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## Stephen Neill, Missions, and the Ecumenical Movement

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# 1 Stephen Neill, Missions, and the Ecumenical Movement

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Missions and ecumenism together form a rich history. It is common to read that the modern ecumenical movement began with the first World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in the year 1910. The relationship of course still exists, although some have expressed concern over the lackluster attention paid to missions by more recent ecumenical leaders.<sup>11</sup>

In May 2005 the thirteenth Conference on World Mission and Evangelism met in Athens, Greece. One of the issues discussed there was the relationship of missions to ecumenism. The General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Samuel Kobia, alluded to this topic in his opening address: “Mission carries heavy historical baggage, having played a part in fostering division and conflict – between peoples, and even between families of churches.”<sup>22</sup> Kobia went on to suggest that missions must now be prefaced with “confession and repentance” for past misdeeds. Kobia’s thoughtful comments were a far cry from the sense of urgency that characterized John Mott’s generation at Edinburgh in 1910.

The present article summarizes Stephen Neill’s (1900-1984) ecumenical activities, contextualizing them within his long, illustrious career. While the purpose of this article is not to

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<sup>1</sup> Donald McGavran was one of the first to decry the WCC’s reluctance to “evangelistic outreach.” See his “Will Uppsala Betray the Two Billion?” in *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate*, ed. Arthur Glasser and McGavran (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972). See also Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003). Kinnamon cites Lesslie Newbigin as one who has critiqued the ecumenical movement for essentially losing its missionary emphasis (p. 112).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Kobia, “Opening Address,” 10 May 2005. For a transcript of his remarks, see <http://www.mission2005.org/>.

address the sufficiency or deficiency of the ecumenical movement's focus on missions, it does contribute to that discussion. Neill was one who understood the interdependent relationship of ecumenism and missions. His life and work was a manifestation of that correlative relationship. Stephen Neill, I imagine, would be one of many current and former missionaries to emphasize that missions is not peripheral to ecumenism; rather, ecumenism is rooted in missions.

### **Formation of an Ecumenist**

It was, perhaps, conspicuous that a respected Oxbridge historian could, as late as 1984, boldly declare Jesus Christ as "supreme" and as "The Central Point of History."<sup>33</sup> Few could claim the breadth of understanding of the world's religious systems as did Stephen Neill. He was well-published in the history of religions and was particularly competent in Hinduism.

To most, however, Stephen Neill is remembered as a missions historian. His voluminous writings on missions are still with us. His *History of Christian Missions* is still being used in seminaries and colleges.<sup>44</sup> The *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* is a valuable resource that continues to serve missiologists.<sup>55</sup> His *Colonialism and Christian Missions*, one could argue, was ahead of its time.<sup>66</sup> His contributions to missions history of the Indian subcontinent are considerable indeed.<sup>77</sup> What is often forgotten, however, is that this doyen of

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<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Neill, *The Supremacy of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Neill, *History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, England: Pelican, 1964). Rosalie Beck at Baylor used Neill's book in the fall of 2003 in the class Religion 4340, "Christian Missions." William Payne at Ashland Theological Seminary used this book in the Winter, 2003 course MS 501: "Introduction to Missions." Wilbert Shenk at Fuller Theological Seminary used Neill's book in MH 510: "The Making of Global Christianity: 1790-1990" (Fall, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Neill, Gerald H. Anderson, and John Goodwin, eds., *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* (London: Lutterworth, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (London: Lutterworth, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> *Out of Bondage: Christ and the Indian Villager* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1930); *Builders of the Indian Church: Present Problems in the Light of the Past* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1934); *Annals of an Indian Parish* (London: CMS, 1934); *The Cross Over Asia* (London: Canterbury Press, 1948); *Under Three Flags* (NY: Friendship Press, 1954); *The Story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); *Call to Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970); *Bhakti: Hindu and Christian*, (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974); *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to A. D. 1707*, and *A History of*

missions was for a time known primarily as an ecumenist.

Neill's ecumenical beginnings go back to his childhood participation in the ubiquitous Keswick movement that began at Keswick, northwest England, in 1875. Neill claimed his parents had come under the influence of Keswick revivalism for a more intense spirituality and a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit.<sup>88</sup>

Neill's ecumenical participation increased during his student days at Trinity College, Cambridge. He joined up with the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) where he made several friends including Carey Francis (later missionary to Africa) and Clifford Martin (later Bishop of Liverpool).<sup>99</sup> With these and about 50 others he formed a missionary interest group called the Cambridge Missionary Band in 1920. This experience would point his career compass in the direction of India. In 1921, Neill was asked to become President of the Cambridge branch of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). This came as a total surprise to him, as the CICCU and the SCM had split in 1910 and remained fractured. To the chagrin of his fellow CICCU members, Neill agreed.

The SCM opened up many opportunities for Neill, not least of which was meeting the famous Presbyterian missionary and ecumenist William Paton, who was then serving as the Secretary of the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon. In April of 1924 Neill

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*Christianity in India: A. D. 1707-1858* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Neill, ed. by E. M. Jackson, *God's Apprentice: The Autobiography of Stephen Neill* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), pp. 31, 113. The Keswick movement was geared towards increasing personal devotion through prayer and greater personal commitment. It was known largely for its international conventions, which are still in existence. The founding motto of the movement was, "All One in Christ Jesus." Ruth Rouse claims that the Keswick movement inspired ecumenism. See Ruth Rouse, "Voluntary Movements and the Changing Ecumenical Climate," chapter seven of *A History of the Ecumenical Movement: 1517-1948* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), ed. by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill. For an entire work on the Keswick movement, see Steven Barabas' *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1952).

<sup>9</sup> The CICCU was founded in 1877 under the influence of the American revivalism of Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey. It split away from the Student Christian Movement in 1910 and carried with it a distaste of higher criticism in favour of a conservative Evangelical view of the Bible. For a history of the CICCU, see David Goodhew, "The Rise of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, 1910-1971," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 54:1 (January 2003): pp. 62-89.

participated in a Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship (COPEC), held at Birmingham under the Chairmanship of future archbishop William Temple, then Bishop of Manchester. This COPEC conference, in Neill's mind, was his official introduction to the ecumenical movement. In 1968 he wrote to "Wim" Visser't Hooft,

Congratulations on your appointment as Honorary President of the WCC! This must make you feel quite like a veteran, considering the names of others on whom this dignity has been conferred; but alas we have to remember that we have both now had an ecumenical career lasting more than forty years, I since COPEC in 1924 and you since Stockholm in 1925.<sup>10</sup>

In November of 1924, seven months after COPEC, Neill was sailing for the Indian mission field.

Neill's first six years in India were rather undefined. He began his work at Dohnavur, under Amy Carmichael. He led two lengthy "itinerancy campaigns" during this time as well. He took three short furloughs. At one point in 1926, he spent a month assisting E. Stanley Jones in an evangelism tour. In 1928 he briefly taught at Union Christian College in Alwaye, modern-day Kerala. In 1930 he became Warden of a CMS seminary in the town of Nazareth, Tinnevely (in modern day Tamil-Nadu), serving in that capacity until rising to the Tinnevely bishopric in 1939.

By 1935, the bishop of Tinnevely began to recognize Neill's powers, largely because of his writings. The bishop asked Neill to represent the diocese at the General Council of the Church of India, Burma, and Ceylon. The meetings were held every three years. Neill was chosen as Clerical Secretary, a post which put him in touch with the influential leaders of the day. He served in this capacity for ten years and was "... continuously at the heart of things; little passed in the affairs of the Church that did not at one time or another come under my notice."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Neill to Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft, 27 August 1968, W. A. Visser't Hooft, General Correspondence, File 994.1.09, Special Collections, World Council of Churches Library, Geneva, Switzerland. Visser't Hooft and Neill were almost exact contemporaries; they were both born in 1900. Neill died in 1984; Visser't Hooft died in 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Neill, *God's Apprentice*, p. 135.

By far the most important subject that came before the committee was church union in south India. Discussions had been ongoing since 1919.<sup>1212</sup> The first draft was released in 1929. Due to many complicated reasons, the Church of South India (CSI) was not a reality until the seventh draft was accepted in 1947.<sup>1313</sup>

Stephen Neill and eminent Indian bishop V. S. Azariah were among that core of devoted thinkers who set the stage for what would become perhaps the most significant ecumenical union to date. Unfortunately, Neill left India in 1944 and Azariah died in 1945. It is not really surprising that nearly the entire generation who began the negotiations had to either die or move out of India before union actually occurred.<sup>1414</sup> Today, the Church of South India is a large, vibrant ecumenical body.

There is one more significant ecumenical activity that took place during Neill's India years. In 1938, Neill participated in the third World Missionary Conference held at Tambaram, India. Neill was asked by William Paton to chair a section called "On the Training of the Ministry." Neill met several important ecumenists at this conference including John Mott, Kenneth Scott Latourette, and Cyril Garbett. Neill's most vivid memory from Tambaram was the conclusion. Neill recorded that when the participants said the Lord's Prayer each in his own language, there were forty-eight distinct forms of speech. Neill was "deeply moved" by the experience.<sup>1515</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The year 1919 is significant because this is the year of the "Tranquebar Manifesto," a document created when a group of about 30 mostly Indian ministers met to discuss Indian ministry and missions. The document is highly ecumenical. It begins, "We believe that union is the will of God" (quoted in Neill, *Brothers of the Faith* (NY: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 62). See also Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union, 1900-1947* (Greenwich, Connecticut: The Seabury Press, 1954).

<sup>13</sup> There were five church bodies involved in the union: Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Reformed Christians, British Methodists, and Anglicans.

<sup>14</sup> Neill's involvement with the CSI were not immediately terminated. In 1948 at the Lambeth conference, Neill "...was the drafter of the crucial resolutions on the Church of South India." See Kenneth Cragg and Owen Chadwick, "Stephen Charles Neill, 1900-1984," in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 91:102 (1985): p. 608.

<sup>15</sup> *God's Apprentice*, p. 152.

## **A Professional Ecumenist**

Neill resigned his bishopric in 1945 and began doing a variety of ministry-related works upon his return to England. In December, 1946 he was asked to become Assistant Bishop to the Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>1616</sup> One of his chief responsibilities was to serve as liaison between the Archbishop and the WCC in Geneva. Neill accepted, moved to Geneva, and jumped headfirst into the planning for the first General Assembly, which was to be held in Amsterdam in 1948. Neill was overruled in his desire that the assembly wait until 1949. Neill later remarked, “I am still sure that I was right.”<sup>1717</sup> Similarly, regarding Amsterdam as the location, Neill wrote, “...no worse choice could possibly have been made.”<sup>1818</sup> Neill played a major role in that landmark assembly. In addition to planning and speaking, he was charged with editing the second volume of the official WCC publication *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design: The Amsterdam Assembly Series*.<sup>1919</sup>

Neill’s term with the WCC lasted from December 1947 to March 1950.<sup>2020</sup> His acquaintances from these years read like a “Who’s Who” in ecumenism: Visser’t Hooft, Archbishop Germanos, Lesslie Newbigin, Hendrik Kraemer, Joe Oldham, John Mott, Paul Tillich, and D. T. Niles. In the early days of the WCC, there were four sub-committees: Finance, Information, Women in the Church, and Evangelism; Neill served on the latter two.<sup>2121</sup> Endless meetings and conferences occupied his WCC years, in spite of the fact that working with others

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<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, December 27, 1946, p. 7b.

<sup>17</sup> *God’s Apprentice*, p. 209.

<sup>18</sup> *God’s Apprentice*, p. 229.

<sup>19</sup> *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1948). Volume II is entitled “The Church’s Witness to God’s Design.”

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, March 18, 1950, p. 8b.

<sup>21</sup> “WCC Minutes of the first meeting of the Executive Committee”, 8-10 February 1949, Box 38.0001, Exec. Committee 1949-1953, File7, Special Collections, World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.

was not his gift, prompting Kenneth Cragg and Owen Chadwick to write, "...he was never good on committees."<sup>2222</sup> The only ecumenical conference that Neill seemed to enjoy was the 1947 International Missionary Council (IMC) conference at Whitby, Ontario, where again he played a key role.

Neill served the WCC in a variety of capacities. He was Co-Director of the Study Department for a time. He was a major player in the Secretariat for Evangelism. He was most active with the IMC, which was only affiliated with the WCC as it did not officially join until 1961. Neill undertook two major research trips for the IMC during these years. In early 1948, he spent fifteen weeks flying all over east Asia gathering data for the archbishop of Canterbury as well as "...selling the idea of the WCC to churches which knew nothing of it."<sup>2323</sup> In 1950, he led a major, four-month survey of theological education in Africa.

While extremely busy years, Neill described his time on staff the WCC as "... an experiment which simply did not work out." He added, "I think that those of us who had lived through the pioneer period would have been wise to resign as soon as the [Amsterdam] Assembly was over."<sup>2424</sup> In his autobiography, Neill explained that very few of the early ecumenists stayed with the WCC for long; the workload was just too heavy, the staff too small, and the compensation far from adequate. Some of that generation, including Neill, suffered intense psychological strain and even physical illness due to the exacting nature of the job. Those who did stay, according to Neill, continued to pay a heavy price.

Another of Neill's major problems in Geneva was his relationship with Visser't Hooft. Hans-Ruedi Weber described their relationship as "... not very close."<sup>2525</sup> Neill's autobiography

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<sup>22</sup> Cragg and Chadwick, p. 611.

<sup>23</sup> Neill, unpublished autobiography, pp. 444-445. This major tour led to a delightful little book by Neill entitled *The Cross Over Asia* (London: Canterbury Press, 1948).

<sup>24</sup> *God's Apprentice*, p. 239.

<sup>25</sup> Hans-Ruedi Weber, interview by author, 12 October 2004, Geneva, Switzerland. Weber knew Neill well.



reveals a certain frustration with “Wim.” To Neill, Visser’t Hooft was largely responsible for driving away able people from the WCC who otherwise would have been excellent to have on board.<sup>2626</sup> While Neill may have been quick to point out Visser’t Hooft’s administrative incompetence, he was equally insistent that Wim was the best choice to lead the WCC. Neill wrote, “I do not think that any other man could have achieved what he did.”<sup>2727</sup> Curiously, Visser’t Hooft made only one brief mention of Neill in his own memoirs.<sup>2828</sup>

Reservations aside, Neill delighted in Visser’t Hooft’s prodigious linguistic abilities. The WCC was a multi-lingual organization, and, like Wim, Stephen Neill relished languages, gaining competence in sixteen of them throughout his life. No doubt this was one reason Neill was recruited to the WCC, and the gift of tongues served him well during these years. One of his colleagues later remarked “Neill was able to lecture at the drop of a hat in any language.”<sup>2929</sup> Neill’s memoirs are chock-full of anecdotal stories of him lecturing in French, studying Icelandic, preaching in Tamil, researching Portuguese archives, reading Dante in Italian, etc. Years later in 1962 Neill was invited to the Chair of Christian Missions and Ecumenical Theology at the University of Hamburg, a position that would exercise his German skills.

In the decade of the 1950s, Neill was consumed with writing and editing books. This little-known chapter in Neill’s life, if measured by his contribution to the worldwide Church, was tremendously successful. During this period, Neill served as General Editor of World Christian Books (WCB), an ecumenical publishing venture sponsored mainly by the IMC. The chief goal of WCB was “... that good simple literature should be made widely available in the languages of

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In 1963 they co-edited a major, WCC sponsored book entitled *The Layman in Christian History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

<sup>26</sup> *God’s Apprentice*, p. 215.

<sup>27</sup> *God’s Apprentice*, p. 214.

<sup>28</sup> W. A. Visser’t Hooft, *Memoirs* (London: SCM Press), 1973. Visser’t Hooft’s files contain only one letter from Neill. This is conspicuous, as Wim was a prodigious communicator.

<sup>29</sup> Hans-Ruedi Weber, interview by author, 12 October 2004, Geneva, Switzerland.

the younger Churches.”<sup>30</sup> The output of WCB was considerable. In addition to the 70 “simple” books in 35 languages that were published, there were scholarly efforts as well such as the *Concise Dictionary of the Bible*<sup>31</sup> and the *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*.

Neill’s years as a professor at the University of Hamburg (1962 to 1967) were spent in serious scholarship, as he wrote some of his most important works then. Neill returned wholeheartedly to his profound concern for the Christian world mission, without fully abandoning his ecumenical interests. He was, however, beginning to realize that his vision of ecumenism was not exactly in line with the ecumenical vision of the WCC. He wrote, “I was wholly committed to the ecumenical cause, as a movement for the unity and renewal of the Church, though far from enamoured of the WCC as it was beginning to take shape.” To Neill, the WCC had become overly bureaucratic and was being run as “...a large business corporation or a bank.”<sup>32</sup> While Neill’s writings are not overly candid about this disenchantment, it is obvious he was troubled by what he labelled the “Geneva nonsense.”<sup>33</sup>

What can be made of such criticism? These comments take us to the heart of Neill’s despondency towards the WCC. There are personal issues involved here, and there are ideological ones. First of all, Neill had not chosen to leave the WCC; the Archbishop dismissed him. The reasons are complex, but they revolve around two things. First, Neill had been removed from his Tinnevely bishopric in 1945 under a cloud of suspicion that he had inappropriately disciplined an Indian clergyman. The charge has since proven true. The Archbishop was not aware of the situation when Neill first came on board. When the information

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<sup>30</sup> World Christian Books, Newsletter No. 1”, January 1956, Box 26-18-03, IMC Archives, Christian Literature, File: Christian Literature Newsletters, 1956-1965, Special Collections, World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>31</sup> Neill, John Goodwin, and Arthur Dowle, eds., *Concise Dictionary of the Bible* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1967).

<sup>32</sup> *God’s Apprentice*, pp. 238-239.

<sup>33</sup> *God’s Apprentice*, p. 272.

began to leak, it was clear something had to be done. Secondly, it is now known that Neill's mental health had not been altogether well since 1943; a mental breakdown contributed greatly to the Tinnevely debacle. Neill had been receiving treatment in Geneva, but the demons still surfaced, prompting concern among colleagues. The Archbishop was unwilling to take the risk of something going seriously awry.

Neill's passion for mission was likely at the core of his ideological critiques of the WCC. Stephen Neill remained a missionary at heart long after leaving India. The WCC, however, was not able to devote considerable attention to missions in the early years, a fact explained by the close relationship between the WCC and the IMC. The IMC had the funds and the infrastructure. Heavy emphasis on missions was not urgent as the IMC was quite capable. In fact, the WCC "Evangelism" sub-unit worked closely with the IMC. Nevertheless, Neill struggled with the paltry attention to missions at the executive level. Neill's qualms here became even more pronounced with time, particularly in the years leading up to the 1961 WCC New Delhi assembly. His autobiography evinces clear misgivings about that assembly. To Neill, it was woefully ironic that the year the IMC joined the WCC (1961) proved to be the very year inter-religious dialogue began to assume a prominent role in the WCC, calling into question traditional notions of missions altogether. Historically, it can be argued that after 1961 the nature of missions was not as clear-cut as it had been prior. It is no coincidence that in 1961 Neill published *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (London: Oxford University Press), his first published work on inter-religious dialogue. While Neill was very much in favour of dialogue, his Christian convictions remained resolute. His Christology insisted upon Christ's decisive role in human redemption. The WCC began moving towards a more inclusive missiology, alienating the likes of Neill.

After Hamburg, Neill moved to Nairobi in order to help found the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. His term lasted until 1973. He spent his final decade at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, travelling frequently and writing prodigiously. His ecumenical interests during these years continued, although his connections to the WCC waned.

## **Conclusion**

Stephen Neill's ecumenical life was remarkable. His experience came on a number of levels: a student participant, a church leader working towards real ecumenical solutions, a professional ecumenist in Geneva, a university professor of ecumenics, and an official historian of ecumenism. There is no doubt that serving with that inner circle of ecumenists in the 1940s and 50s gave Neill a privileged perspective into the movement, and helped him see that the World Council of Churches is not the same thing as the ecumenical movement.

Neill came to understand ecumenism while in the mission field. His memoirs point to his work towards ecumenical fellowship in South India as his most important contribution to the movement. Those painful and complicated discussions made him keenly aware that ecumenical endeavours are never easy. To the end of his life, Neill held that church union in South India was the right thing, in spite of the difficulties. He wrote, "The CSI stands as a challenge to the whole of Christendom to do likewise."<sup>34</sup>

We conclude where we began. After the recent Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Athens, ecumenist Michael Kinnamon made the telling observation that "... the interfaith dimension of mission has been noticeable by its absence from the agenda at this conference."<sup>35</sup> The roots of this neglect and reticence can be traced to the New Delhi assembly

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<sup>34</sup> *God's Apprentice*, p. 332.

<sup>35</sup> For the full transcript of his remarks, see <http://www.mission2005.org/>.

of 1961, when traditional understandings of missions were challenged and fresh interpretations were introduced. The WCC struggled to articulate a clear missiological vision after Delhi. This disappointed Neill. For him, mission was central, non-apologetic, and certainly not negligible.

Perhaps a careful analysis of the history of the ecumenical movement would demonstrate that it is high time to bring Christian missions and ecumenism closer together again. After all, the two share a common history if indeed the modern ecumenical movement grew out of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. Missions and ecumenism need each other. Stephen Neill knew that.