

# Is Ecumenism Valid For Our Times?

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## 1.0 Introduction

Recently, I have been on the move attending seminars, and two of them were focused on the issue of ecumenism and its relevance for our times. The first one was held in New Delhi and it was the meeting of the Global Christian Forum. It is a forum initiated by the World Council of Churches (WCC) almost 10 years ago to provide space for Christians from different theological backgrounds or denominations (Pentecostal, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Assembly of God, Evangelicals, Reformed and Lutheran Churches, Four Square Gospel, etc.) to come together, and tell their stories or share their faith journeys. This coming together has provided a space for theologically, ecclesiological and missiologically alienated individuals and churches to come together to dialogue and fellowship. This spirit of bonding has enabled them to overcome many of their prejudices, barriers, suspicion and ignorance. At one point in history, most of them hated each other and today most of them confess their sin of division, or even share jokes of each other! It is a positive story and a modern day miracle. It is a good beginning and they have a long way to go. It is a sure sign that the Holy Spirit is at work among and within us to bind us together. I hope and pray that the Spirit will lead us into all truth and one day we will be able to say together that we have comprehended the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ which surpasses all knowledge.

The other workshop was conducted by the Faith Mission and Unity (FMU) cluster of CCA. It brought together the Program Area Committee members of the FMU cluster to consult, reflect and plan their programs for the next few years. During their deliberations the group discussed several issues and one was focused on ecumenism and denominationalism. It was a critical, creative and constructive discussion where we were able to reflect together on some of the reasons for the decline or the non-appeal of ecumenism to a large number of people and the temptation of many to guard, protect, and defend denominationalism at the expense of ecumenism. I was told that in Scotland, when one of the Bishops was asked to consecrate a particular building for their worship, he turned to the crowd and said the following words before the consecration: "Lord we are ashamed of our divisions, please forgive us. Show us the way to be united."

## 2.0 Birth and Growth of the Ecumenical Movement

There have been several descriptions given to the meaning of the word ecumenism or oikoumene. It has been described in terms of the "Household of God", "the whole inhabited earth," and so on. Some think of ecumenism only in terms of the unity of the Church or matters concerned with Faith and Order issues. For others, it is a movement which

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challenges people to work towards the organic union of divided churches. One of the prevailing views of ecumenism among some Christians and adversaries of the ecumenical movement is that ecumenism is the WCC. In other words, ecumenism is equated to the WCC. It is unfortunate that very often when we think or talk of ecumenism our attention is drawn only to the WCC, and several people think that the WCC is the incarnation of the devil and therefore ecumenism itself is evil. This is a wrong assumption and to equate ecumenism purely to what comes out of the WCC and to dismiss it is a prejudicial point of view and a gross injustice to the very thought of ecumenism.

Ecumenism is the spirit and the ethos of Christianity which goes back to the early Church of the New Testament times and beyond. It is the ecumenical spirit which inspired the early Christians to venture into new situations, to break barriers and to overcome divisions which had emerged within the early Church (Acts 15 and subsequent Church Councils), and to respond to cries of the people (Acts 6). In that sense ecumenism is a movement led by the Holy Spirit which inspires people and communities to pioneer, to take risks and to launch out into the deep (Luke 5:1-11). It is a movement of the Spirit which dares to risk and to break new ground. It is that movement which led the early church to move from the known to unknown territories/issues and that is the reason the early Christians were called the "people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6, NRSV). Ecumenism is a call and a reminder to discern God's presence in the whole of God's creation and to participate with God for the transformation of the entire creation which is groaning in travail (Romans 8).

Therefore, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the regional ecumenical organizations like CCA are only manifestations of institutionalized forms of ecumenism and they together do not exhaust the spirit and the vision of ecumenism. They are only pointers and reminders to the fact that we are called to be kindom/kingdom community and nothing else or more. Therefore, the ecumenical movement is an arm/instrument chosen by God to work towards the realization of God's reign on earth. Based on that understanding, we take part in ecumenical activities or are in solidarity with the ecumenical movement in order to become co-workers with God to achieve these goals. Aliveness and the credibility of the ecumenical movement is grounded on the vision and values of the Kingdom/Reign of God, and if we do not live and move to promote these values by word and action we cease to be for which we are called, consecrated and set apart by God.

We are called, consecrated and set apart by God to exercise God's mission in the context of Asia. Therefore, our theology, ministry, formation and spirituality have to be rooted in the Asian context and arise out of it to be truly Asian. In a sense I am not saying anything new. But the challenge before us is: have we accomplished this task? I quote a few paragraphs from a publication put out by EACC in 1966 (EACC later became CCA)<sup>2</sup>:

We have inherited a "great Tradition" of the Gospel from those who brought the Gospel to Asia, but we believe that the Christ has more of His truth to reveal to us, as we seek to understand His work among men in their several Asian cultures, their

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<sup>2</sup> "Confessing the Faith in Asia Today", a statement issued by a consultation of the East Asia Christian Conference, held in Hong Kong on October 26-November 3, 1966.

different religions and their involvement in the contemporary Asian revolution. In the past we have been too tied to inherited traditional conceptual forms of confession to make such ventures. Such formulations have been signposts and pointers to the truth, but we have often interpreted them or had them interpreted for us, as the final word of truth so that we have encamped around them, forgetting that even as people of other times and cultures made their own confession, we too must do the same in our time and culture. When we make absolute the written confessions of the churches of another culture or age, we become incapable of discovering the new depths of truth God can reveal to us in Christ amidst Asian life.

A confessing theology, i.e. a theology which is the result of the wrestling of an Asian Church with its Asian environment, will naturally not be specifically confessional even though it may be indebted to many confessional traditions. A confessional type of theology, inherited by an Asian Church as part of its tradition, is usually a source of division; while a confessing theology will under-gird the movement towards unity and union in the churches of Asia.

Finally it says:

A living theology must speak to the actual questions men in Asia are asking in the midst of their dilemmas; their hopes, aspirations and achievements; their doubts, despair and suffering. It must also speak in relation to the answers that are being given by Asian religions and philosophies, both in their classical forms and in new forms created by the impact on them of western thought, secularism and science. Christian theology will fulfill its task in Asia only as the Asian churches, as servants of God's Word and revelation in Jesus Christ, speak to the Asian situation and from in it.

Although I studied at the Theological College of Lanka, I received my Bachelor's degree from the Serampore University. But, this is my first visit to the vicinity of Serampore. The point I want to state is that at that time, in the mid '70s, our lecturers and the 4-year curriculum equipped and nurtured us to embrace an ecumenical vision, although we went back to our denominational churches. Theological College of Lanka was able to rub into us the spirit of ecumenism and, therefore, wherever we were placed we thought ecumenically, acted ecumenically and lived ecumenically. Therefore, I am grateful to my College and to the lecturers who trained me and others for imparting into us a vision which goes beyond parochialism and cultic forms of ministry. Is that the prevailing mood even today in our seminaries, churches, parishes and even in the Theological College of Lanka? Even then we had the pressure from some church leaders and parishes to send back the women and men they send to be trained to fit into their parishes and carry out the parish ministry.

What I have quoted earlier from the CCA document compels us to exercise our ministry and theologize by taking our context seriously. Our context is Asia, and more specifically, where we live. Therefore, the task before us is to forge an ecumenical vision for our times so that the *Christian churches in Asia* will truly become *Christian churches of Asia*.

### 3.0 Our Context

It is with sadness that we notice that the Asia in which we live is broken and bleeding and divided on the basis of ethnicity, race, class, caste, gender, religion, tribe, ideology, language and you name it. Those of us who are entrenched in denominationalism and yet claim to be ecumenical are placed within this divided and broken context to prophecy against and expose principalities and powers which bring about these divisions and contribute to the process of dehumanizing God's people and desecrating the sacred creation. I am reminded of a saying that was often said by Romans of the former Empire: "man is a wolf to man." Very often human beings are driven to engage in acts of violence and destruction because of greed and the desire to accumulate even at the expense of others. The root cause for this is our self-centeredness, self-indulgence, and the struggle for self-sufficiency.

What Jesus the Christ revealed and taught was the self-emptying love of God; and in John 15, Jesus calling himself the vine exhorting those who would follow him to bear fruit. Please note the imagery: the disciples are called to bear fruit, not to gather it. Getting and grabbing – rather than offering and giving – has become the dominant and domineering way of life in the world. It is unfortunate that the world with its dominant culture has invaded the Church to shape our values, perceptions and actions. Although we are a faith-based community we have often tamed, maimed and distorted the kingdom values in order to be comfortable with the values of the world which are often appealing but contrary to the values and ethics of Reign of God.

This type of compromise and behavior are a contradiction to Christian discipleship. That is the reason Jesus at his temptation told the Satan: "Be gone Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (Mt. 4:10). Again when Peter tried to compromise on Jesus' messianic role and tried to tempt him to conform to it, Jesus was firm and denounced Peter by saying: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mt. 17:23; Mark 8:33).

We represent a community called the ecclesia, which is founded on God and inspired by Jesus the Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is a community set apart to witness to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and to swim against the tide of popular culture. That is the reason St. Paul tells us: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). What I am trying to say is: although we are part and parcel of this world, we are called and chosen not to imitate the dominant values or cultures of this world, which is anti-God and consecrated by the cult of Mammon.

The Church which claims to be the Body of Christ is called by God not merely to preach against Mammon but to live and practice a life worthy of kingdom values. Jesus was very clear about this and that is the reason he said: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate one and love the other, or he will devote to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24). The dominant and most popular values in this world are violence, corruption, greed, desire to accumulate, abuse of power, lack of humility and unwillingness to accept the other who is different to us as one of us. Those should never be the guiding principles of the ecumenical movement and the Christian Councils and

Churches we represent. We must be guided on by the values of the Gospel and in so doing we imitate Jesus the Christ in contemporary history.

Fr. Aloysius Peiris of Sri Lanka says: "If the Church is to gain credibility and acceptance among people of Asia, if she is to regain her lost authority, she must unequivocally take the side of the poor and oppressed and repudiate all alliances with wealth, power, and prestige as Jesus did." In other words, the "Church must be humble enough to be baptized in the Jordan of Asian religiosity and be bold enough to be baptized on the cross of Asian poverty."<sup>3</sup>

It is a tremendous challenge and to compromise on these issues is to distort the Gospel of Jesus the Christ and to opt for a worldly and a popular form of discipleship devoid of the cross which Jesus the Christ rejected (Mt.4:1-11).

### 3.1 Asia from a historical perspective

I have spoken of the Asian context in general and then tried to draw implications **for being the Church** in theological and biblical terms. Now I want to draw your attention to some specific Asian realities. I am also aware that I am not competent to speak for the whole of Asia as Asia is not one but many. Sometime ago the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) formulated what they called the "Critical Asian Principle" by which were highlighted a number of critical issues amidst the diversity to forge a common or singular Asian identity. I am informed by those who are familiar with ATESEA today that they have revised this Principle. However, I believe what was identified then is valid even for today. Therefore, I shall state them below for your own reflections.

- Asia is poor and therefore needs to be developed;
- Asian nations have had a colonial past and therefore need to be free and to be built;
- Asia is the birth place and the habitat of major religions of the world and therefore should be understood in terms of the challenge of the "other religions" and the economic, political and cultural demands of religious plurality and tolerance.

I am aware that we can add more to this list. As my intention is not that, let us keep these issues in mind and draw some insights from these areas and raise the question: how do these insights pose a challenge to think of ecumenism in a new way and to make some critical reflections on the ministries carried out by us and the churches we represent? How do we as persons responsible for theological education and formation equip those under our care to carry out ministries of God without getting co-opted and tempted to the flesh pots of Egypt?

### 3.2 Asia and the age of Imperialism

Some of the things I mention below may sound outdated. Yet, I appeal to you to ask the question: Are the issues stated below outdated or do these issues revisit us in disguised form? According to Dr. Ninan Koshy of India, "The beginnings of ecumenism in Asia were

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<sup>3</sup> "For A Real Sri Lankan Church!", a pamphlet of the Christian Workers Fellowship, issued on 20 September 1984.

in the age of imperialism. Today ecumenism in Asia confronts the reality of the Empire.”<sup>4</sup> This statement is a challenge to all of us to re-visit our ecumenical agendas and to ask ourselves whether the mission thrust of our churches and ecumenical institutions address any of these issues. I remember some of these issues were on the agendas of the ecumenical movement in the past. Today they are no longer on our agendas and, if they are, they are no longer issues of priority for mission work and to set apart funds from our mission budgets.

In June 1887 when John R. Mott, well known ecumenical leader, published a book on his historical missionary journey, he titled his book, *The Strategic Points in the World's Conquest: The Universities and Colleges as Related to the Progress of Christianity*. When Mott wrote this book he was conditioned to the mentality of Imperialism and that is the reason we find the terms “Strategic Points” and “World Conquest”. K.M. Pannikar, from an Asian point of view, makes a critique of missionary enterprise by saying that they all (Protestant and Roman Catholics) “had the earmarks of being integrally connected to Western political supremacy.”<sup>5</sup>

Those of us who have studied church history know that at the 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Rev. V. S. Azariah of India, who later became the Bishop of Dornakal in India, was one of the strong critics of the missionaries. Apart from Bishop Azariah, C. H. Yun of Korea, K. Ibuka of Japan, C.Y. Cheng of China were also critics at this conference. Of course, the missionaries were not happy with their criticism. However, they had to listen to their voices. It is reported that Azariah was reprimanded in a closed door session. It has been said that strong criticism against missionaries at Edinburgh was the first shot against missionary imperialism.

During the early years, the ecumenical movement in Asia was clear about its position on Western imperialism. The relationship in which “the initiative and control rest with the West” and the East was expected to follow was “regarded as sinister.” The feeling at the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) conference in Java in 1933 was that, “It must be reversed. Ours should be the initiative and control, while we welcome the cooperation of the West.”

It is interesting that although I am quoting from a document written in 1933, I hear similar remarks even today. These words get expressed at meetings where money and power sharing is discussed. I believe the issue of power and money has to be discussed at ecumenical gatherings of this nature in order to be embraced by the spirituality of self-emptying and liberation.

### **3.3 Asian Nationalism and Struggle for Independence**

From mid 40s to mid 50s we see in Asia many of the nations struggling to be free from the yoke of colonialism and to set up their own forms of Nation-State. It was a time where

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<sup>4</sup> A. Wati Longchar, M. P. Joseph and Josef P. Widyatmadja, eds. *They Left By Another Road: Rerouting Mission and Ecumenism in Asia* (Chiang Mai: Christian Conference of Asia, 2007), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Ninan Koshy, *Ibid.*, p. 4 from K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953), 455.

nationalistic feelings were running high. The most dramatic and epoch-making transformation took place in China in 1949 with the victory of the Communist revolution and the emergence of a new major power in the world scene. The impact of this was felt all over Asia, politically and ideologically. Such an impact was felt among churches either positively or negatively.

Although Asia has gone through this phase of independence struggle, in many countries churches are being accused of being pro-colonial rather than anti-colonial. To this day many churches are being accused of this, although there is evidence to prove that some Christian leaders have strongly supported the movement for national independence.

The first international conference of independent nations of Asia and Africa was held in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia. Bandung charted a new path in international affairs from the perspective of the developing regions of the world, which came to be known as the Third World. The Bandung Spirit had considerable influence across the region. Its impact was on churches in the region of Asia. It is being said that it is the spirit of Bandung which led to the formation of the EACC, which later became the CCA.

### **3.4 Asian Revolution**

EACC Bangkok Assembly in 1968 emphasized the significance of people's movements and asked the churches to stand ready "on occasions to endorse the responsible use of civil disobedience in cases where the law and distribution of power are manifestly unjust" (EACC Bangkok Assembly Report, p.7).

Ecumenical documents of the 50s and 60s refer repeatedly to the term "Asian Revolution" as a context to discern God's presence and be in mission. Although the Asian revolution was a revolt against the western political, economic and cultural domination, it was also a social revolution affecting every aspect of life. This social revolution had three major aspects: (a) political freedom, (b) economic justice, and (c) social equality.

Although these were the dreams and visions of Asian leaders, they were not able to take the Asian revolution into its logical conclusions as most of them were part of the feudal class and therefore had to lose a lot if the revolution was to continue to appease the aspirations of the people. In fact the Asian revolution was hijacked by Asian leaders with vested interests and the blessing of the colonial masters. Therefore, what we observe in most of Asian countries is an unfinished revolution where structures of domination and exploitation are still in place and thriving.

What is most deceptive is that in most of these societies a form of democracy has been poured over these unjust structures rather than allowing democracy to blossom from the struggles of people after dismantling the structures of death-giving forces.

At the early stages the ecumenical movement was associated with movements of people who struggled for true democracy, power sharing, distribution of wealth and land. Today, we find ourselves in opposition to these movements. One of the reasons for this is that the ecumenical movement is no longer under the influence of crucified people. On the contrary

the ecumenical movement today is influenced and controlled by the advocates of theology of glory devoid of the cross.

## **4.0 Our Commitment to an Ecumenical Vision amidst rising trend in Denominationalism**

### **4.1 Revival of denominationalism**

What Asia received as Christianity with the coming of missionaries was a divided Christianity. This form of divided Christianity found it difficult to be re-born in the Asian soil and that is one of the reasons we are still being accused of being agents of a foreign religion. Because of our foreignness we have not been able to understand and feel the heart beat of the majority of people in Asia who toil under the oppression of the Pharaohs of Asia. This reality forces us to make a critical assessment of Asian Christianity which has been transmitted from the West and maintained in close relationship with Western Christianity.

Western heritage of Christianity has also passed on to us an exclusive attitude towards Asian religions, cultures and spirituality. Even the process of indigenization, inculturation and contextualization of western heritage of Christianity has not enabled us to be converted from colonized minds and “Teutonic captivity<sup>6</sup>.”

Asian Christianity is gradually moving the economic ladder and becoming a religion of “the middle or upper middle class, reflecting its Western Protestant Mission roots, which originated in the rising of the bourgeois class of western societies. That is why I said earlier, although the poor are in Asian churches we cannot say that the Church in Asia is the Church of the poor!

All these and more factors suggest why denominational churches still under the influence of their western counterparts are reluctant to embrace the ecumenical agenda and witness to the Gospel in their given context. The class nature of the Church, theological orientation and the western influence make many of us comfortable with the piety and the other worldly spirituality which is under-girding many of our ministries. That is the spiritual food majority of our people are asking for and we give it without questioning its dietary implications! We have selected the easiest way and that is the way to swim with the dominant culture of our times.

### **4.2 Spirituality to Comfort**

Another reason may be is that denominationalism is on the rise and therefore denominationalism has become more attractive and less sophisticated to quite a number of Christians. Many prefer a parochial form of Christianity to pitching their tent within the oikoumene and treading the path of a costly discipleship. I remember once a parishioner of mine saying to me, “Father, when I come to Church I do not want to be disturbed by reminding me of the pain, suffering and injustice in the world.” My immediate response to

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<sup>6</sup> Teutonic captivity has been used to describe the fact that theology, mission practices, governance, liturgy, art, symbols and architecture of the church in Asia are still replicas of the west.



him was the words of the late Archbishop William Temple: "The word of God is preached to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed." And that was the end of the conversation! Here one sees the clash of ecumenical and parochial agendas. It is a clash of theology, mission, ministry and spirituality. It is a clash between costly Grace and cheap Grace.

#### **4.3 Critical assessment of the institutionalized ecumenism**

It may be that for some of us and the churches we represent, the Ecumenical Movement, especially the WCC and the CCA, are no longer attractive and challenging. Some see these ecumenical bodies as a political arm of the Church to play ecumenical politics. There is some truth to this comment. Because of the petty politics of some personalities within the ecumenical movement and also because of the overstay of some ecumenical bureaucrats in ecumenical positions, it has not only lost its vigor, vitality, vision and pioneering spirit but has also kept some key and dynamic people away from the movement. The result of this is felt by some and I would dare to say that it has contributed to blocking of new blood flowing into the veins of the ecumenical movement and thereby crippling the movement or often making it cease to be a movement. This, along with many other reasons, may be contributory factors for not attracting a new generation of leaders from all walks of life to the ecumenical movement. To a great extent a sense of bankruptcy has crept into the worldwide institutionalized version of ecumenism. The end result is a vast number of Christians in Asia are outside the institutionalized structure of ecumenism. As a result of it, the ecumenical movement is losing vital human and financial resources.

But these are not reasons to distance oneself from the stream of ecumenism and strengthen denominationalism. This are the very reasons for you to be involved with ecumenical institutions to clean up where necessary and strengthen where it is weak and to be motivated and influenced by its strength and vision. Therefore, the issue is not denominationalism or ecumenism. It is not an either-or issue. Denominationalism should be seen and used as a vehicle to spread the vision of ecumenism as spelt out by me at the beginning of this paper. Therefore, ecumenism is not another form of a denomination.

Many of our denominational oriented churches have ceased to be prophetic and to address the issues raised by ecumenical institutions. We who are entrenched in denominationalism are often reluctant to address issues of poverty, injustice, exploitation, genocide, ethnic cleansing, war, gender justice, sin of capitalism, etc. We give many reasons for our inaction and one of the reasons is that Asian Christians are a minority and therefore we have to be careful with our actions. Is that a genuine reason or is it because we have failed to grasp the mission of Jesus the Christ spelt out in his Nazareth manifesto?

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)*

It is with sadness that I say: denominationalism is the biggest obstacle to ecumenism in contemporary Asia. There was a time when denominationalism embraced the spirit of

ecumenism to carry out God's mission in Asia, and set apart human and financial resources to support it. But today, that is not the priority. The priority is to isolate ourselves as denominations and do things on our own.

Rise, spread and the rapid growth of so-called free or younger churches are also a challenge to the ecumenical movement. These churches are attracting vast numbers of members from traditional churches, and therefore quite a number of leaders belonging to traditional churches have expressed the need to compete with Younger/Free churches by confining the work of mission mainly to narrow forms of evangelism and church growth. In other words, they imitate them by falling in line to their agendas! This has made them become allergic to the ecumenical agenda which speaks about siding with the poor, oppressed and marginalized and exercising a prophetic ministry to expose the principalities and powers of this world that are responsible for the "sinned against" in this world. In other words, the holistic mission of the ecumenical agenda is sidelined or ignored for the sake of the prosperity gospel. The challenge for us is: how do we enter into a meaningful and creative dialogue to convince church leaders, both clergy and laity, that the ecumenical agenda is not a politicized agenda which contradict the Gospel Jesus the Christ preached? This is your task and mine.

What I have stated above is nothing new. But what is needed in this hour is to preach the "whole Gospel to the whole world" in season and out of season. In other words, for the Church to be the Church it cannot abdicate from the responsibility of preaching the whole Gospel which is rooted in "Crucified Jesus the Christ". Let us keep in mind the words of St. Paul: "we preach Christ crucified" (1Cor. 1:23), "for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2). This is a major challenge to all of us and to the worldwide ecumenical movement.

If our ministry is rooted in the Gospel of crucified Jesus the Christ, then ecumenism is certainly valid and relevant for our times.