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The Ecumenical Movement in Asia: A Theological Reflection

A. Wati Longchar¹

The ecumenical movement in Asia has gone through many changes. In our journey together we have encountered many obstacles and problems as well as opportunities. What were the driving forces that united us in Parapat, Sumatra, Indonesia?² What have we achieved during the last forty-nine years? What are the challenges of our present time? How do we raise our prophetic voice ecumenically in the present context of our time? How do we uphold the ecumenical movement as a 'people's movement'?

The Need for a New Paradigm of Ecumenism

The current global context of our time calls for a paradigm shift in ecumenical engagement. Why do we need to search for a new paradigm? Christianity legitimises and continues to support the ruling and powerful class and therefore a party to the manipulation and exploitation of God's creation through globalisation. The history of the ecumenical movement shows the misuse of religion, especially Christianity, as an instrument or agent to protect the interests of the rich and colonial power. Here are some examples. First, since the time of first ecumenical council of Nicea, Christianity has consistently maintained religious legitimacy of the empire. The poor Christians, the uneducated, the untouchables from Bethany and the neglected villages in and around Jerusalem and Galilee claimed that at the Pentecost, the royal symbol of God was placed on them through the outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and, thereafter, to express resistance against the power of mammon, they practised common ownership of property and the sharing of wealth. This became a threat to the empire. Hence, the council of Nicea was convened and the council rejected and suppressed the claims and practice of the poor Christians and established religious hegemony of the empire at that time. Gradually, faith became an obligatory state religion to express loyalty to the empire.

The history of Christian countries in the West shows that Christianity was used as an instrument to expand imperialism. The crusades were waged nine times by Christians against

¹ The Rev. Dr. A. Wati Longchar serves as a joint consultant of the Christian Conference of Asia and World Council of Churches, specifically looking after the programs on Ecumenical Theological Education. He hails from Nagaland, Northeast India. This reflection has been inspired by the series of consultations on Rerouting Mission and Ecumenism in Asia organized by the CCA-Faith, Mission and Unity program area.

² Parapat in Sumatra, Indonesia was the venue of the gathering of Asian Christians who decided on forming the East Asia Christian Conference (now the Christian Conference of Asia) in 1957.

Muslims and Jews. Indigenous Christian communities were also not spared. The crusaders killed those who resisted, and destroyed and confiscated crops and properties by force. The Pope blessed the soldiers, offered forgiveness of sins to all soldiers, and the soldiers who died during the Crusades were elevated as martyrs of the faith. The crusades were wars of invasion to obtain supremacy of empire and to control the Mediterranean trade.

Western Christianity was closely associated with colonial expansion. Using military force, Christianity spread through Asia, Latin America and Africa. Colonial expansion was considered (or explained away as) a providence of God to take the good news to the so-called heathen world. The colonizers did not only invade these territories, but they also forcibly proselytised the people. Though some of the missionaries were critical of colonial interests, most conspired and cooperated with colonial governments. Some missionaries acted as government agents rather than as messengers of the gospel. That is the reason why we do not see any resistance movement against colonialism in the history of Western Christianity.

The crusades and colonisation have two aims in common — to recapture the Holy Land and expand Christianity by means of violence and military might. The crusades and colonisation were vile wars characterised by cruel killing, plundering and destroying of cultural heritage. It was in this imperial historical context that the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 took place. The conference was held under the patronage of colonial powers. The people who sent greetings to Edinburgh conference included the King of England, the President of the USA and the rulers of other colonial powers. The Edinburgh Conference clearly acknowledged that colonial expansion was God's providence to evangelise the so-called uncivilised and barbaric people. The *Oikoumene* of Edinburgh pretended that Christian unity is possible even without removing and transforming the structures of oppression and exploitation. The Edinburgh Conference coopted the poor and marginalised them into the scheme of the Western empire. Without much alteration, we simply follow the tradition set by the Edinburgh Conference. Oftentimes the ecumenical movements, perhaps unknowingly, acts as an agent of the empire. The ecumenical movement should not be reduced to a ruling-class movement to serve the needs of the empire. It must take the position of and for the poor and become the voice of the poor and the exploited. The paradigm of the Edinburgh *oikoumene* is not relevant in Asian context and we must look for a new paradigm of ecumenism.

Imperial Theology and Ecumenical Movement

Under the patronage of empire, we also see a theological discourse that supports imperialism. Since the time of Constantine the Great, the theological metaphors developed in the churches supported the male rulers and oppressors. In other words, the theological concepts developed under the imperial regime did not only legitimise a religion for the one who is the master and the ruler, but also sanctioned the exploitation and manipulation of all segments of God's creation for the extraction of maximum profit. There is no place for the people who have been ruled and oppressed for centuries. We may cite three examples.

First is the concept of God. Theology is God-talk, discourse on God. The discourse is based on a language that is symbolic and metaphorical. Metaphors are constructed out of a cultural or social environment and context. The dominant images of God developed under the

imperial power were images such as ruler, Lord, master and warrior. They are all patriarchal, political and military images. These images have made Christianity a religion of and for the ruler, the elite and the upper-class. The theological concepts or images of God that we uphold today are in deep crisis because they are not capable of liberating the poor and marginalised people from unjust systems and practices. The burning of innocent children and women in Lebanon, Iraq, etc., the mass destruction of property and infrastructure, invasion and aggression of sovereign countries in the name of liberation, freedom and peace all prove that we still uphold an imperialistic concept of God. Such rulers' theology supported colonial governments, war, invasion and unprecedented exploitation of the earth's resources. The imperial constructs and images of God will not be able to liberate the people who are the victims of power today.

Second is the understanding of mission. The discourse on God as ruler and master has reinforced a success-oriented or triumphalistic mission. The terms 'mission crusade', 'mission campaign', 'home penetration', 'mass evangelisation' etc. are all military language and concepts. Christians by and large are engaged in denominational expansion rather than in God's mission. Success in mission is measured by how many churches have been planted, how many people have been converted and baptised. Mission has been very exclusive and it has never recognised God's revelation in other religious traditions. Yet, we affirm that mission is God's mission. God is the owner of mission, not the churches. The churches are sent to be missionaries to witness compassion and justice with the poor and the victims. The ecumenical calling is to witness compassion and justice with the poor. But Christians have manipulated and acted as if we are the owner of mission.

Third is the understanding of creation. The Western Christian interpretation of creation is anthropocentric — i.e. the human is the reference point of all realities. In such a view, nature exists for humans. Apart from us, so-called rational beings, the other segments of God's creation cannot come under the scheme of salvation. There is no sacredness and mystery in nature; it is something to be manipulated and controlled for the benefit of human beings. To exploit nature is unfortunately perceived as divine will. This one-sided theological interpretation justifies expansion of colonial powers and exploitation of nature. The ideology of globalisation and the expansion of the global capital market are deeply rooted in this interpretation. The unprecedented exploitation of nature and the present ecological crisis testify to the failure of the Christian understanding of creation.

Therefore, we need a new ecumenical paradigm where God is perceived as a fellow sufferer, a great comforter and a divine power that is not dominating or controlling nor a dialectical power in weakness but is a liberating and transforming power that is effective in compassionate love, care and service. Mission needs to be understood as 'servanthood' in God's liberating act. We need a radical departure from the imperial theology of the ecumenical movement because Christian values are used to support rulers and oppressors and perpetuate exploitation of earth's resources.

The Ecumenical Movement in Asia

The ecumenical movement in Asia has struggled and continues to struggle even today against this imperial ecumenical framework and theology. Many people are theologically

confused. The churches in Asia came together in Parapat with the conviction that the dissection of the body of Christ is a scandal of faith and imperialism is contrary to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. When the East Asia Christian Conference was born in 1957 in Parapat, Indonesia, the leaders were careful not to submit their association as a subordinate entity or branch of the World Council of Churches or any denomination. They deliberately chose the term 'Conference' instead of 'Council' to maintain the spirit of movement. The spirit of Parapat was that 'the churches of Asia sharing the ethos of that time, grasped the vision of the peoples of Asia sharing a single hope, bearing a single destiny, and sought the make distinctive contribution, deriving from and contributing to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.' The key words that united and overwhelmed the spirit of this first Asian ecumenical gathering were *Parapat* and *gotong royong*. *Parapat* means 'come together' and *gotong royong* means 'working together for common task/goal'. These words were the driving force of Asian ecumenism: 'Come and work together for common task/goal.' It is in this spirit that the many ecumenical leaders supported the national independence struggle because of their conviction that imperialism is contrary to Christian faith, principles and practice. (However, we need to note that nationalism in Asia was primarily a bourgeois nationalism, created and financed by the respective national bourgeoisie. For example, in India, the Dalits and tribals were always kept outside the framework of the Congress Party). The EACC Assembly in Bangkok in 1968 emphasised the significance of Asian people's movements and struggle for justice and freedom and asked the churches to stand ready to endorse the responsible use of civil disobedience in cases where the law and distribution of power were unjust. When the authoritarian regimes, most often the military itself or with the support of military, assumed power in several Asian countries in 1970s, the EACC called the churches to listen to the voices of the suffering people under those regimes. In spite of many failures, the message of EACC was very clear—the confession of Christian hope should be set in the context of the aspiration of the people themselves. The framework of the ecumenical movement in Asia was 'people', namely those who have been denied justice and oppressed. We have a lesson to learn from this past experience to strengthen our present ecumenical movement in Asia.

The Present Context of Ecumenical Movement in Asia

We have moved from colonial to postcolonial context (some may call it postmodern context) where the global empire and globalisation are the main players. We are now in a new context and are confronted with new challenges. To raise a prophetic voice requires serious engagement in the new context of the people. The most obvious global sign of the time is the symbiosis of the global empire and economic regime (globalisation). The global empire and the greed of global capital are destroying and threatening all life, especially of the poor and marginalised.

The global empire claims absolute power to dominate all the other political powers of the world, and it seeks such hegemonic domination. It has no rivals, nor can it allow any. The global military regime with its imperial strategy is totalistic, limitlessly destructive and homicidal in character. The empire justifies its power and actions in pseudo-religious terms, misusing Christian values and demonising other religious expression of resistance to its imperial power. The military regime has inflicted and continues to inflict the most vicious and brutal forms of violence and adverse humanitarian impact to the people, e.g. the geno-

cidal war in Iraq, and in Lebanon and Palestine, and brazen human rights violations in many Asian countries. We need a decisive prophetic voice against the global empire.

Globalisation is a new form of colonialism. The global market turns human beings and their cultural activities and the earth's resources into commodities for profit. The weak—e.g. migrant workers, farmers, consumers, small entrepreneurs and the whole ecosystem—are the victims of globalisation. Asia has become a source of raw materials, cheap labour and food needs. The unjust financial system, the ever-increasing ideology of consumerism, materialism, individualism, competition and greed erode life-affirming values, fragment communities and increase poverty. This is a value system that is driven by powerful financial corporations. Therefore, the future of ecumenism in Asia lies in its ability to create counter movements against globalisation and empire. This counter movement is possible through the strengthening and building of grassroots or local ecumenical movements.

Jesus' Paradigm of Ecumenical Engagement

We have argued that we have inherited an ecumenical movement and theology that supports and protects the rich, the ruler, the elite, the master and the empire. We still struggle with this ecumenical framework and theology. However, the ecumenical movement in Asia can make a difference by turning and rerouting to the Jesus of Galilee movement. In Jesus' movement, we see a decisive reversal from empire to people in pain, from ruler to ruled, from oppressor to oppressed. Jesus' movement was a people-centred movement against the power of destruction and death. He stood for a different value system. Peace, love, service and liberation of the poor constituted the message of Jesus, not power, sword, military and mammon. Jesus became the voice of the oppressed and the voiceless. Since Jesus stood for the people against the powers and principalities of the Roman Empire and those who were collaborators with the Romans, he was crucified, his disciples became martyrs, and his community of faith bore the wounds of the empire. His movement was anchored upon the hope of the resurrection of all living beings. Therefore, to resist the empire for the liberation of the poor is the imperative and theo-praxis in our context.

Rerouting Ecumenism in Jesus' Movement

Though Jesus stood for the universal salvation of all people, he deliberately took the side of the oppressed to liberate and redeem them. The option of and for the 'people in pain' as the locus of the ecumenical movement requires sacrifice and radical departure from the power, institution and mammon. We must reroute our mission in the context of people in pain like the three wise persons (magi) from Asia. The three wise persons were asked by the empire to report on the birth of Jesus. But instead of obeying the imperial obligation, they left through a different route, a route to Galilee to protect the life of Jesus. They chose life rather than imperial order. The ecumenical movement should be a movement that protects life from death.

Another example is that of the two disciples of Jesus who were walking to Emmaus. Emmaus was the place to flee to, a safer place, something for refuge at a time when the disciples of Jesus were under threat. But when they recognised that the one who walked, talked, listened and shared sorrow with them was none other than their Master Jesus, they decided

to return to Jerusalem, the place where Jesus was crucified by merciless rulers, the place of crosses, of suffering, of injury. It was the place where people were tortured, a place that caused fear, made people sad and lose hope. It was there that people were oppressed, made powerless and discriminated by merciless rulers through unjust system. The two disciples returned to Jerusalem to struggle with people in pain. They chose struggle and hardship rather than comfort and safety.

If we want the ecumenical movement to be prophetic it has to take the position of the three wise persons and the two disciples of Jesus. They took the position of 'people in pain,' just like their teacher Jesus. We too can make a difference in our ecumenical engagement by choosing the way of Jesus.