

## Future of the Ecumenical Movement

### 基督徒合一運動的未來

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[ABSTRACT] The ecumenical movement<sup>1</sup> is facing today a deep crisis and the future of the movement cannot be predicted, though some emerging trajectories may be identified.

In the first part of this article, the traditional approaches to ecumenism is presented on the part of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, the agency of the ecumenical movement representing most of the denominational Churches today.

In the second part, some of the problems, challenges and ambiguities of the movement encountered today are indicated, and in the third part, some of the trajectories that are emerging are drawn, though the new directions are not definitive but mixed up with several ambiguities and uncertainties.

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<sup>1</sup> For the History of the Ecumenical Movement, see the basic source books: Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill (eds), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517 - 1948*, London: SPCK, 1967 (Second Edition); Harold E. Fey (ed), *The Ecumenical Advance, A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume Two 1948 - 1968*, London, SPCK, 1970; Norman Goodall, *Ecumenical Progress: A decade of Change in the Ecumenical Movement 1961 - 1971*: London, Oxford University Press, 1972; David P. Gaines, *The World Council of Churches: A Study of its Background and History*, The Richard R. Smith Co. Inc, Peterborough, New Hampshire, 1960.

[摘要] 今天的基督徒合一運動面臨著深切的危機，雖然發現新興軌跡，但仍無法預測運動的未來。

本文第一部分介紹了羅馬天主教會和普世教會協會（一個基督教跨教派合一運動組織）就合一議題上傳統的取向。

在第二部分，作者指出了運動在今天遇到的一些問題、挑戰和模稜兩可的情況；在第三部分，儘管仍未確定，並存在含糊和不確定的因素，作者描繪了一些新興的軌跡。

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## **Part I: Approaches to Ecumenism**

### **(1) Roman Catholic Approach**

With the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church has, indeed, entered into a new era of ecumenism, in the sense that from polemics, triumphalism and condemnation, the Church entered into an era of dialogue and mutual relationship. However, I hold the view that the Catholic Church has not really made any radical breakthrough in its traditional approach to ecumenism. I also maintain that in spite of fifty years after the Council, the Catholic Church failed to translate the positive statements and insights of the Council into ecumenical acts of commitment and practice. In other words, there is a conspicuous gap between statements and the actual praxis in the area of ecumenism. The Catholic Church continues to maintain that it alone possesses the 'fullness' of the ecclesial reality and the other Churches have only some 'ecclesial elements'. For the fullness of the visible Church what is required is 'fullness of faith, fullness of sacraments and fullness of ministerial structures including the Papal ministry'. The other Churches lack fullness as they lack some or any one of these three visible elements. This is the traditional view of the Catholic Church.

This traditional view was first identified and formulated clearly by the scholastic theologian Robert Bellarmine (1542 - 1621) against the attacks of the Protestants on Catholic doctrines, teachings and practices during the Reformation. The Council of Trent (1545-63) was the official and formal response to the Protestants. Although a response to the Protestants was timely and necessary, unfortunately it was a too strong reaction which was very negative as the Council totally rejected all the views and teachings of the Reformers without evaluating them in an objective and balanced manner. The Catechism of the Council of Trent and the whole Counter-Reformation movement were extremely apologetic and they failed to see any element of truth in the Protestant teachings and doctrines. Bellarmine opposed the views of the Reformers emphasizing the visible structures of the Church as ‘divinely ordained or instituted’. He defined the Church on earth as “the congregation of persons bound together by profession of the same Christian faith, and by communion in the same sacraments, under the rule of lawful pastors, and especially of the only Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff”.<sup>2</sup> It was a clear-cut definition of the Church which he drafted to exclude the other churches, especially the Protestant churches and to exclude all those who belong to other religions from the ambit of salvation in the Church given by Christ. It was clearly meant to be an anti-Protestant formula. This Bellarminian ecclesiology is the backbone of Catholic tradition as seen in all the documents and teachings of the Church thereafter. Vatican II also in a way repeats this teaching in *Lumen Gentium* Nos.14 – 16. Those who know the history of Vatican II and its dynamics will agree that the Council documents do not have a perfect continuity and theological consistency. The major defect of this approach is its overemphasis on the visibility of the Church, on the visible,

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<sup>2</sup> *Controv. Generalis de Conciliis et Ecclesia*, 3, 2.

institutional and juridical aspect of the Church. The mystery aspect of the Church is found missing in the Bellarminian approach.

The Vatican II documents, indeed, made a distinction between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Protestant Churches.<sup>3</sup> The Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church had to separate themselves in the year 1054 not exactly on account of "filioque" question or other doctrinal issues, but primarily due to political and socio-cultural factors and the conflict over Papal jurisdiction. The Council pointed out the apostolic origin of the Eastern Churches and acknowledged that the West had drawn in bounty from the spiritual treasury of the East for its liturgy, spiritual traditions and jurisprudence. The most important Trinitarian and Christological dogmas had been definitively taught by the ecumenical councils held in the East. In the doctrines of the sacraments, apostolic succession, ordained ministry and Eucharist, Orthodox and Catholic teachings are very close. The Council did not grant this ecclesiological status to the Reformation Churches. For, the Reformation caused a substantial break from the traditions of the Catholic Church and its doctrinal heritage and there are serious differences between them and the Catholic Church.

One has to keep in mind the background of the medieval scholastic theology and the political and imperial ecclesial structures and corrupted practices of the medieval Church in contrast to the biblical and patristic teachings for a correct understanding and right response to the Reformers teachings. The Protestant Reformation and the subsequent divisions in the Church cannot be explained by mere

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<sup>3</sup> The Eastern Orthodox Churches were recognized by the Council as 'Sister Churches', whereas the Protestant Churches were called as 'other ecclesial communities' (UR, no. 14, 19, 3). In principle, the Council granted the Orthodox Churches 'equal status'. The differences between them are only in theological formulations or expressions of doctrines, which are complementary rather than conflicting (UR nos. 14 – 18; OE, nos. 2 – 11; *Ut Unum Sint*, nos. 55 – 58).

doctrinal issues and differences. The political, cultural and social factors played the key role in the divisions.<sup>4</sup> However, the council acknowledged that many significant "ecclesial elements" are present in those Christian communities, such as, the Word of God, life of grace, faith, hope and charity, some sacraments and so on.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, life of grace is available in these Churches and they are indeed also means of salvation to their members due to the salvific efficacy of Christ and His One Church.

In the Roman Catholic view, the Bishop of Rome has a specific and unique role in the Communion of Churches. As the successor of Peter, the Pope is the 'visible sign of unity' and the bond of communion, 'the servant and instrument of unity'. According to this view, the communion with the See of Peter and his successors is necessary for the fullness of the unity of the visible Church. Those who know history will agree that it was Papacy which played the decisive role in the historical divisions in the Church. Papal interference in the affairs of the Eastern Churches and the Papal claim of 'universal jurisdiction' was the real cause for the separation of the Orthodox Churches in 1054. During the Reformation controversies too Papacy was the bone of contention. Luther and the Reformers accused that Papacy usurped the supreme place of Christ in the Church. Reformation was a revolt against the corruption of the Papacy and the hierarchy. Students of Church history know well that the assertion of the Papacy and its authority was a gradual historical development. In the system of Pentarchy (five Patriarchs together exercising authority in the Church), Bishop of Rome or Patriarch of Rome emerged gradually as the sole authority. Papal authority over all the Churches was doctrinally articulated, theologically elaborated and actually implemented only with the 'Gregorian Reform' of the

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<sup>4</sup> See "The Root Causes of the Divisions of the Church", Kuncheria Pathil, *Unity in Diversity: A Guide to Ecumenism*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2012, 251ff.

<sup>5</sup> UR, no. 3, 19; LG, no. 15; *Ut Unum Sint*, no.64.

11<sup>th</sup> century. The final doctrinal and theological articulation was made by the First Vatican Council in 1870 by the solemn definition of Papal Primacy and Papal Infallibility.

The Second Vatican Council endorsed the dogmas of Vatican I, though they were qualified by the doctrine of Episcopal Collegiality. In 1967 Pope Paul VI in his address to the Roman Secretariat for Christian Unity said: "The Papacy constitutes the greatest obstacle to reunion". This statement seems to be still accurate.<sup>6</sup> In dialogue with the other Churches, could the Catholic Church understand and reinterpret the doctrines of Primacy and Infallibility in a way acceptable to the other Churches?

## **(2) Approach of the World Council of Churches**

The Ecumenical Movement is today officially represented by the 'World Council of Churches'(WCC), which is said to be 'the Flagship of the Ecumenical Movement'. WCC was formed and inaugurated in 1948. Indeed its central concern was the unity and co-operation of all Christian Churches for common witness. Approach of the Roman Catholic Church to ecumenism starts from the centre, a centripetal approach, centering on the concepts like 'fullness of faith' and 'unity centred on the Papacy'. The approach of the WCC, on the other hand, is multifarious, diverse and centrifugal, naturally as the WCC tried to include the various ecumenical movements. The World Council of Churches was formed out of three important separate threads or movements, 'Missionary Movement', 'Faith and Order Movement' and 'Life and Work Movement'. In all

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<sup>6</sup> Both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II asked forgiveness from all Churches for the painful events of the past caused by the Papacy and invited the other Churches and theologians to engage in a patient and fraternal dialogue on the question of Papal ministry, and see how best it can serve the unity of the Church and how we can move beyond the past controversies (*Ut Unum Sint*, Nos. 95 – 96).

these movements the students and youth from many churches played significant roles.

Although the contemporary ecumenical movement was inspired and shaped by several historical, social and theological forces, its immediate origin and rapid growth was due to the missionary movement. It was in the mission field that the problem, disadvantage and scandal of a divided Christianity, was acutely felt, and it was the missionaries who initiated denominational cooperation and joint-action. The underlying basic approach is that mission and unity are closely interrelated. Mission requires unity and the goal of mission is unity. *The World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh* (1910) may be said to be the first ecumenical conference on mission in the full sense, and is often said to be the birth place of the contemporary ecumenical movement. The Edinburgh Missionary Conference did not directly deal with the doctrinal and theological differences between the Churches and the conditions for unity. But it was accepted by all that the mission of the Church and the question of the unity of the Church cannot be separated.<sup>7</sup> In the WCC this missionary thrust is consistently present and there is a strong conviction that common proclamation of the Gospel in the context of today alone can unite the Churches.

*Faith and Order Movement* has been another main stream of the ecumenical movement and at present an important constituent part of the WCC. Its objective was precisely the restoration of the visible unity among the Churches by means of doctrinal dialogue for reaching consensus in 'matters of faith and order in the Church'. All the Churches which confessed 'Jesus Christ as God and Saviour' were invited to participate in this movement. Almost all the Churches

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<sup>7</sup> Edinburgh Conference proved that Christians of different denominational allegiances could meet and discuss and cooperate in many areas of mission and ministry without compromising their convictions (see, David P. Gaines, *The Worlds Council of Churches*, New Hampshire: The Colonial Press, 1966, 20).

except the Roman Catholic Church, responded positively to this call and the result was a series of conferences for common study, consultations and deliberations. The initial approach and method was to present the doctrines of the different churches, compare them and see where they agree and where they differ. To solve the differences they had tried other methods, such as, the Christological and Biblical methods and common study and search.<sup>8</sup> In 1968 the Roman Catholic Church also joined the Faith and Order Movement by permitting Catholic theologians to participate in the Faith and Order meetings as official members. After frank discussions and exchange for more than a century, today the Churches in the Faith and Order Movement have arrived at 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'. According to Konrad Raiser, if we can say that the fellowship in the WCC is of those who believe in Christ and bonded together in Baptism, then certainly this fellowship has an ecclesial nature and we have to build up on this foundation.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the path ahead of the 'Faith and Order Movement' in search of visible unity by means of doctrinal convergence faces today several problems which we will take up later in this article.

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<sup>8</sup> For an elaborate treatment of the history and theological methods of the Faith and Order, see, Kuncheria Pathil, *Models in Ecumenical Dialogue*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991, 113 – 117.



*Life and Work Movement* was the third wing of the contemporary ecumenical movement which brought the Churches together not to discuss their internal disputes and differences, but to witness together as Christians in the world, to promote fellowship and peace among the nations torn apart by war and conflicts, and to establish justice and lawful order in society on the basis of the Christian principles of truth, justice and love.<sup>10</sup> The watchword of the movement was “doctrine divides, service unites”, which implied that the Churches will be reunited only by their common witness and action in the world. In the WCC, Life and Work Movement continues to function as the *Department of Church and Society*, which continuously reminded the WCC and the ecumenical movement not to become introverted with the concerns of a narrow ecumenism, but to be involved in the world in the concrete problems of the wider humanity; for *oikoumene* means not merely the Church but the Whole World. The contribution of the Life and Work Movement and its social approach is indeed very promising as well as crucial for the ecumenical movement. It has brought all the Churches together into a fellowship that seems to be irreversible. What unites them together is not only the concern for their visible unity but the concern for the unity of the whole humankind. The unity of the Church is seen as a sign and sacrament of the unity of the whole humankind. Besides, visible unity of the Churches not only means the healing of all sorts of divisions in the Church, but also divisions in the name of race, class, sex, culture, language, etc.

In the recent years one of the main thrusts in the approach of the WCC has been the attempt for doctrinal convergence on Baptism, Eucharist and ordained Ministry. The ecumenical document on

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<sup>10</sup> The immediate context of the “Life and Work Movement” was World War I, and the proposal was the formation of an *Alliance of the Churches* for promoting international friendship and peace among the nations. The leader of this movement was Archbishop Nathan Soederblom of Uppsala, Sweden.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (*BEM Document* or *Lima Document*, 1982), approved by the "Faith and Order" and the World Council of Churches, is an important ecumenical document meant for doctrinal convergence. It tried to articulate the common faith of all the Churches in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. It is a common proclamation of the faith of the One Church received from the apostolic times. On Baptism and Eucharist there emerged practically a full doctrinal convergence, but in theology and sacramental practice a healthy pluralism was endorsed. Ministry still remains to be a crucial issue.

The document made a significant recommendation to all Churches to accept the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons as an ecumenical pattern, which was, indeed, normative for all the Churches until the time of the Reformation.<sup>11</sup> The doctrines of Apostolic Succession, sacramental nature of the Ordination, nature of the Episcopal ministry and Papacy are still problems to be clarified. The emerging doctrinal consensus and the proclamation of our common faith in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry have immense prospects in view of the mutual recognition of the Churches and the restoration of ecclesial communion. This 'Lima document' was circulated among all the Churches including the Roman Catholic Churches, and the responses of the Churches were published from the WCC in VI volumes.<sup>12</sup> Many of the responses suggested that the serious issue underlying the Lima document is ecclesiology, and at present the focus is concentrated on doctrinal convergence on the nature of the Church. Its final result is WCC statement, "The Church Towards a Common Vision".<sup>13</sup> Similar to the ecclesiology of

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<sup>11</sup> *BEM Document*, no. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Max Thurian (ed), *Churches Respond to BEM*, VI Volumes, Geneva: WCC, 1986 – 1988.

<sup>13</sup> See, Faith and Order Paper 214, Geneva: WCC, 2013. The proposal to concentrate

Vatican II, the WCC document too has its focus on *koinonia* by which the nature and meaning of the Church is presented with emphasis on unity in diversity, mission in gathering the whole creation into different levels of communion under the Lordship of Christ and communion in faith, sacraments and common ministry in the Church.

In the view of WCC, all its approaches have to lead finally to the mutual recognition of all authentic churches in their diversity, intercommunion and fellowship among the churches and a ‘conciliar way of fellowship’ for common witness and mission for the sake of the world. According to 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. In the vision of WCC, one reunited Church should be clearly in terms of a "Communion of Churches" or "Fellowship of Churches" or a “Conciliar Fellowship”, where all Churches must recognize each other as equals. This communion shall be grounded in the common faith and in the communion of the sacraments. Communion among the churches shall be celebrated by the ecumenical practice of intercommunion in the common Eucharistic celebration. Such a communion must be maintained, supported and fostered in a conciliar relationship among the Churches. To be clear, all the authentic Churches must be able to sit together as equals in an ‘Ecumenical Council’, which could be a visible sign of ecclesial communion. It is the vision of the WCC.

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on the concept and nature of the Church mainly came from the Catholic and Orthodox Churches (See, *Churches Respond to BEM*, Vol. VI, 5). This proposal was accepted by the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991, and the final document on the Church was endorsed by the WCC General Assembly, Busan, South Korea in 2013.

## **Part II: Problems, Challenges and Ambiguities**

### **Introduction**

Christian theology and the ecumenical movement, and its approaches both of the Catholic Church and the WCC, have their own cultural backgrounds. By and large they seem to be a project of Modernity with emphasis on rationality, academic, systematic and a movement from the centre. Today we have moved away from the culture of Christendom and Modernity and we live in a Postmodern culture and ethos which project different sets of values and thought patterns. The new trends make the traditional theological positions ambiguous and often out-dated. The Ecumenical Movement and the WCC are the products of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there were pioneer and dynamic movements for unity at the social, cultural, political and religious realms. Christianity was the dominating force in the world and Christian mission belonged to the West centred in Europe and America. But today Christian presence is shifting to Africa, Asia and Asia Pacific. Two more radical changes have to be noted, first, Christianity is no more considered the only 'true religion', but one among the many powerful world religions, secondly, Christianity itself is getting not more and more unified, but more and more diversified with the rapid spread of the Pentecostal and Indigenous Christianities.<sup>14</sup>

### **(I) Cultural Transition**

Culture is the main category today in all the discourses, sociological, ideological and theological. All cultures today are in radical transition, wherever it is, West or East, South or North. Even

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<sup>14</sup> See, Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner (eds), *Ecumenical Visions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013.

the most conservative or traditional societies in remote areas cannot resist to fast changing cultural mutations today. Western Christianity encountered *three dominant cultural waves*. The first was 'Christendom'. The Church in the Roman Empire assumed a mono-cultural approach, though Christianity was born in the Biblical and Semitic cultural world which had a quite different approach and method. It must be also noted here that the passage of Christianity from the Biblical and Semitic world to the Greco-Roman world radically changed Christian theology and its method. It was a shift from the Biblical experiential faith to the doctrinal definitions and systematic rational theological speculations.<sup>15</sup> The living God of the Biblical revelation became the God of Greek metaphysics. The Semitic idea of knowledge through experience was increasingly replaced by the category of rational knowledge. God's revelation was no longer understood as God's self-communication in history, but as communication of certain rational truths from God and about God. The gradual centralization of the Church by the assertion of the primacy of the Roman Church over the other Churches practically destroyed the legitimate diversity, autonomy and identity of the early Churches. Until late middle ages, the Church played the most dominant role in the West in all areas of life, in religious, social and cultural, in ethics, politics, economics, education, aesthetics, art, literature, music and architecture. In many countries Christianity was the official religion and it wielded authority not only in religious matters but also in politics, economics, morality and in the whole cultural area. During the colonial period it was this type of cultural Christianity or 'Christendom' that was taken to the colonies. Western European Christianity with its social, cultural, political and religious form was simply exported from Europe and imposed upon the

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<sup>15</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigmshift in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis, 1991, 194ff.

natives of the colonies of South America, Asia and Africa without any consideration of their cultural differences and the formation of authentic 'local Churches'.

The second encounter of the Church was with the culture of Modernity. The 'Enlightenment' Movement in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries may be said to be the main historical factor for the intellectual, social, political, cultural and religious ferment for a new age, culture and civilization. From God, Revelation, absolute truth, church and its teachings, traditions and doctrines, focus was tuned to rationality and human autonomy. Rationality and the absolute autonomy of the human subject were the two pillars of Modernity. In the culture of modernity, human mind perceives the external world instrumentally and mechanically and this autonomous reason has a totalizing tendency which erected binary oppositions and sharp distinctions of objective / subjective, intellect / senses, reason / faith, theory / praxis, monism / dualism, natural / supernatural, spiritual / material, soul / body, individual / society, determinism / freedom, analytic / synthetic, right / wrong, good / bad, true / false etc. Modernity thus provided infinite confidence in the absolute power of human reason. This absolute power of human subject and autonomous reason provided great confidence along with the concept of progress, development, human dominion over nature, progress in knowledge and human emancipation. It's Creation of meta-narratives and mega-narratives and over-arching intellectual and conceptual systems claimed absolute certainty and universality of truth.

The third wave in the cultural encounter of the Church is with the contemporary Postmodernity. Whether Postmodernity replaces Modernity or it is a later period of Modernity which does not totally reject modernity is a matter to be discussed. Some of the characteristics or features of the culture of Postmodernity may be described over against Modernity as follows: For modernity, reality

is a unified whole as presented in meta-narratives or mega-narratives or one overarching or self-subsisting system, which stands for order, stability, consistency, and it provides answers to all problems, and explanations for everything. What can be fitted into the system is accepted and others rejected or they become less important. Postmodernity casts suspicion over or even rejects such meta-narratives or mega-narratives which excludes others outside the system that cannot be fitted into it. Naturally, Postmodernity rejects all binary oppositions, and it advocates mini-narratives which are local without any claim of universality, rationality, stability and absolute certainty, but are of a provisional, temporary and fragmentary character. They do not make absolute truth claims. According to Postmodernity all rational systems have a totalizing tendency and are totalitarian in nature, similar to a totalitarian State or Party or a religious institution which claims absolute authority. For modernity the only valid knowledge is scientific knowledge which alone is objective. For Postmodernity story-telling, myths, narratives, poetry, etc are not fictions or secondary, or irrational and imaginary. For the postmodern thinkers, the so-called scientific-objective knowledge is also a narrative and not removed from fiction, story and poetry. Thus postmodern thinkers want to demolish the monopoly of scientific knowledge as the only true and valid knowledge. They establish that there are different kinds and forms of knowledge, scientific, aesthetic, religious, political, historical, mythical, theological, philosophical with their own different kinds of logic. We are living in a world which is pluralistic, fragmented and ambiguous, where contradictions cannot be avoided. By affirming plurality and the other, postmodernists want to affirm and vindicate the identity and importance of smaller people, neglected groups and their marginalized traditions.

The contemporary ecumenical movement and the approaches to it either by the Roman Catholic Church or WCC reflect the shades of

earlier cultural worlds, both of Christendom and Modernity. The ecumenical movement seems to be a project of a 'mega-narrative' and it conceals the ambitions for constructing an overarching system with control from the centre. This approach faces a serious crisis from the point of the changing culture of our time.

Most of the scholars of ecumenism admit that the movement faces today a transition. Konrad Raiser, the Protestant ecumenist and spokesperson of the WCC sees this transition as 'paradigm shift' from the Christological to the Trinitarian, from ecclesial to cosmic, from ecumenical structures to concrete fellowship.<sup>16</sup> The Official spokesperson of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his address to the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity spoke about the changing situation and the ambiguities of the future. He proposed concrete intermediate steps for the life and praxis of the churches rather than spelling out the final goal.<sup>17</sup>

## **(2) Religious Unity or Institutional Unity**

The great historical religions of the world emerged with the extra-ordinary personalities of their founders and their unique religious experiences. Their life, work, message and the way they responded to the needs and situations of the people of their time captivated their disciples and followers who pursued the path of those founders. The disciples, followers and communities around the founders formed a nucleus and they functioned as a movement to share the original experience and to spread the message of the founder for a better world and thus to transform the society. Acts of the Apostles mentions the unifying elements of the early Christian community: the teaching of the Apostles, fellowship, the breaking of

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<sup>16</sup> Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, Geneva: WCC, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> See his Address to the Plenary of 2001, Nov. 12 – 17, 2001.



the bread and prayer.<sup>18</sup> They were communities of a movement for the wider society and not self-enclosed institutions with meticulous rules, regulations and administrative structures.

As the religious movements were in history and conditioned by the socio-cultural factors, it was natural they gradually became institutionalized and assumed concrete structures and underwent historical developments. Developments in all religions were more or less in a similar pattern with the formation of creeds, codes and cults. I do not want to analyze here the social, cultural, psychological, anthropological and religious factors in the formation of those creeds, codes and cults. Such historical developments were indeed inevitable. But there is an inherent danger in this process. Some religions underwent extreme forms of institutionalism and they became petrified and rigid which leads to the enslavement of its members. Although religion at its origins was meant to liberate people and the original message of all religious founders was authentic and integral liberation of all people, the institutionalized religions often became tools of oppression infringing upon and violating the freedom of people. Hence there is an inherent tension between religious message and its institutionalized forms.

It is evident that different historical religions in the world have different forms and levels of institutionalization. Hindu religion does not have a centralized institution and a central authority, it is practiced, in general, by people around the local temples with their own traditions and festivals, though some of the Hindu fundamentalist movements of the upper castes today think of common religious institutions and centralized structures and organizations for their hidden agenda of capturing political power. Much less organized religion is Buddhism. Buddha's teachings and life-example alone are the commonality among the various Buddhist

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<sup>18</sup> Acts 2: 42 - 47; 4: 32 - 35; 5: 2 -15.

sects, movements and Ashrams. Islam too has no one central institution, organization and authority except the Holy Book of Koran and Islam is known for its various sects and groups who often do not see eye to eye. Roman Catholic Church is the most powerful institution today, a centrally organized religion with meticulous structures and laws, and its head the Pope wields the central authority even after the Second Vatican Council. The Pope is known for his Primacy and Infallibility. All other Christian Churches too are well organized and institution-centred. They have their top authorities or authoritative bodies for common action and decision making. Compared to other religions Christian religion is the most organized and institutionalized.

The Ecumenical Movement and the WCC are functioning in a way similar to Vatican with headquarters in Geneva, hundreds of officers and paid employers and annual budgets of several million dollars. Does the ecumenical movement crave for religious/ spiritual unity or institutional unity with new structures and organizations with new power-centres? The ecumenical models of visible unity, mutual recognition among churches, intercommunion and common decision-making bodies seem to be no more appealing to many Christian believers today, who aspire for authentic Christian spiritual experience and tend to reject all forms of extreme legalism and ritualism.

### **(3) Authority in the Church: Spiritual or Secular**

Jesus' concept of authority in the community of his disciples was very clear and he repeatedly reminded them of it: "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise their authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be the first among you

must be slave of all. For the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many”.<sup>19</sup> The early Church was a “community of little ones who believe in Jesus”, a “community of brethren”, and to this community some authority was conferred, and the function of those in authority was “service” like the shepherds who feed the sheep and have to empty themselves to the extent of even sacrificing their life for their sheep. Secondly, in the early Church there was no question of authority of one man over the community, rather the community had supreme authority and it was exercised in a collegial manner with common consensus. But this authority became gradually corrupted in the Church along the secular and imperial model due to its close allegiance with the Roman Imperial authority which ‘lorded over the subjects’, subjugated and enslaved them. Naturally authority has a tendency to corrupt itself and ‘absolute authority corrupts absolutely’.

In the early churches the members of the community who had charism (gift) for different ministries voluntarily took up the ministries or the community recognized the different charisms of the members and invited and authorized them to undertake the ministries for the service of the community. Anyhow, charism or gift of the member given by the power of the Spirit was the primary requisite for the ministry. But gradually as the institutional developments of the church happened, ordination and appointment by the church became the primary element by which the gift or charism was given in the act of ordination. Ministerial authority and the power to exercise it was simply given by the institutional church. It was indeed a distortion and deviation from the practice of the early church.

Authority in religion is really a ‘spiritual’ authority freely given by the power of the Spirit. Religious authority in Hinduism and

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<sup>19</sup> Mt 20: 25 – 28; Mk 10: 45; Lk 22: 27; Jn 13: 12 – 15.

Buddhism is generally exercised by persons who are deeply rooted in their respective traditions and who are really transformed by the authority of spiritual experience. Their authority is spontaneously recognized by people of their traditions. There is a wide complaint against Christian churches that many of their leaders today are just heads of institutions and not really spiritual leaders who are transformed by the power of the Spirit. They are often regarded as administrators and guardians of institutional churches and their fossilized traditions.

The function of religious authority is to gather together the believers in relationality, animate them and discern the faith of the community and give its authentic interpretations. Authority is located within the community and not above it. In the Church there are two basically different notions or models of faith and its interpretations. According to the first model, faith is a set of truths and doctrines entrusted to the Apostles by Christ, and it is handed down to the community by the legal successors of the Apostles. Here people including theologians do not have any positive and creative role in matters of faith; they just receive them passively and interpret them strictly according to the directives of the leaders of the church. According to the second model, faith is God's selfgift to the people which they experience and communicate inadequately in symbols, rituals, creeds, doctrines, prayers and praxis in order to nurture and promote fellowship. In this model the community has a lot to do with the teaching, understanding and interpretations of the faith. Of course in this model too the Apostles and the early Christian community played a key role as they were the *media fidei* of the original Christian experience. The correct view seems to be in between where we have to hold together the role of the successors of the Apostles in the church and the role of the living community today. Apostolic

succession in the strict sense belongs to the community of the Church and not exclusively to the leaders of the church.

Unfortunately, all the discussions on authority in the ecumenical movement is limited to the authority of ordained ministers, and role of the community in decision making and in the discernment of matters of faith based on *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium* is almost ignored. In other words, authority is often understood and exercised in the ecumenical movement in a secular fashion. On the other hand, those who witness and manifest the signs of authentic Christian faith experience must play an active role along with community in the discernment of matters of faith. The decision making in matters of faith should not be exclusively limited to the officially ordained ministers.

#### **(4) Doctrinal Consensus elusive if not impossible**

From the very beginning one of the main objectives of the ecumenical movement has been visible unity of the churches by means of doctrinal consensus. The assumption was that the churches were divided in history due to doctrinal differences among them. Both bilateral and multilateral dialogues were organized where differences were clarified, analyzed and attempts for mutual understanding were made. Several rounds of exercises were initiated to draft consensus statements, and the document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ordained ministry (1981) is one of the best examples. There is an endless line of reports, studies and statements, but unfortunately without any substantial progress. Mutual recognition of churches and visible unity seems to be elusive. What are the underlining deeper problems and difficulties with regard to the question of 'doctrinal consensus'?

Seven decades ago Karl Barth the great theologian of the Reformed Church pointed out that within every agreement among the churches there are concealed differences and within every

disagreement there are hidden agreements. He also underlined that the 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' churches are two different ways of being church and two different ways of doing theology. No agreements and compromise can be reached between them, but they are complementary.

Perfect consensus on matters of faith and doctrines is an impossible task for various reasons. First of all, Religious experience and faith experience belongs to the category of 'mystery'. It happens in a unique encounter between the infinite and the finite, eternal and transient, absolute and contingent. Secondly, such 'peak experiences' cannot be adequately described, formulated or defined. They can be only pointed out by means of signs and symbols, and can be presented or introduced only by means of narratives, poetry, stories and art forms. Thirdly, any linguistic formulation is historically limited, culturally conditioned and context specific. Two individual persons from two historical and socio-cultural contexts cannot formulate their faith experience in the same way. Fourthly, every language has a unique horizon, cultural, social, economic, political and philosophical. These and several other reasons make historical dogmatic definitions of churches to be considered as final or absolute. Such definitions of a Church may not be valid or acceptable to all other Churches and communities. All the same, experiences, including faith-experience, always need and crave for expressions, however they are inadequate. Therefore, formulations, doctrines and statements are inevitable, though they are provisional and contingent and subject to revisions and reformulations. It calls for a healthy pluralism and plurality of formulations that may be held together or related in complementarity. All formulations have to be held together in a creative and critical polarity. They enrich, challenge and question each other, and they must be always dialectically and dialogically related.

It calls into question the character and validity of several current consensus and convergence documents of the ecumenical movement. It demands new approaches and new methods for dialogue and mutual relationship and it challenges the relevance of the present approaches of the ecumenical movement and its objectives.

#### **(5) Decline of Denominational Systems and Loyalties**

Most of the Christian denominations of today have their origins from the background of the Reformation Movement and the craving for independence of the church from State control. Some of the traditional Christian denominations have still some relevance in their home lands. But in Asia, Africa and South America they are increasingly becoming remnants of the Colonial period due to several factors. With the political independence, the people of these countries have become today conscious of their own nation, culture and history. Even before the formation of the WCC at Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910, church leaders from the so-called mission countries, people like Bishop V. S. Azariah of India, raised the strong voice that denominations of foreign origin with foreign leadership have not much relevance in the new mission countries, what is needed is not a paternalistic relationship, but friendship, freedom and independence. People of these countries look at the history of their own nations where God has been also alive and active, as in the history of Israel and in the histories of other people. They turn to their own history and culture, read their original myths, stories, ancient texts, poems, folklore, music and art forms and try to interpret them and discern God's designs for them. They can very well situate Jesus and the Gospel in their own context. They try to trace Jesus within their own history and culture and a church will be born there from within and not simply imported from outside.

Today several traditional Christian denominations are in conflict and on the verge of break-up due to internal doctrinal and theological

issues such as, question of authority, autonomy of church, admission of women to ordained ministries, abortion, same sex marriage etc. Even within the Roman Catholic Church some of the issues are very serious and sometimes their internal differences are greater than those against other denominations. What I wanted to point out is that there is an increasing conflict today between denominational loyalty and national, cultural and ecumenical consciousness, which challenges the historical identity of Christian denominations and of the ecumenical movement. This is what is often referred to as 'Postdenominational Christianity'.

### **Part III: Emerging Ecumenical Trajectories**

In the light of the new trends, cultural values and problems as spelt out above, we have to re-conceive the ecumenical movement and reset its approaches, targets and methods. It is indeed very painful to consciously break from the past traditions, models and approaches held so far. It requires courage, hope and faith, faith in the continuing presence and guidance of the risen Lord and absolute commitment to the movements of the Spirit, whose presence we have to discern by reading the signs of the times. Outlining of these emerging trajectories here are very tentative and provisional, and they are subjected to further criticism, corrections and revision.

#### **(1) From the Institutional/Visible to the Prophetic/ Mystical**

Core of every religion is religious experience which is in the realm of spirituality or the experience of the Spirit. Spirituality is the experience of being gripped by the power of the Spirit; it is the awakening to the dimension of self-transcendence; it connotes the state of being grasped by the sense of the Sacred or a sense of being rooted to the Ultimate Ground of Being. The visible institutional religion without the core-element of religious experience is an empty



shell. Any religious and liturgical celebration which does not raise the participant to the higher realm of a spiritual experience will become just a ritual and social celebration. Mystical experience is the peak of religious experience. It is the experience of being one with the Absolute where one does not feel any distinction between the subject and the object, self and the other. All religious experiences have an inner craving for the mystical and the absolute. In the mystical experience all the different religions meet and merge. One can therefore legitimately say that while religions appear to divide, spirituality and mysticism unite. “Spirituality is like the root dimension, religions evolve like branches which grow in different directions. The unity at the depth of spirituality has to be recognized, and the diversity at the level of religions has to be respected”.<sup>20</sup>

Religious experience and its peak of mystical experience are not self-centred or for self-indulging, but altruistic. It leads one to the other and to the whole humanity. A mystic is at the same time a prophet. A prophet listens to God as well as to his fellow humans. At the root of every prophetic activity, there lies a mystical experience by which one is envisioned, empowered and energized. Mystical and prophetic are the two moments of the same religious experience. Devotion to God and compassion to one’s fellow humans are the hallmark of all genuine religious leaders. As Mary Grey has pointed out, the age-old Christian tension of ‘fleeing the world’ or ‘changing the world’ is a false dilemma. What we need today are prophetic as well as mystical communities. Isolated prophet or mystic is no longer relevant.<sup>21</sup>

The ecumenical movement today is at a turning point. Its activities, projects and programs for the institutional and visible unity

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<sup>20</sup> Sebastian Painadath, “Interreligious Relations in Civil Society” in *Jeevadhara*, No. 262 (July 2014), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Mary C. Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism: The Heart of the Post-Modern Church*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997, 80.

get less and less support whereas its programs for common prayer, spiritual experience and social commitment get increasing support, sympathy and encouragement. The ecumenical movement has to be alert and become open combining the spiritual and the prophetic.

**(2) From one and the only Definitive Meaning to Plurality of Meanings**

Official Teachings of the church and their interpretations have been always dividing issues between the churches. The Catholic Church insists that some of its teachings and its meaning are definitive in the sense that they are absolutely true and therefore unchangeable. Some of its teachings are officially sealed with 'infallibility', a dogma defined by the first Vatican Council. The Orthodox churches do not hold the teaching of infallibility as such though they teach that the perennial tradition of the church bequeathed by the Apostolic church in the deposit of faith has to be always maintained as true and valid. For the mainline Protestant churches and post-Reformation Free churches in general the doctrinal teachings of the church and their meanings have to be always evaluated and revised as they have been always historically and culturally conditioned. On matters of faith we cannot insist on one and the only meaning.

The ecumenical movement has been struggling to sort out these differences and to arrive at certain consensus statements in the document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ordained Ministry (BEM Document 1982). It brought together the authority of the ordained ministers and that of the community as interdependent and reciprocal. Otherwise, there is the grave danger that the authority in the church may become distorted by isolation or domination, isolation from the community and domination by the authority over the community.

In today's postmodern cultural ethos the emphasis is not on one definitive and absolute meaning given once for all, but on the contextual and the provisional. There are different layers of meanings and these diversities have to be related to each other. The different churches, their teachings, doctrines and theologies have to be held together in a dialogical relationship rather than opting for one over against the other.

### **(3) From the Centre to the Margins**

Basically, the ecumenical movement has been always a search for the centre and a return to it. This centre is and will be Jesus Christ in whom all Christians are bonded by their faith. There is absolutely no debate on this central point. In Christian faith Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the centre of all humanity. The debate comes when the question of the relationship between Church and Christ is discussed. In the New Testament tradition Church is said to be the body of Christ, the sign of the presence of the Risen Christ and his Spirit in our midst in the world today. Does it mean that Christ is present only in the historical churches? Is he not present and active also in the world, in other religions and cultures and in the whole humanity? But how is he present? Is the presence in the same way or in different ways, sacramentally or spiritually? These are areas of debate and topics for ecumenical discussions.

Some mainline churches like the Roman Catholic Church generally limit the 'full' sacramental presence of Christ to itself. Although the Orthodox churches do not make such absolute claims, they do believe that they have preserved the 'faith' of the Apostolic church in its entirety till today. Most of the Protestant churches maintain that they are faithful to the fundamentals of the Apostolic church, whereas some might have deviated from the heritage of the early church. According to Protestants, the Reformation was a revolt against the 'aberrations' of the Catholic Church of the middle ages

which had fallen into clericalism, institutionalism, legalism and ritualism. According to them Reformation was a bold attempt to restore the purity and integrity of the Gospel. The ecumenical movement has been struggling to face these questions and challenges for the last one hundred years, and it is still making every effort to get out of these wrangles, yet without much success. The ecumenists are going round and round with the same questions again and again, from one conference to another, and they produce volumes of reports, studies and statements.

Many people suggest today that we have to move from the centre of the institutional church and its narrow ecumenical concern of the visible unity of the churches to the periphery where people live, struggle and search like the sheep without the shepherd. There is present today immense suffering, despair and agony outside the gates of the churches and their institutional boundaries, where people are struggling for their legitimate human rights, food, clothes and shelter, millions of poor, oppressed, orphans, migrants, refugees, dalits and those who are at the margins. In such situations Christ seems to be present not just within the churches, not at the centre, but at the peripheries identifying with those at the margins. 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. Could the Churches declare with honesty that they too are with God and His people at the margins!<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See, Joerg Rieger (ed), *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 18.

#### **(4) Movements for Indigenous Christian Communities**

Christian ecumenical ideal has been One Reunited Church, consisting of all Christian denominations with mutual recognition, intercommunion and functioning by way of a Conciliar fellowship. As indicated above, today denominational systems and structures are increasingly being broken and in their place Indigenous Christian communities are emerging in local cultural and national settings. They may be called as '*Post-Denominational Churches*'.<sup>23</sup>

In the post-colonial and nationalistic cultural context numerous indigenous Christian communities are emerging and spreading very fast in various parts of Asia, Africa and South America. The common features of these indigenous churches may be described as follows: They are post-denominational in the sense that they do not have perfect continuity with the denominational churches, though they maintain some elements of the so-called 'mother-churches'. They spread rapidly by the work of lay-people, both men and women who are preachers and healers. Most of these communities have a congregational set-up without having national or international denominational structures. Such communities are nurtured by deep fellowship, prayer and common worship, social commitment, witness and service to the larger society, especially to the marginalized.

Let me just mention one example of the growth of such post-denominational churches in China without entering into the complex history of Christianity in China. Today in the changed context of limited religious freedom, the local and indigenous churches are spreading rapidly. Most of them are Protestant and Pentecostal churches, if we may speak of their denominational and historical lineage. In 1982 their number was about 3 million, whereas in 1998 their number was calculated to be 16.7 million. In 2014 China

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<sup>23</sup> Miikka Ruokanen and others, "Is Postdenominational Christianity Possible?", *Ecumenical Review* 67/1 (March 2015), 77 – 95.

has a population 1.35 billion of which 24 million belong to indigenous Christian churches. According to World Christian Database, China has today 45 - 60 million Christians of which Catholics are only about 12 - 14 million. By all evidences the future of Christianity in China seems to belong to the indigenous churches.<sup>24</sup> Indigenous churches can take the risk and courage to break from their petrified denominational heritage and lead the churches to fresh understanding of the Gospel and of Christian faith and to initiate new Christian practices relevant and meaningful for today's context.

#### **(5) Intercommunion at the Local Level**

Common Eucharistic celebration or intercommunion has been always one of the main objectives of the ecumenical movement. The problem of intercommunion has been discussed since almost a century without arriving at any concrete solution. There are two theological problems underlying this issue. The first one is the differences on the doctrine of the Eucharist. Is the Eucharist a sacrifice? How is Christ present in the Eucharist? In what sense is there *real presence*? The second problem is the question of the validity of the minister of the Eucharist i.e. who can validly preside over the Eucharist. Can any Christian preside over the Eucharist, or only an ordained minister? Who is a validly ordained minister? My intension here is not to answer or explain these questions. I only want to say that these theological and doctrinal issues still remain unresolved and they cannot be completely solved once for all. Therefore common Eucharistic celebration and intercommunion among all the churches remains still a mere dream.

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<sup>24</sup> See the articles in *The Ecumenical Review*, 67/1 (March 2015), *Christianity in China*

What is the way ahead? I would like to suggest that approaches to intercommunion and its practical negotiations must be shifted to the bi-lateral and local level. This is the only practical way to arrive at concrete solutions and to reach tangible results. Practical solutions can be arrived at only on the local level where the picture and the problems are very concrete and therefore solutions can be more practical and not merely theological, academic and speculative. On the local level the problem is not merely theological and speculative, but it is a question of life and death for the actual communities in each place. The approach and the solutions must emerge from the local context and their common commitment. It has to be a 'leap of faith' in context and a concrete act of ecumenical commitment for which the local Christian communities must be called, challenged and moved by the Spirit. Common Eucharistic sharing is a sign of mutual hospitality among Christians and an act of Christian love. It should not be simply a ritualistic and legalistic act initiated by the institutional churches and their authorities in the name of the visible unity of the Churches.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued in this article that the ecumenical movement has arrived at a point of stalemate or impasse in our Postcolonial and Postmodern cultural and religious context. The century long hard work undertaken by the churches in search of visible unity and the target of mutual recognition, intercommunion and a conciliar fellowship among the churches is still elusive and the future of the movement is clouded with a lot of ambiguities and uncertainties. Unless the Catholic and Orthodox Churches change their view that they alone possess the 'fullness' of the ecclesial reality and that the Protestant Churches have only some visible elements of the church, and ready to revise their traditional approach in the light of the new ecumenical experiences of today and grow accordingly, the

ecumenical movement will not be able to overcome this impasse. The WCC also must move from its emphasis on the visible and institutional and turn to the religious, spiritual, prophetic and mystical unity centered on Jesus Christ and the Spirit. 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. The target should be not be limited simply to the visible unity of all churches, rather the focus must be the emergence of the 'Reign of God', a 'New Heaven and Earth', which has radical implications for the whole humankind and the whole Cosmos.