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***South India: Ecumenism's One Solid Achievement?
Reflections on the History of the Ecumenical Movement***

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According to historian David Carter, when the World Council of Churches was formed in 1948, there was “only one really solid achievement to celebrate”—the 1947 formation of the Church of South India.¹ Carter’s article appeared in 1998, during the fiftieth anniversary of the WCC. He took a rather bleak view of ecumenical history, pointing to the “Great, but largely disappointed hopes” that had come and gone.² Insisting that ecumenism, historically, was rooted in Christian missions, he reasoned:

... It was the effect of the Indian mission field that had the greatest importance in changing traditional attitudes in certain Churches, and allowing [ecumenical] advances unparalleled elsewhere.... The missionary movement developed the strongest sense of the ecumenical imperative.³

One of the ironies of the modern ecumenical movement is that while it was historically rooted in mission—and its greatest successes were in the mission field—there is a high degree of ambivalence regarding the relationship of missions and ecumenism today. Carter noticed that irony. Outside of India, ecumenism “attained little genuine popularity”.⁴

¹ **Error! Main Document Only.**David Carter, “The Ecumenical Movement in its Early Years,” in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 49:3 (July 1998), p. 466.

² Ibid., p. 465.

³ Ibid., p. 467.

⁴ Ibid., p. 465.

This article is a primer for understanding and evaluating the history of the ecumenical movement. In the first half we focus on the missions-born Church of South India and assess the difficult relationship between ecumenism and missions. In the second half we ask whether or not ecumenism is still, in the words of Archbishop William Temple, “the great new fact of our era.” Carter believed Temple’s famous pronouncement was “a gross exaggeration.”⁵

The Union of South India’s Christians

Carter’s emphasis on the successful union of the South Indian churches is justified. Unlike most ecumenical unions, it was “transconfessional” rather than “interconfessional.” It included Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. This is not what set it apart, however. It was the Anglican commitment that made this union unique.⁶ A brief survey of this landmark accomplishment in ecumenical history may shed light not only on the history of the ecumenical movement, but also on its present purpose.

At the risk of oversimplifying, there were three general phases in the modern history of European missions in India. First, there was a fatherly role played by the early European missionaries who went to India: they were admired, they were shepherds to native parishioners, and they were respected. The second phase was one of tension. Missionaries had established successful mission points, but Indians began to see their own leadership abilities were often far superior to the colonial clergy’s. In the third period, Indian leaders became more active and prominent while European missionaries

⁵ Ibid., p. 465.

⁶ In 1970 the Church of North India was formed; it likewise included Anglicans.

realized their own diminishing role. Ultimately, most missionaries returned to their homelands for good, leaving a church that was fully sustainable. No longer was foreign oversight necessary, or desired. Of course there were, and are, exceptions to this, but for the sake of brevity we can point to this general trajectory that played out repeatedly.

The Indian church has a long history. Christianity may have entered India in the first century AD through the preaching of the apostle Thomas. It was solely a Syrian Orthodox Church for many years until Jesuits came in the 1500s. This was a volatile and contentious time as Portugal, together with the Roman Catholic Church, asserted its jurisdiction in the region around what is today known as Goa.

Lutheran missionaries went to India in the early 1700s. By the end of the century a vast network of Protestant missionary movements were established. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts began in 1701 and many organizations followed in its wake: the London Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, Baptist Missionary Society, Wesleyan Missionary Society, as well as various Bible and Tract groups designed to disseminate the gospel in print.

It became clear to missionaries that Christianity in India was very different from the European context. Denominational loyalty was an obstacle to effective evangelism. Competition in the mission field proved divisive. Converts to Christianity were faced with stigma from their own cultures, compounded by a bewildering array of Christianities that treated each other like different religions.

During this period, certain missionaries such as William Carey (1761-1834) began to rethink the entire missionary enterprise. Early in his career, Carey claimed mission work should operate within the confines of distinct denominational fellowships.

After a dozen years in the field he realized he had been wrong. He called for a missionary conference to meet at the Cape of Good Hope in 1810, but the timing was not right, and little resulted from his endeavors. Increasingly, however, missionaries realized that disparate Christian traditions were less binding in the missionary field, and cooperation was a must. Protestant missionaries frequently discovered they had more in common with other missionaries than with members of their own denominations in the West. Frequently, but certainly not always, denominational loyalty became secondary to unity in Christ. Missionaries in the field needed each other for support, medicine, and fresh ideas. Educational initiatives proved much more effective when other denominations were included. Ecumenism had begun.

However, a united church in South India had to wait nearly 140 years. Chiefly, this long delay had to do with church polity and theology. Indian leaders were often perplexed by the contentious nature of the missionaries and their proclivity for disagreement. The great bishop of South India, Samuel Azariah, lamented that Indians were more or less united in Bhakti (worship and devotion to God) and not dogma. If union was left to Indians, a united church would have happened much sooner. Azariah argued throughout his career that “The divisions of Christendom may be a source of weakness in Christian countries, but in non-Christian lands they are a sin and a scandal.”⁷ It is perhaps not surprising that the Church of South India was finally realized about one month after British withdrawal in 1947.

⁷ V.S. Azariah, “The Necessity of Christian Unity for the Missionary Enterprise of the Church,” in *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927*, ed. H. N. Bate (London: Student Christian Movement, 1927), p. 495. Cited in Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 235.

Indian converts to Christianity were often aware of ecumenical trends going on around them, resulting in an ecumenism that was rooted in the land, and could never have been obtained by foreigners. Indians were able to argue persuasively to their fellow countrymen that there were many social and economic advantages attached to Christian conversion. Geoffrey Oddie discusses the Tirunelveli Christians' "rapid progress, economically, socially." He continues,

Shanar Christians were making rapid progress intellectually, in habits of industry, materially, in improved cleanliness, dress, and quality of housing, in their tendency to move into new and rising occupations and in their upward social mobility.⁸

Indians were successful in evangelizing their own homeland through translating texts, communicating the gospel, and crafting genuinely Indian theologies. Indian involvement in the faith often precluded a strong denominational loyalty, and this frequently led to a breakdown in longstanding ties to colonial-based denominations. While Indians were typically members of European-based churches, such as "British Anglicans, Canadian Anglicans, or German Lutherans," it was obvious that a new Indian polity for an Indian church was needed.⁹

Bengt Sundkler's history of the Church of South India is the standard reference work for this watershed ecumenical endeavor.¹⁰ With meticulous documentation and extensive footnotes, his book is a fascinating accounting of events that began in the mid-nineteenth century, but accelerated at the Madras Conference of 1900. Around that year, different Christian fellowships in South India began to recognize the travesty of a

⁸ Geoffrey A. Oddie, "India: Missionaries, Conversion, and Change," in Kevin Ward and Brian Stanley, eds., *The Church Mission Society and World Christianity, 1799-1999* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p. 249.

⁹ Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, p. 235.

¹⁰ Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union, 1900-1947* (UK: Lutterworth Press, 1954).

fractured church. Several mergers occurred within Presbyterianism for example.¹¹ Congregationalists began to unite amongst each other, as well as with Presbyterians, forming an embryonic form of what would culminate in 1947 as the Church of South India.

Two ecumenical documents were especially noteworthy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. First was the Anglican-inspired *Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral*. While not specifically Indian, this important document written in the 1880s proposed Christian union on four premises: the Bible, the historic creeds, the two sacraments instituted by Christ (Eucharist, Baptism), and the Episcopate. It proved supremely important for ecumenical conversations worldwide.¹²

It was around this time the Roman Catholic Church began responding to the spirit of rapprochement amongst Protestants. The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) damaged relations between Catholics and Protestants by promulgating the infallibility of the Pope. Allegiance to the Pope had long been a divisive issue between all Christian parties, and this seemed to end all hope for ecumenism across Roman Catholic and Protestant lines. This was also around the time when the Vatican declared all Anglican Orders invalid in the papal encyclical *Apostolicae Curae*, also known as *On the Nullity of Anglican Orders*. Popes Pius IX (Pope 1846-1878) and Leo XIII (Pope 1878-1903) were open to ecumenical discussions with the Orthodox, whom they considered legitimate churches, but Protestants were considered outside the realm of the historic Christian faith.

¹¹ This was not limited to India or to Presbyterianism, however. In Canada, the Presbyterian Church saw nine mergers, the Methodists saw eight and the Congregationalists three, culminating in the founding of the United Church of Canada in 1925.

¹² Stephen Charles Neill and Ruth Rouse, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 250ff.

The second document of note was the *Tranquebar Manifesto* which was the result of an ecumenical conference in South India in 1919. The Manifesto was a call for unity and for the senseless sectarianism in India to cease. The meeting thrust Anglican Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah (1874-1945) to the helm of ecumenical leadership in India.¹³ Azariah was born in the Tinnevely region of South India, the son of one of the first Anglican priests from the Nadar people.¹⁴ By 1919, Azariah was no stranger to ecumenism, however; he had been present at the monumental Edinburgh Missionary Council of 1910.

Azariah made his presence felt at Edinburgh, boldly critiquing the methods of European Christians. His famous plea rang loud at Edinburgh, “You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for *love*. Give us FRIENDS!”¹⁵ Indian Christians rallied around him in favor of a united church in India.

Edinburgh 1910 was meticulously prepared by J. H. (Joe) Oldham, a Christian statesman who was largely deaf, yet this made him a master organizer.¹⁶ American John

¹³ See Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, p. 237ff.

¹⁴ Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, p. 4. There was a substantial pocket of Christians in the Tinnevely area, and over time they had become quite ecumenical. In the 1870s there was a severe famine that forced many Tinnevely Christians from their homes and into other parts of India. This migration paved the way for a strong ecumenical impulse. Many missionaries were involved in the relief efforts during the famine, which made a favorable impression on Indians and led to a series of mass movements toward Christianity. These new converts were impressed by the joint action taken by Christians, irrespective of denominational affiliation. See Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1908), p. 218ff. “But the terrible famine of 1876-1879 was more or less felt throughout all the north and east ... But the districts which felt the famine far more severely than any others were the Telugu and Tamil countries. Here hundreds of thousands died. ... It thus came about that when the famine ceased ... vast numbers of the people went over to Christianity. It was the famine which first gave the decisive impetus to this mass movement.”

¹⁵ See Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 125.

¹⁶ Oldham would go on to play a critical role in the organizing of this council as well as the momentous 1937 Oxford Meeting, which effectively united the Life and Work Movement with the Faith and Order Movement, forming the early era of the World Council of Churches. “Before dispersing, the Conference approved, with only two dissenting votes, the proposal for a World Council of Churches in which the two

Mott chaired the conference, and quickly emerged as the clear leader of the worldwide ecumenical movement. He coined a slogan that resonated at Edinburgh and became something of an ecumenical anthem, “The Evangelization of the World in this Generation,” illustrating the enmeshment of missions and ecumenism. Mott befriended and mentored Azariah; they remained very close until Azariah’s death in 1945. In 1970, Stephen Neill wrote, “Azariah was the greatest leader yet produced by any younger church.”¹⁷ Mott died in 1955, about a decade after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

With such ecumenical fervor as found at Edinburgh 1910, why did it take nearly forty more years for a united church in South India to occur? Bengt Sundkler points out that church union really should have occurred shortly after the 1919 Tranquebar meeting, as by then it was obvious that Indian Christians wanted unity. However, there were seriously divisive issues going on such as Indian independence. Furthermore, Anglicans were by and large closed to the idea of intercommunion in 1919. For example, the Eucharist had to be administered by a cleric of Anglican Orders in order to be valid. This reached crisis proportions in the 1930s when the entire movement toward church union in South India nearly collapsed. There was also the supremely important question of episcopacy.

The move towards a united church in South India began to pick up speed in the 1940s with the death or departure of some of the key players in the union discussions. The long time Anglican Metropolitan of India, Foss Westcott, resigned in 1945 and bishop Azariah died that same year. Bishop Stephen Neill, who had been one of the

movements should become one.” See Stephen Neill and Ruth Rouse, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, p. 592.

¹⁷ Stephen Neill, “Azariah, Vedanaikam Samuel,” in *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* (London: Lutterworth, 1970).

major figures in union discussions, abruptly left the mission field to return to Europe around the same time. Ironically, it seemed as if these three stalwarts—who all had ecumenical sympathies—had to step aside in order for fresh air to enliven the discussions. Referring to the regrettable fact that Azariah died just two years before the Church of South India was formed, Sundkler wrote, “By faith he looked from afar into the Promised Land.”¹⁸ The gifted Presbyterian Lesslie Newbigin injected new blood, and played the key role in bringing the negotiations to fruition.¹⁹ Newbigin was promptly appointed a bishop in the Church of South India in the year of its birth, 1947.

David Carter was right; it is a tragedy that there have been so few “trans-confessional” unions in the history of ecumenism. There have been many important mergers throughout ecumenical history such as the United Church of Canada in 1925, the Church of North India in 1970, and the United Church of Australia in 1977, but the Church of South India was the largest and most important.

Carter is also right in his claim that the ecumenical movement has failed to reach the expectations of the first generation of ecumenists who were so idealistic at Edinburgh 1910. He argues that the ecumenical movement seems reluctant to take risks. Ecumenical history shows that churches are understandably loath to jettisoning their long-held teachings in favor of ecumenical mergers. Of course there are always theological reasons for the hesitance. Orthodox Churches, however, have for years claimed the opposite; they have argued that Protestants are perhaps too eager to grasp onto ecumenism at the expense of careful theological reasoning.

¹⁸ Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India*, p. 349.

¹⁹ Sundkler wrote, “During the ‘forties there was an interesting and highly competent group of new men in the delegations. They gave a fresh impetus particularly to the theological debate. Among the SIUC representatives J. E. L. Newbigin was outstanding.” Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India*, p. 302.

Perhaps the Church of South India is the shining example of what ecumenism can become. It would be a mistake to neglect the other accomplishments of modern ecumenism. The movement has proved highly successful in other, perhaps less tangible, ways, such as fostering a climate of open-minded discussion, and the creation of myriad ecumenical initiatives that permeate virtually all denominations today. The modern ecumenical movement has certainly fostered a spirit of rapprochement that was not generally evident prior to Edinburgh 1910.

Ecumenism, Missions, and “The Great New Fact of Our Era”

In 1942 Archbishop William Temple famously declared the worldwide ecumenical movement to be “the great new fact of our era.”²⁰ Recent scholars have been more cautious, suggesting Temple’s statement was made during the high tide of ecumenism. Looking back, Temple had every reason to be optimistic. The situation has changed radically, however, in the decades since.

William Temple was born in 1881 to the Rev. Frederick Temple. When William was thirteen years old, his father became the Archbishop of Canterbury (an office William would later hold from 1942 to 1944). William was one of an excellent, competent group of young men masterfully recruited by Joe Oldham to enliven the Edinburgh 1910 assembly, serving as ushers and attendants. By the time of the Jerusalem International Missionary Council (IMC) gathering in 1928, William Temple was a rising star in Christian ecumenism. It was an optimistic time. British and American ecumenists

²⁰ See William Temple, *The Church Looks Forward* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), pp. 2-4.

such as John Mott, Oldham, William Paton, and Charles Brent had articulated a contagiously ecumenical vision.

The World Council of Churches began to become reality in 1937 at the Oxford Conference.²¹ It was supposed to come into formal existence in 1941, but World War II severely hampered progress and even called its very existence into question for a time. It was within this context that Temple, with great confidence, articulated his belief. Indeed, Temple's sense of purpose captivated a generation and sustained the WCC throughout the difficult war years, even with the deaths of many prominent leaders: Temple himself died suddenly in 1944; Bishop Azariah in 1945; Theodore Hume—an American staff member of the WCC whose relief work plane was shot down by Nazi forces—in 1943; William Paton in 1943; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was hanged by Nazis in 1945. Courageous leadership had developed within the ecumenical movement. The Confessing Church—led by Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth, and Bonhoeffer—in 1934 issued “The Barmen Declaration” which was a stark condemnation of the distorted theology of Nazi Christianity. This competent leadership emerged in the face of palpable evil, and it was motivating. Willem Visser t' Hooft became the first general secretary of the WCC in 1948 at Amsterdam, although he had served in that role since 1938 when the WCC was “in process of formation.”

Another reason for Temple's optimism was precisely what was happening behind the scenes during World War II. Britain, Switzerland, Sweden (under the leadership of prominent ecumenist Archbishop Soderblom), and America had contributed substantial funds to get the WCC up and running. In addition, John Rockefeller, Jr. had donated a

²¹ See Edwin Ewart Aubrey, “The Oxford Conference, 1937,” *The Journal of Religion* 17, no. 4 (Oct. 1937), pp. 379-396.

tremendous amount of money in order to establish a headquarters for the WCC. The World War II years of the WCC were full of treacherous correspondence, in the form of microfilm in shaving soap cans, for example.²² These were very difficult years for the movement. For example, the WCC staff was drastically cut during World War II. Undercover Gestapo was strategically situated at Geneva and elsewhere to disrupt WCC activity. Yet by formidable leadership and the hopeful vision of the ecumenical leaders this period actually proved to be one of the most important in ecumenical history.

The ecumenical movement remained an Orthodox and Protestant affair until the 1960s, when the Second Vatican Council put Rome squarely within discussions for unity. There were, however, four or five Roman Catholic ecumenical stalwarts throughout the twentieth century, none greater than Yves Congar (1904-1995). Congar grew up in France during World War I when his local Catholic Church was burned down in the midst of war. He and his family, as well as their entire church, had to worship in a Protestant Church for six years, an event that proved critical in the shaping of this Catholic ecumenist.

Another great French ecumenist was Paul Couturier (1881-1953), a high school math teacher and priest in Lyons. Couturier is primarily known for his work with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which he reformed and revived in the 1930s. Catholic prayer for unity actually goes all the way back to 1840, but is generally recognized as beginning around the turn of the century with a prayer that all Christians

²² “The men and women of many nationalities and positions who as officers, as civilians, or as “illegal” couriers kept the Churches in touch with one another, were in those years the real builders of the ecumenical fellowship.” See Willem Visser ‘t Hooft, “The Genesis of the World Council of Churches,” *History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, p. 709.

return to Rome. Couturier put a new slant on the prayer, basing it on Jesus' words in the Gospel of John chapter 17.

Max Metzger (1887-1944) is a third Catholic ecumenist from that period. He was a German chaplain in World War I and became an outspoken pacifist for the rest of his life; he was imprisoned during World War II more than once. Metzger founded the *Una Sancta* Movement, a Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical initiative. It was at one of these meetings he was compromised by an undercover Gestapo agent. Father Metzger was eventually beheaded and is a martyr of the faith.²³

A fourth Roman Catholic leader of ecumenism was Josef Lortz (1887-1975), a native of Luxembourg who was educated in Germany. He was responsible for re-evaluating the Reformation in his epic work, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*. This monumental text reevaluated Roman Catholic attitudes toward Martin Luther, and was rather irenic towards the early Luther. It was also revolutionary in its ability to be self-critical towards the Catholic Church. Lortz's reputation has been tarnished because of his pro-Nazi sympathies, but his ecumenical drive for Lutheran and Catholic reconciliation was significant.

While the previous thinkers were shaping Roman Catholic ecumenism prior to Vatican II (1962-1965), it was Pope John XXIII who dropped the Roman Church right into the center of the ecumenical movement. Pope John had served as a cleric in Turkey, Bulgaria, France and Germany before his brief time as Cardinal in Venice. He was familiar with Eastern Orthodoxy as well as with Protestantism. He established a committee to work towards Christian union, and this committee became a Secretariat to

²³ See Robert Krieg, "Joseph Lortz and Max Metzger on Ecumenism and Hitler," *In God's Hands* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), pp. 89-108.

the Vatican during the Second Vatican Council. Pope John appointed some of the brightest minds in the Catholic world to serve on the committee: Cardinal Augustin Bea, Gregory Baum, and Gustave Weigel, among others.

Vatican II produced one of the most important documents in the movement's history: *On Ecumenism*. It was highly ecumenical. Its courteousness and conciliatory tone were complemented by Pope John's actions which spoke even louder than the documents. John invited Protestant Observers to Rome during Vatican II, and in 1961 he sent representatives—the first time this had been done—to the third assembly of the WCC in New Delhi. John XXIII died after the first session of Vatican II, but was succeeded by another ecumenical figure: Pope Paul VI, who invited Protestants and Orthodox Christians to participate in the closing ceremonies of the council. After Vatican II, Paul VI continued his ecumenical agenda. He visited the ecumenical headquarters at Geneva in 1967. He developed a very good relationship with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras, and they went so far as to recant their excommunications dating back to 1054. The Roman Church had never advocated this level of ecumenism and in the 1960s it was apparent that ecumenism was no longer exclusively an Orthodox and Protestant affair. Established in 1965, the "Joint Working Group" became the Roman Catholic Church's primary vehicle for ecumenical relations. However, in 1968, at the Uppsala assembly, it began to become evident that the Roman Catholic Church would not formally join the WCC. The issue of authority proved to be insurmountable for full communion.

The current climate of Catholic ecumenism is ambiguous. In the year 2000, the Roman Catholic Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith produced a

document that was widely seen as a break with the spirit of ecumenism so evident at Vatican II. Signed by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Dominus Iesus* touched off a controversy. To many it represented a return to the past, to a spirit reminiscent of the *Mortalium Animos* encyclical of 1928 which essentially condemned non-Catholic faith as “false Christianity.” *Mortalium Animos* went so far as to forbid Catholics from taking part in any ecumenical activities.²⁴ While *Dominus Iesus* is not so brash, it certainly has the ring of pre-Vatican II thinking:

... [T]he ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate ... are not Churches in the proper sense.²⁵

Many Protestants were dismayed by this document, viewing it as a condescending insult to the integrity of their churches.

The Orthodox churches have long contributed to ecumenical discussions, albeit at times with strong cautions. Orthodox leaders have been involved since 1920 when the Ecumenical Patriarch issued the decree “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere.”²⁶ This important decree, written largely by Archbishop Germanos of Thyatira, was one of the first steps in forming a council of churches. While Orthodox Christians have long been open to ecumenical discourse—particularly since the Russian Church’s entrance into the WCC in 1961—they are uncompromising in their own theological integrity. For them, the Orthodox Church is truly Christ’s institution on earth. Since the WCC’s seventh general assembly in 1991 at Canberra, it has become clear that Orthodox Christians are uncomfortable with certain progressive aspects of the WCC. They have been vocal critics that unity must not come at the expense of established Christian

²⁴ See *Mortalium Animos* at the Vatican website: www.vatican.va.

²⁵ See *Dominus Iesus* at the Vatican website: www.vatican.va.

²⁶ Located online at: <http://incommunion.org/?p=142>. Also see Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), pp. 11-15.

doctrine. The Orthodox voices were even louder at Harare in 1998, when the churches of Georgia and Bulgaria pulled out of the WCC because of these tensions. Initially, some saw this as a potential threat to the entire Orthodox presence in the WCC. However, this has not proven to be the case as all of the Orthodox churches except Georgia, Bulgaria, and Estonia are WCC members to this day.²⁷ In addition, all of the Oriental Orthodox Churches are members of the WCC.²⁸

Conclusion

David Carter's article discloses the ecumenical movement's inability to reach full, visible unity over its young life. There is not a shortage of critics, either, from within. Most notably, and with rather striking irony, the Canberra assembly began to call the very existence of the WCC into question in 1991; these questions persisted at Harare in 1998. Konrad Raiser, a former general secretary of the WCC, was a creative voice in those years. He initiated various attempts for renewal through humanitarian issues and social justice, concentrating for example on the "Decade of Solidarity with Women," and later the "Decade to Overcome Violence." This social activist mood continues to characterize the WCC and its many programs. The Porto Alegre 2006 Finance Committee applauded the many good initiatives taking place under WCC auspices, but conceded that funding was depleted, and there needs to be a "sharpening of focus" within the WCC Central

²⁷ See the World Council of Churches website's list of Orthodox member churches:

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/church-families/orthodox-churches-eastern.html>.

²⁸ The Oriental Orthodox, or non-Chalcedonian, Churches include: Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Malankara Syrian, and Armenian.

Committee.²⁹ Larger questions emerged during those sessions such as what the WCC is called to do as the largest community of churches in the world.

The WCC will have to make difficult decisions as it hones its meaning and purpose. There are many issues that must be faced during this period of transition. One crucial question is the nature and function of Christian missions. Should missions be directed at the conversion of non-Christians, or mainly an emphasis on social justice and Christian witness? The ecumenical movement is inextricably intertwined with the missionary movement, and it would be impossible to try and neatly separate the two. The Harare assembly of 1998 essentially took the position that missions are central to the ecumenical movement; however, the meaning of that is not altogether clear.

William Temple's optimism was located within an idealistic, hopeful context. In recent decades the WCC spread itself thin, albeit with good intentions. Certainly the ecumenical "movement" will continue, and ecumenism as a principle seems to have a bright future. What is being questioned right now is the purpose of the WCC. Is it for social justice? Is it primarily an institution to facilitate global missions and/or the evangelization of the world, whether in this generation or in generations to come? Is it for creating visible unity, however understood, among the world's Christians?

The WCC must today pause and reassess. As leadership changes, perhaps new questions will organically emerge. Does the Church of South India represent the very best that the history of the ecumenical movement has to offer? Clearly, the CSI has been an enormous success. Church mergers and unions should not be underestimated. However, the future of the WCC—as attested by the finance committee in Porto

²⁹ The present author served on the Finance Committee at Porto Alegre in 2006.

Alegre—must be shaped by a sharper focus. At the present time the WCC risks ineffectiveness due to its breathtaking plethora of initiatives and objectives.

This article is an attempt to readdress the history and successes of the ecumenical movement and the WCC. The WCC must reflect on its past before moving forward. The greatness of the church has always been its ability to look backward at Christ, at the apostles, at the scriptures, at the martyrs, at the tradition—*prior to* looking ahead. We learn much more about ourselves by looking back. By looking back, we look in the mirror of our sisters and brothers who have gone before. This great cloud of witnesses has much to offer us if we would only look.

May we also reflect back on the icon of our Lord Jesus Christ, bowing before him in search of answers for how we should live, think, and change. Let us conform our lives to His will for us. Let us never be afraid to change if that is what God desires. Let us move forward. But first let us look back, listen, and learn.

The WCC has an illustrious history; it is one of the most significant developments in the history of Christianity. However, its purpose is today unclear. By highlighting the Church of South India and the Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, we have attempted to offer the very best of what the ecumenical movement can encompass, with all of its hopes, optimism, and, yes, tangible results. It has been over 60 years since the CSI was formed, however. The WCC needs fresh, tangible results to motivate ecumenically minded Christians worldwide.

David Carter's assessment was in many ways a welcome critique. However, it was a very limited critique. The ecumenical movement is alive and active. Indeed, the Church of South India is a living testimony to the movement. It is not, however, the

greatest that our movement is capable of accomplishing. At least we must have hope that we, as a community of faith, can reflect on our victories as well as our failings, and prepare ourselves for “greater things than these.” There may be a pruning process. New wineskins may be needed. We must beseech the Holy Spirit and remember our ancestors in the faith in order to determine our course. As Christians, this is something we must always do, both personally and collectively. By looking back, we are strengthened, encouraged, and perhaps challenged to move forward to the wonderment God has in store for us as members of his one Church. By God’s grace we will continue to grow together.

“We intend to stay together.”

Abstract

This article is a primer for understanding the history of the ecumenical movement by focusing first on one of its greatest institutional successes, the Church of South India in 1947, and then assessing the difficult relationship between ecumenism and missions. In the second half the article takes a broader view of ecumenical history, asking whether or not Christian ecumenism is still, in the words of Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, “the great new fact of our era.” Focusing on various achievements and failings in the twentieth century, the article asks throughout whether or not Christian ecumenism has already reached its height. The conclusion of the essay argues that in order to move forward in this time of transition, the World Council of Churches must take a careful look back at its successes, failures, and very reasons for existence.

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