DEFINING ECUMENICS FIFTY YEARS AFTER MACKAY

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Introduction

When John A. Mackay wrote *Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Universal* in the early 1960s, he was not only the first professor of ecumenics in history, who had served in this capacity already for one generation. The book was apparently also the first English monograph dedicated to ecumenics as a distinct theological discipline. Much has changed in ecumenism and ecumenics in the last 50 years; thus, a reflection on the various approaches to ecumenical research and writing seems appropriate.

This article surveys and classifies ways in which ecumenics has been defined so far with the purpose of arriving at insights for an appropriate contemporary view of the discipline. The first aim of this article, the more modest one, is therefore to present a listing and discussion of the various definitions and even some implicit understandings of ecumenics that can be found so far. However, there is also a second, more ambitious aim: a reflection on parameters to be considered when delineating the contours of the discipline today, which will lead to a working definition of ecumenics that aims at corresponding to the global situation of contemporary Christianity.

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The point of departure is the assumption that ecumenics is a subdiscipline of theology. One significant alternative to viewing ecumenics as a clearly demarcated area of study is to emphasize its importance for all theological subdisciplines.\(^4\) The logic of this argument is appealing, and it appears to boost the importance of ecumenical thinking. However, the same logic can be applied to mission, to a biblical orientation, and to a historical perspective,\(^5\) and one can argue that theology as a whole relates to the rest of academia in a similar manner. Moreover, the academic division of labour during the last centuries (or, in the case of ecumenics, the last two generations) cannot simply be ignored. If everything in theology is ecumenics and ecumenical, there is likelihood that nothing is fully so; ultimately the focus on the object of ecumenism may be blurred, and the theme might only appear as a peripheral interest among researchers of other subdisciplines of theology.

Finally, the question has to be raised as to whether ecumenics should be considered an academic discipline at all.\(^6\) There is a serious alternative: considering it as a “field of studies” (similar to African Studies or Environmental Studies) with more or less loosely connected areas of interest but no overarching methods and theories, and – in the case of ecumenics – possibly even no agreed-upon object. The advantage of such a view is that it grants room for a plurality of approaches and potentially makes the whole endeavour more flexible. Nevertheless, there is a price to pay, and it may be a high price, for a loose definition as a field entitled “Ecumenical Studies” implies a volatility which can lead to extinction once fashions in the environment change. Although academic disciplines and their function are occasionally questioned,


there are no signs that they will ever disappear from the scene. Only a well-defined discipline with a clear aim and object is able to demonstrate its significance to the larger theological academy and to the churches.

**Mackay’s definition**

But what is the object of ecumenics? Mackay defined the emerging discipline as “the Science of the Church Universal, conceived as a World Missionary Community,” focusing on “[i]ts nature, its functions, its relations and its strategy.” His definition originated in the establishment of the Princeton chair of ecumenics in 1937 and breathes the spirit of the missionary era. While one may wonder today what exactly he meant when referring to “strategy,” much of this broad description is helpful in that it suggests that the Christian Church can be studied in manifold ways, which necessitates exceeding a mere systematic-theological approach, pure historical study, or a wholly sociological point of view. Both the “functions” Mackay mentions – the worshipping, prophetic, redemptive, and especially unitive function – and the “relations” (to non-Christian religions, society, culture, and the state) indicate that the way he designed the new discipline aimed at centring upon the Church and, at the same time, broadening the researcher’s perspective to include the whole inhabited world, the οἰκουμένη.

The strength of Mackay’s definition, however, may also be its weakness: a comprehensiveness that did not really demarcate a new disci-

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7 A helpful critical discussion of the controversies about what disciplines mean for universities is found in Robert Post, “Debating Disciplinarity,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Summer 2009), pp. 749–770.

8 This is not to deny the substantial overlap of ecumenics with Systematic Theology and Church History, and the importance of the social sciences for much of the study of ecumenism.


10 Different from other elements in this definition, to which whole sections or chapters are devoted, “strategy” is not explained anywhere in the book; it is only mentioned in passing in the epilogue.
pline in a concise manner but outlined his view of "church" and of ecumenism and attached deliberations on a number of research interests. Nevertheless, Mackay had made a beginning, and most of the definitions crafted afterwards emphasize one of the aspects he mentioned. Almost all of the later views of what ecumenics is to focus upon – the Church, Christian unity, theology, and the relationship to the world – appear in this early definition and in the book expounding it. Thus there is a certain logic in the similarity between a somewhat imprecise initial shape of the discipline and the pluriformity in the more than a dozen understandings of what ecumenics is all about which will be delineated below. This lack of unity may seem surprising; after all, ecumenism, the seeming object of ecumenics, is precisely about unity. Yet we know that the nature of Christian unity is among the most debated subjects in the Ecumenical Movement; we should expect, therefore, that even the object, methods, and aims of the academic reflection on ecumenical matters are contested.

It is, of course, a common phenomenon in academia that fields and disciplines are conceived in somewhat varying ways in different regions or sub-discourses.11 Thus even reflections on the task of theological subdisciplines, including ecumenics, must recognize and would probably do well even to appreciate the necessity of some diversity in defining the very foundation they are built upon. In Christian theology with its two thousand years of history, various confessional traditions, manifold theological schools, and changing fashions, something would be wrong if all agreed on what we actually do when we engage in ecumenics! At the same time, when observing the area of studies alternatively entitled “ecumenical theology” or “ecumenical studies,” it becomes clear that this endeavour is defined in such divergent ways (ranging from the systematic-theological reflection on theological dialogues to the multi-disciplinary study of any issue associated with interfaith relations and Christianity in the public sphere) that a discourse is needed in which the object of the discipline is clarified. Although this study makes no claim of completeness, it aims at contributing to this discourse by outlining and categorizing extant definitions of ecumenics and by evaluating them. As will be seen, these

definitions can be grouped into four major sets. The first comprises those that focus on the Church.

Focus on the Church and the churches

1. Ecumenics as the study of the Church

Mackay’s conviction that a new discipline was needed that would study the Christian Church in a comprehensive manner, a “Science of the Church Universal,” was astonishingly far-sighted. He realized that the results of global missionary activities had led to a situation in which Christianity had become a truly worldwide phenomenon for the first time - a phenomenon to be studied and explained, therefore, with a perspective that paralleled this universality. It is interesting that journals with a similar focus, dedicated specifically to the study of the Church, were founded only in the early 21st century.12

While a very inclusive outlook that makes the Church the object of ecumenics provides space for a broad range of issues to be part of the new discipline, it provokes a concern for method. How does one study “the Church Universal”? In his book Mackay did not give us instruments but presented his own theological reflections and experiences, connected with the idealistic conception of the Church “as a World Missionary Community.” This certainly laudable thinking raises the question as to whether ecumenics is a normative or rather a descriptive-interpretative discipline. Mackay clearly opted for the first of these two options. The second does the opposite.

2. Ecumenics as the study of the churches

Major tributaries to ecumenics in its 20th and 21st century shape were the earlier disciplines or modes of theological reflection called irenics, symbolics, and Konfessionskunde (i.e., the comparative study of churches).13 In this tradition, the major Christian confessions, denom-

12 These are Ecclesiology and the International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church.

13 For an excellent overview, see Brosseder, Ökumenische Theologie, pp. 11-97.
institutions, and movements were analysed and compared with the aim of accurately depicting and interpreting them. Some research in this tradition already included a major focus on interchurch relations. This way of studying the churches was ecumenized in a more straightforward manner already in 1962 by Peter Meinhold in his book entitled *Ökumenische Kirchenkunde* ("The Ecumenical Study of Churches"). He considered his approach a theological discipline in its own right and stipulated that *Ökumenische Kirchenkunde* "has to treat the present life of Christianity in its different types, i.e., how it presents itself in the churches, free churches, movements, communities and groups of all kinds." On the basis of this tradition, one may actually view ecumenics as merely the continuation of these earlier disciplines. A certain limitation of these, however, has been, and still is, the focus on the well-established traditions. Many of the young movements and much of Christianity in the Two-Thirds World hardly appears in this more traditional approach. Because of its focus on theology and historical developments, recently born denominations simply do not provide enough material for this kind of perspective. This is different in the third option of defining ecumenics:

3. Ecumenics as the study of world Christianity

When Archbishop William Temple spoke about the "great new fact of our time" in the mid-20th century, he referred to the global presence of Christianity and the "worldwide fellowship of Christians" that had arisen through the missionary movement of the preceding generations. In spite of its context, this quotation has often been connected with more specifically ecumenical endeavours and organizations when

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14 See, e.g., Ferdinand Kattenbusch, *Lehrbuch der Vergleichenden Confessionskunde*, Freiburg i.B.: Mohr, 1892, a book which explicitly includes in the prolegomena a reflection on the "inner relationship of the particular churches" (pp. 28–36) and presents itself as a "history of the science of the relationship of confessions" (pp. 39–70).


16 Ibid., p. 17.

it was cited later. Temple's original observation, however, is even more important today; Christianity is now much more a southern and Two-Thirds World phenomenon than he might have imagined in the 1940s. This reality calls for understanding ecumenics as a discipline reflecting upon the global diversity and almost endlessly contextualizable shape of churches.

Interestingly, the last twenty years have brought forth an emerging area of research that focuses precisely on this reality: the study of World Christianity. So far it has remained more of a research area than a discipline of its own, and a considerable number of its protagonists are institutionally linked to mission studies (and others to church history). However, the connection of many of its aspects to mission is little more than historical, while much of this field is of immediate ecumenical relevance. If Mackay were still with us, he would probably recognize the study of World Christianity as a partial fulfilment of his prediction regarding the new discipline of ecumenics.

In spite of the promising era of ecumenics we may enter in researching World Christianity, we have to realize both what this line of studies can and what it cannot do. It certainly does complement the traditional symbolics and Konfessionskunde. What it does not do, at least not so far, is to explore movements, avenues, or models of unity in the non-Western world. In fact, theology does not seem to be as important as in the more traditional approaches to ecumenical study at all. This calls for a focus on theological issues.

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18 Again, two journals indicate the maturing of the discourse in this area: Studies in World Christianity and the Journal of World Christianity.

19 Viggo Mortensen, "Nordic Missiology and Ecumenics," Svensk Missionstidsskrift 89 (2001/4), pp. 439–453, does not discuss ecumenics at all but urges that missiology needs to grow into a study of World Christianity. My argument is that he should have advocated that ecumenics has to include studies of World Christianity.
Focus on theology

4. Ecumenics as ecumenical theology I: comparative dogmatics

But what role should theology actually play in the discipline? At least four can be imagined; all of them have been called "ecumenical theology," but they represent quite distinct ways of utilizing theological approaches in the ecumenical discourse. The first among these, and probably the most common one, may be called "Comparative Dogmatics." In this view, Ecumenical Theology is "a distinct field ... in which questions of doctrine and lifestyle which are controversial among the churches and the interdenominational debates of these questions are researched and deliberated." According to this view ecumenics is, as it were, an academic extension of the theological dialogues between the churches.

The contribution of such a discipline to the success of ecumenical projects is its focus on issues of tension and attempts to resolve them. The Comparative Dogmatics perspective, therefore, clearly goes beyond the older symbolics approach, which did not aim at resolutions but at describing profiles. The weakness of this perspective, however, is its adherence to established confessional boundaries, which are not necessarily the greatest hindrances to unity in all cases. Moreover, the fact that they have been overcome in the history of ecumenism only in a few cases does not mean that we should merely "try harder," but that there are deeper issues to be addressed. These shortcomings are avoided in a second way of relating theology and ecumenics.

20 Thils, La théologie œcuménique, lists five meanings of "ecumenical theology"; three of these, of which two overlap, correspond to categories in this paper (i.e., ecumenical theology IV and the study of the Ecumenical Movement). The other two meanings (the theological significance of the WCC and the theology done by the WCC) are not pursued any further here due to their focus on a single organization.

5. Ecumenics as ecumenical theology II: interconfessional theology

Here a non-denominational vantage point is taken from the outset.\textsuperscript{22} Evidently this is not fully possible for any human being, whence the criticism that “ecumenical theology” in this sense is a misnomer.\textsuperscript{23} However, one should not overlook the fact that all theological thinking builds upon earlier reflection on the things of God. Theology is never purely confessionally owned or shaped. Thus a way of doing ecumenics as an explicitly trans-confessional theological endeavour reminds us of the reality that ecumenicity is an aspect of all theologizing,\textsuperscript{24} even where this is hard to see.

One can argue that such an interconfessional theology may ultimately turn out to be a confessional substitute, thus merely adding to the manifold positions taken on the theological spectrum. Yet this kind of theologizing, which does not clearly determine to what extent or whether it considers itself normative or descriptive, may be a serious alternative to those theological discourses in which the normativity orientation is overly strong. At the very least, this second option of doing ecumenical theology suggests that the normative-descriptive dichotomy must not be the final word, especially in ecumenics.

6. Ecumenics as ecumenical theology III: intercultural theology

If theology has been interconfessional at least to some extent for many generations, it has also always been intercultural. Ecumenical interaction and reflection has regularly taken place between the Christianities of different cultures, and contextual theologies have played a significant role in the Ecumenical Movement. It is somewhat surprising


\textsuperscript{24} Cf. also Peter Neuner’s related but distinct argument; he emphasizes in “Ökumenische Theologie,” \textit{RGG}\textsuperscript{4}, p. 534, that “every theology is ecumenical insofar as it is committed to the Christian truth, which is addressed to all humans.”
that only rarely has this situation led to a definition of ecumenics in which the cultural plurality visible in theology has been made a guiding theme.  

Recent discussions on the adequacy of the term “Intercultural Theology” for Mission Studies indicate that many of representatives of this neighbouring field of ecumenics do not wish to adopt this new paradigm for their discipline. Yet as a description of ecumenics, it has definite advantages. Similar to the way the study of World Christianity relates to Konfessionskunde, this approach relates to what has been called above ecumenical theology II (or, interconfessional theology). Interconfessional Theology in extending its logic further but incorporating insights from the global diversity of Christianities. Of course this celebration of plurality can be overdone; diversity borders on tension and division, and a study of global theological plurality will ultimately lead back to the insight of the necessity of research on Christian unity and its dynamics.

Focus on unity

7. Ecumenics as ecumenical theology IV: theology of ecumenism

This can be done, firstly, in a theological manner. A fourth way of doing “ecumenical theology,” therefore, is to focus on the ecumenical indicative and imperative and, possibly, on unifying themes in the Ecu-

25 Adriaan Geense reasons, “ecumenical theology might ... be the dialogue of different contextual theologies. ... With regard to its future, it would also be conceivable only as intercultural theology”; see his article “Ecumenical Theology,” in: Erwin Fahlbusch et al. (eds.), The Encyclopedia of Christianity, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, p. 44. Volker Küster views Ecumenics as part of the “‘plural-discipline’ of missiology, ecumenics, and comparative religion” leading to the new discipline of “intercultural theology”; see his contribution “Toward an Intercultural Theology: Paradigm Shifts in Missiology, Ecumenics, and Comparative Religion,” in: Viggo Mortensen (ed.), Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, pp. 171–184, here 171. This, however, would mean the end of ecumenics as a distinct discipline.

26 For such a suggestion by the German Society for Mission Studies (DGMW), see “Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology and Its Relationship to Religious Studies,” Mission Studies 25 (2008/1), pp. 103–108, and three critical responses in the same issue of Mission Studies (pp. 109–114).
menical Movement. In other words, this kind of theology mainly aims at providing an intellectual foundation for ecumenical projects. Therefore it has a more practical orientation and tends to be viewed as being normative, similar to confessionnal systematic-theological reasoning. 

There is a tendency that the Theology of Ecumenism keeps little distance to the practice associated with it – similar to a missiology that considers itself as part of specific missionary pursuits. We can see, therefore, a clear focus but a certain narrowness of scope; such an approach reduces ecumenics to a subject of Systematic Theology. Thus, as is the case with all views of ecumenics as ecumenical theology, other factors, especially the sociological ones, tend to be neglected.

8. Ecumenics as the study of the Ecumenical Movement

A possible corrective to this situation is a broad definition of ecumenics as the study of the Ecumenical Movement, which necessarily implies significant thematic and methodological plurality. This way of engaging in ecumenical research has its strength in the descriptive-interpretive focus on a (seemingly at least) well-defined object. It is interesting, though, that Mackay opposed this view of the discipline. He argued, “[a]s thus conceived, Ecumenics has included all matters connected with the unity of the Church, but nothing that has to do with the Church’s mission.” Mackay raised an important point: the unity of the Church and its relationship with the world should not be isolated from each other.

Another issue, which only became visible as the decades passed, was the problematic nature of the very definition of the “Ecumenical Movement.” To fulfil its purpose, the movement created institutions

27 An example is Gillian R. Evans, Method in Ecumenical Theology: The Lessons So Far, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. According to her, “Ecumenical theology has both to look towards and maintain unity; and to counter division” (p. 19).
29 Mackay, Ecumenics, p. 31. Emphasis in the original.
and organizations such as the World Council of Churches and analogous national councils. Even if these did not draw boundaries around themselves in a very marked manner, such entities inevitably created “Others,” which raised the question of ecumenicity in novel ways. At the same time, alternative ecumenisms – such as the Christian World Communions, the Evangelicals with their organizations, and revivalist concepts of unity among Charismatics and Neo-Pentecostals – arose. These ecumenisms hint at the usefulness of an even broader approach, which is found in the next definition:

9. Ecumenics as the study of interchurch relations

The advantage of defining ecumenics as the study of all types of interchurch relations\(^{30}\) is that the focus is broadened from particular institutional manifestations of the Christian search for unity to a much more diverse array of ecumenical phenomena, including those where spirituality is in the focus and various fields of interdenominational cooperation which are not normally labelled “ecumenical.”\(^{31}\) Thus here ecumenics becomes the study of forms of Christian unity, which is a useful approach when one considers that models of unity are much debated among and in many traditions.

Compared with Mackay’s vision of the discipline, this is still a “narrower” one\(^{32}\) in that it does not direct much attention to the church’s

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\(^{30}\) Cf. the self-description of the Centre for Ecumenical Research in Leuven; according to its official profile, this centre was established for “the scientific study of the interaction between the confessional traditions within Christianity” with a focus on the aspects of “anticipating unity and stimulating the common action of churches in the world.” See “Centre for Ecumenical Research” (n.d.; cit. March 1, 2012). URL: http://theo.kuleuven.be/en/researchcentres/centr_ecu.

\(^{31}\) An interesting early sociological study of interchurch relations in the USA views a variety of evangelical, social service, theological education, youth, and administrative interdenominational organizations and coordinating bodies as manifestations of “ecumenism”; see Dean Allen Boldon, “The Ecumenical Movement in America: Protestant Conciliarism as Interorganizational Relations,” Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975.

\(^{32}\) Charles W. Forman “The Definition of Ecumenics,” Theology Today 22 (1965/1), pp. 1–10, here 6. Forman suggests that “both the wider and narrower definitions of the subject need to be allowed to operate in complementary fashion”; for him, the “narrow” definition was “emphasizing inter-church relations and the movement for Christian unity” (ibid.) while the broader one was Mackay’s.
relationship with the world; nevertheless, the definition of ecumenics as reflection on Christian ecumenism in all of its varieties is convincing in that it has an unambiguous object. If there is any technical weakness in it, it is that research of this kind has been dominated by theological and historical perspectives in spite of the fact that interchurch relationships are as much a social reality as a theological problem. This insight led to the view of

10. Ecumenics as a theory of ecumenical processes

After an initial boom of ecumenics in the 1960s and early 1970s, various voices called for a more comprehensive paradigm for the discipline from the late 1970s onwards. Michael Hurley, for instance, observed that Christian disunity "is not just theological, but also involves cultural and other factors," whence "Ecumenics as the scientific study of ecumenism is necessarily multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary. It is a whole of which ecumenical theology is indeed a part, and an important part, but only a part." In a similar vein, Karl-Heinz Stobbe emphasized the importance of considering the "non-theological factors" in ecumenism such as issues of power and identity, and Peter Lengsfeld proposed his "collusion theory" as a perspective in which ecumenics was conceived as a "theory of ecumenical processes." further helpful reflection on such a comprehensive paradigm is found in the work of Peter Staples. He describes "ecumenical science" as an analysis of "the processes of denominational differentiation" and "the processes of ecumenical dedifferentiation" and envisions "a new ecumenical interdiscipline," incorporating theology, history, and considerably more sociology than commonly vis-

Staples’ proposal did not yield many responses,\(^3^8\) possibly because sociological or interdisciplinary studies reveal more hurdles than avenues to visible unity. In spite of this, the writings of Stobbe, Lengsfeld and Staples present the most comprehensive approach to ecumenics as a theory of interchurch relations and Christian unity. The only major limitation in this approach is its exclusive concentration on the inside of the Church, which is reversed in the following fourth focus.

**Focus on the world and Church-world relations**

**11. Ecumenics as ecumenical missiology**

When considering options of ecumenics as the study of the relationship of the church to the world, the first more specific definition of the discipline to be considered is that of an ecumenical theory of mission, for this view is found in Mackay’s thinking. It may well be the one that comes closest to his vision, for he argued,

> The time has clearly come to move beyond the ‘Science of Missions,’ which stirred Christian thought in the first decades of the present century ... The moment has arrived when the worldwide Christian Community must be studied in its essential character as a missionary reality, together with all that is involved when this ecumenical society is true to its nature and fulfils its destiny. This is the task of the Science of Ecumenics.\(^3^9\)

Subsequently the theme of mission remained a less central component in the ecumenics discourse, and Mackay’s view was echoed only a few times.\(^4^0\) The fact that the discipline of mission studies continued to

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37 Ibid., p. 164.
exist evidently made it difficult for ecumenists to claim neighbouring academic territory as their own. As attractive as Mackay’s idea might seem, and as tempting as a transformation of missiology and ecumenics into a combined ecumenico-missiology or missio-ecumenics appears, a wholesale takeover of mission by ecumenics is not imaginable in the near future. As in the case of sociology and anthropology in the social sciences context, a certain overlap will always exist between some academic disciplines, but it is not to be expected that mission scholars will abandon their field altogether or seek merger with ecumenics. However, the configuration of the two disciplines may be different when ecumenists choose to define

12. Ecumenics as the study of the Church’s external relations

An approach that envisages ecumenics as the study of the Church’s or the churches’ relationship with the world can take as a point of departure the very term oivkoume, nh, which perceptibly points beyond mere intra-Christian relations – at least in its initial meaning. What such a definition of the discipline can do is providing a broader view of the mission of the church than some missiologies do, as found e.g. in reflections on ecumenics by the Theological Faculty of Rostock, which defines it as the study of “the interaction of Christianity and culture.”

The focus on the oivkoume, nh could also turn Ecumenics (if focusing on ministry to the world) into a neat complement to Practical Theology (focusing on ministry to the Church). Yet beyond the question as to how this field of research can properly be divided with missiology, this

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pastoral, missional, and ecclesial discipline whose objective is to equip men and women to proclaim Christ’s message of reconciliation and call the community to fulfill the mission of the Triune God and to manifest the church’s unity in the whole inhabited world.” Charles C. West, “Ecumenics, Church and Society: The Tradition of Life and Work,” Ecumenical Review 39 (1987/4), pp. 462–469, quoted Mackay’s definition (p. 465) and asserted (p. 462), “Ecumenics is concerned about the world … it is about the world known, judged and reconciled in Christ. As such, it is missiological, dialogical, and practical.” Crow’s and West’s essays were also published in Samuel Amirtham and Cyris H. S. Moon (eds.), The Teaching of Ecumenics, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987, pp. 16–29 and 86–93.

disciplinary definition almost completely omits the question of church unity or assigns this traditionally central issue of ecumenism a minor role, which would imply a serious rupture of academic tradition.

13. Ecumenics as ecumenical studies

This is probably the case only to a lesser extent when labelling “Ecumenics” such studies that take an ecumenical point of view as a basis and from there explore a variety of themes which may or may not have an immediate connection with movements of Christian unity. Like attempts of constructing interconfessional theologies, such ecumenical studies will face the challenge of a truly trans-confessional perspective, but will be of great benefit to Christians of all backgrounds. In addition to theology and church history, these studies concern aspects of mission, inculturation, spirituality, peace, ethics, ecology, and other issues, which shows that Ecumenical Studies would mean an even broader definition than ecumenics as “the church’s external relations.” At the same time, a move towards a study of everything would soon dissolve the discipline into a field of studies with no clear object and little methodological coherence.

14. Ecumenics as interfaith studies

A last common definition of the discipline is that it studies, mostly in addition to interchurch relations, what happens between the religions. Whether the perspective on the interaction of different religions is called Interfaith Relations, the Study of Interreligious Dialogue, Comparative Theology,42 or Interreligious Theology,43 there are obvious structural parallels of what some call “wider ecumenism” with intra-Christian discussions and relations.

43 Cf. recently Linda Hogan and John d’Arcy May: “Visioning Ecumenics as Inter-cultural, Interreligious, and Public Theology,” *Concilium* 47 (2011/1), pp. 70–81. It should be noted that the term “interreligious theology” is not used very much yet and presents a complicated problem of fundamental theology. Its continuing usefulness will probably have to be assessed by another generation of scholars.
Thus it is not surprising that several exponents of ecumenics defined their pursuit as interdenominational and interreligious studies quite early.\(^{44}\) Moreover, when observing how difficult it is to define the boundaries of Christianity\(^ {45}\) and that Christianity shares many traditions (and some scripture) with Judaism and Islam, it becomes clear that it is not easy to completely disentangle interchurch and interfaith relations, at least when focusing on those religions that we commonly call “monotheistic.”

Nevertheless, this difficulty in fully separating intra- and extra-Christian relations does not mean that one should not distinguish these two realms. In fact, whatever the basis of viewing others as Christian, there is a categorical difference between interchurch and interreligious dialogue that must not be overlooked. As much as we can learn from non-Christians and their religious thinking and practice, and as much as dialogue with them can enhance mutual understanding, peace and even friendship, discrepancies in the very root of our convictions remain so crucial that the unity we seek with adherents of other religions is of an essentially different nature than the unity most Christians can at least imagine with other Christians. Moreover, when we take non-Christian Others seriously, we will also have to accept in which regards they wish to be at variance with us and where their view of unity is different in substance from the unity that Christ mentioned in his High Priestly prayer.

This does not mean that interreligious engagements are unimportant or less important than intra-Christian dialogue. At least for governments and organizations issuing academic grants, this whole area of research and activities is evidently of great interest, which is mirrored in the current support given to universities establishing clusters, chairs, and curricula focusing on interfaith issues. However, this does not mean that this field then must be called “ecumenics.” The fact

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\(^{44}\) The *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, for instance, was founded in 1964 and moved to a view of ecumenism as including interfaith dialogue already in the latter part of the 1960s.

\(^{45}\) The World Council of Churches excludes non-trinitarians without emphatically declaring them to be non-Christians. Together with the growing movement of Jesus followers in non-Christian religions, and the phenomenon of post-Christian religions such as Mormonism, the existence of unitarian and binitarian denominations poses a non-negligible challenge to the traditional trinity-based ecumenism.
that this term has been used for interfaith studies of various kinds does mean, though, that more reflection on “narrow” and “wider” definitions is necessary.

**Ambiguities and avenues**

This quick walk through the labyrinth of ecumenics reveals that this line of studies has lived with a lack of clarity as to its basic orientation from its early stages; it is not surprising, therefore, that it was described as “a generally ill-defined subject” already in 1965.46 Needless to say, such a state of affairs is not entirely atypical of academic disciplines. Uncertainties, shifts of focus, and overlaps with other disciplines and fields arise because of the historical and social nature of knowledge production and other contextual and internal parameters such as markets, the development of distinct discipline cultures or subcultures, and the necessity of institutional embeddedness.47 This does not mean, however, that obscurity is a virtue. Disciplines can fade into oblivion or become extinct both for insignificance and for a want of precision. Yet it is the latter that has plagued ecumenics, not a lack of importance.

The ambiguity of the discipline is visible even in two aspects of Mackay’s definition: (1) He mixed certain normative elements (“world missionary community”; “nature”) with elements demanding empirical study (“functions”; “relations”). This issue will be addressed later. (2) Mackay tried to combine a study of the church’s inside (the “unitive” and “worshipping” functions) with an outside orientation (the “redemptive” and “prophetic” functions and relations to other religions, society, culture, and the state).48 Evidently this attempt is

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46 Forman, “The Definition of Ecumenics,” p. 6. Forman’s essay is actually a review article of Mackay’s Ecumenics.

47 Armin Krishnan, *What are Academic Disciplines? Some Observations on the Disciplinarity vs. Interdisciplinarity Debate*, National Centre for Research Methods Working Paper, Southampton: ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, 2009, connects these parameters with six major perspectives on academic disciplines: (1) philosophy (knowledge production communities); (2) anthropology (“academic tribes”); (3) sociology (division of labour in academia); (4) history (continuity and creativity); management (supply side for labour markets); and (6) education (stability and coherence for teaching).

48 Most of these elements represent sections or chapters in Mackay’s book.
related to the fact that the term “ecumenical” itself has been used with rather diverse meanings, as Visser ’t Hooft’s oft-quoted explanation shows, for the word refers to all of the following:

(a) the whole (inhabited) earth; (b) ... the whole of the (Roman) Empire; (c) ... the whole of the Church; (d) that which has universal ecclesiastical validity; (e) ... the world-wide missionary outreach of the Church; (f) ... the relations between and unity of two or more Churches (or of Christians of various confessions); (g) that quality or attitude which expresses the consciousness of and desire for Christian unity.49

Two of the four major foci of ecumenics definitions mentioned above neatly correspond to Visser ’t Hooft’s categories: the world-orientation to (a) and (e) and the unity-orientation to (f) and (g). While (b) is obviously no longer relevant, the “Church” and “Theology” foci are those arenas where (c) and (d) are debated because unity is at stake or because views on the Christian existence in this world differs. Thus unsurprisingly the most salient foci of the term “ecumenical” relevant to defining the discipline are church unity and the church’s relationship with the world – precisely those in tension in Mackay’s understanding.

The future course of ecumenics may follow any of the three avenues commonly used as “survival strategies” by academic disciplines or sub-disciplines which face the threat of decline, the challenge of changing environments, or indeed a crisis of identity: (1) “turning inward and strengthening boundaries”; (2) “forming strategic alliances with stronger disciplines”; or (3) “reconstituting the discipline in a newer and larger field of study.”50 All of these strategies may be successful; however, each can also lead to the eventual extinction of a discipline because it becomes either irrelevant (= 1) or a minor area of study rather than a significant partner of an established discipline (= 2) or because it changes its shape so much that continuity with the original line of studies no longer exists (= 3).

In the case of ecumenics, “turning inwards” could mean a re-emphasis on the traditional approaches to studying church unity, i.e., research


on doctrinal issues, official dialogues, ecumenical documents, and WCC-related institutions. This would lead, however, to a narrowing of emphasis that does not really point forward into the 21st century with its many global challenges. “Forming strategic alliances” probably will not produce any novelties as well, for institutionally ecumenics is, in many cases, only able to exist in cooperation with church history, systematic theology, or mission departments anyway.

Broad definitions and beyond

The third option, “reconstituting the discipline,” is visible in the definitions of John O’Grady and Peter Scherle as well as in a recent proposal of Linda Hogan and John d’Arcy May.51 Hogan and May describe ecumenics as “Intercultural, Interreligious, and Public Theology.” As a dialogue of cultures, religions, and religion with society, and as a reflection on such dialogue,52 ecumenics appears here as a manner of enhancing and possibly even steering the relationship of the church with the world.

O’Grady and Scherle present a similar conception. They stress that ecumenics must have a wider scope in the 21st century than in its beginnings and announce the “next phase of ecumenics”53 in which the discipline is to become “a theory of processes of dynamic interrelations, of communications and conflicts that are taking place within Christianity and between churches, between and within religions as well as within the emerging and ruptured world society.”54 According to them, therefore, the aim of ecumenics is ultimately nothing less than the aim of the Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; their reflection noticeably echoes the language used in this pro-

54 Ibid., p. 10 (emphasis in the original).
cess when they say, "one could define ecumenics as applied reflection on the conditions of the possibility for transformation to a more just, peaceful and sustainable world society."\textsuperscript{55} In other words, they suggest ecumenics to become a Christian version of Peace Studies combined with elements of Political Science and Ecology (and possibly Economy and Law), implying a comprehensive research programme that helps making the world a better place.

O'Grady, Scherle, Hogan and May appear to have suggested the most inclusive definition of ecumenics so far, and its strengths are evident. From the beginning of ecumenical action and reflection, those engaged in the Ecumenical Movement stressed that the Church has a mission in the world. Whatever the shape of this mission, an interest in society and in transforming the world is thus part of the DNA of ecumenism. Moreover, the Conciliar Process aims, which O'Grady and Scherle propose for ecumenics as a discipline, and a broadening of perspective as promoted by Hogan and May, are indeed desirable.

At the same time, this "wide ecumenics" paradigm can affect ecumenics as a discipline in various ways. When it is presented as a field of studies or an "intellectual paradigm,"\textsuperscript{56} it may mean that the discipline will not only be transformed or reconstituted but will ultimately suffer fragmentation or dissolution. Of course ecumenics thus defined may be able to remain in existence as a field, a research programme, or an orientation, especially if funding agencies continue to favour projects focusing on interreligious, intercultural, and peace issues – which they will likely do for some time.\textsuperscript{57} Yet evidently the promise of public financial support alone does not justify a definition of a discipline that owes its existence to theology. There must be reasons inherent in the

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 13 (emphasis in the original). Among the several other definitions for ecumenics in their paper, the following puts it in a similar way: "Ecumenics could best be described as a meta-reflection on all the aspects of human life on planet earth with the aim of enhancing all life on earth." (p. 4)

\textsuperscript{56} Linda Hogan, Preface to Ecumenics from the Rim, [xi], referring to May's and her own view; O'Grady and Scherle repeatedly speak of "the study of ecumenics" ("Ecumenics in the 21st Century," pp. 5, 10, 13, 20) and "ecumenical studies" (pp. 3, 19) and introduce their reflections by calling ecumenics a "field."

\textsuperscript{57} O'Grady and Scherle argue that "ecumenical studies" (i.e., especially in its more traditional form) "has to struggle for funds" and that therefore a "new framework" increases the "plausibility of ecumenics"; ibid., p. 19.
object of study that necessitate any conception of an academic pursuit shared by larger numbers of researchers.

The major element that defines what is at times portrayed as the “older” ecumenics (but is, as we have seen, merely the other major orientation of the discourse on the discipline) – a focus on Christian unity – constitutes a distinct object which is not claimed by other academic disciplines. Its advantage, therefore, is that conflicts of “ownership” are virtually excluded. Of course even here overlaps with church history, systematic theology, and sociology exist; however, these disciplines do not as such claim the object of Christian unity as theirs; rather, as is the case often in disciplines that cross the paths of other lines of academic inquiry, there is a borrowing of methods and possibly even a cross-fertilization that takes place.

If ecumenics is defined as a “meta-reflection on all the aspects of human life on planet earth with the aim of enhancing all life on earth,” or if it is conceived as interfaith studies or public theology, the question arises as to what such a type of ecumenics can do that is not already done by other academic disciplines. As for including interreligious dialogue or interfaith relations in general, the discipline of mission studies has engaged in reflection on this for a long time, and scholars of religious studies certainly do not leave this topic unattended. Comparative Theology is still in its early stage; however, its main challenge concerns Systematic Theology: that all Christian theological thinking be done in conversation with, or at least against the background of, non-Christian theologies.

Undoubtedly the world needs interdisciplinary think-tanks and groups of researchers dealing with a “transformation to a more just, peaceful and sustainable world society.” Perhaps this kind of reflection is even the most important academic pursuit on earth. One has to ask, though, whether theologians should have the lead in such ventures.

58 Ibid., p. 4.
59 The fact that mission scholars envisage interfaith dialogue in a rather diverse manner indicates that potential fears that the older “meliorist” paradigm thwarts all attempts at genuine communication and mutual understanding.
60 An encouraging beginning in terms of a fully developed dogmatics monograph was made by Hans-Martin Barth, Evangelischer Glaube im Kontext der Weltreligionen, Götterloh: Götterloh 2001.
Moreover, O’Grady and Scherle assert that “ecumenics” is not the best term for the research programme they envision, and that they use it due to a lack of alternatives.\(^6\) Perhaps “irenics” would be more appropriate for the kind of study they envisage,\(^6\) for in spite of the earlier narrow theological use, its etymological root expresses an interreligious and social-political ethics perspective better than the term under debate in this article.

Whatever other appropriate terms are found, if ecumenics mutates into a broad-based research on the transformation of the world, the rationale of choosing this object arises even more acutely than if it merely widens into interfaith studies. The affinity of Christian theology to the study of religions is beyond dispute; but if ecumenics draws so heavily on economics, ecology, political science, peace studies, development studies, sociology,\(^6\) and ethics that the focus on religion becomes a minor one, one must ask what this course of action can achieve in areas which all have their own specialists. Theologians, and even Christian historians, sociologists, economists, etc., will certainly not claim that their mode of reflection is necessarily more useful than sound academic work done by others in these very fields.

This is not to say that no broader approach to ecumenics is needed. The call for widening the discipline is timely. Nevertheless, when reconstituting the discipline, this should be done on the basis of sound

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\(^6\) Ibid., p. 20; they also mention “Earth studies” and “Studies of Religion and Peace” but then quickly discard these two options.

\(^6\) One recent exception to the use of “irenics” in the historical sense of interconfessional attitudes is an Institute of Irenics which was owned by the University of Frankfurt from 1966 to 2009.

\(^6\) Among the various relevant academic disciplines mentioned here, sociology may serve as an example that the areas to be covered by this “broad” definition of ecumenics have actually been a well-established part of other disciplines for a significant time. The proposal is to make ecumenics “a theory of processes of dynamic interrelations, of communications and conflicts ... taking place ... between and within religions as well as within the emerging and ruptured world society” (O’Grady and Scherle, “Ecumenics in the 21st Century,” p. 10). However, Interorganizational Relations theory, the sociology of intergroup relations, social psychology, and the sociology of religion all cover these areas.
criteria. As for other disciplines, these criteria should include (1) a precise object of reasonable proportions; (2) comprehensiveness of scope with regard to this object; (3) continuity with academic tradition and the discipline culture; (4) relevance for the subsystem of society concerned; and (5) interaction, but as little competition as possible, with neighbouring disciplines. How, then, can an alternative broad definition of ecumenics look like?

Ecumenics as the study of Christian unity and diversity

The starting point for this definition is the very issue of unity that was decisive for defining the discipline in a more restricting manner. The longing for unity, and even the need of addressing the issue of unity, only exists when there is division, discord, or diversity. The common “narrow” view of ecumenics is, therefore, to identify themes of discord and histories of division in order to chart avenues towards overcoming the difficulties of the past. What such an essentially problem-oriented perspective tends to overlook is the legitimate (and perhaps even necessary) diversity of Christianity, which is partly expressed in the regional and global variety inside confessional traditions, but also in the ongoing denominational differentiation. According to David B. Barrett’s 2012 count, there are about 43,000 denominations and more than 300 global confessional councils (Christian World Communities). Barrett’s statistics alone evinces the continuing significance of ecumenics

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65 An in-depth discussion of such criteria would demand a paper of its own. Apparently no major discussion on ecumenics in the light of various approaches to the philosophy of science exists to date, which would be desirable when developing further the theoretical foundations for this discipline.

66 These criteria are derived from the insights found in Krishnan, What are Academic Disciplines?, pp. 9, 12–47.

67 Reflections the shape of academic disciplines regularly include the issue of methodology. This issue is omitted here because the various subsdisciplines of theology use a variety of methods which are largely shared with some other lines of study. Ecumenics relies on most other parts of theology and is thus methodologically rich in any case. The problem of methods arises, however, when the focus turns away from Christianity to the world at large.

as a discipline. At the same time, this empirical side of World Christianity implies that the kind of unity we can speak about is hard to picture as a single organizational entity, discourse platform, or even movement. Nevertheless, the differentiation of Christianity and processes of Christian de-differentiation – i.e., those that we commonly call “ecumenical” – are two sides of the same coin, processes that depend on each other. They must be studied together, and this is one major reason to define ecumenics as the study of Christian unity and diversity.

Before discussing the correspondence of such a definition to the criteria mentioned above and reflecting on its consequences, it should be noted that not only is the unity and diversity of the Church in apostolic times well-established, the diversity of Christianity is also a theme that the Ecumenical Movement has regularly accentuated and celebrated beside its focus on unity. While ecumenical rhetoric has vacillated between “visible unity” and “unity in diversity,” significant publications from the various decades of the movement make it clear that issues of unity can only be discussed when the questions of legiti-


70 This definition comes very close to Peter Staples’ view of ecumenics as the study of Christian differentiation and de-differentiation. The difference is that he suggested to focus on the two processes; I propose a perspective which includes the results of these processes and cases where there is (at least seemingly) no process but degrees of unity or diversity without perceptible change. The definition is also similar to the one suggested by Falconer, “Ecumenics, Teaching Ecumenics and Ecumenical Formation,” p. 315: a study of “the theological foundations of unity and diversity, and of historic divisions and the attempts to overcome them.” The present study uses a more comprehensive perspective, however; while Falconer focuses on “theological foundations,” the following will consider unity and diversity as principles that apply to realms beyond theology as such.


mate dissimilarity, desirable differentiation, and necessary variety are explored as well.\footnote{I understand Paul Avis’ recent book Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?, London: T&T Clark, 2010, as an attempt of reflecting along this line, for it opens with a chapter on “The Church – Unity and Multiplicity” (pp. 1–20) and ends with a chapter on “Forging Communion in the Face of Difference” (pp. 185–206).} It would be appropriate for the discipline of ecumenics, therefore, to focus on Christian diversity in addition to its traditional concentration on Christian unity.

This proposed shape of ecumenics also conforms with the five criteria for academic disciplines mentioned above: (1) and (2) Its object is similar to the one which is undisputedly the discipline’s very own: church unity; but it widens in a reasonable way by including the manifold aspects that make Christianity diverse. The scope of such research will be comprehensive – perhaps the most comprehensive with the exception of interfaith relations involving only non-Christians – because each aspect of similarity and difference between and inside Christian traditions is to be examined, including convictions, attitudes, and practices in the realms of interfaith relations, the church’s public role, and engagement with culture. At the same time, the perspective will be different than in an approach which sees its very object to be interfaith relations or the transformation of the world. Ecumenics as the study of Christian unity and diversity will balance broadness and focus by engaging in a comparative meta-reflection on the benefits of various approaches to these and other issues from differing Christian perspectives.

(3) As for continuity with academic tradition and the culture of the discipline, studying Christian unity and diversity incorporates most of the other approaches: symbolics and Konfessionskunde, the study of World Christianity, theologies of unity and diversity, intercultural theology, research on interchurch relations and the construction of theories of ecumenical processes, including its social scientific aspects, and even the comparative study of church-world relations. It is also worth noting that two lesser-known precursor monographs in the field of ecumenics defined their approach in a manner that comes close to the proposed definition. One designed a field of study described as focusing on the “Unity and Variety in the Christian Religion” as early
as 1927; another author entitled an introduction to the Ecumenical Movement “The Way of World Christianity” in 1952. Thus ecumenics as a global study of Christian unity and diversity actually takes up early views of the emerging discipline.

(4) The relevance of a study of Christian unity and diversity for theology and Christianity as a whole can hardly be overestimated. In a globalized world and in an overall context of a world Church that has both post-denominational and(re-)denominationalizing tendencies, only a view of Christianity as a religion of multi-dimensional pluriformity and its unifying core of adherence to Jesus Christ is adequate for an understanding of particular types of Christian faith and their mutual dependence and interaction.

(5) This certainly requires significant learning from related disciplines and fields and utilization of methods brought forth by them. Among these are for instance the blossoming field of Inter-Organizational Relations, abundant research in intergroup relations, and social movements research. Empirical studies are relatively scarce so far in the area of ecumenism (but common in the study of local Christianities); both quantitative and various qualitative methodological approaches can help in exploring the unity and diversity of churches globally. At the same time, unnecessary overlap with neighbouring

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74 Cajus Fabricius, Ecumenical Handbook of the Churches of Christ, Berlin: Evangelischer Presseverband für Deutschland, 1927, p. 9. This book was published at the occasion of the 1927 World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne, as was a concurrent German version. Fabricius also mentioned that he was “at the present occupied in building up a central office for the study of denominations and ecumenical intercourse,” i.e., an institute of ecumenics (ibid., p. 2). Fabricius taught as a professor in Berlin from 1921 and at Breslau from 1935 to 1943 (Systematic Theology and Religious Studies).

75 Ernst Hornig, Der Weg der Welchristenheit: Eine Einführung in die ökumenische Bewegung, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1952. Hornig was a bishop of the Evangelical Church of Silesia.


disciplines (such as ethics, religious studies, mission studies, and peace studies) can be avoided. In fact, defining ecumenics as the study of Christian unity and diversity will also give ecumenics a clearer shape in the common triangle missiology-ecumenics-religious studies.

Beyond the inescapability of studying the diversity of Christianity when studying its unity, this double orientation arises from the necessity of distinguishing major factors in evaluating interchurch relations (and, indeed, even intrachurch conflicts). Church unity, like disunity, is constituted by two main factors in any relationship – closeness and harmony. In ecumenism, these are essentially the cultural and irenic dimensions, respectively (which, of course, both translate into theology). Traditional approaches to ecumenics tend not to distinguish between these two factors; when the separation of churches is deplored, often there seems to be a dichotomy between unity and division or at best a one-dimensional perspective, which distinguishes degrees of unity on a scale ranging from “full communion” to “no fellowship.” Yet given the divergent views of the very unity that Christians seek to achieve, what is actually needed is a multi-dimensional understanding of ecumenical matters.

A definition of ecumenics as the study of Christian unity and diversity aims at such a complex understanding; for the sake of manageability, however, it can specify its field of research with a two-dimensional system in which the coordinates denote closeness/distance and harmony/disharmony. Beyond the common unity/division bifurcation, such a system implies a rationale for diversity and discord and indicates eight ideal types of inter- and intra-church relations:

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78 This perspective is based on the work of Millar and Rogers, who distinguish “trust,” “intimacy,” and “relational control” as the three major three dimensions of social relationships. In the context of group relations, intimacy can be interpreted as closeness and trust as harmony; relational control means the power balance or imbalance, which is an issue of its own and must be addressed in a separate discussion. Of course a three-dimensional model is also thinkable but would go beyond the scope of the discussion of this paper. For the model mentioned, see Frank E. Millar and L. Edna Rogers, “Relational Dimensions of Interpersonal Dynamics,” in: Michael E. Roloff and Gerald R. Miller (eds.), Interpersonal Processes: New Directions in Communication Research, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987, pp. 117-139.
Even some of the specific approaches to ecumenics can be understood more clearly when locating them in this chart. Ecumenical Theology (II and IV), for instance, emphasizes unity (1); theological dialogues searching for convergence express congruity (2), while fundamentalist visions of unity end in uniformity (3). Polemics or controversial theology highlighted discord (5); some types of symbolics tended to view the division of churches (8) as fixed; the study of World Christianity, by contrast, focuses on the diversity of Christians and the Church (4). The study of Christian unity and diversity will glean insights from all of these tributary lines of inquiry. The insight that such ideal types do not exist in reality can fuel new research: there is, for instance, no pure and final division of churches this side of the Eschaton; ecumenics will have to suggest models, therefore, of explaining how and to what degree divisions remain partial. On the other side of the chart, the occurrence of "congruity" challenges to develop expla-
nations of why such a state of relations does not automatically lead to organizational or other types of unity.

A last issue to be clarified is whether ecumenics is to be viewed as a normative or descriptive-interpretative discipline. As mentioned before, this ambiguity is also found in Mackay’s definition. Of course it concerns other parts of academia as well (e.g. Law and Pedagogics); wherever significant cultural interests or values combined with praxis are at stake, this ambiguity is difficult to resolve. Visser ’t Hooft’s last definition of “ecumenical” suggests that “the consciousness of and desire for Christian unity” is a presupposition for engaging in research on processes connected with this goal. As in the field of Medicine, ecumenics is about healing conflicts, and thus a certain degree of normativity should be expected. One must remember, though, that theological positions are much more contested than questions of Medicine, and thus the views on what constitutes a significant disease in the Church are much more diverse than physicians’ opinions on whether a particular tumour is malignant. Hence ecumenics can speak normatively only on the very few issues on which all churches agree; where this is not the case, we will have to live with a discipline in which the influence of confessions or various schools of thought is not negligible – as in Systematic Theology. Therefore, the normativity of ecumenics is necessarily limited to the respective audience it addresses.

The definition suggested in this article aims at enlarging the understanding of the discipline, and with view of its healing task, Health Science, which emerged in the last few decades, may be a helpful analogy. The Church is not totally sick, and where it is, organizational connectedness or disconnectedness may not be a major factor. Some conflicts inside Christianity can be resolved; others are needed because they are healthy, while some that are resolved evoke others. Therefore, ecumenics, like human biology and Health Sciences, will study the whole Body – the Body of Christ – without diagnosing disease too quickly. In other words, a descriptive-analytical, empirical study of ecumenism encompassing aspects of church unity and diversity is much needed to

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avoid over- and misdiagnosing and to evaluate the therapies utilized so far.

To close, a few research desiderata derived from the suggested view of the discipline must be mentioned; they indicate that such a shape of ecumenics would certainly be academically generative. (1) A top priority is merging traditional ecumenics with the study of World Christianity. Many aspects of World Christianity are of immediate interest even in the context of a narrow definition of ecumenics—such as interchurch relations and concepts of Christian unity in emerging Two-Thirds World Christianities. But even the dynamics of church interdependence in spite of long histories of church independence have significant ecumenical dimensions. (2) More generally, models of church diversity and diversification are needed that complement the traditional discussion on “concepts of unity,” as are (3) more empirical studies and theological reflection on “grassroots” ecumenism and emerging alternative ecumenisms. (4) Inquiries into the relationship between the praxis of interchurch and interfaith relations in various Christian traditions would be welcome as much as comparative analyses of approaches to interreligious dialogue. (5) Of special interest in terms of unity and diversity would be empirical research on the correlation between ecumenical rhetoric and ecumenical praxis in different Christian movements. (6) And, finally, a particularly broad field of inquiry would be a more extensive application of social science insights to the Christian search for unity (as suggested by Staples already twenty years ago) and to the diversification of Chris-

80 See, e.g., Connie Ho Yan Au, Grassroots Unity in the Charismatic Renewal, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011.
82 Boldon, “The Ecumenical Movement in America” [1975], found that those denominations commonly viewed as anti-ecumenical because of their public statements on ecumenism were much more involved in ecumenical activities than expected, often to a similar degree as more “mainstream” denominations. Since then, no similar research appears to have been attempted.
83 Most of the areas Staples suggested to be explored (in “Theory and Method,” pp. 164–168) have not been ploughed yet. Among these are bargaining and negotiation research, Social Rule Theory, the study of elites, cognitive and affective dimensions
tianity, as well as a general sociology of ecumenism, which would bring together many insights from the sociology of religious differentiation with reflections on the dynamics in the uniting of churches and in the Ecumenical Movement.

**Summary:** The main question of this study is: What do we actually study when we engage in “ecumenics”? In its short history, this academic discipline has been defined in a variety of ways. The article presents a classification of approaches to what John A. Mackay called “the Science of the Church Universal,” discusses the role of “wider” approaches for ecumenics, and suggests a comprehensive definition of the discipline for the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Ecumenics, the study of ecumenism, John A. Mackay, Christian unity and diversity

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84 Of ecumenism (i.e., something like a “psychology of ecumenism”), bureaucratization theory, and organizational mergers theory.

84 Cf. the call for a comprehensive study of this kind by Staples, “Sociology of Ecumenism.”