

**Asian Agency, Protestant Traditions, and  
Ecumenical Movements in Asia, 1910 to 2010,  
with special reference to  
Malaysia and Singapore**

**亞洲組織、新教傳統和亞洲基督徒合一運動  
(1910 - 2010) —— 馬來西亞和新加坡**

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[ABSTRACT] Ecumenism in Asia has involved movements concerned with repairing the damage of Christian divisions and facilitating a commitment to Christian mission in contexts marked by strong religious cultures, conflict, poverty, and inequality. The divisions to be addressed include those between Western and Eastern traditions, as well as those within the Western Christian tradition exported to Asia as part of colonialism and Christian mission.

As well as being sources of ongoing fragmentation, Protestant traditions deriving from the rupture in the Western church at the time of the Reformation have been sources of attempts at repairs in those relationships, and contributors to the formulation of an understanding of Christian mission appropriate to Asian contexts.

The story is one of both international movements and local agency, and its history has raised questions about securing trust, the

development of appropriate structures and governance, and the navigation of sensitive political contexts.

Reflection on these issues and their historical roots in this article relates particularly to Malaysia and Singapore, but also connects to the wider Asian experience of both the Reformation and the Ecumenical Movement.

**【摘要】** 亞洲的基督徒合一運動涉及修補基督徒分裂，並在強烈的宗教文化、衝突、貧窮和不平等的背景下促進對基督徒使命的承諾。要解決的，除了是西方和東方傳統之間的分歧，還有那些通過殖民主義出口的西方基督教傳統自身之間的分歧。

雖然是分裂的根源，在宗教改革時期西方教會分裂所產生的新教傳統，同時也是修復這些關係的源泉，並為理解一個適合亞洲的基督徒使命作出貢獻。

既是國際運動，又涉及本地組織，整個運動的歷史提出了關於信任、發展適當架構和管治，以及遊走在敏感的政治環境中等問題。

本文以馬來西亞和新加坡的情況作反思，但也廣泛地論及亞洲在改革和合一運動上的經驗。

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Ecumenism can be considered as a cultural phenomenon manifest in individuals and organizations, and in relation to representative institutions who identify with the term and intentionally work to expand the common life and mission of

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<sup>1</sup> In preparing this article I would like to acknowledge the librarian and staff of the Presbyterian Research Centre, Knox College, Dunedin, New Zealand and the use of the resources of the Rita Mayne England Collection. See <https://presbyterianresearchcentrenz.com/home/hewitson-library/special-collections/th-e-rita-mayne-england-collection/>. Accessed 27 March 2018.

churches and "mend their fragmentations."<sup>2</sup> In Asia, organizations of ecumenical significance, which may or may not have explicit ecumenical sympathies, include bible societies, faith missions, interest groups such as those concerned with Asian hymnody,<sup>3</sup> and international funding agencies.<sup>4</sup> Church historians<sup>5</sup> and theologians<sup>6</sup> have an important role when they seek to contribute to understanding by being fair and objective rather than defensive, as do secular ethnographers and commentators who see religion as an interesting part of culture and life rather than as a category of activity to be resented or politicised. Also important for ecumenical understanding are the libraries of theological schools and their networks.<sup>7</sup> Peer review processes for the accreditation of theological education engage representatives of different traditions as examiners of institutions outside their own traditions. There are churches which see bringing the parts of the body of Christ together as part of their identity,<sup>8</sup> and in Malaysia Mar Thoma and Syrian Orthodox

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<sup>2</sup> Yeow Choo Lak and Henry S. Wilson, eds., *Being Reformed Christians in Asia Today* (Singapore: ATESEA, 1994), 1.

<sup>3</sup> I-to Loh and Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, *In Search for Asian Sounds and Symbols in Worship* (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, and the Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, "The Association for Theological Education in South East Asia, 1959-2002: A Pilgrimage in Theological Education," in *Supporting Asian Christianity's Transition from Mission to Church : A History of the Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia*, ed. Samuel Pearson (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 363-402.

<sup>5</sup> Including those networked through the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the Church History Association of India (CHAI).

<sup>6</sup> John C. England and Archie C. C. Lee, *Doing Theology with Asian Resources : Ten Years in the Formation of Living Theology in Asia* (Auckland: Pace Publishing for the Programme for Theology & Cultures in Asia, 1993). <http://ptcaweb.blogspot.co.nz/> Accessed 28 February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Forum of Asian Theological Libraries (ForATL). <http://www.foratl.org/> Accessed 28 February 2018.

<sup>8</sup> The CSI and CNI have been important witnesses, even if unions have not proceeded further. The Uniting Church of Australia was one of those influenced by the CSI and CNI. It has sustained a commitment to ecumenism as part of its identity. Interview with Kerry Enright, 4 January 2018. See also William W. Emilsen and Susan E. Emilsen, *Marking Twenty Years: The Uniting Church in Australia 1977-1997* (Sydney: United Theological College, 1997).

churches have been conspicuous by their active support of ecumenical ventures.

Each of these manifestations of an “ecumenical spirit” has both theological and social-contextual dimensions, and in Asia concern for mission in context has usually been more important than confessional identity. 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. The context in which one seeks to worship is often one of urgency, survival, opportunity, dislocation, migration, and conflict. Yet changes in structures and traditions take time. In India the ecumenical success story of church union was a labour of faith begun by local leaders decades before independence. The development of Asia-wide ecumenical instruments and the consideration of union in Malaya and Singapore during the 1950s and 60s took place in an era when there were other priorities which could not be avoided. Sixty years later what Christian unity and mission requires has further shifted in the light of the assumptions and needs of a post-colonial, post-modern, and pluralistic world.

West Malaysia and Singapore have both a shared and a distinct ecumenical history which presents commonalities and contrasts, particularly in the period since the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965. The Malayan Christian Council (MCC) was founded in Singapore in 1948. In 1967 it became the Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore (CCMS), then splitting in the mid-1970s to become separate councils in each country, the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) and the Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM).

From 1983 to 1990 while I was teaching at Seminari Theology Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur I sought to collate archival and oral information on the story of ecumenism in Malaysia and Singapore as

part of a number of projects re-centring Malaysian church history on Malaysia itself.<sup>9</sup> *A common voice : a history of the ecumenical movement in Malaysia* was published by the CCM in 1991.<sup>10</sup> There is a need to update this history, though there are some observations in my more recent *History of Christianity in Malaysia*, where the focus is on Christianity as a Malaysian religion.<sup>11</sup>

In Singapore support for the national council faltered with the departure of Western leadership until it was reborn with an evangelical focus and with social concerns more in keeping with those of Singapore society.<sup>12</sup> The Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) has a stronger sense of continuous history not only from its own formation in 1976, but through the CCMS to the founding of the MCC in 1948 and the earlier steps which led to that point. It has continued successfully as a representative body of mainstream churches and has cordial relationships with the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) and the Roman Catholic Church. Together these three bodies constitute the Christian Federation of Malaysia (1985). There are also a Sabah Council of Churches (SCC) and an Association of Churches in Sarawak (ACS). In Singapore the NCCS has relationships with the Catholic church, but there is no separate organization to represent what might be called the "old" ecumenism.

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<sup>9</sup> The re-centring was not only in relation to the Western focus of older sources, but also in relation to Singapore where much Christian work in the region was headquartered.

<sup>10</sup> John Roxborough, *A Common Voice : A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Malaysia*, Ecumenism in Malaysia Series (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Council of Churches of Malaysia, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> *A History of Christianity in Malaysia* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2014), 63-65, 81-83, 118f.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected: The Demise and Rebirth of the National Council of Churches, Singapore," *Transformation* 26, no. 4 (2009), 258-268. Also published in *Trinity Theological Journal* 14 (2006), 48-70.

In 1969 George Lindbeck reflected on reasons for the weak uptake of ecumenism in West Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>13</sup> The timing of church union negotiations could hardly have been worse. The Emergency was a living memory. In May 1969, though no doubt after he wrote, there were race riots and fatalities in Kuala Lumpur. Churches had other things on their minds and there was little grass-roots support. The evangelicalism common across the major denominations and other churches, “in one way, the closest thing to be found to indigenous Protestantism,” provided the level of inter-church cooperation that people actually wanted.

This is supported by Simon Chan’s later observation that primal spirituality is an important element in Asian evangelicalism and Pentecostalism,<sup>14</sup> and the influence of parachurch groups “has resulted in a new form of ecumenism where denominational loyalties are transcended and traditional divisions between mainline and non-mainline no longer apply.” Yet, “pragmatic rather than theological considerations usually underlie these ecumenical impulses, such as the need to cooperate in evangelism and to deal collectively with civil authorities.”<sup>15</sup>

In 2009 Thomas Harvey took the analysis of Lindbeck further, exploring how earlier ecumenical failures proved not to be the end of the Singapore story and shifted the focus from church union to the NCCS.<sup>16</sup> In the 1990s the Singapore government and the churches identified areas where engagement served both their interests, including over issues of land for churches, and moral concerns where

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<sup>13</sup> George A Lindbeck, “The Present Ecumenical and Church Situation in West Malaysia and Singapore,” *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (1969), 72-80.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Chan, “Evangelical Theology in Asian Contexts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 228.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>16</sup> Harvey, 258-268.

the voice of the churches was recognised as an important constituency. The leadership of the council of churches also shifted towards trusted local leaders who reflected the conservative and charismatic theology pervasive in the churches in Singapore generally.

A synthesis of the wider story of ecumenism in Asia through to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Assembly of the WCC in New Delhi in 1961 was provided by Hans Ruedi Weber based on detailed research in the archives of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council.<sup>17</sup> Further analysis was provided in 2004 by Ninan Koshy, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*.<sup>18</sup> In 2010 Norman Thomas highlighted the interplay of concerns for mission and unity globally, including in relation to Asia.<sup>19</sup> Published in 2013 for the 10th assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, South Korea, the 82 chapters of the *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism*,<sup>20</sup> provide a substantial enrichment of the story. It is significant that its strategic locus is theological education and that it draws widely on both evangelical and mainline perspectives.

*A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia* highlights the roles of the World Student Christian Federation, the YMCAs and the Christian Conference of Asia in the reformulation of Christian mission in Asia in the post-colonial era. It indicates how inter-related these groups were, and their role as seed-beds for successive

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<sup>17</sup> Hans Ruedi Weber, *Asia and the Ecumenical Movement, 1895-1961* (London: SCM, 1966).

<sup>18</sup> Ninan Koshy, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: World Student Christian Federation Asia-Pacific Region; Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs; Christian Conference of Asia, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Norman E. Thomas, *Missions and Unity: Lessons from History, 1792-2010*, American Society of Missiology Series (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Hope S. Antone et al., eds., *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013).

generations of national leadership. Their transfer of leadership into local hands was in advance of the churches and they provided opportunities in frameworks other than those limited by traditional church structures and clerical roles. The success of these organizations in youth development, tertiary education, and Asian representative ecumenism, set the centre of gravity of Asian Christian identity firmly within Asia itself. Within the Roman Catholic churches in Asia, the reception of Vatican II and the formation of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Councils<sup>21</sup> provides a narrative with parallels and points of interconnection.

Despite church unions in some countries, the major story is the localization of Christian identity and mission in Asia, contributing to a sense of its contribution to the global transition away from Western dominance. Norman Thomas's survey also pays attention to the role of Asian leadership in challenging Western confessional priorities in favour of contextual and mission interests.<sup>22</sup> The amount of diplomatic resolve needed on the part of emerging Asian ecumenical leaders in the debates leading to the formation of what became the CCA was considerable. The WCC and IMC leadership feared a rival body, and Asian leaders were determined not to be a branch office of Geneva, whilst being fully aware that at that stage there was no alternative to being dependent on the WCC and the IMC for funding.<sup>23</sup>

The *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism* also goes some way towards explaining how past the initial success of union schemes and the broad Protestant theological

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas C. Fox, *Pentecost in Asia : A New Way of Being Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). <http://www.fabc.org/> Accessed 24 February 2018. Peter C. Phan, *The Asian Synod : Texts and Commentaries* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas, 125-127.

<sup>23</sup> Yap, Kim Hao, *From Prapat to Colombo: History of the Christian Conference of Asia (1957-1995)* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 1995), 4-16.



groupings of the Asia Theological Association (ATA)<sup>24</sup> and the Association for Theological Education in Southeast Asia (ATESEA),<sup>25</sup> mission and context have in the long run prevailed as the dominant concerns of Asian ecumenism.<sup>26</sup>

Related to this is how the sharing of resources in the development of church leadership through theological education has, generation after generation, brought future parish ministers and heads of churches into long-lasting personal relationships and friendships. The formation of church leadership in this way parallels what the YMCA / YWCA and WSCF (and later student movements) did for lay (and some clerical) leadership. The place of church leaders in ecumenical bodies coming from both these ordained and lay streams has been crucial.<sup>27</sup>

It is also significant that the very process of teaching students from different churches together raises challenging questions for theological educators seeking to bring together the life of the actual churches around them and the commonalities and divergences of the Christian tradition. It is no accident that of the authors noted above, Lindbeck, Harvey and Chan, have all been lecturers in theology at Trinity Theological College in Singapore, and my own reflections derive from my teaching and experience at Seminari Theology Malaysia. Other key writers to be noted below, particularly Thu En Yu (Sabah Theological Seminary) and Michael Poon (Trinity Theological College), are also theological educators. But this is a

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<sup>24</sup> Founded in 1970. <http://www.ataasia.com/>. Accessed 28 February 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Founded in Singapore as the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia (ATSSEA) in 1957. <http://atesea.net/about/history/>. Accessed 28 February 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Hermen Shastri, "Widening Christian Unity as a Challenge for Ecumenism in Asia," in *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism*, ed. Hope S. Antone, et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 161-174.

<sup>27</sup> Compared to New Zealand, where the national council marginalised church leadership, failed to generate a lay constituency for its vision, and eventually collapsed altogether. Michael Wallace, "Churches Together in God's Mission - Aotearoa New Zealand," *ibid.*, 447. Interview with Kerry Enright, 4 January 2018.

sociological as well as a theological story, and the analysis of the Singaporean sociologist and member of parliament, Daniel P S Goh, is also important.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. Christian Traditions and the Reformation

The arrival of different Christian churches in what is today Malaysia and Singapore is associated with Portuguese Catholicism in Melaka from 1511,<sup>29</sup> an era of Protestantism in Melaka under the Dutch from 1642 and the English from 1814, and Anglicanism and French Catholicism in Penang after 1786.<sup>30</sup> Anglicans, Armenians, Catholics, Presbyterians and Open Brethren established themselves in Singapore early in its history. American Methodism arrived in Singapore in 1885 and extended to Kuala Lumpur, Sitiawan, and Sibu in Sarawak. Following the Treaty of Pangkor in 1874, Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians and Lutherans migrating from India and China became increasingly significant. Christianity among Iban and other tribal groups in Sarawak and Sabah grew through Anglican, Catholic, and evangelical missions. English Anglican and Scottish Presbyterian churches in Penang, Perak, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore grew until after independence when they have transitioned to local churches, some continuing an active ministry to new generations of expatriates, European and Asian. Today the significance of Sarawak and Sabah for indigenous Christianity in Malaysia cannot be overstated.<sup>31</sup> Indigenous

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel P. S. Goh, "State and Social Christianity in Post-Colonial Singapore," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25, no. 1 (2010), 54-89.

<sup>29</sup> Maureen K. C. Chew, *The Journey of the Catholic Church in Malaysia, 1511-1996* (Kuala Lumpur: Catholic Research Centre, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxborough, eds., *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1992). This book covers only West Malaysia, and the omission of the word "West" in the title was a mistake.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel K. C. Ho, "The Church in Malaysia," in *Church in Asia Today: Challenges*

Christianity in Singapore is Chinese, with some Tamil. In both countries Peranakan descendants of Chinese migrants and local Malays, and Eurasians of Portuguese, Dutch and Asian ancestry from as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century are also important groups.

In the period up until Independence and beyond, Singapore was the dominant centre for most churches in their relationships with each other and their own administration. The groundwork of ecumenical cooperation took place there, from meetings of the Continuation Committee of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference in 1912, to the discussions in the Changi POW camp among expatriate detainees during the War leading to the formation of Trinity Theological College and the Council of Churches in 1948. The Overseas Missionary Fellowship has had its international headquarters in Singapore since 1951, as did the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) from 1974 until it was expelled in 1987. Malaysia has often hosted international ecumenical and other Christian gatherings.

At the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his 95 theses, it is fair to ask what connections these churches have with the Reformation.

Of course, Lutherans have the most direct connection. The LCMS (Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore) was largely Chinese and supported by conservative North American Lutherans. The ELCM (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malaysia) was Evangelical in the European sense, largely Indian, and supported by the more ecumenically minded Swedish Lutheran Church. The Lutherans in Sabah were Chinese who had migrated to Sabah and

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*and Opportunities*, ed. Saphir Athyal (Singapore: Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1996), 257-287.

received some support from the Basel Mission.<sup>32</sup> The Malaysian theologian, Sivin Kit, has drawn attention to the relevance of Luther to dialogue in a Muslim-majority context.<sup>33</sup> Lutheran assumptions about church and state and evolving cooperation may also help understanding of story of the Negri Sembilan Agro-Industrial Training interfaith project in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>34</sup>

Anglicans may be aware that they were part of a church that had broken away from Rome in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but for migrant Indians and Chinese, and the Iban tribespeople in Sarawak being Anglican was about being Christian in a way that made sense to them, not about identifying with British colonialism or English religious history. Apart from Anglican missionaries with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Perak, Church Missionary Society missionaries in Sabah and on the staff of Trinity Theological College in Singapore, and a few locals who trained in Moore College, Sydney, most Anglican leadership prior to the charismatic era was high church in its sympathies, did not like the word protestant, and played down their connection with the Reformation.

Methodists arrived as a mission of the Episcopal Methodist Church in the United States and had little connection with British Methodism. They were highly organized and successful particularly

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<sup>32</sup> Julius Paul, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia and Singapore," in *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, ed. Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxborough (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1992), 199-219. Thu En Yu, "The Church's Ministry of Nation Building and National Integration in Malaysia," *Studies in World Christianity* 8, no. 2 (2002), 244-263; "Churches Together in God's Mission - Malaysia," in *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism*, ed. Hope S. Antone, et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 559-564.

<sup>33</sup> Sivin Kit, "Christian Participation and Creative Resistance: Reflecting on Luther's Two-Fold Governance in Muslim-Majority Malaysia," *Dialog* 56, no. 3 (2017), 260-271.

<sup>34</sup> John Roxborough and Göran Wiking, "Disconnected Visions and Mission Beyond Their Means? The Negeri Sembilan Agro-Industrial Training Project, 1972 to 1987," *Asia Journal of Theology* 31, no. 1 (2017), 21-40.

through their wide network of schools.<sup>35</sup> They became leading partners in ecumenical cooperation, including in the founding of both Trinity Theological College and Seminari Theoloji Malaysia. Their theological heritage, although generally evangelical, was Arminian not Calvinist, and as a denomination that had grown out of 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglicanism not 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholicism, as well as having been mediated by their missionary experience on the American frontier, their sense of identification with Luther, Calvin and the Reformation in Europe was somewhat muted.

Presbyterians came to Malaysia and Singapore with Scottish and Chinese migrants who were only integrated together after independence. The name Presbyterian is linked to the Reformation in Scotland, but in Chinese simply meant "Church of the Elders." Chinese Presbyterians had a strong sense of linkage to China and to Congregationalist and English Presbyterian missions. They were also influenced by separatist and anti-ecumenical teaching. Expatriate leaders and missionaries might value a Reformation heritage and its concerns for religious freedom. A sense of God's sovereignty and the doctrine of predestination also helped cope with crises such as the "loss" of China with the Communist revolution.<sup>36</sup> In any case, with few exceptions, the priorities and interests of ministers were usually pastoral rather than theological.<sup>37</sup>

Asian interest in Calvinism has been growing,<sup>38</sup> but outside of the influence of Dutch Reformed missionaries, Calvin has often been

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Hunt, "Have You Not Seen a Vain Vision? The Marginalization of the Methodist Church in Malaysian Society," *Asia Journal of Theology* 5, no. 2 (1991), 410-428; Hwa Yung and Robert Hunt, "The Methodist Church," in *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, ed. Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxborough (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1992), 142-198.

<sup>36</sup> Conversation with George Hood, August 1989. David Paton, *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God* (London: SCM Press, 1953).

<sup>37</sup> Lak and Wilson, 20-22.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Seitz, "Calvin in Missionary Memory and Chinese Protestant Identity," in *Sober, Strict, and Scriptural: Collective Memories of John Calvin, 1800-2000*, ed.

a vague symbol rather than a pointer to theological identity much beyond a commitment to the idea of the priesthood of all believers and the importance of elders in church governance.<sup>39</sup> Even for Presbyterian missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Calvin was seen more as an exemplar of Christian commitment than as a source of theological insight.

One notable exception was Timothy Tow, leader of the Bible Presbyterian Church and the Far Eastern Bible College, whose separatist teaching divided Presbyterians and made ecumenical involvement difficult for decades. Yet in 1993 Tow could say that he was “Happy to lecture on John Calvin” - but he also said that he was “happier to tell about John Sung.”<sup>40</sup> The story of Presbyterianism in Malaysia was one of a church already indigenous in China becoming rooted in another country in a different cultural context.<sup>41</sup> Recently Presbyterians in both Singapore and Malaysia have taken the step of referencing the Westminster Confession among their documents in an effort to give more substance to their theological identity.

Other Reformed emphases have been mediated through confessional bodies and influential personalities. Published in 1969,<sup>42</sup> Karl Barth’s “letter to Asia” giving encouragement to be Asian rather

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Johan de Niet, Herman Paul, and Bart Willems (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009). Andrew Brown, [interview with Rev May N. J. Tan, Presbyterian Church of Singapore] “Chinese Calvinism Flourishes” *The Guardian Opinion*, 27 May 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2009/may/27/china-calvin-christianity>. Accessed 26 March 2018.

<sup>39</sup> M. P. Kody, “The Reformed Self-Understanding in the Gereja Presbyterian Malaysi,” in *Being Reformed Christians in Asia Today*, ed. Yeow Choo Lak and Henry S. Wilson (Singapore: ATESEA, 1994), 28-38.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, “Interpreting John Sung’s Legacy in Southeast Asia,” *Trinity Theological Journal* 21 (2013): 144.

<sup>41</sup> Tee Heng Peng, “From China to Malaysia: A Study of the Growth, Development and Rooting of the Presbyterian Church in Malaysia in Malaysia from 1946 to 1975,” (South East Asia Graduate School of Theology, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Karl Barth, “No Boring Theology! A Letter from Karl Barth,” *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (1969). See also Daniel D. Lee, *Double Particularity: Karl Barth, Contextuality, and Asian American Theology*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xiii.

than Barthian, helped some theologians find their own voice whilst connecting with his theological vision.<sup>43</sup> Lutheranism has contributed to some productive dialogues, notably with Roman Catholics over justification by faith, and the shared events commemorating the Reformation in 2017, have been remarkable. Calvinism and Methodism (despite their oppositional attitudes to predestination) have contributed to an evangelicalism which has a felt sense of "being one in Christ," regardless of organization. Their ethical concerns have been particularly important for mission – as they had been in the original homelands (Calvinism never lacked a mission to society, but until the 19<sup>th</sup> century it lacked the means and the vision for extending it to other places). Ethical seriousness is important, but mixed with cultural and political diversity, the invocation of the will of God can exacerbate divisions. When both Presbyterianism and Methodism have a history of difficulty accommodating minority views, (though American Methodism has been more pragmatic), agreement easily relies on alignment with values popular in wider society, whatever the theological rationale. Simon Chan has noted that Asian evangelicals are interested in holistic mission, but not in some of the key Western social issues. For instance, "principalities and powers" are spiritual realities not simply social and political structures.<sup>44</sup> The concern of the Singapore government for morality and religious harmony allows space for Christian exploration of some ethical issues, but those touching issues of politics, justice and economics have to be treated with caution.

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<sup>43</sup> David Thang Moe, "Karl Barth against Religion, Not Religions: Constructing His Dialectical Theology of Divine Revelation and Human Religion in Asia," *Asia Journal of Theology* 31, no. 1 (2017).  
<http://www.faith-theology.com/2010/05/on-korean-theology-and-karl-barths.html>.  
Accessed 28 February 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Chan, 229.

### 3. Singapore and Malaysia

As noted, church cooperation took on new urgency after World War II.<sup>45</sup> The Malayan Christian Council was founded in Singapore in 1948 with a vision for “the Christian good of its peoples”<sup>46</sup> to be worked out in common action and cooperation. In what ways were the experiences of Singapore and Malaysia similar and different, and what significance might this have?

Thu En Yu has outlined the political and religious context in which churches in Malaysia sought to find their way before and after independence for Malaya in 1957, followed by Sabah and Sarawak who joined with Singapore and Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963. What is now Malaysia dates from 1965 following the expulsion of Singapore. Yu blames British colonial era policies for poor communal race relationships which in turn affected relationships between churches and with the majority religions of East and West Malaysia.<sup>47</sup> Churches lacked commitment to other communal groups and were not prepared for the needs of a pluralistic society. Independence brought a dramatic shift of political power from British to Malay, from a tacit sympathy for Christianity to recognition of the special status of Islam, and from the wide use of English to Malay as the national language.

It is difficult to argue with this. British colonial policy, and the desire to meet its own needs even at the expense of others, led to

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<sup>45</sup> Roxborough, *A Common Voice : A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Malaysia*, 13-21.

<sup>46</sup> John Fleming, the first secretary of the CCM, was quoting the Scottish Evangelical Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), reflecting Chalmers’ view of the mission of the church and the way in which denominations should work together expressed at the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in 1946.

<sup>47</sup> Yu, “Churches Together in God’s Mission - Malaysia.”



reckless levels of migration and the neglect of Malay social development, including failure to support and develop agriculture, to the point that profits from tin and rubber were needed to import rice that used to be grown locally. The racial dynamics of the War, and the Malayan Union scheme of 1946 which threatened to make Malays a numerical minority, alienated Malays further. Racial issues could be quiescent yet suddenly erupt. Churches had real issues with security and found it difficult to rise above concern for their own communal groups. Indians and Chinese were properly worried about what would happen to them after Independence. Malays were rightly concerned for their own place in their country which had been invaded and ruled by peoples whose religions and way of life were in some respects deeply offensive. Some Christian leaders, expatriate like Bishop Baines of Singapore and local, like the Methodist educationalist Ho Seng Ong, recognised this, but their sentiments were not publicised or widely shared.

Today Bishop Yu's deep concern is for the churches' role in reconciliation, and the role of ecumenical and inter-religious bodies such as the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) in this. It is striking how much in recent years this has become a theme which other writers, including some evangelicals, have taken up.<sup>48</sup> The development of Christian ecumenical structures, the CCM, the NECF and the CFM (1986) involving both together with the Roman Catholic Church have thus been important for the nation, not only for the churches themselves.

The issues Yu identified in Malaysia were not absent in Singapore, but there are differences muted by policies of a carefully

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Rowan, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker : The Malaysian Church as an Agent of Reconciliation in a Multicultural Society* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2012).

managed nationalism, a secular state, and legislation in support of religious harmony. The seemingly level playing field of Singapore meritocracy has led to economic developments which many admire, but it has also enhanced Chinese dominance relative to other communities. A secular state appears to provide for the even-handedness in religious provision which ecumenical bodies in Malaysia have to advocate for.

Michael Poon's survey article<sup>49</sup> sees Singapore as a case study for testing a particular vision of what mission in Asia should be and the roles that ecumenical bodies should take. He frames his analysis in response to a comment made in 1982, at a meeting of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) by the Australian Methodist Harvey Perkins. Perkins expressed the view that the CCA's role was to be an agent of change in the churches, building up "a group of people ... willing to probe the frontiers of the Christian enterprise."

The implication this carried of infiltration was easily seen as another form of the paternalism and colonialism it was seeking to replace.<sup>50</sup> Poon's purpose in highlighting Perkins' comments was to "chart the strategic role Singapore has played in working out this ideal, and how... in fact [it] radically challenges this model of engagement."<sup>51</sup>

Poon notes that in their early period, the CCM made some valued contributions in the era marked by the Malayan Emergency and moves towards independence. It also did much of its work in Malaysia where it had some success developing local committees

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Poon, "Churches Together in God's Mission - Singapore," in *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism*, ed. Hope S Antone, et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013); 593-598.

<sup>50</sup> It is a hazard that expatriates who see themselves as prophetic easily appear patronizing. See also [http://www.canberracityuca.org.au/Harvey\\_Perkins\\_Tribute.pdf](http://www.canberracityuca.org.au/Harvey_Perkins_Tribute.pdf). Accessed 26 February 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Poon, 593.

and involving national and regional leadership. The CCA's most notable success was reconnecting with China and Indochina after the Vietnam War and following the Cultural Revolution.<sup>52</sup> It is also part of our story that areas of failure for both the CCM and the CCA were in Singapore. The Singapore Industrial Mission or "Jurong Experiment" from 1966 to 1972 (when it was closed down by the government) was impressively organized, but its confrontational style embarrassed local churches and alienated the government. Over time the location of the CCA in Singapore became untenable.<sup>53</sup> The CCA was asserting Asian agency, but its support of issues of decolonization and indigenization in terms of what might be called liberal Asian theological frameworks proved problematic in the Singapore context. In the long run its advocacy of Asian contextualisation and the validity of social concern was influential, particularly in Malaysia, but at the time it was a factor in Malaysian heads of churches deciding to set up their own theological seminary in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>54</sup>

In 1969 George Lindbeck had noted that the CCA (then the East Asia Christian Conference) was perceived as foreign even when it was addressing issues of "anti-colonialism, indigenization and nation-building."<sup>55</sup> More than an Asian voice was needed, and what may have been necessary and appropriate in one Asian context, was not necessarily appreciated in another.

Following the CCA expulsion in 1987, it was important to challenge, as the CCA and others outside the country did, the rationale given by the Singapore government and its views on the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 595.

<sup>53</sup> Goh, 59-62.

<sup>54</sup> John Roxborough, "Protestant Theological Education, Indigenisation, and Contextualisation in Singapore and Malaysia, 1948-1979," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016), 71-83.

<sup>55</sup> Lindbeck, 78.

proper role of churches in society. However there was also a trap in believing these were the only issues. There were matters of style and tone which should not be ignored. Their expulsion related to the wider suppression of activist Christian activity in Singapore, particularly from some Roman Catholics, a war of words with the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, which was also expelled, and perhaps even more importantly, a determination to prevent anything like the role that the churches had had in the Philippines in overthrowing the Marcos regime in 1986. It was no accident that this coincided with a similar government operation in Malaysia, Operation Lalang, which detained political figures, social activists, and people involved with Malay Christianity. The initial responses of the CCA and the WCC did not seem to show awareness about concerns that the government, and some otherwise sympathetic to the theology of CCA, might reasonably have.<sup>56</sup> Yet over time things did change. In the years since 1987, based in Hong Kong and now Thailand, the CCA has shifted the tone of its statements and worked to build contacts with other groups including Evangelicals and Roman Catholics.<sup>57</sup> Like the WCC it has become in my view more measured about many of the world's problems it may reasonably claim to know something about solving.

Poon notes that the CCA approach did not prevail in Singapore and alternative theologies and protocols of constructive engagement between church and state have evolved. This is consistent with the article by Thomas Harvey, that a liberal theological agenda crippled the effectiveness of ecumenical institutions until the NCCS found itself when it reflected the evangelical and charismatic theology of Singapore churches. Other analyses, including the sociologist Daniel P.S. Goh, also identify the theological issue as central to these

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<sup>56</sup> Koshy, Vol. 1, 263-266.

<sup>57</sup> Shastri, 165-166.

transitions. In 1977 Alan Heron, a New Zealand Presbyterian lecturing at Trinity Theological College, also used the evangelical liberal divide as his critical framework for understanding the trajectories of church development in West Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>58</sup>

Poon also notes the influence of the ministry of John Sung in providing a common experience across Chinese churches of different denominations. Sung's ministry from 1935 to 1940 left a complex imprint on Chinese spirituality. Many later saw it as preparation for the years of suffering which followed. It also encouraged Chinese Christian groups to assert their autonomy and increased their sense of distance from Western denominations, including ecumenical bodies. His memory of North American liberalism was part of his testimony and a factor in the way Chinese speaking congregations were influenced by the American Fundamentalist Carl McIntire and his anti-ecumenical separatist campaigns, including through the ministry of Timothy Tow.<sup>59</sup>

One has to be careful with the terms liberal and evangelical, and for much of the post-war period they were not always pejorative designations.<sup>60</sup> The first generation of CCM leadership had more evangelical sympathies than they were given credit for. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that those with a more liberal theology were a significant presence among missionaries and theological educators. Only a smaller group again might be fairly linked to the social

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<sup>58</sup> Goh and Harvey vindicate the work of Heron whose doctoral thesis was rejected by the University of Otago primarily on the grounds that the evangelical-liberal theological divide was an inadequate critical framework. Like Harvey and many others, I have found Heron's careful documentation invaluable. Alan Craig Heron, "A History of the Protestant Christian Churches in West Malaysia and Singapore," (Dunedin 1977).

<sup>59</sup> Poon, "Interpreting John Sung's Legacy in Southeast Asia."

<sup>60</sup> Siga Arles, "Relations between Ecumenicals and Evangelicals in Asia," in *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism*, ed. Hope S. Antone, et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 94-106.

agenda with which the CCA became associated and the way it was expressed.

The charismatic movement is another factor. Its predominance in Singaporean Christianity by the end of the twentieth century gave a coherence to the churches of Singapore which in turn gave fresh relevance to the NCCS.<sup>61</sup> It also contributed to accommodation to government policies and values of material prosperity, marketing, and managerial competence. The ability to work within government frameworks and values became to be seen as a gift which Singapore churches and institutions could also offer churches in other countries with similar political environments.<sup>62</sup>

If the CCA in the years up until 1987 represented a counter-cultural critique of Asian society, which in Singapore did not take local churches with it, the temptation now being faced runs in the other direction. Poon considers that Christianity in Singapore has become “socially respectable and politically correct.” Like others he notes the importance of the LoveSingapore movement in which churches organize to pray together for the nation in intense, personal and dramatic ways. Bringing together more churches and pastors than the older ecumenical movements ever did, it also reinvigorated the NCCS. Perhaps ironically it has succeeded in stimulating and sustaining Christian commitment to society when previously pietism was associated with disinterest. Both its achievements and its weaknesses are important.<sup>63</sup> Issues may be not only its embrace of

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas Harvey, *ibid.* James Y K Wong, “Singapore,” in *Church in Asia Today*, ed. Saphir Athyal (Singapore: Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1998), 288-311.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, ed. *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006).

<sup>63</sup> May Ling Tan-Chow, *Pentecostal Theology for the Twenty-First Century : Engaging with Multi-Faith Singapore*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). An extract is published as chapter 14 in Michael Nai-Chiu Poon and John Roxborough, eds., *Handbook of Popular Spiritual Movements in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia* (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2015), 211-27. See also the review by Simon Chan,

national mores in ways which may or may not "probe acceptable limits with the authorities,"<sup>64</sup> but in the narrowing of its ecclesial range to the like-minded. This of course is an issue in ecumenically movements generally, whatever their dominant theology. Harvey contrasts Singapore with collapsing ecumenical bodies in the West (he gives the example of North America),<sup>65</sup> but it is not its theology which makes the difference, so much as its acceptability to its constituency. Movements of any theology or ideology are more likely to be successful when their dominant ethos reflects that of their constituencies. All theological traditions face the challenge of being able to earn respect in situations of diversity.

Facing the same sequence of issues as the ecumenical movement in Singapore as a whole, but retaining a broader theological base, Trinity Theological College successfully managed the challenge of shifting its primary support base from international churches and funding agencies to the Singapore churches by a focus on a core biblical and theological curriculum and by developing strong personal links with the leaders and pastors of local churches. Its teaching staff transitioned from expatriate to Asian to Singaporeans willing to pay close attention to the concerns of Singaporean churches. As a result, it became in due course well supported. It describes itself as a "union" seminary rather than an ecumenical one, and its acceptance of contextualisation as a dominant motif has been cautious, despite that being a major concern of the first generations of expatriate Western teachers and its historic funding bodies. Here too there is a contrast with Malaysia, where the

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<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=13966>. Accessed 27 February 2018. Matthew Matthews, "Accommodating Relationships. The Church and State in Singapore," in *Christianity and the State in Asia : Complicity and Conflict*, ed. Julius Bautista and Francis Khek Gee Lim (London: Routledge, 2009), 184-200.

<sup>64</sup> Poon, 597.

<sup>65</sup> Harvey, 258.

attitude towards contextualisation was more explicit and positive among national staff. Timing was a factor in this.<sup>66</sup>

Church union negotiations were begun in 1951 in Singapore and fizzled out by 1962.<sup>67</sup> The issues were insoluble in the time frame and it was hard for local leaders to get a sense of why it mattered when there were so many more important things to deal with. Nationalism did not demand it, because Christians in West Malaysia and Singapore came from groups less identified with a struggle for independence. Nationalism and independence were largely Malay issues. In the 1950s expatriate Presbyterian missionaries and ministers were anxious to assert the validity of their ministry in the face of its rejection by Anglicans and were strongly opposed to re-ordination. But to other Presbyterians it made no sense to argue about whether someone from another church should lay hands on you and pray for you before you could share in ministry together. Local Christians were glad of all the prayer they could get.

Most of the MCC activity took place in Malaysia where it brought recognised benefits. Local church leadership included a greater proportion of English speaking Indian and Chinese who had experience of ecumenical cooperation and its value in the face of the issues that the country was dealing with, including in the aftermath of the race riots of 13 May 1969. Indian church leaders had awareness of ecumenism in India, were more orientated to the use of English, and had been active in local CCM committees. This infrastructure had already built up relationships when the time came to take over the MCC as it relocated from a joint body in Singapore to Malaysia. From the beginning leadership and initiative was

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<sup>66</sup> Roxborough, "Protestant Theological Education," 79.

<sup>67</sup> Roxborough, *A Common Voice : A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Malaysia*, 26-29.



Malaysian, and it was this leadership which also brought about the founding of Seminari Theoloji Malaysia in 1979.

In the 1980s the NECF developed the trust of independent evangelical groups as it proved itself responsive to the practical issues facing Malaysian churches. When the time came to create a body which represented practically all Christian churches and groups in the country, the NECF, the CCM and the Roman Catholic Church implemented the Christian Federation of Malaysia and retained their existing roles. This was extremely important and contrasts with Singapore where, as noted, there is no group representing the old ecumenism.

It may have helped Malaysia that colonial era institutions and church headquarters and their expatriates were largely based in Singapore. Although the task of rebuilding infrastructures in Malaysia was expensive and time-consuming, it had the effect that what was being done was what Malaysian churches and leaders wanted done. The decades after 1965 for churches were partly about implementing an independence from Singapore not just from Britain. The fact that it was left to Malaysian leaders to create the institutions they wanted gave a sense of ownership which enhanced their viability and gave them more scope for managing diversity while being able to present a common voice to the nation. It was also important that the CCM did not try to be the one ecumenical organization representing the entire spectrum. By working with the NECF and Roman Catholics in the CFM, the CCM helped facilitate a set of ecumenical structures which together could be representative of practically the entire Christian community. Perhaps paradoxically, by accepting the existence of the major theological groupings of churches, it also reduced the sense of polarity between them, and also helped ensure the ongoing viability of mainstream ecumenism.

#### 4. Conclusion

Despite their differences of theology, style, and in due course of physical location, the CCA, the MCC and the NCCS can each of them be seen as being about Asian agency and Christian mission in context. One significant contribution to the wider Christian world arising out of this context has been the promulgation of the idea that multiple religious belonging is a fact of life to be accepted.<sup>68</sup> Kan Sang Tan is an evangelical who has the credibility to be able to assert that it is possible to belong to more than one source of identity and meaning and yet be loyal to Christ without being relativist or agnostic. This allows for mission to return to language of witness and reconciliation rather than evangelisation, and for different understandings of the oneness of John 17 to be explored.

But there is also something here which goes back to the Reformation: the translation of the scriptures into the language of the people. Theories of language and issues of hermeneutics are fundamental to our understanding, including our beliefs about organization, faith, and purpose. Asian religions, including Christianity, insist that we cannot limit meaning to what is material. This is consistent with what is perhaps the greatest contribution of Martin Luther and the Reformers who came after, including the reformers of the Roman Catholic Church meeting in the Vatican II Council: the insistence that the Word of God and the Worship of God must be in the language of the people. What ecumenism in Asia, and Asians in ecumenism, have emphasised, is that however contested, this must also be true of the theology, the mission and the governance of the church.

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<sup>68</sup> Kang-San Tan, "Dual Belonging: A Missiological Critique and Appreciation from an Asian Evangelical Perspective," *Mission Studies* 27 (2010), 24-38; "Can Christians Belong to More Than One Religious Tradition," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34, no. 3 (2010), 250-264.

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