
‘Reception’ has emerged during the last twenty years as a key concept in ecumenical theology. But it is a notion that is itself in the process of being ‘received’ and remains imperfectly understood. The nature of reception is being critically assimilated throughout the Christian Church. It is an idea whose time has come: it is fitted to the more realistic mood and the longer-term dynamics of the ecumenical movement today. There is a danger, however, that reception, as a critically under-determined concept, can be made to mean many things and to justify almost anything. It needs to be pinned down a bit. Bill Rusch, a veteran Lutheran ecumenist with a global reach, has provided a useful introduction to the theme (this volume supersedes his pioneering study *Reception: An Ecumenical Opportunity of 1988*).

Reception is a phenomenon that has always characterised the life of the Church. It is endemic to the whole course of Church history and refers to the unceasing process of development that characterises the theology, worship and mission of the Christian Church. However, as an idea, ‘reception’ is comparatively young and undeveloped, though deeply rooted in Scripture. The nature of reception varies from one context to another. It is, therefore, continually being adapted and adjusted to meet fresh demands. One of the most recent and particularly suggestive discussions is found in the report of the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue *The Church of the Triune God* (2007). Half a dozen main applications of reception can be identified.

The idea of reception has its origins in the history of law and has been taken up in literary theory. In its theological guise it derives from the ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church. In its official Roman Catholic context it refers primarily to the process of acceptance, by the faithful, of teachings or decisions of the magisterium, as an act of obedience to the pastors of the Church. Reception in the Roman Catholic tradition refers to the incorporation of the teaching of the Magisterium into the life of the Church. The term reception is now also applied to the assimilation of ecumenical dialogues by two or more churches or communions that have reached a new understanding of one another.
‘Reception’ also refers to the way in which the creative contribution of an individual theologian who is of universal significance (Karl Barth or Karl Rahner, perhaps) becomes absorbed into the bloodstream of the Church. Reception is also applied to the way in which the treasures (say hymnody, liturgy, theology or spirituality) of one tradition come to be shared with others. Reception is now used in a broad sense of the way in which two churches may gravitate towards each other and, through theological dialogue and various forms of practical interaction, may ‘receive’ each other as churches, so that they commit themselves to share their life and mission through some form of mutual recognition. Finally, reception can be applied, in a missiological context, to the process of the inculcation of Christian faith in a host society and culture and to its power of adaptation and assimilation – I think this is one of the most suggestive applications of the idea of reception.

What is striking in all these cases, except aspects of the first (the official Roman Catholic usage), is that the process of reception is marked by the features of gradualness, mutuality, active discernment, responsibility, unpredictability and the real possibility of non-reception. These characteristics all register on the spiritual, personal and relational end of the scale of reception. They point to the only possible way in which one may make one’s own what offers itself from elsewhere. Here we are on rather different territory to that of the official Roman Catholic view of reception, the obedient acceptance of what is handed down on authority.

Against the background of its origins and diverse usage, Rusch focuses on ecumenical reception, outlining the emergence of the concept and then showing how it relates to some key ecumenical agreements: the Leuenberg Concordat (1973) between Lutherans and Reformed in Europe, the seminal multilateral text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), the Meissen Agreement between the Church of England and the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (1991), the Anglican-Lutheran Porvoo Agreement in Northern Europe (1996), the Methodist-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), The Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) and Lutheran-Episcopal and other agreements in the USA. The book concludes with some methodological reflections on ‘differentiated consensus’ (of which the Joint Declaration is probably the prime example) and its corollary ‘differentiated participation’, both of which Rusch believes (correctly in my view) are crucial for further progress.