholics are not out to win over followers of the Anglican brand, like Tesco competing with Aldi! Ian Stackhouse, a Baptist theologian, admits that there is a pressure to get bums on seats and be successful in that sense. Clergy keep a beady eye on church attendance figures and glance at each other's car parks on a Sunday to see which is the fullest.

It has often been argued that the reason why Evangelical Christianity flourishes in America is precisely because there is a vigorous, competitive market in religion and that the Catholic Church became corrupt in the late Middle Ages because we held a virtual monopoly, and monopolies become sluggish and slack. There seems to be something to this argument. The Catholic Church was challenged by the Churches of the Reformation to reform itself, once again to give primacy to the Word of God and renew its formation of priests and laity. It could be argued that the vast renewal of the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council was in part because we were not the only Church on the block, and we had to



be renewed or fade. And so, some will claim, it was providential that the unity of Western Christendom was broken at the Reformation. This contributed to the vitality of Christianity.

But at the heart of the Catholic tradition is a profound longing for a Church that is one and universal. That is the very meaning of the word 'Catholic.' However fruitful, as well as destructive, might have been

the rivalries of post-Reformation Christianity, the unity of the Church across time and the globe is at the heart of our faith. We declare in the Nicene Creed our belief in 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.' The gathering of all Christians into unity is not a vague aspiration for something which might be rather 'nice'. It is the hungering for what is at the core of our faith. A splintered Christianity is disfigured. Why is this?

Globalisation was in the DNA of Christianity from the beginning. Even when Christians were a tiny minority scattered in a few small cells across the vast Roman Empire, already we thought of ourselves in global terms. The [final words of Jesus in St Matthew's Gospel](#) are: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.' (28:19)

Most religions remain deeply rooted in the culture and language of their original believers. Judaism remains the faith of a particular people and is wedded to its language and traditions. Islam is rooted in the Arabic text of the Qur'an. Hinduism is profoundly identified with the cultures of India. But from the very beginning Christianity was seeking to transcend any particular culture or language. The New Testament is not written in the language of Jesus, which was Aramaic, but in the universal language of its time, a rather coarse sort of Greek that was the *lingua franca* of the Roman Empire. Perhaps just 25 years after Christ's resurrection, St Paul wrote: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:27f). It was global before it was even known that we live on a globe.

Why is this so? St Paul wrote to the Ephesians: 'For [God] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight, the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things on heaven and things on earth' (1:9–10). If God wills to gather all things into one in Christ, then of course the Church must treasure unity, reaching across all ethnic and national divisions. This is not about wiping out all the competitors and regaining the monopoly. It is not claiming superiority for Roman Catholicism over other denominations. It is saying that our unity across space and time is a sign of what God wills for humanity.

Yves Congar OP, the greatest ecumenist of the twentieth century, discovered his theological vocation when he was a young Dominican friar and was overwhelmed by studying John 17, where Jesus prays that the disciples may be one as he and the Father are one. Congar called it 'the apostolic prayer of Jesus for Christian unity' and he gave his entire life to heal the divisions between the Churches. Our celebrations of the feasts of the saints show that we are a community that transcends even that most radical of barriers, death.

In the opening paragraph of *Lumen Gentium*, proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council, it is written that 'the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human

race.' Notice that the Church is a *sign* of unity. This does not mean that everyone has to become Catholic. What matters is that the Church makes visible what it means to be human: to be human is to belong to the whole of humanity, indeed the whole of creation. The Church must be one because humanity is called by God to be one.

So the Church challenges any identity which uniquely privileges our national or ethnic origins. I am a Christian before I am British or Irish or Polish. This is why tyrants have always feared and opposed the Church, from the early Roman emperors who persecuted our ancestors, through Henry VIII, Napoleon to Mao Tse Tung. Even in today's China, the universal community of Catholicism is seen as uniquely threatening to the rule of the Communist Party. Patriotism may be fine, the love of one's own country, but nationalism is incompatible with Christianity if it makes demands that are absolute.

Globalisation is an ambiguous phenomenon, a blessing and a curse. It is knitting humanity into unity across the globe. We are aware as never before that we have brothers and sisters all over the planet. When I opened my emails this morning in Toronto, having just flown across the Atlantic from England, I found an email from a Japanese writer asking about the translation of one of my books, a message from a Ukrainian writing in Italian, and an invitation to go and speak in Colombia! Globalisation has lifted millions of people out of poverty, especially in China and India.

But the global market has also produced vast inequalities of wealth and wounded the unity of the human family. The poor are confronted every day with the images of a paradise from which they are excluded. 'Advertisements for ice cold Coca Cola, redolent of youth, vitality, happiness and the wealth of the United States, look down on societies where only the rich can afford clean water.'<sup>1</sup> Corruption is globalised, too. 'We are living through an unprecedentedly corrupt period in world history. It has, admittedly, always happened but not on the same scale.'<sup>2</sup> Think of FIFA. Globalisation is often experienced as the imposition on everyone of Western and especially American culture, and as the humiliation and subversion of ancient cultures and civilisations. It fuels the violent aggression of ISIS as well as empowering it through social media.

What about Christian globalisation? This has often been experienced as oppressive and imperialistic. Missionaries of God's word were often also apostles of Western culture. But we have come to see with ever greater clarity that true Christian globalisation should be about cherishing the common good to which every culture contributes. We cannot ultimately flourish apart from each other. Catholic Social Teaching is about much more than good and just politics and economics. It is an expression of humanity's shared destiny in Christ.

Louis-Joseph Lebret, a French Dominican economist who profoundly influenced Pope Paul VI, wrote that 'the spiritual common good' is:

the potential of intelligence, scientific understanding, wisdom and social skills; of intellectual, moral, artistic and pedagogical traditions; the potential of humanity's material masterpieces and its institutions as well. It is culture, humanism – all of it leading to an eternal destiny. God is in fact the absolute and transcendent common good for all human beings, just as God is their origin and their fulfilment. Christ is the common good of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

And yet many Christians who are not Roman Catholics, and some who are, may have a fear that a global Church easily becomes oppressive of difference. In recent centuries the Church has been held together in unity by a structure of centralised power which has often been intolerant of dissent.

First of all, it is easy to underestimate the vast diversity within the Church, even when it has most sought to exercise control. Catholicism is nowhere near as monochrome as many suspect. People forget that the Roman Catholic Church includes 23 autonomous churches, each with their own rites and canon law, from the Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt to the Syro-Malabar Church in India. These are all just as much part of the Catholic Church as the members of the Latin Rite.

There is also the extraordinary diversity of theological and spiritual traditions: Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite, Ignatian. The Church holds within itself Catholics from every nation of the earth who think, pray and gather in their own ways. In our Father's house there are many dwellings.

Catholicism is irreducibly plural and inalienably one. Indeed from its beginning, the extraordinary gift of God's grace has been the Church's ability to hold together diversity and unity. We have four gospels in a single New Testament, and they do not by any means say the same thing. A friend of mine was trying to explain to a group of prisoners why the gospels contradict each other. One of them said: 'Of course they disagree. If they didn't everyone would suspect that it was a put up job.' Jesus Christ in his very person embraces the biggest difference imaginable, one person who is divine and human; the doctrine of the Trinity is all about difference in unity.

Secondly, it must be admitted that the Catholic Church, especially since the Reformation, has often been fearful of diversity. Original thinkers, such as the Dominicans and Jesuits who prepared the way for the Second Vatican Council, often were silenced unjustly. The Church was nervous of the new. But the Holy Spirit, at work in all of the baptised, has ensured that renewal does take place, and Pope Francis above all is eagerly working for a Church in which the vitality of the Spirit is not repressed. The global unity of the Church is so central to its identity that it must always be treasured, whatever the cost.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Linden, *A New Map of the World* (London, 2003) p.95.

<sup>2</sup> Zoe Cormack, 'Everyone's at it' in *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 2013, reviewing Laurence Cockcroft, *Global Corruption: Money, power and ethics in the modern world* (Pennsylvania, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Houée, *Un éveilleur d'humanité* (Paris, 1997) p.21.