

Inter-cultural ecumenism

Rethinking ecclesiology in global conversation

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Introduction (= abstract)

Christian churches are found to be locally rooted in almost every nation on the planet – a phenomenon increasingly studied as 'world Christianity'. The emergence of new forms of church in different global contexts is highly significant for ecclesial learning. The growth of churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America presents a direct challenge to the traditional denominations and to ecumenism. Ethnic and cultural differences within denominations and church structures may now be as significant as those between them. Sometimes local and regional concerns over-ride denominational allegiances.

The 'individual, communal and structural conversion' of the Church to its contemporary ecumenical context, for which 'receptive ecumenism' calls¹, must include recognition of world Christianity in this sense. This means that learning to be church together is not only an inter-denominational exercise but also an inter-cultural one. Unless a large proportion of those who call themselves Christian are to be excluded, a shift is required in models of ecumenism from the 'inter-denominational' model which emerged in the colonial period to an 'inter-cultural' approach. This paper will attempt to justify these assertions and illustrate how this shift in ecumenical relations can be facilitated structurally. It will also suggest a methodological and theological way forward in receptive ecumenism by means of 'global conversation', which widens the circle of those from whom wisdom is received, to include for example theologians from Korea, India and sub-Saharan Africa.

World Christianity

The contemporary worldwide spread of Christianity cannot simply be regarded as the result of colonial movements and more recent forces of globalisation, which facilitate cross-cultural mission activity around the world and advance certain shared cultural norms. This would be to neglect studies of globalisation which show that it simultaneously encourages aspects of cultural diversity, as implied in the term 'glocalisation'², and also that it is not uni-directional but issues from multiple hubs³. In the case of Christianity the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, which is polycentric, is an example of this. *expand*

Just as importantly, to see the worldwide presence of Christianity as the result of Western expansion would be to do an injustice to the history of Christianity and its diverse nature.

Historically, the fact that Christianity is at home in different continents and cultures is not a recent development – Christianity crossed into Gentile cultures in the first century and was already widespread across Asia, Africa and Europe by the fifth century but Western

¹ Paul D. Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

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perception, which has tended to regard Christianity as a European religion and disregard other expressions of it, has changed. One of the main reasons for this re-evaluation is the realisation that numerically people of European descent are a minority, and a decreasing one, among the global Christian community. *statistics* This fact is sometimes referred to as a 'shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity' from the global North to the South⁴. *examples*

Two other facts have become increasingly apparent about the Christian church worldwide: first that many churches have local origins outside Europe; and second that churches founded in the colonial period are increasingly developing regional characteristics.

Many churches worldwide are the result of the expansion of Christian denominations originating in Europe and North America but many others have local origins⁵. These include several different kinds of church: first, the ancient churches dating back to the first millennium, for example the St Thomas churches of India and the Coptic Church in Egypt *expand*.

Second, independent churches founded more recently as alternatives to churches of Western origin. The largest grouping is the African Independent (Indigenous or Initiated) Churches *expand*.

A third category consists of other churches of non-European origin which are the result of migration movements and also intentional missionary activity from bases outside the West. In the UK 'migrant churches' include black-majority churches of various sorts, and churches of other ethnic groups such as Koreans, Chinese and Tamils. *expand*

There are important implications of this state of affairs for ecumenical endeavours. Globally, this means that the churches to be included in ecumenical dialogue are more and more diverse, and have their headquarters not just in the West but in all the continents. Locally, in any context where churches wish to work together, the Christian community is not limited to the 'historic' churches of European or Western origin. Twentieth century ecumenical movements found it difficult to encompass Evangelical churches *expand*. Now all sorts of other groups also need to be taken into consideration. In this situation, any ecumenical activity which brings together only the 'historic' denominations will be missing a large proportion of those who call themselves Christian. *statistics*

The second fact which now impinges on our attention as a result of 'world Christianity' is that strong regional characteristics have developed within the denominations that expanded from a European base from about 1500 onwards. Interest in 'world Christianity' is not because of its conformity to the Western patterns which were exported but because of its diversity of expression. Alongside the process of export, there are also processes – often referred to as inculturation – by which Christianity has been imported by the people of different localities and appropriated in different ways according to local criteria. Although there are features which bind together the 'historic' denominations worldwide, it is also possible to consider the characteristics of world Christianity on a regional basis, as we and others have recently done, and to * describe 'African Christianity', 'Latin American Christianity', 'Afro-Caribbean Christian', 'Indian Christianity', and so on.⁶

The inculturated nature of Christianity has two further implications for ecumenical relations.

⁴ Walls*. Problematic terminology*; Jenkins

⁵ WCC website**

⁶ Sebastian Kim & Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008); Davies & Conway**; Oxford series**

First, within the global denominations or churches, cultural and regional differences may lead to significant differences in theology and practice. This may lead to the breakdown or weakening of denominational ties. The most prominent example of this at the moment is the tension in the worldwide Anglican Communion over the ordination of practising homosexuals. While the problem is articulated through a shared theological discourse, there are strong contextual reasons why African church leaders particularly oppose such ordinations.⁷ *expand*

Second, regional or cultural commonality may bring Christians together across traditional divides, leading to new alliances and different configurations of denominational relations in different regions. For example, in India in 1947 Protestant churches were first able to unite across the barrier between episcopal and non-episcopal churches to form the Church of South India. There are cultural, political and historical reasons why this step forward in ecumenical relations was achievable there at that time and has rarely been possible elsewhere. *expand – more examples*

Awareness of ‘world Christianity’ in the sense of the widespread and locally rooted nature of the faith has important implications for the nature of ecumenism.

Inter-denominational ecumenism

The International Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 is often regarded as the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement – although not of the instinct to ecumenism itself⁸. There is a clear historical line from Edinburgh 1910 to the first assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948. *expand*

However, the significance of Edinburgh 1910 for contemporary ecumenism is not only perceived by the WCC but by probably the widest consortium of global Christian bodies ever brought together which is sponsoring a centenary conference in Edinburgh in 2010, about which more will be said below. However, the main point to make here is that the Edinburgh model of ecumenism was closely related to the colonial context in which it took place.

Edinburgh 1910 was a conference of Protestant missionaries representing mission boards of Western churches and missionary organisations, most of which were linked to particular church denominations⁹. At the height of the colonial era, the missionaries were also representing the churches founded by these missions in sub-Saharan Africa, many parts of Asia, the Pacific, and parts of the Caribbean¹⁰. * This was a gathering of church and mission leaders from the Protestant West which perceived itself to be bringing about ‘the evangelisation of the world in this generation’¹¹. The need for cooperation ‘on the mission field’ in order to achieve this task, which justified the holding of the conference, led to fresh impetus to address questions of disunity at ‘the home base’. This need was felt most strongly in Europe in the coming decades where the cause of the disunity of Europe could be laid partly on the divisions between the churches, especially as the major churches were the established ones in the different nations of Europe. The churches came together with some other bodies to form the WCC * were perceived to share a common historical origin with a structural unity which had been fractured and lost. This was a matter for repentance and fuelled a desire for unity to be restored. So the dominant mode of ecumenism was in conversations for church union and theological agreement. This mirrored the political context

⁷ Jenkins**

⁸ WCC history, Vol I

⁹ Exception CIM**

¹⁰ Explain absence of Latin America**

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of the time: the first assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 was dominated by the need for reconciliation between Europeans and the reconstruction, and even unification, of Europe.

In the years after 1945, there were strong centripetal forces in international affairs which encouraged the unity of humanity in a shared modernity but * since about 1968 forces of globalisation have been centrifugal, with increasing fragmentation and insistence on diversity¹². 1968 was also a watershed year for the WCC when the assembly in Uppsala and its aftermath raised a host of issues about the purpose and shape of ecumenism¹³, and led to a widening of its meaning which extends beyond church structures to encompass the whole world¹⁴. The result of increasing diversity, the rising plurality of churches, and the multiplication of theological issues to deal with is that organic union and agreement are no longer so significant in the aims of the ecumenical activity of the WCC and its related churches and bodies, and that at present a commitment to continuing dialogue is perhaps the most that can be achieved¹⁵. The WCC is now very limited as a forum for common decision-making¹⁶. * The work toward ‘Common Understanding and Vision’ has emphasised, not the need to repair a unity that once existed, but the celebration of the *koinonia* or fellowship which is a gift already given to the churches’ due to their common ‘sharing in Christ’, without which there is no church. This implies ‘accepting the churches as they are’ and moving forward from there¹⁷. * The current paradigm is one of reconciliation of those who are separated rather than restoration of an original unity. The present reconciled community of the church is seen as not as the goal but as the first-fruits of the reconciliation of the whole universe, and the authentic way in which the church can bear witness to Christ today¹⁸.

Inter-cultural ecumenism

* The new ecumenism, which I am calling here ‘inter-cultural ecumenism’, is less concerned with overcoming a history of division and more focussed on the geography of world Christianity as it is today. It recognises that many Christian churches are only tenuously connected with the historic traditions developed in Europe, and some are more of a reaction to them, and it takes seriously the cultural and political realities from which different churches arise. This includes recognising the contextual and contingent nature of the ‘historic’ denominations.

Three examples of the culturally-conditioned nature of Christian expression – from Korea, India and Africa – will illustrate the challenges this poses to contemporary ecumenism. (I only mention the first here.)

¹² Martin E. Marty, ‘The Global context of Ecumenism 1968-2000’, in John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Georges Tssetis (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Vol. 3: 1968-2000 (Geneva: WCC, 2004), pp. 3-22.

¹³ Michael Kinnamon, ‘Assessing the Ecumenical Movement’, in John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Georges Tssetis (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Vol. 3: 1968-2000 (Geneva: WCC, 2004), pp. 51-81; at pp. 78-9.

¹⁴ Michael Kinnamon, ‘Assessing the Ecumenical Movement’, pp. 53-4.

¹⁵ May, Melanie A. (2004), ‘The unity we share, the unity we seek’, in John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Georges Tssetis (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Vol. 3, 1968-2000, pp. 83-102.

¹⁶ John Briggs, ‘The changing shape of the ecumenical movement’, in John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Georges Tssetis (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Vol. 3, 1968-2000, pp. 659-74; at p. 669.

¹⁷ John Briggs, ‘The changing shape of the ecumenical movement’, at p. 671.

¹⁸ Matthey, Jacques, 2004, “Reconciliation, *Missio Dei* and the Church’s Mission” in Howard Mellor & Timothy Yates (eds.) *Mission, Violence and Reconciliation*. Sheffield: Cliff College Publishing. Pp 113-37

The majority of Korean Protestants belong to Presbyterian and Methodist churches but many observers agree that these churches as they in Korea today exhibit a distinctive and shared Korean Christian spirituality which overrides the differences that might be expected in view of the different Western origins of these denominations¹⁹. * Korean Christianity assumed an indigenous form in 1907 in a revival movement stimulated by missionaries but understood by Koreans, both popularly and theologically, as an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Korea. To this revival can be traced many of the distinctive aspects of mainstream Korean Protestantism today²⁰. Koreans therefore regard themselves as belonging to an indigenous church, constituted in the Holy Spirit on Korean soil. Their name for God is the name of the one Koreans have always known as the Great Spirit, transcending the lesser spirits of Shamanistic spirituality, who is now identified with the One Spirit embodied in Jesus Christ. They regard themselves as having a direct experiential connection with the first Christians at Pentecost which, from the point of view of church life, is more significant than their historical links with churches that originated in the West. Although they look to the latter and their Christian heritage for models of Christian practice, what they select is their decision on the basis of their local concerns. *expand*

[Indian Christians – Catholics and Protestants *expand*]

[African Initiated Churches (AICs) *expand*]

In each of these cases, the historical origins of the churches in question are deemed less significant than their own authentic baptism in the Holy Spirit and experience of the risen Christ, a rebirth which bestows on them directly the status of children of God * (John 1:12-13; cf. 3:3-8). This effect is magnified in churches which were founded independently of the major denominations. If these churches are to be included among those from whom we receive ecumenically then ecumenism cannot be on the basis of historical relatedness. Participation must be extended to those churches which fall even outside the branches of the tree of denominations. In this case, ecumenism is not primarily an inter-denominational endeavour but an encounter of local cultural expressions of Christianity. The framework for the new ecumenism then involves both engaging across cultural difference and also widening the circle of participants.

Rethinking ecclesiology

Cultural difference is experienced both between churches and within them. In the WCC there has been an interest in 'regional ecumenism' *expand*²¹. Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church encouraged and facilitated regional synods in the years approaching the millennium, beginning with the Africa Synod in 1994. The response to the latter was varied but a frequent complaint was their failure to go far enough in recognising the need for ecclesial and theological freedom to respond to cultural context²². The pressure on the Catholic Church to diversify its leadership and adopt a more devolved and de-centred model can only increase with time. Already Latin America has forty-five percent of all Roman Catholic believers worldwide²³.

¹⁹ Grayson article**

²⁰ S. Kim*

²¹ **Tsetsis pp. 461-8; see also ** pp. 469-656.

²² Phan; Knights; Shorter**

²³ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom?* (OUP 2002): 118

Embracing a cross-cultural approach not only has structural but also theological implications. For the Roman Catholic Church particularly, taking account of regional diversity means rethinking the meaning of its catholicity. Robert Schreiter, for example, expresses a vision of ‘the new catholicity’²⁴ which involves more than an extension of catholicity from Rome. *expand* This can only be achieved by intense intercultural exchange and communication in an attitude of generosity and respect toward other Christians with whom we may differ²⁵. Schreiter envisages a church which encompasses the whole of time and space, and celebrates the variety of Christian expression and experience within them, while also encouraging mutual sharing and close interaction between different parts of the church catholic. William T. Cavanaugh explains the implications in terms of the challenge to the Church to become the true body. Not the kind of body of modern politics in which the universal is dominant and the world is fragmented so that localities are detached from one another and each locality is seen as ‘an administrative division of a larger whole’. In the ‘true body’ the parts relate to each other as well as to the head and each part is ‘a concentration of the whole’. In the body of Christ, diverse local churches identify with one another not by the compulsion of the head but because, participating in the one body, they suffer and rejoice together.²⁶

Global conversation

In the last few years, the WCC has recognised that as a council, by and large, of the ‘historic churches’ its discussions do not include all the Christian churches. The most obvious church which is not a member of the Council is the Roman Catholic Church. This huge numerical absence (at least half of the world’s Christians!) is not as great as might be assumed because all WCC activities include Catholic representatives and many receive delegations. Nevertheless Catholic participation could be much increased, together with that of other non-member churches – mainly Evangelical, Pentecostal and independent – by a new forum to which member and non-member churches can have equal rights²⁷. The greatest widening of the circle to date which the WCC has sponsored has been the Global Christian Forum in Nairobi in 2007²⁸ and the centenary conference in Edinburgh in 2010 will be similarly broad. *expand*²⁹ *

I have suggested elsewhere that ‘global conversation’³⁰ describes the method for facilitating a broader ecumenism. * ‘Global conversation’ is based on a Pneumatological framework. *expand* It begins from the unbound presence and activity of the Spirit of God in the world, which Christians see embodied in Jesus Christ. The Spirit cannot be captured in any one expression of church, so no one church is the norm for the whole body. The body of Christ is greater than any human institution or theological system; and it is being constantly recreated by Spirit. Recapturing a sense of the church as a living, Spirit-filled body rather than an institution will help facilitate receptive ecumenism which involves a truly global conversation. Participating in one body is also sharing in one Spirit, which is the life that flows in all parts of the body. None of us were born into the body of Christ; we are all baptised into it, whether hundreds of years ago or yesterday. The Spirit authenticates cultural diversity: the body is made up of many and varied parts and endowed with diverse gifts

²⁴ Schreiter, Robert J. (1997), *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

²⁵ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, pp. 116-33

²⁶ Cavanaugh**

²⁷ Briggs, p. 673

²⁸ **website

²⁹ **website

³⁰ K. Kim, Mission Studies article*; Kirsteen Kim, *Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007)

without partiality. At the same time the Spirit encourages unity, enabling the breaking down of barriers and crossing of boundaries to bring about the reconciliation of all things in Christ.