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Ecumenism At Fresno Pacific University

W. MARSHALL JOHNSTON

From every family, language, people, and nation... (Revelation 7:9)

Ecumenism at a Mennonite Brethren School

Fresno Pacific's identity, from its earliest years, is founded on Christ,¹ and within a specific part of the Radical Reformation. The most visible and numerous branches of the Anabaptist movement in the modern world are the various Mennonite denominations, out of which the Mennonite Brethren emerged over 150 years ago. The distinctives of the Mennonite Brethren are quite clear from the perspective of an outside admirer: an expectation of adult (or age-of-reason) baptism, egalitarianism, community effort, organizing for mission work without concern for national borders, a real belief in consensus, and a shared journey in community that is focused on the *Sermon on the Mount*. The pacifism that has been such an important part of their history is under debate in their churches today—I am fortunate that I do not have to address that piece, given the nature of this essay. I should note that I write from well outside the tradition: a cradle Episcopalian, and a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Perhaps this very identity is valuable to our ecumenicity, since the Anglican *Articles of Religion* from the sixteenth century were quite negative toward Anabaptists!²

The Mennonite Brethren do not simply remember persecution from the sixteenth century. They have faced persecution in Europe and in this country through the last several centuries. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that when the denomination founded its West Coast school, there was a sense that the primary purpose of the institution would be to inculcate Mennonite values and to educate Mennonite Brethren. Indeed, for most of its history the faculty at Fresno Pacific was predominantly Mennonite, and a large part of the student body was as well. Some of the early non-Mennonite faculty thought that there was virtual quota of those who could be from other traditions, and at least in one case felt largely excluded.³

I do not believe that the development into a more ecumenical institution was entirely about growth, or even, as it was called in the eighties, “broadening the base.” While it was in the nineties that the triad of Evangelical, Anabaptist, and

Ecumenical was first coined as a way to understand our identity (probably by Howard Loewen), it has always been the case that students of all denominations—and those from outside the Christian faith—were welcome in the College and Seminary. There was a notional ten percent non-Christian ceiling in the early years; however, my experience in this millennium is that there is no proportional calculus taken into account. The welcome of faculty from other denominations was slower, with Episcopalians and Roman Catholics included in the nineties and Orthodox in the 2000s.

The “broadening the base” initiative had the salubrious effect of encouraging a Board made up of more members from outside the denomination, and that development probably made it even less likely that there was any sense of required Mennonite percentages. It was also the case that diversification of funding became an objective in the same period. Further, there had been earlier ecumenical efforts like the Mennonite Kings View hospital, with its concern for the local Armenian population.⁴ Lay leaders became more involved, which resulted in later opportunities through Ed Peters’ business connections with such corporations as Producer’s Dairy.

It may be that the German/Paraguayan Fernando Enns has had a lot to do with a comfort level in moving toward denominational integration. He is a leading Mennonite proponent of ecumenicity who has spoken in Fresno and is admired by many here. He is a voice in the World Council of Churches and pushed us to make the first decade of 21st century a decade to end violence: a noble but unsuccessful rallying point.

What Does Ecumenism Look Like?

Many of us continue to see the Fresno Pacific project as an inclusion of other Christian paths that can understand the value of a rooting in Anabaptism, though recent faculty conversations have occasionally veered toward simply wondering why we ever split hairs beyond who is a Christian. Thus, ecumenism remains a better term for what we’re about than multi-denominationalism. The latter was a recent suggestion to deal with the changing definition of ecumenism. Though perhaps previous efforts for Christian unity feel more like hopes of federation now (as one Emeritus colleague put it to me), the term “ecumenism” still seems to cover our efforts effectively. It is my understanding that the college would not have used that particular term in the 1960s—the

idea of seeking a Universal Church would have been more likely. The historian Henry Krahn is given credit for assisting the reorientation from denominational identity to a theological identity in that period.⁵

It is indeed obvious that the word “ecumenism” does not explain itself, and that it has been understood differently in different epochs. Since, if I may take a moment to indulge my training as a classicist, it derives from the idea of encompassing the whole world—the *oikoumene*—it can be understood to mean a search for common ground among all religious paths. And indeed we do have speakers and presentations from leaders of different religious communities who come to campus, and whom we go to visit. Our intercultural faculty urge us to reach out to our religious neighbors.⁶ There is perhaps a sense that debate and interaction had more space to be active and far reaching in years when the community was more secure in its identity (College Hours in the eighties apparently were often quite challenging). It was in those days that an Imam came to study with us to find out about Christianity.

I believe that most Fresno Pacific faculty and staff would identify our ecumenical distinctive as how we in our community honor different Christian paths and welcome them among our number. Agreement would be more difficult in the area of non-Trinitarian paths like Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses, but it is almost certainly true of a majority of our community that we would be eager to engage in dialogue with those groups, honoring our Anabaptist roots, even if such grounding is not a conscious effort for some, but simply part of our culture. We are not without tension in the ecumenism that I am outlining here, as in a recent faculty workday one colleague stated before the assembled body that Roman Catholics worship Mary. He made that comment while speaking from a table that included a Roman Catholic, and in a room in which there were at least ten others. Ecumenism is not easy!⁷

I have made it my specific work to address how vocabulary can affect our ecumenical project. Should we talk about “conversion” of Roman Catholics to another denomination, or vice versa? Doesn’t conversion mean a change of religion? And doesn’t our ecumenical distinctive mean that all who are welcomed into our community are equals on the Christian path? Certainly one can hear the term “conversion” (a “full turning”!) used in moving both to and from the Roman Church in other contexts. If we don’t talk about conversion between Christian denominations, what term should we use? Changing paths? Entering

a new fellowship? Seeking a new expression of our Christianity? On a jejune note, transferring membership? You can say you were “received” into the new tradition, a transition for which some denominations have a liturgy. We should also be aware of the tension often present in referring to a student who “was a Christian but became a Catholic” or vice versa. It took me a few conversations to realize that this oddity comes from the Spanish terms for Roman Catholic and Protestant, and probably the most important growing edge of our work now is as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, but we can’t ignore how the translation sounds in English.

We even have at least one colleague who will not talk about “conversion” of our Jewish neighbors, and I find myself more and more convinced. The Pope has been very careful of how to address this subject.⁸ Not only are we in some ways just a continuation of the Godly Jewish tradition, but the history of abuse of the Jews by Christians is horrifying—and sadly continues to this very day. We must take a prophetic stand against such prejudice. We also need to be very careful not to stereotype groups long associated with the university, or ones that are more recent, such as Sikhs and Buddhists. We need to engage each person’s journey as a child of God. As we Episcopalians say in our Baptismal Covenant, we must “seek and serve Christ in all persons...and respect the dignity of every human being.”⁹

FPU’s Ecumenical Practices

Apposite to the idea of “seeking a new path” as colleagues often move between churches and even denominations, I find our tradition of a faculty pilgrimage at FPU a profoundly ecumenical practice. In several cases members of the community have gone on literal pilgrimages, such as the *Camino de Santiago* or the *Via Francigena*. We have also worked with the idea of the labyrinth, and the metaphorical pilgrimage. But a presentation of the personal and spiritual pilgrimage that makes up each of our lives is basic to our honoring of each other, and I am very glad that many of us continue to call the new faculty presentation to the community the “pilgrimage.” It would be very appropriate to build out pilgrimages at other times before the community, as it is an exercise valuable for the pilgrim and the listeners. This is another practice that was much more common in past years. Steve Varvis asked faculty to share their pilgrimage in early spring convocations when he served as provost. No

one can be summed up by where they are at any given moment: we are pilgrims on The Way.¹⁰

In 2017, the university brought together a number of events in light of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, appropriately dated to Martin Luther's famous protest. It is perhaps ecumenical in itself that FPU has recognized these kinds of anniversaries (this article is part of the 75th anniversary volume for our institution!), and that we were careful not to call it a "celebration" of the Reformation. I was included in three panels that took voices from different traditions coming out of the Reformation (my role was to speak of how we considered the Anglican Reformation—and now Communion—as a *via media*)—I was especially moved by twice sitting on a panel next to a former student, and now Youth Pastor at Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Church. As we were arranged from Radical Reformed, to Reformed, to Anglican, to Roman Catholic, it felt like we were being prophetic about a vision of Christianity as unified not in sameness, but in common purpose.

As I candidated for a job at FPU a few years ago, I was reminded that while the Nicene Creed is an excellent way to understand our faith, it is perhaps not an ideal way to talk about our shared journey among people of different backgrounds. I have come to learn that the Primitive Church is a good way to speak into the commonalities of our shared journey. As I have talked with various members of the founding generation, I have also learned that they much more often thought of ways new members of the community might intersect with Anabaptist thought than looked for any kind of doctrinal purity.

How *The Idea* Encourages Ecumenism

The Fresno Pacific Idea has historically been how we understand our body. The most recent version of it nicely articulates how we seek to be a prophetic Christian community of learners. In light of the context above, the Idea should not be an unmoving target, but an organic notion that speaks as much to our rapidly expanding Roman Catholic population today as it did to the "broadening the base" notion of the 1980s and 90s. It should be the description of a journey, a pilgrimage, of the institution, and we should continue to unpack it.¹¹ Paul Toews suggested that each generation of faculty should compose it anew, but I am one who feels that we may be just as well commissioned constantly to interpret it anew. The Idea became a significant ecumenical statement, since

our focus moved very early from denominational loyalty to being able to support the Idea.¹²

The great tensions of modern Christianity have genealogies that go all the way back not just to the Reformation, but to the Church Fathers, and even to the Apostolic generation. How do we understand scripture when there are those who insist on literal interpretations and those who are comfortable with allegorical interpretations? This conundrum would be very familiar to early Antioch and Alexandria. We have colleagues who look to Scripture for answers, and others who look to it for questions. How do we acknowledge that we are saved by grace, and yet “faith without works is dead”? Though my Anglican mind is tempted to use concepts we hold dear, like “generous orthodoxy,” or “creative tension,” those notions are not comfortably ecumenical...but the Fresno Pacific Idea does give us a valuable approach:¹³

All authentic knowledge and experience are unified under God. All aspects of reality are understood to be parts of a larger whole. There is no contradiction then between the truth of revelation, of scholarly investigation, and of action.

The bold, prophetic statement continues:

The intersection of Christian belief, the liberal arts,¹⁴ and an ethic of service provides an educational perspective that leads to an examined understanding of God, self and the world that unites theory with practice.

And something I deeply value about this community is that one can still talk with many of those involved in the formation of the original Idea and the community that it seeks to describe. When I asked Dalton Reimer about how the process of accreditation had gone for such an experimental (a word that was frequently used from the initial formation through the establishment of the innovative School of Education, for which Elias Wiebe, Arthur Wiebe and Silas Bartsch provided the vision) project as the early years of Pacific College, he said that the leader of the team had come from Santa Cruz, and felt that there (at UCSC) they tried to talk about and build a community, but at Pacific we actually had one. I hope that with the changes of recent years in polity and demography, we are continuing to have some version of that community...and of that belief in Christ-centered experimentation.

Where Are We Now?

It is difficult to cover this topic without thinking how the developing attitudes toward secular changes, and their intersection with Fresno Pacific, come into play. While the 1990s still saw major concerns about faculty or administration who had divorced, that piece was now seen as a part of a larger evaluation of a potential employee's journey. The university has also had to face the changing attitudes toward the LGBTQ community, and it has felt pressure from Christians on the left and right of the question of full inclusion. President Richard Kriegbaum came down strongly on the conservative side. On another issue, when the faculty produced a petition to the President and Board two years ago asking that we become a sanctuary campus for undocumented students, it was another uncomfortable moment for the administration. For the time being the Jones administration has found a way to use FERPA to essentially carry out the same purpose: we do not share student records with outside parties. Here is another example of the difficulties of ecumenism: some feel that Gospel imperatives force us to act on behalf of the alien, the stranger, in our midst; others see Pauline imperatives to respect the government that is in place.

Such a treatment as I have undertaken here can end with some optimism. We see increasing ways that a variety of Christian traditions are a part of our campus. The Church Fair brings denominations from all over the (literal and denominational) map to campus for students to learn about and question. We see liturgical services of various kinds, especially at Easter. While there was an unfortunate dismissal of the Roman Catholic view of purgatory a few years ago in *College Hour*, our Civilizations Series that undergraduates take in their GE offerings includes grappling with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with its tripartite division of the supernatural world into Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso.

Our foundation in the Mennonite Brethren tradition may make it easier to build an ecumenical community. Paul Toews says the hermeneutic of suspicion makes us Mennonite and Anabaptist (not accepting the status quo), but also opens us to intellectuals from other traditions willing to ask questions. He felt that the Mennonite Brethren therefore have an ease of associating with different traditions.¹⁵ While that ease is perhaps shocking to find in a group that has been as oppressed as the Mennonites, it is indeed what I have found at FPU. The campus has been open to my views, including a president who supported me when my public comments concerned members of our base, and it has not

just been open to welcoming me, but many have actively tried to understand and include my perspective: my being asked to compose this article is not the least of those efforts. From my earliest days investigating campus when I was faculty across town, the tendency of members of the FPU community to open the door and have a talk with a willing partner, and learn of his or her journey, is a deeply ecumenical distinctive.

NOTES

- ¹ A phrase taken from a favorite passage in Corinthians of Menno Simons. The unfortunate Latin rendering of the phrase, *Fundamentum Christus*, has been wisely eschewed by Fresno Pacific, though I gather not for its double entendre in translation, but for fear that it gave a non-ecumenical, fundamentalist intimation.
- ² E.g., Article 38: “The Riches and Goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast.”
- ³ Those of us who have arrived more recently have had in many cases almost the opposite feeling: we have had space to critique and prophesy without being under the microscope often applied to the Mennonites.
- ⁴ Froese, B. *California Mennonites*. Baltimore 1969. 158-159.
- ⁵ He became President of Concord College. He is one of several Pacific College faculty who went on to be Presidents: perhaps this is another area in which the experiment has been successful.
- ⁶ In 2008 I wrote an article in the *Christian Leader* on my relationship with a Muslim student, Reza Nekumanesh. He is now the President on the local Islamic Cultural Center, and he came as an ambassador to welcome our new Dean at the Episcopal Cathedral in town. *Faith in Fresno* has its offices in the administration building of that church (St. James). Johnston, W.M. *The Christian Leader* Nov. 2008. “Conversations with a Child of Abraham.”
- ⁷ Several colleagues have pointed out that such episodes make clear we are a functioning part of the Academy, since there is the space to state even very objectionable opinions.
- ⁸ Recent pontifical statements seem to have gone even farther than *Nostra Aetate* from Vatican II.
- ⁹ *Book of Common Prayer*. 1979. 305.
- ¹⁰ The idea of the pilgrimage in the Fresno Pacific community was treated by Dalton Reimer in the *Pacific Journal* issue on the theme of pilgrimage.
- ¹¹ In the *Festschrift* honoring Emeritus colleague Delbert Wiens, Peter Smith suggested that the version of the Idea we use now has a heresy: we follow God’s direction—we do not “build” the Kingdom. *A Dangerous Mind: The Ideas and Influence of Delbert Wiens*. Eds. W. Marshall Johnston and Daniel J. Crosby. Portland 2015.
- ¹² To make that aspect of our Christian identity clear, Dalton Reimer included the Idea in the college catalogue.
- ¹³ <https://www.fresno.edu/about/our-mission/fresno-pacific-idea>
- ¹⁴ It is my personal view that we need to maintain our identity as a liberal arts university. Though we have talked about identifications like “regional master’s,” the idea of the arts of freedom, and its foundation in 1,000 years of Christian universities, seems too important to undermine, even if another identification seems valuable in the present educational market.

- ¹⁵ Toews, Paul. “Singing the Christian College Song in a Mennonite Key.” *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education*. Fresno 1995. I am always deeply touched by Anabaptists who are curious about, and sometimes even adopt, our Anglican/High Church traditions; e.g., as I write this piece during the Christmas season, I recall how many friends in the community have embraced the Epiphany Blessing of the House.

