

## Editorial: Ecumenism in Scotland

What should we be learning from each other, and with each other, in the increasingly post-Christian context of today's Scotland? For this issue of *Theology in Scotland*, contributors were invited to explore various facets of ecumenical theology and reflect on different expressions of ecumenical engagement. Indeed, there were so many aspects that could be discussed: official dialogues and institutional collaboration between different church communions; issues around conflict and reconciliation; joint ventures in mission or social justice; the interplay between different ecumenical and cultural contexts and backgrounds; ecumenical lessons to be gleaned from the earlier pages of Christian history within and beyond Scotland; and many more.

Having found a home in the west of Scotland myself, I am particularly cognizant of the history of sectarianism in Scotland, which still shapes (or rather, misshapes) the lives of many, both within and without particular congregations and denominations. At the same time, Scottish ecumenical endeavours, though certainly present on various levels, are not exactly brimming with energy. As many denominations shrink, ecumenism seems a luxury on a practical level at least, even if not on a theological one. So how do we approach the ecumenical imperative in the present set of circumstances? How do we move beyond a merely propositional commitment to ecumenism and token gestures, and discover (or rediscover) genuine opportunities for common witness?

It is apposite, therefore, that this themed issue begins with a D. W. D. Shaw memorial lecture which was delivered earlier this year by Paul Nimmo. Ecumenical engagement represented one of the matters close to the heart of Bill Shaw, a founding member of the editorial board of *Theology in Scotland*, whose legacy is being celebrated in a series of memorial lectures enabled by the generous support of the Hope Trust. Nimmo provides a superbly lucid overview of the complex development of the concept and practice of ecumenism, carefully charting its key concepts and challenges. Having outlined the limitations of ecumenical visions expressed in different church traditions – such as those emerging from either institutional or doctrinal concerns – he offers another way to think about ecumenical efforts. Seeing it as a pilgrim journey of sorts, he

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suggests, allows for a more dynamic, realistic, and hopeful vision, and one which embraces the open-endedness of the process. How that translates into actual ecumenical efforts which meet real needs will depend on local particularities as well as denominational commitments – but Nimmo offers some initial suggestions for the Church of Scotland, his own home tradition.

What, then, of concrete examples of ecumenical engagement? In a three-way conversation, Paulus de Jong, Jared Michelson, and Trevor Hart – ministers in Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches respectively – reflect on their own experience of ecumenical theology and local church practice. As they wrestle with the reality of the Church’s disunity, they seek to draw out some specific biblical, theological, and practical resources which have been especially helpful in their own ecumenical practice as local church ministers. What clearly emerges as a central feature is the *gift* which denominational differences and diversities can bring out of ecumenical efforts. Encountering sisters and brothers in other ecclesial communities can play a crucial role in enriching our own ecclesial identities, but, as these authors emphasise, it requires pushing against the consumerist competition which can easily creep up on us in a shrinking church ‘market’. Remaining open to the gift of another – in this case, another Christian communal expression – is at the heart of anything that can be called genuine ecumenism.

History, of course, has much to teach. In their co-written piece, Victoria Turner and William Gibson consider some key ecumenical aspects of the Iona Community – a fascinating ecumenical and international experiment which grew out of Scottish Presbyterian soil. Turner and Gibson’s historical account sheds light on the early days of the Community’s life, the formation of its ecumenical outlook and its relationships with the Church of Scotland, as well as its later challenges in regard to the inclusion of laity and women. As such, it provides yet another reminder that ecumenism at its deeper level raises questions about openness not only to those in other denominations, but also to the internally marginalised or second-class groups within any communal setting.

However, communities are comprised of persons who, though powerfully shaped by their environment, do not have to remain defined by it, and indeed can become agents of change within their own communities of belonging. Jim Gordon paints a reflective autobiographical picture of the process of transformation from a rigid denominational identity to a much more generous embrace of Christian diversity. As a Scottish Baptist,

he draws a contrast between his early experiences of sectarianism and deep hostility towards Roman Catholicism, and his later wholehearted embrace of Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers in John 17. The two resources to which he particularly draws attention are the kenotic mindset, or self-giving love, and the call to the practice of intercession, insisting that ecumenism starts at a spiritual, rather than rational or theological, level.

The Arts and Culture corner features a poem by Samuel Tongue – another invitation to consider the intricately interconnected nature of Christian life. Meanwhile, in the Gifford Lectures corner, George Coghill turns our attention to the 1986 Gifford Lectures which were delivered, just before his death, by Donald M. MacKay, a physicist with particular interest in neuroscience and communication. The book reviews section opens with Jonathan Birch's essay on John Gray's *Feline Philosophy*, in which readers will learn a great deal about cats and human-cat relations – in the churches of the East and the West – from theological, philosophical, and other perspectives. As usual, a few shorter book reviews follow.

Hopefully, the pages of this issue will serve as a timely reminder of both the necessity of ecumenical work as well as the rich and complex nature of the ways in which the unity of the Church can be expressed. Christian communities have been diverse from the earliest days of the Christian story, and recognising the *particular way of being Church* in the tradition we belong to needs to go hand in hand with the need for the gift of other ways which we can learn from, and be enriched by. Given the emerging variations within a number of particular Christian traditions and denominations, discerning these different ways of being Church – both the potential and the limitations of each – may be a more helpful way to think about ecumenical engagement than focussing on denominational labels.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, such ecumenical humility should keep returning our gaze to the central task of this endeavour – our common witness, 'so that the world may know' (John 17:23, NRSV).<sup>2</sup> May this issue of *Theology in Scotland*

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am particularly thinking about the three streams of Christian tradition ('Catholic', 'Protestant', and 'Pentecostal') suggested by Lesslie Newbigin in *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 94–95; 120ff. One of the ways Newbigin's proposal has been embraced and developed along parallel lines in my own, Baptist, tradition, is by James Wm. McClendon, Jr.; see his *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 335–44.

<sup>2</sup> The recently concluded Phase III of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, in which I had the privilege of

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– itself an ecumenical journal – provide some reflection and inspiration as to what forms such common witness might take.

Lina Toth  
Editor

### Date for your diary: D. W.D. Shaw Lecture 2024

Rev Prof David Fergusson, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, will give the latest in our annual series of lectures honouring *Theology in Scotland*'s founding editor, Rev Prof Bill Shaw.

**When:** 27th May (time tbc)

**Where:** University of Aberdeen

### Contributions welcome

We'd be pleased to receive proposals for contributions for our two regular features:

**Gifford Lectures Corner** – if you'd be interested to write a short piece on any Gifford lecture(s) or a Gifford fellow from any period please contact Dr Jonathan Birch: [jonathan.birch@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.birch@glasgow.ac.uk)

***Theology in Scotland on Arts & Culture*** – please send proposals for creative contributions to Dr Lina Toth: [Lina.Toth@uws.ac.uk](mailto:Lina.Toth@uws.ac.uk)

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participating, was centred around the theme of 'The Dynamic of the Gospel and the Witness of the Church Today.' As the forthcoming report of this five-year long Dialogue notes, 'the dynamic reality of the Gospel is that as we are drawn closer to Christ and to one another, we live more fully for the world that God so loves.' Discerning – and imagining – the possible shapes of our shared witness involves a renewed appreciation of this dynamic of unity and mission.