

Editor's Word

This issue is a collection of articles from The International Conference on the Asian Ecumenical Movement held on April 12 – 13, 2018 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Experiences from India, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong are featured. Scholars have considered the situation of the Ecumenical movement in Asia from many different perspectives and have suggested directions for the movement. This editorial will first provide a brief glimpse into these articles, and then some ideas relevant to the Hong Kong context will be expressed.

To begin with, we have Lai Pan-chiu's article: *Divine Love and Human Love: An Asian Ecumenical Revisit of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation 1518*. Lai commented that, "Luther's 'dialectical' approach to divine and human loves in the *Heidelberg Disputation* may sound all too 'dualistic' in comparison to the 'non-dualistic' way of thinking prevalent in various religious / philosophical traditions in Asia...If one follows Mannermaa's interpretation of Luther, one may find that there is no absolute contradiction between divine and human loves, and practicing divine love is possible for human being. Furthermore, there can be some common grounds between Luther and Aquinas and thus basis for dialogue between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism."

The Ecumenical Movement is today officially represented by the World Council of Churches (WCC) inaugurated in 1948, which is said to be 'the Flagship of the Ecumenical Movement'. Kuncheria Pathil in his *Future of the Ecumenical Movement* has quoted WCC, "no one Church can claim to be the only valid type or the only one genuine

model. All the existing individual Churches and their identities are our precious heritage which must be maintained and safeguarded although these identities should not be conceived as static and closed. No one historical Church is a finally finished product, but is always in the making by a giving-and-taking process of growth.” The Faith and Order Movement initiated by WCC have arrived certain conclusions: (1) The agreements among the churches are much more than their differences and they are united in the fundamentals. (2) The Catholic and Protestant are two different approaches and they are complementary rather than contradictory. (3) The socio-economic and cultural factors are at the root of many doctrinal and theological issues. (4) Unity and plurality must be held hand in hand and the way ahead is contextual and ‘unity in diversity’.

As put together by Jan S. Arintonang in his essay *An Overview of Denominationalism/Confessionalism on the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, “The Christians deserve and are entitled to be called as Christ’s disciples not because they belong to certain denomination, but through their life style and conduct that follow Jesus.” Works from the Lutheran, Reformed/Presbyterian, Anglican/Episcopal, Baptist, Mennonite, Methodist, Adventist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal-Charismatic are examined. The operation of World Council of Churches (WCC), East Asia Christian Conference (CCA) and the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) is also observed.

The primacy of the Roman Pontiff was challenged when Martin Luther began preaching against several practices in the Catholic Church early in 1517. Papal infallibility has always been a controversial issue. In 1995, Pope John Paul II identified the question of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome as one of the five major areas that need fuller exploration for bringing about the goal of ecumenical progress in his

encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint*. Philip L. Fuentes has in his article *Towards a Ministry of Unity and Charity: A Survey of the Christian Reformation Leaders' and Theologians' Responses to Pope John Paul II's Ut Unum Sint* selected responses from the Christian Reformation world including Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Baptist to gauge their level of receptivity. As observed by Fuentes, "They were in unison in saying that the platform provided by Pope John Paul II to critically undertake and look into the question of the centuries old impasse created 'a new situation'. This, in a sense, is a 'significant shift' in the attitude of other Christian traditions towards the Catholic documents... *UUS* was welcomed positively by other Christian traditions, one reason being that there is an observable shift in the language used and the tone by which the pope enunciated his message as nothing short of fraternal. They also applauded the humility that was manifested by the pope."

Indeed, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification created and agreed by the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999 stated that the churches now share "a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." As the fruit of an extensive ecumenical dialogue, it clarified long dated theological and exegetical misunderstanding especially between the Catholic Church and churches emerging from the reformed traditions.

Wider Ecumenism

So what is the phenomena of ecumenism in Asia? Kyo Seong Ahn reminds us in *The Asian Ecumenical Movement in Historical Perspective: with Special Reference to its Contribution to Ecumenism* that "it was at the International Missionary Council conference in

Tambaram, India, in 1938, ten years after the Jerusalem conference, that the issue of the establishment of the Asian ecumenical body as a regional one was for the first time raised.” Aswin Fernandis mentioned in *The Organizational Solidarity of the Christian Community in India, both with the Orthodox Churches and Western Christianity (Churches of Reformation), in a path way to Ecumenical union* that during the Tambaram Mission Conference, “Asian participants, irrespective of the denominations they belonged to, posed a decisive challenge to Western Christianity, questioning its negative attitudes towards religions other than Christianity...which paved the way to what is known today as ‘wider ecumenism’, meaning the dialogue and cooperation of the churches with the various religious traditions.”

More than one author reminds us the word ‘ecumenical’ is derived from ‘oikoumene’, which originally means the habitable world, and the meaning has been stretched to be an ecclesiastical term indicating the unity of the churches. Ahn stated, “Since the turn of the century, the ecumenical movement including the Asian ecumenical movement has been urgently required to transform itself from a family business to a business in partnership with society. This signals the arrival of the plurality of ecumenism, which ranges from Christian ecumenism, to wider ecumenism, and to Oikoumene ecumenism, together with grass-roots ecumenism.”

Unlike in the West, Christianity in Asia is imported. Asia is a place of different religions: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. In some countries, Christians are the minorities in their country, like India, Malaysia, Taiwan, Japan. Fernandis continues, “The issues before our churches are not always the same as those facing the churches in the west. It will be foolish to see the European problem against our situations, or to accept their solutions as our solutions.” Ahn believes ‘wider ecumenism’ has been widely used to indicate the

ecumenical endeavor to build up the relationship with other religions. This is particularly true to those countries where Christianity is a minority religion.

Karel Steenbrink in his article *From Internal Christian towards Multireligious Ecumenical Arrangements in Indonesia* has in a nutshell provided us with the religious phenomena in Indonesia. Although in percentage Christians are a 10% minority, they have in many aspects the same rights as the vast majority of Muslims. “Religious diversity is with some exceptions accepted as a permanent reality for public life.” *Gunung Kasih* or the Hill of Love in Indonesia, built in 2002 as a spiritual center housing a Catholic Church, a Christian church, a temple, a mosque and Hindu temple is a place where religious followers from these various faiths can gather, meditate and worship side by side at the lush and misty tropical hill. Steenbrink observed that “For harmonious relations Indonesian churches and other religions have created a situation that in general is very open for religious institutions and initiatives.”

In *Asian Agency, Protestant Traditions, and Ecumenical Movements in Asia, 1910 to 2010, with special reference to Malaysia and Singapore*, John Roxborough said, “In Malaysia and Singapore, as in many parts of Asia, religion is not a theoretical construct but the way of life of family, neighbours and friends.” Despite their differences of theology, style, and in due course of physical location, the Asian agencies’s significant contribution to the wider Christian world has been “the promulgation of the idea that multiple religious belonging is a fact of life to be accepted.”

Christians in Taiwan occupy 5.86% of Taiwan population. Paulin K Batairwa addressed the situation by providing us concrete examples of ecumenical incidents, including exchanges among theological schools, Taizé prayer and joint action for the translation of bible. Batairwa asserted, “Being a Christian does not imply cultural alienation

rather a rooting in society with a different dynamism.” This echoes with Simon K.M. Wong’s *Ancestor Remembrance and its Implications on Ecumenism in the Chinese-speaking World*. The society we are now dwelling in is comparatively open-minded, the contradiction between religious identity and cultural identity has lessened. Looking back in history, the Chinese rites controversy among Roman Catholic missionaries over Confucianism and Chinese rituals during the 17th and 18th centuries had caused much disputes. Borrowing Karl Rahner’s theology of symbol, Wong argues that “ancestor remembrance is but a cultural and liturgical expression of our filial piety, which is in full harmony with the teachings of the scripture and *magisterium* of the Catholic Church.” He also believes that the same applies to icons and statues in Catholic Church, which opens a common ground for dialogue between Protestantism and Catholicism.

Collaboration between Catholics and Lutherans can be witnessed in Japan as well. The Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (JELC) is considered as ‘double minority’ by Arata Miyamoto in *Ecumenical Trace and Future in the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in Japan*. The commemoration that JELC and Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan co-organize for Reformation 500 at Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki, the southern island of Japan on Nov 2017 is a very good example demonstrating ecumenism by real action. “There, Lutherans and Catholics led common prayer for repentance and reconciliation. They came to pray together in the memory of being peacemakers.” The notion ‘who is your neighbor’, the metaphors of the dialogues of head, heart and hands vividly walk us through a promising ecumenical journey. As Miyamoto puts it, “the theological dialogue between both churches for the past fifty years is corresponding to the dialogue of head, and the common prayer to the dialogue of heart. The Declaration of Intent signifies the intention of both churches in the level of the

dialogue of hands.” Common projects for human aids such as refugee and immigrants supports also started among these Churches.

Pathil has rightly pointed out that programs for the institutional and visible unity get less and less support, programs for common prayer, spiritual experience and social commitment get increasing support, sympathy and encouragement.

The culture of violence on women and girls in India is not merely a national crisis but also poses challenges to Indian Churches and the Asian ecumenical movement that reflect ecumenism in action to promote gender justice. Moumita Biswas has given us examples of three Indian women: Pandita Ramabai, Shanti Solomon and Mary Roy who made unique contributions in transforming the society in *Christian Women Reformers in India: Strategies of Transformation*. The contributions of Shanti Solomon is widely acknowledged by Asian and global ecumenical movement as she worked within the church, with Christian women and was involved with prayer movement. Pandita Ramabai is recognized as Christian social reformer. Mary Roy is globally recognized as a woman activist and reformer in the history of feminist movement in India. Biswas stressed that in order to understand Indian ecumenism especially from Asian feminist perspective, ecumenism needs to be re-thought and placed within the wider search for the unity of humankind. Therefore ecumenism or modern ecumenical movement is not merely confined to internal developments and relationship within the on-going church.

Public Theology

Both Kyo Seong Ahn, Cheng Yang-en and Sivin Kit talk about public theology. Ahn said, “the church and the society were not far from each other in the meanings of the ‘ecumenical’, and thus the

relationship of the ecumenical movement with the society was an essential one, neither secondary nor peripheral.” From public theology Ahn coined ‘public ecumenism’, which requires “the church to take on a new stance in socio-political issues: to be a part, not the leader, of society working with other civil society groups in pursuit of common good, providing its unique ideas and legacies. On the part of the church, this will be a totally new experience, but perhaps will be the only option available for it. It is worth mentioning that in some Asian countries such as Korea, the church failed to appreciate the significance of the changed context and attempted to have a strong influence on the society, and yet the society tended to interpret it as a special interest group’s abusing the power.”

Yang-en Cheng’s article on *Post-colonialism, Ideological Divide and Emergent Civil Society: Current Challenges for Ecumenical Movement in Asia* admitted “whether Christians should engage in social and political actions still alienate Christian churches from each other.” This might be the cause of Asian mindset of privatization of faith and the long estrangement of public awareness. Cheng borrowed from Clive Pearson, the New Zealand theologian, some directions where public theology can be engaged: The capacity to address occasional public issues for the sake of the public or common good for a civil society; The need to draw the ‘wisdom’ and ‘riches’ of the Christian tradition into the public conversation in order to contribute to the well-being of society.”

In *Speaking the Truth in the Midst of Divisiveness: The Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statements of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM)*, Sivin Kit outlined the situation Christians faced in the country. Christians in Malaysia are also a minority, contributing to 9.1% of the whole population in 2011. By taking a closer look at The Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Statements issued by The Christian

Federation of Malaysia (CFM), Kit tries to gain an insight into Malaysian Christian life and mission, which offers a bridge for further ecumenical, intercultural and interreligious engagement to enhance their approach in doing public theology. “Those statements clearly show that CFM is no longer merely speaking on behalf of the Christian community and interests but now has ventured to speak openly, explicitly, and courageously on social issues. The statements tend to be more general in nature, the specificity of issues also suggests that CFM wishes to make its view heard to those in the corridors of power as well as the citizens on the street.”

In the Philippines, where Christianity is already the dominant religion, Tapia-Raquel invited us to revisit in *Community, Solidarity, and Subsistence A reflection on the ecumenical movement in the Philippines* how colonization bastardized the indigenous culture of the place, buried myths and stories. Constructing a local theology in the Philippine context today demands listening to the most vulnerable communities: the urban poor, the laborers working in the country. And that the ecumenical movement in the Philippines has chosen radical solidarity with the poorest and the most oppressed. “Ultimately, the ecumenical spirit is not just intended for church unity, but unity in service to those who need God the most.” To Tapia-Raquel, the ecumenical movement is about going to where people are crying out for life.

The Hong Kong Context

Affordable living space is a priority concern of many Hong Kong people, especially the young generation. Those were the days when we worked hard and living standards improved. There is discontent nowadays among young people about opportunities of moving

upstream. How can we Christians respond to this? In the Chief Executive's 2018 Policy Address, Carrie Lam presented some plans on land supply, they include short to medium planning of the development of brownfield sites, land sharing and revitalisation of industrial buildings, and there is also a long term planning of building artificial islands in the Lantau Tomorrow Vision. The vision is said to instil hope among Hong Kong people for economic progress, improve people's livelihood and meet their housing and career aspirations. While these are with no doubt practical hopes, are we not also concerned about our spiritual needs and development that will nurture us to be citizens with love and care?

Imagine a chapel that houses Christians from different denominations, with function areas to share, and affordable residential area on the upper floors for young people or those who are in need. The Ökumenisches Forum in HafenCity of Hamburg, Germany is a sacred and a residential and office building that brings together the diversity and traditions of 21 churches. On the ground floor there is the shared chapel, a café and a function room. Upper floors house offices, residential area, city convent and guest area.

The ecumenical chapel is small but elastic, with the altar, lectern and cross as shared elements. The diversity of the member churches is expressed in the design of the interior walls: the left side of the entrance belongs to churches connected more to visual expression, including icons from Russian Orthodox tradition, Greek Orthodox Metropolitan and the Roman Catholic Church. The right side of the entrance is designed by the churches of the Reformation, which feel more connected to the words. The interplay of images and words results in a dialogue that becomes the expression of being together in spite of all differences. The managing director Henning Klahn said the forum is

unique in the whole Europe, and he stresses that it is the relationship of all these churches that counts, not differences.

Can this idea be amplified to Hong Kong? Can Christians from different denominations have a common space for worship and at the same time provide dwelling place for those in need? Do we have space for dialogue on this issue? Pathil said that perfect consensus on matters of faith and doctrines is an impossible task and asks, “What should be the priority of the ecumenical movement, searching Christ at the centre within the institutional churches or at the margins of the society? God is definitely on the side of the oppressed people at the periphery as in those days of the slavery and oppression of the people of God in Egypt in the story of the Exodus of the Old Testament.” He continues, “All churches must move from the center to the peripheries and prophetically involved in the lives of the poor, oppressed and marginalized and thus become agents of transformation of society and instruments of unity among the whole humankind irrespective of religion, culture, caste and creed.”

Who are the people struggling at the peripheries in Hong Kong? Young people who want to lead an independent live? People marginalized by the social norms? There are concrete problems that need practical solutions. Ambrose Mong said in *Joseph Ratzinger's Approach to Ecumenism*, “Our churches are still so caught up with doctrinal purity and ecclesiastical rectitude that they are neglecting Christ’s command to serve the poor and the oppressed. In fact, it is one of the crucial tasks in our endeavour to promote Christian unity.” As suggested by Mong, ecumenism in Asia has its own meaning, as “the gap between the rich and poor is growing rapidly...a practical or secular ecumenical approach that strives for the common good, amid religious pluralism, is more appropriate and meaningful here. For example, Christians from different denominations, including Roman

Catholics, can co-operate in charitable and social work...putting aside their doctrinal differences, and making a concerted effort to deal with the problems related to poverty, justice, peace and ecological issues.” This observation is particularly true in the context of Hong Kong. Responding to the policy address, can Christians join hands and play a role in the future development of land supply, no matter whether it is on brownfield sites, revitalization of industrial buildings or Lantau Tomorrow Vision that aims to improve the common good of people?

In this Journal, we witness some common notions in the ecumenical movement in Asia, they are: acceptance, respect and understanding. The Centre for Catholic Studies has been promoting ecumenism in an academic way. The organizing of the Liturgical Space and Architecture Symposium in 2018 and Sacredness with Music Symposium in 2019 has gathered experts from different Christian denominations for an exchange of ideas and communication. Instead of doing ecumenical things, we do things ecumenically, i.e. we do things together which are already a part of our normal life, like appreciating architecture and sharing music. Through this kind of events we learn from each other. As Batwaria said, “Christian identity derives not primarily from the belonging to a given denomination but by the identification with the spirit of Jesus who shapes the follower in his image and likeness.”

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