

Ecumenism For Everyone

(This is a summary text in simple terms of four presentations at a Workshop on Ecumenism organised by the Christian Conference of Asia in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on April 28 to May 02, 1997.)

I THE CONTEMPORARY MEANING OF ECUMENISM

1. Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Movement burst upon the world scene at the beginning of the 20th century. It signified a fervent search for unity among the divided Protestant Churches. After initial hesitation the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has come forward to promote the Ecumenical Movement. Through Vatican II it acknowledges the Holy Spirit to be the source of this movement and exhorts its faithful "to take an active and intelligent part" in it (UR 4)*. The World Council of Churches (WCC) through its activities represents the strength and advance of this Movement.
2. But the term Ecumenism itself is pre-Christian and its significance is in tune more with Asian religions than with Christianity, as we shall see in the course of these lectures. Let it be noted here that the root Greek word "Ecumene" denotes the inhabited world and therefore the movement named after it has to do with the world in which we live. To many secular writers today Ecumenism denotes Universalism, a concept much wider than that of Church unity.
3. Unity of the churches, however, is a legitimate concern of Ecumenism. Disunity of the followers of Jesus is a veritable scandal and unity among them would strengthen

* UR = *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism. The number is that of the 'article' or of official paragraph.

God's design for a much needed unity and renewal of the modern world. True to its original meaning, Ecumenism needs to be viewed in terms of 4 dimensions or levels or concentric circles. They are: unity and renewal of Churches, unity in the fellowship of faiths, unity at the service of whole humankind, and unity and integrity of Creation. These constitute what is called Wider Ecumenism.

The theological and biblical foundations for each of these 4 levels of unity will be discussed under the next topic. Now a few brief comments on the contemporary meaning of these levels of Ecumenism.

Unity of Churches

- a. Jesus prayed for unity among his followers (Jn 17:21), his new command was love and understanding (Jn 13:34) by which they were to be identified. Paul sees the Christians as the Body of Christ who are to preserve the *unity of the Spirit* - "one body, [one spirit, even as you were called in one hope: one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:4-5). Serious divisions to [the extent of mutual exclusion and hatred certainly constitute a sin against the Holy Spirit. But differences stemming from cultural and minor doctrinal diversities need not mean divisions. "In essentials unity, in others liberty and in all things charity" (Augustine). Lack of charity has often been the primary cause of divisions in Christianity. Another reason has been failure to distinguish between unity and uniformity, between divine design and human arrangements.
- b. Missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries contributed most to the resurgence of church ecumenism. Unity for the sake of Mission and Mission for the sake of unity are the two poles of Ecumenism (P.D. Devanandan). Mission is not for mechanical unity, but for renewal,

reform and service. Ecumenism at the level of Church unity is therefore *Conversion, Renewal, mutual Service and Witness*.

- c. Not all church unions, thanks to the Ecumenical Movement, have been meaningful and according to the mind of Christ. The unification of Churches is no guarantee for community of persons (the case of the Church of South India).

Unity of Faiths

- a. It is this level of Ecumenism which Asia with its culture of religious pluralism needs most. The traditional Christian exclusivism ensconced in such expressions as "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord between the Academy and the Church?" (Tertullian 160-225) or "No one to the Father except through Jesus Christ" needs to be understood today with due respect to the sincere faith and sensitivity of other religionists as we shall explain under the next topic.
- b. Dialogue between peoples of all faiths is the need of the hour, the signs of the times (Pope John, Vatican II UR 4). Dialogue is more than speaking to one another after a long period of mutual estrangement. It is readiness to accept the other as the other, readiness to listen to and to be corrected by the other. Building fellowships and harmonious multireligious local and national communities through meaningful dialogue is a major ecumenical task of contemporary Christianity, especially in Asian countries, where the centuries - old peaceful coexistence of different religious groups is in danger of being fanned by irreligious politicians into flames of violent religious conflicts. India is a current example here.

Unity of Humankind

- a. Ecumenism at the level of human concerns and rights: It is often called secular ecumenism; for many Asian countries promotion of Ecumenism demands promotion of authentic Secularism in a given nation. Secularism is not merely legal separation of state and religion, not only respect for all religions; it is also placing the practice of religion at the service of the suffering humanity.
- b. Ecumenism at this level urges people to get politically involved. The right kind of political activism is part of Ecumenism. Freedom from racism, and concern for distributive justice have always dominated the activities of the WCC. "Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is for" (Mahatma Gandhi).

Unity (Integrity) of Creation

- a. The Ecumenical movement, as it is embodied in the WCC, is currently turning its serious attention to this level of Ecumenism as was evident at the Canberra Assembly in 1991 whose theme was "Come, Holy Spirit, Renew all Creation".
- b. The Vancouver (WCC 1983) watchword: Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation - JPIC. There will be in the world no peace without justice, and no justice and peace without concern for the integrity of the created order, namely concern for the environmental and ecological degradations resulting from the present selfish pace of economic and technological advancement.
- c. The so-called "cosmic religions" of the Asian peoples (as different from the historical religions of the Jews and Christians) may be more helpful towards the promotion of this level of Ecumenism and towards foster-

ing a much - needed Eco-spirituality, or Creation spirituality as Mathew Fox would call it.

II A FEW THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL REASONS FOR WIDER ECUMENISM

1. We begin with 'theological' reasons because *Theos* (God) is the common centre of all levels of unity-hence 'concentric circles' of Ecumenism. As a matter of fact, this is the most consequential ecumenical breakthrough of our times-that all the main churches and religions of the world concede that the living God may be speaking to the problems and possibilities of the present world outside of the Bible and in other sacred Scriptures. Even the Word of God, enshrined for us Christians in the Bible, needs to be reinterpreted under God's inspiration in the context of today's world. Thus theological reasons come first.
2. The first and foremost theological reason for Ecumenism is the essential unity of God. All religions and all churches seek the same God and the best all religions and churches can and should do is to enter into dialogue, listen to each other and cooperate for the sake of humanity. All religions and all churches are built on God's concern for the weak and sinful and suffering humanity. The notion of *avatar* in Hinduism brings it out forcefully. What then about the uniqueness of Jesus?
3. For us Christians, Jesus is the Centre of all our religious experience - He is the Lord, the Way, the Life, the Alpha and the Omega. But to exclude and belittle in the name of Jesus people of other religions is to go against the very core of the Bible as the following illustrations from it will bear out :

- a. The Bible, though the book of a particular people, reveals throughout God's loving care for all peoples of the earth. God asks the Jews: "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me? Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?" (Amos 9:7).
- b. To be biblical is to be ecumenical, to seek solidarity with the far and near, to render service to all without distinction as God did through prophets Elijah and Elisha to the widow at Zarephtha and Naaman the Syrian (cf. Lk 4:25-27) respectively. So too Jesus' attitude towards the 'outsider' who was driving out demons in his name (Mk 9:38-41).
- c. It is significant that exclusivism, the very opposite of Ecumenism, often characterises the followers of *all religions*, including the Jews gathered with Jesus for prayer in the synagogue (Lk 4:25-30) who scheme to throw down Jesus from the cliff of a hill as a punishment for his wider ecumenism.
- d. In fact, the larger context of this exclusivism here begins with Lk 4:16 when Jesus announces his ecumenism towards the blind, the poor, the oppressed and the imprisoned. Ecumenism is truly for the good of society, as we shall see below.

III ECUMENISM FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

1. The world and human society, as we said, are central to Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Movement. WCC statement in 1951: "It is important to insist that this word 'ecumenical' which comes from the Greek word for the whole inhabited world, is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the Gospel to the whole world". Thus Ecumenism is dialogue between the world and the

Gospel. Ecumenism aims at changing the human society by the power of the Gospel and its values.

2. The WCC has had the world and human society as the themes of its deliberations at its General Assemblies: *God's Design and Man's Disorder* (1948), *JC the Hope of the World* (1954), *Jesus Christ the Light of the World* (1961), *Behold I Make All Things New* (1968), *JC Frees and Unites* (1975), *JC the Life of the World* (1983), *Come Holy Spirit, renew All Creation* (1991). A most significant document to come out of Vatican II of the RCC is "The Church in the Modern world" (1965). It anticipated the Uppsala 1968 dictum: "The World provides the agenda for the Church". We need to listen to the world too. The Gospel to the World and the World to the Gospel! (WCC 1951, 1968).
3. In brief, Ecumenism aims at renewing human societies from within (like salt and leaven) by ushering in *a new culture* or a counter-culture by which human society is to be radically restructured for the sake of the disadvantaged and the marginalised. Ecumenism challenges the present order of things and calls for a New Order, especially in economic and political systems. The reasons for it are thoroughly theological and biblical, as the Bible, originally the Book of one particular people, finally opens up through Jesus to a New Heaven and New Earth (Rev. 21:1). Hence Unit III of the WCC undertakes tasks such as Development and Social Justice, Indigenous People and Land Rights, Ecumenical Action on Racism, Solidarity with Women, International Affairs, Peace and Human Rights.

IV THE PRACTICE OF ECUMENISM AT LOCAL LEVEL

1. The impression is widespread among Christians and others that Ecumenism is a matter of concern for top leaders and that it deals with administrative issues of

coordination at the top level. The impression is that the practice of Ecumenism must begin from above. Hence members of the RC and Protestant Churches in their practice of Ecumenism wait for clearance from above. One gets this clear impression when one examines the formation and working of some recent ecumenical unions of churches. The formation of the Church of South India, for example, was decided upon and carried through by missionaries and theologians (some residing in London!) with almost no consultation with the Christians at the local levels. Hence while ecumenical leaders agree across conference tables, the people of the united church still remain divided on the basis of caste and money power.

2. A major critique today of the WCC and similar ecumenical structures is that they are becoming top-heavy and often irrelevant to the concerns of the people at local and grassroot levels.
3. Ecumenism is not a mere doctrine. It must become the praxis (practice) of the local churches; it must first involve the hearts and minds of local peoples. Mega-structures do not constitute Ecumenism. The life-style (praxis) of the historical Jesus is, as we saw above, is ecumenical; so too that of the early church until it was made a tool for the imperialistic expansion of the West.
4. The practice of Ecumenism has to be *primarily* local - this for several reasons :
 - a. The church is both an Event and an Organisation. The Church becomes alive when and where the Word of God is listened to and responded to in faith. This takes place almost always at a local level. No wonder, in the NT the word church (ecclesia) is found quite often in the plural.

- b. The local Christian community does not possess part of God's Word, nor part of God's promise, nor part of the Holy Spirit. All these totally belong by the Grace of God to each local church. As a NT scholar concludes,

The church is not like a school...whose existence in a given place is quite accidental. The Catholic Church is always a local church, the church of some city or country ... Locality, nationality and particularity are the essential marks of the Universal Church

(Alan Richardson).

5. The practice of local Ecumenism calls for

- a. efforts towards *conciliar unity* among the churches, and not organic unity (which model according to WCC since 1975 is neither practicable nor biblical). A unity that leaves room for different kinds of experiences and styles of living in people coming to Jesus Christ.
- b. pooling together of the resources of the church (personnel and wealth) for works of common benefit for people of *all faiths*. Focus should be more on evolving basic (base) *human communities* in a given place than on forming merely better Christian congregations.

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