

What kind of ecumenism should we want?

Since the Council of Nicaea the aim of ecumenical efforts has been doctrinal agreement. Even where partners in the ecumenical dialogue have been willing to negotiate, compromise or fudge, or to allow for differences of opinion on theological details, their aim has been substantial agreement on what they have taken to be core doctrine. I suggest that such expensive, time-consuming negotiations and other projects in support of ecumenism are pointless and wasteful.

The kind of ecumenism we should want is intercommunion or, more broadly an arrangement in which all people are welcome to use all church facilities, to visit church buildings and participate in liturgy, without doctrinal tests or affiliation requirements. It is not the business of churches to make windows into men's souls or, arguably, to impose theological tests for participation.

Theology is the business of the academy; liturgy is the work of the Church.

1 Why can't theologians be more like philosophers?

The sentence "there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being" is either true or false. Context-independent sentences like it are either true or false simpliciter; they are not, and cannot be, true for me but false for you, true within one context and false in another. From the *semantic* point of view we should be strict exclusivists. When people disagree about the existence and nature of God, or any of the other metaphysical claims that constitute the propositional content of religious belief, they cannot all be correct. If God exists, and you do not believe that God exists, you have got it wrong; if God does not exist but I believe that God exists, then *I* have got it wrong.

From the *epistemic* perspective, however, we should be radical pluralists. Assuming that knowledge is (albeit with provisos and complications) *justified* true belief, no reasonable person can seriously claim to *know* that God exists. All metaphysical questions, including those concerning the existence and nature of God, are disputed questions and reasonable people, who have made every effort to determine whether religious claims were true or false, disagree. Philosophers are used to this, and are not worried because the answers we give to questions in metaphysics have no practical import. It makes no difference to the business of life whether there are Platonic forms *ante rem* or universals *in re* or tropes, whether ordinary middle-sized objects are 3-dimensional things that

endure or 4-dimensional things, with temporal as well as spatial parts, that “perdure,” or whether the lump of clay that constitutes a statue is identical with the statue. When it comes to metaphysics it is not important to get it right: there are no bad consequences if one is mistaken.

To us, therefore, it seems odd to imagine that anything important hangs on being theologically correct. It seems crazy to think that God, if there is a God, cares whether we get it right about the doctrine of the Trinity or the Real Presence doctrine, about whether Christ has one or two natures, about whether he is of the same, similar or wholly different substance with the Father--or whether God exists.

So, in this respect philosophers approach theology differently from traditional theologians even when addressing the same questions. Theologians have traditionally assumed that when it comes to questions about the existence and nature of God, getting the right answers—rather than simply coming up with good arguments—was of the greatest importance. In the absence of argument, they have assumed that catechism would do insofar as belief was salvific in and of itself.

Philosophers have no use for catechism or wisdom literature, which purport to deliver correct answers and recipes for successful living: we care about argument. Philosophy is the pure mechanics of intellectual organization, structure and argumentation. It is conceptual engineering: philosophers design abstract, argumentative structures. Some of the questions we address have no practical import. Others are of the greatest importance. Whether we shall survive in a future state, Bishop Butler said, is the most important question that can be asked. But whether the questions we address are important, trivial or, by ordinary human standards, ridiculous they are of interest both in and of themselves, and because dealing with them refines and perfects our intellectual capacities. As in all academic disciplines, we aim for truth; but in philosophy we are skeptical about the possibility of arriving at it or if we have arrived at it knowing that we have. So, for us getting right answers is not what chiefly matters.

We wonder: *why can't theologians be more like philosophers?* Ecumenical projects, as they have traditionally been pursued, aim at unity understood as some appropriate degree of doctrinal agreement in what are deemed to be essential matters. So ecumenical dialogues usually involve negotiation about which issues are essential and about which doctrinal differences are substantial rather than merely verbal. We should first address the more fundamental question suggested by reflection on the philosophical approach to theology: why should we aim for unity at all? Why should we want agreement?

2 The quest for doctrinal agreement

I suggest that there is no compelling reason why we should want doctrinal agreement. But this is a deeply heterodox view and contrary to two millenia of Christian tradition. There are three reasons typically invoked in support of the quest for Christian unity:

First, unity is, apparently, mandated in Scripture--both in the Fourth Gospel, where Christ prays that Christians “may all be one” and by St. Paul who urges Christians not to call themselves followers of Paul or of Apollos, but to regard themselves and all their Christian brothers and sisters as followers of Christ.

Secondly, when it comes to doctrine, getting it right is supposed to matter. The Athanasian Creed lays out what is to be believed and concludes by asserting that unless a person believe the Catholic faith thus understood he cannot be saved. We may disagree about the details and interpretation or build in build in mitigating and excusing conditions for people who have not heard the Gospel, but the fundamental assumption is that getting the theology right is important. One of the essential jobs of churches as traditionally understood, therefore, is to teach correct doctrine. And churches must agree on correct doctrine in order to teach it.

Thirdly, there is the worry that religious disagreement is a source of bigotry, violence, warfare and a great many other social evils. Advocates of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue rattle off long litanies of evils allegedly caused by theological disagreement and misunderstanding: the Crusades and the Inquisition, the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, war in Sudan between Muslims and Christians, wars in the Balkans amongst Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Bosnian Muslims and one should perhaps add the ongoing culture war in the US between the conservative evangelical lower classes and the secular elite (that is, *us*).

None of these reasons is compelling but each deserves a response if we are to argue for the admittedly heterodox view that Christian unity in matters of doctrine is not worth pursuing.

2.1 The mandate of Scripture?

First, although advocates of church unity appeal to Scripture, all Christians read the Bible selectively: we buy what we like even when it comes to what are likely the *ipsa verbum* of Jesus. Jesus forbade divorce. We do not take him seriously. There is all the less reason for taking the exhortation to unity in the high priestly prayer ascribed to him in the Fourth Gospel seriously since it is unlikely that the historical Jesus said any such thing.

Again, Paul exhorted Christians to unity. However even if we are committed to taking the Bible seriously in this matter it might be helpful to look at the context of Paul's discussion to get a better idea of what he was talking about. It does not seem that he was concerned with doctrinal disagreement: his concern was with politics, personality conflicts and church fights. Church fights are almost never about doctrine: they are about the rector's (real or imagined) preference for one old lady over another or interference in altar guild affairs, about competition for the congregations' various offices and disputes between factions—followers of Paul and followers of Apollos. Church fights are certainly unchristian but the kind of unity Paul urged in the interests of avoiding these shenanigans had nothing to do with doctrinal agreement.

Insofar as doctrinal agreement was pursued, the aim was largely political. Constantine wanted doctrinal agreement in the interests of promoting political unity. A consummate politician with little patience for theological niceties his program was conflict-resolution. Like Good President Ike he believed that the Empire needed to be founded on a firmly held religious faith--whatever it was. He vacillated between support for Athanasius and Arius, trying to predict whether proto-orthodoxy or Arianism would win the widest support and so best serve the Empire's political interests.

Nowadays we recognize that political unity doesn't require doctrinal agreement. Mainline Christians work together with one another and with secularists to promote their goals and, more surprisingly, evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics and Mormons happily collaborate in support of their conservative social and political agendas. Where your treasure is there your heart is and, conversely, where your heart is there your treasure is: conservative evangelicals, Catholics and Mormons, whose theologies are thoroughly incompatible, give generously of their time, talent and treasure to promote sex roles and "family values" making it abundantly clear that they have no interest in theology.

To this extent there doesn't seem to be any compelling reason why churches should attempt to achieve doctrinal agreement, either by appeal to Scripture or to tradition. Given a plausible reading of Paul, it is not enjoined by Scripture. And the quest for doctrinal agreement in the Church when it became a tolerated and subsequently established religion, was politically rather than theologically motivated.

2.2 The importance of doctrinal correctness?

Traditional sources, such as the Athanasian Creed recommend doctrinal unity on the grounds that a person cannot be saved unless he maintain

orthodoxy. The Athanasian Creed is one of the official creeds of the Church, but we should ask why we should believe the teachings of the Church, however defined, rather than picking what we like and rejecting claims we find implausible.

The idea that God cares whether we get it right about the fine points of doctrine or, for that matter, whether we believe he exists or not, seems thoroughly implausible. This is the problem of the Hiddenness of God. Traditionally we have been told that God wants us to believe in him even though he is hidden and even though he could, if he chose, reveal himself. The standard explanation for this apparently self-defeating policy on his part is that “faith,” understood as belief without compelling evidence, is meritorious: God hides himself because he wants us to believe in him without having any good reason for doing so. Faith is held to be a virtue.

This however piles absurdity upon absurdity. What can be meritorious about believing without evidence? Apart from special pleading it seems more plausible to suggest that knowledge of God, like knowledge of higher mathematics and other difficult matters, is simply hard – and that God is hidden not because he intentionally hides himself, or aims to elicit “faith,” but rather because he has no particular interest in having us believe he exists, and so has no reason to make special efforts to convince us of his existence.

The quest for doctrinal unity is motivated by the assumption that getting doctrine right is both achievable and important. But it may be time to rethink these assumptions. Doctrine is speculative. Christian doctrine consists of metaphysical claims about the existence and nature of God, and about post-mortem survival. But metaphysical claims are rarely, if ever, conclusively refuted and there are good arguments for a great many competing claims: holding false beliefs does not, per se, reflect adversely one one’s intellectual competence, diligence or moral character. We do not evaluate philosophers according to whether they have arrived at the truth because no one knows what it is; we evaluate them according to how well they argue and the extent to which their discussion clarifies issues and is a basis for further results. Nothing prevents us from treating theological doctrines in the same way. *We don’t know whether they’re true or false; and God knows but doesn’t care.*

2.3 The dangers of doctrinal disagreement?

Ecumenists’ greatest worry is perhaps that religious disagreement leads to bigotry, intolerance, violence and all manner of social evils. Historically, however, religious differences have not been the root causes of conflict.

When it wasn't feasible for Christian crusaders to fight Muslims they cheerfully turned on fellow Christians and took Constantinople. More recently Sudanese Muslims in the North have been just as happy to attack fellow Muslims in Darfur as Christians in the south of Sudan. Religion is epiphenomenal: it serves as a *marker* of the affiliations and interests that cause conflict but is itself causally idle. From the Fourth Crusade to the world wars of the 20th century, Christians have waged war against fellow Christians. Muslims have made war on fellow Muslims since the Abbasid dynasty overthrew the Umayyad caliphs in the 8th century; currently Sudanese Muslims are conducting a slow-motion genocide on their fellow Muslims in Darfur. Religious disputes merely signal tribal and ethnic clashes, power plays, territorial disputes, and other mundane, political differences, which often enough have played out in the absence of religious disagreement.

Religious agreement is not sufficient for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, and it is not necessary either. As Robert Putnam and David Campbell in *American Grace* note, even Evangelicals and other committed religious conservatives are remarkably accepting of religious difference. Drawing on large data set, Campbell notes that "Americans on the whole are very comfortable with people who are of another religion and in many cases even those who have no religion."¹ An overwhelming majority believe that "a person without religious faith can be a good American."

Most of us Americans are "lay liberals" who believe that "it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you live right." We have no stomach for holy wars or even for proselytizing. "Evangelism and mission outreach," Luidens, Hoge and Johnson note in their study of religion among the Baby Boomer generation, "are condoned by lay liberals to the extent that they involve education or service to the less fortunate" but not if they promote prostelytization:

"Go teach" and "go heal" are acceptable battle cries. But lay liberals are resistant to "go preach"; evangelism and mission programs are not acceptable if they involve efforts to persuade others that their faiths are inadequate. Many Boomers...say that they would be content if their children adopted non-Western religions "as long as they are happy" and as long as they are moral citizens.²

· Campbell, D. (2010, December 16). *A conversation with David Campbell*. Retrieved from American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us: <http://www.pewforum.org/American-Grace-How-Religion-Divides-and-Unites-Us.aspx>

² Luidens, D. A., Hoge, D. R., & Johnson, B. (1994). Lay Liberalism Among Baby Boomers. *Theology Today*, 51 (2), 249-255.

Of course that's us. Critics will suggest that elsewhere, particularly within the Islamic world, lay liberals are scarce. Nevertheless there is little support for Europeans' worry that Muslims aim to take over the West and impose Shari'a. Even radical Islamicists are not interested in establishing Eurabia: their aim is to oppose Western neo-colonialism. In the past third world anti-colonialists adopted Marxism as a protest against Westernization; now formerly colonized peoples in the Middle East and elsewhere oppose Westernization the name of Islam. But, arguably, the clash of civilizations is not, as Samuel Huntington suggested, between cultures defined by their religious affiliations but between affluent cosmopolitans in societies formed by the Enlightenment and members of the traditional societies of the Global South, who have been colonized, exploited and humiliated. Many have turned to radical Islam as an expression of their anti-Western sentiments. But here again religion is just a marker of other interests and affiliations rather than a driving force.

Religious differences are not responsible for violence, warfare and terrorism. On the world stage, religion is not important. People kill one another because of tribal affiliations, economic interests and other secular motives. Religious leaders who, because of their professional interests, imagine that religion is relevant and important, promote ecumenism and interreligious understanding. But if, as I have suggested, religion is epiphenomenal, greater religious understanding and theological agreement will not make any practical difference.

Moreover, ecumenical efforts are not only pointless: they are undesirable to the extent that they have undermined the distinctiveness of different religions traditions. What shape *should* ecumenism take? Arguably what we should want in the Church is a consumerist religion to accommodate the widest possible range of tastes, and intercommunion so that individuals can sample and enjoy different styles of religiosity without affiliation or commitment. Ideally, we would like to see denominational bureaucracies eliminated in favor of an integrated administrative structure, the merger of organizations devoted to social service and other essentially secular projects in the interests of efficiency, and at the same time the greatest possible diversity of sacred spaces and liturgies. The model I suggest is Saddleback megachurch with its integrated program and diverse "tents" providing different styles of religiosity to suit the diverse tastes of its clientele.

3 The ecumenical model: Saddleback's many tents

3.1 The end of congregations and denominations

The dying mainline churches assume that religious participation essentially involves belonging—in particular, belonging to a congregation and to a denomination. But many of the churches that are now growing operate differently: most are not congregations in the conventional sense and are either *de jure* or *de facto* non-denominational.

Rick Warren's Saddleback megachurch, which maintains several "campuses" in Southern California, is a prime example. Most individuals who attend services at Saddleback are non-members who visit only occasionally. Of members who attend regularly, only a minority belong to the small groups that Saddleback, like most megachurches, regard as the core of its ministry. Most people who attend megachurches like Saddleback *go* to church in the way they *go* to shopping malls, parks or other public facilities: they do not *belong* to megachurches or identify with any denomination, even where the megachurches they attend have denominational affiliations.³ Saddleback allows its clientele to choose their level and style of involvement and offers a variety of consumer choices in liturgical style: it features services at a variety of outbuildings or "tents" in addition to its main preaching hall, including black gospel, hard-rock and Hawaiian-themed venues, where Rick Warren appears on jumbotrons.

Like it or not, Americans are consumers. They look at churches as providers of goods and services. And when Americans "church shop," as they unabashedly call it, they typically consider congregations across denominational lines, looking for the local facility that offers the product they want. Moreover, according to a 2009 poll by the Pew Research group,

large numbers of Americans engage in multiple religious practices, mixing elements of diverse traditions. Many say they attend worship services of more than one faith or denomination -- even when they are not traveling or going to special events like weddings and funerals. Many also blend Christianity with Eastern or New Age beliefs such as reincarnation, astrology and the presence of spiritual energy in physical objects.⁴

³ Saddleback is *de jure* Baptist but *de facto* non-denominational.

⁴ *Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths*. (2009, December 9). Retrieved from The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: <http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/Many-Americans-Mix-Multiple-Faiths.aspx>

	All adults %	-----Protestant-----				
		Total %	White evang %	White mainline %	Black %	Catholic
Attend only one place	37	44	54	36	40	42
Attend multiple places	35	39	37	31	57	40
Only of own faith	11	9	9	7	15	21
Different faiths	24	30	28	24	42	19
Seldom/Never attend/DK	28	17	9	34	3	18
	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>How often attend other places?</i>						
Regularly	9	8	6	6	12	9
Occasionally	26	31	31	25	45	30
Total attend multiple places	35	39	37	31	57	40
Sample size	2,003	1,099	465	402	135	437
Q281-Q282f.						

Denominations no longer track the theological disagreements or differences in national origin that were originally responsible for the multiplication of religious institutions in the US. Different denominations have effectively become differently themed “tents.”

To this extent denominationalism is a good thing: liturgical differences, “branded” by denomination, expand the scope of individual choice. The proliferation of denominations makes it possible for more individuals to get the liturgical experience they prefer and, indeed, for those who enjoy variety to visit churches that belong to different denominations as the spirit moves them – as “large numbers of Americans” already do. In the interests of accommodating the widest range of preferences, we should want these tents to be as different to one another as possible. We should want Presbyterians to be grim Calvinists and Methodists to be cheerful Arminians; we should want Baptists to sing gospel, Lutherans to play Bach and Episcopalians to do high church.

Megachurches are not for everybody: preaching is the centerpiece of all their services and they are, for the most part, socially and theologically conservative. Even Saddleback, with its numerous “tents,” activities and options, offers only a narrow range of liturgical styles. The service in each of its tents is a preaching service, focused on Rick Warren’s 45-minute sermon dispensed with a little sugar to make the medicine go down. Traditional denominations can offer a wider range of styles and so appeal to a greater range

of tastes. Americans approach religion, quite reasonably, as consumers.⁵ They want, and expect, choices. Arguably, progressive mainline churches should emulate megachurches' consumerist agenda and go it one better, by providing liturgical styles that evangelical churches cannot or will not offer.

3.2 Belonging and going

In addition to offering participants a choice of different liturgical styles, Saddleback allows them to choose different modes of participation and levels of commitment. Driving onto Saddleback's main "campus" you can park and head directly for one of the preaching-halls or you can stop for Krispy Kreme donuts at the satellite parking area and chat with others waiting for the shuttle bus that goes to the mesa, where the preaching-halls, eateries and other facilities are located. At the main theater-hanger, which has been compared to a community college gym, you can sit deep in the bleachers, committed to staying through the 45-minute sermon, or you can sit at the periphery, drifting in and out, or you can sit at a table outside with your coffee and Krispy Kremes listening to Warren's sermon booming outside on loudspeakers.

You can also choose your level of commitment when it comes to membership. Most visitors never become members of Saddleback. They attend casually frequently or infrequently knowing that they will never be buttonholed or embarrassed. Like all megachurches, because of its sheer size, as well as its intentional organization, Saddleback provides visitors with the option of remaining anonymous and participating impersonally. It is a public space where you can enjoy the day out and crowd scene without making contact and where you can dress as you please like a park, farmers' market or

⁵ Theologians and clergy hate consumerist talk because it sounds crass and cynical and, more importantly, because the rhetoric of consumerism, choice and "freedom" have been appropriated by the political right. Within the current political discourse, the right has adopted "freedom" as its leitmotif and, in response, the left appeals to "the common good." Arguably, as progressives we should reject the assumption promoted by the Right that progressive, pro-government policies sacrifice "freedom" or individualism in the interest of promoting a communitarian "common good."

It is not government but business and other non-governmental agencies that constrain individual freedom. "Big government," by regulating those agencies, expands the scope of individual choice. If the government did not prohibit employers from discriminating and if it did not promote affirmative action policies my employment options as a woman would be restricted to secretarial work, "caring" work, waitressing and retail sales. If the government did not prohibit landlords from refusing to rent to racial minorities and real estate agents from steering them to segregated communities, people of color would have far less choice about where to live. The state restricts a few of the relatively unimportant choices of the few, e.g. the option of employers, landlords and real estate agents to discriminate against women and minorities, in order to greatly expand the options of the many to promote the greatest good, understood as preference-satisfaction, for the greatest number.

shopping mall. If however you want to belong and are looking for “community” Saddleback offers innumerable activities and small groups.

Conventional mainline churches do not, and probably cannot, offer this range of choices. Moreover the trend during the past 50 years has been to restrict choice. For advocates of liturgical revision liturgy was a teaching tool or, more precisely, a way of “using psychology” to wheedle and manipulate the laity. Clergy promoted the “horizontal dimension” in liturgy in the interests of “building community,” assuming naively that sociability promoted social concern, “caring” behavior and political action. And they did what they could to eliminate religious experience, the “vertical dimension” of worship, which they regarded as selfishly “escapist.”

But advocates of liturgical reform failed. They did not turn their adherents to the left politically. And they did not, as they had hoped, draw in hordes of young people, attracted by colloquial English and Christian rock. Mainline churches began declining in the 1960s and the dropout rate of the young of the period, the Baby Boomers, was unprecedented. (Luidens, Hoge and Johnson 1994) The changes in any case were not intended to appeal to consumer tastes and they did not: mainline churches effectively destroyed their clients’ interest in religion and drove them away.

Evangelical churches by contrast aimed to please and used the results of consumer research to tailor their services and programs to suit the interests of their target populations. After extensive research, Rick Warren and his Saddleback team developed a profile of their target consumer, “Saddleback Sam,” the typical unchurched man within their catchment area, and created programs and liturgical styles would appeal to him, his wife Saddleback Samantha, and their kids, Steve and Sally.

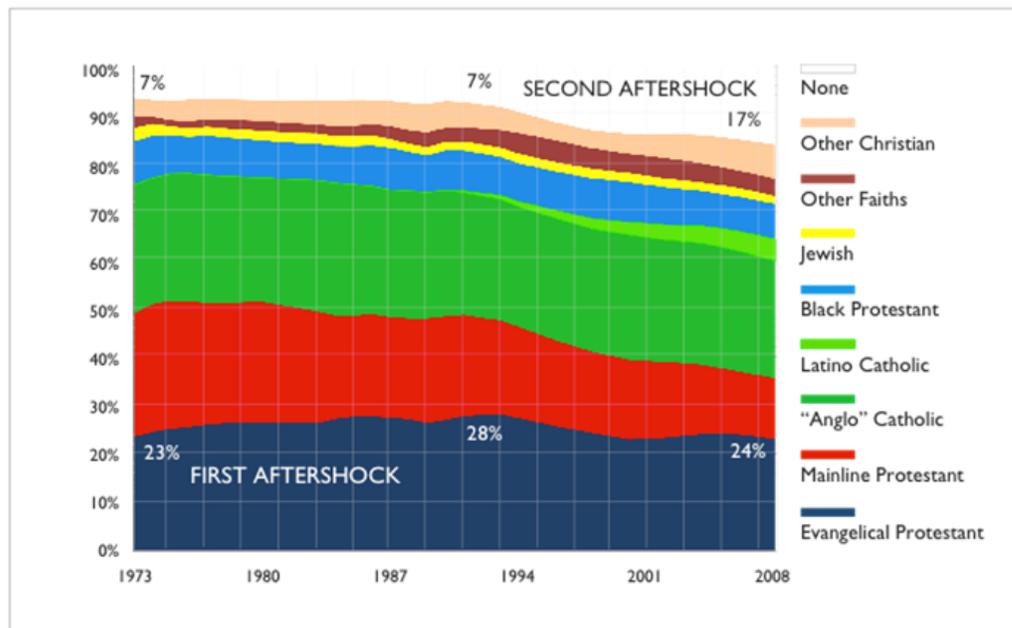
Mainline clergy, for the most part, sniffed at these tactics. They imagined they had a captive audience awaiting their teaching. But they were wrong, and disastrously so. By the late 20th century, in most American communities, churchgoing had become *de facto* as well as *de jure* optional. Americans were behaving like religious consumers: they were not going to go to church if the church didn’t supply the products they liked. Mainline churches which, despising consumerism, regarded church services as teachable moments addressed to a captive audience, lost out and deservedly so.

4 Consumers arise!

By every measure religious participation in the US is declining. From 1991 to 2011 the number of Americans who did not go to church went from 24

percent to 37 percent, and that trend shows no sign of reversing.⁶ Evangelicals now represent a larger share of Americans who state a religious preference because the percentage of Americans who state a religious preference is declining. For all their visibility, evangelicals just about held their own from 1973 to 2008 during which time the fastest growing “religious group” in the US was the Nones – individuals who say they have no religion.⁷

TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY (1973–2008)



The churches’ problem is not ecumenism or interfaith relations but secularization. Secularization may be inevitable but if there is any chance of stopping or reversing it it will take a radical rethinking of the role of churches and of the purpose of ecumenism. What sort of ecumenism should we want? Arguably a consumerist ecumenism that seeks to satisfy the tastes of diverse consumers without imposing doctrinal tests – an ecumenism directed to giving religious consumers what they want. Whether churches recognize it or not laypeople do not look to churches as sources of authority or as communities, but rather see them as the suppliers of religious products that they can select, combine and tweek as they please. Arguably it is time for churches to recognize and accept this role.

<http://www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/90059845?More%20Americans%20customize%20religion%20to%20suit%20their%20needs>

<http://pewforum.org/American-Grace--How-Religion-Divides-and-Unites-U.s.asp>

Now, in the depths of what has been called an “ecumenical winter” the institutional efforts of the Roman Catholic Church and its dialogue partners have reached an impasse. All doctrinal differences that were negotiable have been negotiated and what remain are non-negotiable disagreements. Anglicans and Orthodox Christians will never accept the Roman Catholic interpretation of Papal supremacy, and that is a commitment which the Roman Catholic Church, in its official teachings, will never compromise. Roman Catholics and Orthodox will never accept the ordination of women and that is something that Anglicans will never repudiate. Other Christian Churches have additional difficulties with theological doctrines concerning the Apostolic Succession and the Real Presence. There will be realignments: Anglicans who oppose women’s ordination will affiliate with the Roman Catholic Church, which is now promoting an “ordinariat” for disgruntled Episcopalians. And some churches *within* the broad traditions of Christendom may merge. But at the institutional level there will be no further progress amongst Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Churches because the differences that remain are non-negotiable.

But ecumenism is still alive under the frozen surface amongst consumerist lay Christians, whose syncretistic quasi-Christianity blends popular ideas about reincarnation and karma with Christian doctrine and plain superstition. Deeply pragmatic, they “church shop” in the same way that they try out diets, exercise regimes or self-help programs to see what will “work” for them. They visit different churches, across denominational lines, in the same spirit that they go to restaurants offering different cuisines. For most, doctrinal differences are of no interest and they do not see any reason to accept churches’ teachings if they are uncongenial. It makes no difference to them one way or another if a group of bishops or denominational bureaucrats reach an agreement about doctrine.

Both religious liberals and conservative evangelicals deplore Americans syncretism and penchant for customizing their religious beliefs and practices to suit their preferences. But arguably the ecumenism we should want is one that embraces this syncretic consumerism. A large minority of Americans go to churches across denominational lines to taste different flavors of religiosity and enjoy different styles of liturgy and it is hard to see why we should regard this as a bad thing.

And if this is indeed a good thing then what matters is not doctrinal agreement but intercommunion – permission to participate in the liturgy of different churches. This has always been regarded as contingent on doctrinal agreement. But doctrinal agreement is impossible and this presses us to consider whether there is any good reason to make it a requirement for

intercommunion. The Spirit bloweth where it listeth and whether churches recognize it or not, intercommunion is a reality on the ground.

The bad news is that ecumenical negotiations have reached an impasse; the good news is that they are irrelevant.