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ECUMENICAL TRAJECTORIES TODAY

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Abstract

The ecumenical movement is the common search of the Churches to rediscover their visible unity which they have lost due to several factors doctrinal, theological and socio-cultural. Today the movement faces a crisis and its future cannot be predicted. What are the emerging trajectories of the ecumenical movements? This article, first introduces the ecumenical movement and its historical journey. Secondly, it highlights some of the problems and challenges it faces today. The mutual recognition, intercommunion and a visible fellowship in a 'conciliar relationship,' as envisaged in the ecumenical movement seem to be elusive today. Thirdly, the article searches the emerging trajectories on the horizon. The emphasis on the visible and institutional unity is more and more replaced by the prophetic and mystical orientations. The local seems to have precedence over the universal. Instead of worldwide denominational fellowships what emerge today are indigenous and charismatic Christian communities. In today's postcolonial and postmodern cultural scenario the smaller people and smaller traditions assert their identity, and plurality has become the irreversible law of the future.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Ecumenical Movement, Faith and Order Movement (FO), Indigenous Christianities, Orthodox Church, Plurality, Postmodernity, Protestant Church, Reformation, World Council of Churches

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1. Ecumenical Movement and the Common Pilgrimage of the Churches

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, the disadvantage and the scandal of a divided Christianity, was acutely felt, and it was the missionaries who initiated denominational cooperation and joint-action. Missionaries gradually realized that what was needed was mutual recognition and not rivalry or unnecessary competition or duplication of work.

The World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh (1910) may be said to be the first ecumenical conference on missions in the full sense, and is often said to be the birthplace of the contemporary ecumenical movement. The 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. This was, perhaps, the greatest contribution of Edinburgh; namely, that the concerns of mission and unity were brought together once and for all as in the prayer of Jesus, "that they all may be one... that the world may believe." The Edinburgh Conference gave inspiration and initiative to three different international ecumenical movements, the *International Missionary Council (IMC)*, *Faith and Order Movement (FO)*, and *Life and Work Movement (LW)*. All these three were later merged to forming the *World Council of Churches (WCC)*, which is today the official forum or body of the ecumenical movement.

The *Faith and Order Movement* has been one of the main streams of the ecumenical movement, and its objective was precisely the restoration of the visible unity of the Churches by means of doctrinal dialogue among the Churches and of reaching consensus in 'matters of faith and order in the Church.' All the Churches that confessed 'Jesus Christ as God and Saviour' were invited to participate in such a conference. Almost all the Churches except the Roman Catholic Church, responded positively to this call and they came together at Geneva in 1920 for a preliminary meeting, which prepared a plan for the World Conference. The first World Conference on Faith and Order was held at Lausanne in 1927, the second at Edinburgh in 1937, and the third at Lund in 1952. With the formation of the WCC in 1948, the Faith and Order Movement became a constituent part of the WCC, but it continued the discussion on matters of faith and order in the WCC Assemblies and in the meetings of the Faith and Order

Standing Committees and Plenary Commissions.¹ In 1968 the Roman Catholic Church joined the Faith and Order Movement by permitting Catholic theologians to participate in the meetings as official members. After frank discussions and exchange for more than a century, today the Churches in the Faith and Order Movement have learned from each other, renewed themselves, and are proposing now an act of mutual recognition of the Churches on the basis of their common faith in Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry.²

The *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. The watchword of the movement was “doctrine divides, service unites,” which implied that the Churches would be reunited only by their common witness and action in the world. In the context of World War I, fully conscious of the Churches’ role and task in an unjust and conflicting world, the *Life and Work Movement* was inaugurated with the first World Conference of Life and Work at Stockholm in 1925 in which almost all the Churches except the Roman Catholic Church participated by sending official delegates. In order to carry on the work of the movement, a Continuation Committee was appointed by the Stockholm conference, and in 1930 this committee was reconstituted as a permanent body with the name, *The Universal Christian Council for Life and Work*. The second World Conference of Life and Work was held at Oxford in 1937 and it passed the resolution to integrate it with the Faith and Order Movement in forming the *World Council of Churches*. In the WCC, the Life and Work Movement continued 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 formation of the *World Council of Churches* with the merging of all these three movements, and the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948 and the

¹For the detailed discussion on the history and theological methods of the Faith and Order Movement, see, Kuncheria Pathil, *Models in Ecumenical Dialogue*, Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 1981.

²*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, Geneva, WCC, 1982.*

subsequent chain of World Council Assemblies, heralded a new stage in the growth of the ecumenical movement.

The WCC succeeded in coordinating all the ecumenical movements and organizations and in bringing the Churches together in a common forum for discussions, common witness, and joint action. Although the Churches are not bound by the decisions of the WCC, they can no longer remain in isolation. The WCC today unites about 350 member Churches representing more than 400 million Christians. Although the Roman Catholic Church, which is the biggest Church, still does not have official membership in the WCC, to every Assembly of the World Council, the Roman Catholic Church sends a large delegation as observers or fraternal delegates. There is official relationship between the two bodies in the form of a *Joint Working Group* which discusses common problems and concerns, and it undertakes common study and research projects. The membership of the Roman Catholic Church in the WCC, although it involves tremendous psychological and administrative problems for the WCC, remains still an open question.

The objective of the Ecumenical Movement is the visible unity of the divided Churches as One Communion of Churches. Visible unity of the Churches does not mean uniformity, but unity in faith and diversity in faith-expressions which would mean a 'typology of Churches'³ with mutual recognition, intercommunion, and a "conciliar fellowship." Thus the restoration of the visible unity of the Churches entails a long historical process, and, in fact, the encounter between the Churches has passed through different stages.

At the first stage of the encounter, the Churches in the ecumenical movement realized that it was premature to enter directly into any reunion negotiations, but certain first steps to unity were needed. Genuine mutual understanding was felt to be the necessary 'first step' to unity. The centuries of isolated existence, inherited animosities, rivalries, prejudices and mutual suspicion had resulted in total ignorance and misunderstanding about the other Churches. The method used at this first stage for mutual understanding was the *comparative method*. The pioneers of the ecumenical movement were convinced that "the beginnings of unity are to be found in the clear statement and full consideration of those things in which we differ as well as those things in which we are at one."⁴ What they aimed at was "a candid but loving comparison of positive beliefs on the

³Jan Cardinal Willebrands, "Moving Towards a Typology of Churches," in *The Catholic Mind*, April 1970, 40-42.

⁴*Faith and Order Papers, Series I*, No. 1, 1910, 3-4.

questions which need to be considered in promoting the unity for which the Saviour prayed.”⁵

Discovery of the fundamental unity of all Christians was the great achievement of the first stage of the encounter among the Churches. But gradually the seriousness and stubbornness of the differences among the Churches began to be felt in the ecumenical movement. No way was found to tackle the fundamental differences among the Churches on the crucial questions of the nature of the Church, its ministry, and sacraments. There appeared a definite cleavage among them between the ‘authoritarian’ and ‘personal’ types of the Churches or between the ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ types of Churches. Thus the first stage of the encounter ended up in a *cul de sac* of diverse irreconcilable positions. And the major concern of the second stage of the encounter was how to deal with the differences among the Churches.⁶

The simple ‘comparative method’ of the first stage could not deal with this question of the remaining differences. More critical methods were used to solve the problem of the differences among the Churches. The positions, views, practices, and life-styles of all Churches have to be tested against the person of Jesus Christ and his teaching, against the biblical witness and the Apostolic Tradition. Naturally, this critical norm was applied to one’s own Church, too. All Churches examined carefully how faithfully they preserved, interpreted, and handed down the biblical message and the Apostolic Tradition, or whether they obscured, distorted, or fragmented it. It was a common study and search of all the Churches, demanded by their common life and fellowship in the ecumenical movement. The method they used at this second stage was the *Christological Method*. The Christological method, therefore, demanded common biblical and historical studies. It challenged the historical positions, views, and practices in the light of the eschatological perspective, which makes the historical traditions relative and provisional, inviting them to open up to the ever-coming inspirations of the Spirit of Christ who speaks through the ‘signs of the times.’

Thus, at the second stage of the encounter the Churches made an attempt to overcome and transcend their differences by the Christological method and by the common study of the doctrinal issues, making use of the results of the contemporary biblical and historical studies, which were the meeting-point of all Churches. It

⁵*Faith and Order Papers, Series I, No. 1, 1912, 4.*

⁶Pathil, *Models in Ecumenical Dialogue*, 276 – 285.

made available to the Churches and the ecumenical movement a common language and a new experience of fellowship. Compared to the first stage and its comparative method, the Christological method was, indeed, a "Copernican change." At the first stage each Church regarded the other Churches as planets rotating around it. But at the second stage all Churches perceived Christ as the sun, as the centre, around whom all of them are rotating.

But even the second stage and the Christological method did not succeed in reaching the visible unity of the Churches. The Christological method had the presupposition that the common biblical and historical studies would at last lead the Churches to the one true ecclesiology, to the one true Christology, to the one true Pneumatology, to the one true sacramentology, and to the one true doctrine of the ministry, and thus the differences would be overcome. But this presupposition was challenged by biblical scholars and historians, who spoke of the existence of a diversity of ecclesiologies, Christologies, Pneumatologies, sacramentologies, and diverse concepts of ministry in the New Testament.⁷ Common biblical and historical studies in the ecumenical movement confirmed this latter view, and thus once again the ecumenical movement had to face squarely the differences among the Churches. Many of the differences among the Churches were found to be not only legitimate but also mutually enriching. Thus, a new stage, a third stage, in the contemporary ecumenical movement was begun with the discovery of the principle of "unity in diversity."

Differences and diversities of the Churches are no longer seen as an obstacle to unity but as complementary and mutually enriching factors, provided the Churches have communion in faith and sacramental life. Pluralism has become legitimate today not only because Bible contains diversity of views and positions, but also because it is based on contemporary human experience. Pluralism is a contemporary fact at all levels of human existence, cognitive, ethical and existential, and it is accepted as legitimate, healthy, necessary and enriching. Pluralism in the Church or in theology or in religion has a double source: first, the inexhaustible mystery of God's being and of divine revelation cannot be contained in any one of its expressions. Second, the diversity and the finiteness of the modes of human existence and human perceptions which are based on man's psycho-somatic, socio-economic, and cultural differences automatically

⁷E. Kaesemann, "Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology," *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963) 290-297; Raymond E. Brown, "The Unity and Diversity in the New Testament Ecclesiology," *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963) 298-308.

lead to the diversity of man's understanding and creativity. In other words, pluralism in theology means that theology is *contextual*. That is to say, as many contexts are there, so many theologies are possible as well as legitimate. So the diversity and the differences among the Churches are understood as arising from the inexhaustibility of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and from the diversity of their particular contexts. Hence, to understand the differences of a Church means to understand its specific context. To seek unity means to search for a dynamic unity behind diversity.

But many people who are involved in the ecumenical movements are becoming more and more sceptical and pessimistic today. They think that the ecumenical movement is still playing the 'Merry go round,' taking the traditional issues and questions again and again. The truth is that the mainline Churches are reluctant to change their traditional positions and unwilling to learn from the ecumenical experience of the last one hundred years. In fact, renewal and reform scarcely happen in the mainline Churches.

In the ecumenical movement today there are several options before the Churches: (1) Abandon the traditional position of the ecumenical movement which emphasizes the 'visible unity' of the Churches, with mutual recognition, intercommunion and conciliar relationship. These objectives have to be revisited and radically revised in today's historical, social and cultural contexts. (2) The ecumenical movement has to depart from its ecclesio-centric approach and recapture the spirit and vision of a wider ecumenism focusing on the unity of the whole humankind and struggle for justice, peace and ecological concerns. (3) Mainline Churches have to learn some lessons from the success stories of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements and the amazing growth of the new indigenous Churches in Africa, Asia and South America.

2. Challenges and Problems Facing the Ecumenical Movement Today

Christian theology has been invariably shaped by its cultural context, even so the ecumenical movement. By and large the ecumenical movement of the 20th century was a project of Modernity with emphasis on rationality, academic, systematic, and a movement with a centre. Today we are moving 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. Christianity was the dominating force in the world and Christian mission belonged to the West centred in Europe

and America. But the 21st century witnessed to a major shift from the West to the East, from the North to the South, from Europe and America to Asia and Africa. 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 united or centralized, but more and more diversified with the rapid spread of the new Pentecostal and Indigenous Christianities.⁸

(1) Culture is the main category today in all the discourses, sociological, ideological and theological. Western Christianity encountered *three dominant cultural waves* one after the other. 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 as well as 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.⁹ 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, 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 from Europe to the colonies. Western European Christianity with its social, cultural, political and religious form was simply exported and imposed upon the natives of the colonies of South America, Asia and Africa without

⁸See, Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner, ed., *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013.

⁹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis, 1991, 194ff.

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 17th and 18th 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. Creation of meta-narratives and mega-narratives and over-arching intellectual and conceptual systems were the products of modernity and they 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 often 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 exclude others outside the system. 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.¹⁰ 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 the identity and importance of smaller people, neglected groups and their marginalized traditions.

The contemporary ecumenical movement and the approaches to it reflect the shades of earlier cultural worlds, both of Christendom and Modernity. The ecumenical movement seems to be a project of 'mega-narrative' and it conceals the ambitions for constructing an overarching system with control from the centre. 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

(2) 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

¹⁰Stanislaus Swamikannu, *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. II, Bangalore: ATC, 1065.

¹¹Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, Geneva: WCC, 1991.

¹²See his address to the Plenary of 2001, Nov. 12 - 17, 2001.

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.

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 analyse 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 lead 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 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 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.

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 most of the common Christian believers today, who aspire for authentic Christian spiritual experience and reject all forms of extreme legalism and ritualism.

(3) *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" (Mk 10:42-45). The early Church was a "community of little ones who believe in Jesus," a "community of brethren," and to this community authority was conferred, and the function of those in authority was "service" like the shepherds who feed the sheep and have to empty themselves, even to the extent of sacrificing their life for the sheep (Mt 18:1-4, 15-17). 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 most of the contemporary democratic societies, where, in principle, government is 'of the people, for the people and by the people,' the fact is the contrary. The voice of the majority of the people is simply not heard or cleverly suppressed. Corruption and the domination of the powerful is the most contagious and common disease today all over the world, and religious institutions are no exceptions.

In the early Churches the members of the community who had charism 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 Churches. There is a wide complaint against Christian Churches that many of their leaders are today 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.

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. The decision making in matters of faith should not be exclusively limited to the officially ordained ministers.

Authority in Christianity has a political, secular and institutional framework, inherited from the Roman imperial Christianity, and not from the New Testament communitarian Church. The Roman Papacy has indeed an imperial history, outfit and legacy. As Christianity is basically and essentially a spiritual and religious tradition, it can be legitimately asked whether it requires today a central, institutional, visible and legal authority like the present Papacy and the Roman Curia. If a universal authority is needed for Christianity, it seems that it should be by and large a 'spiritual authority' and not an institutional and legal one.

(4) 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 different 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 and 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 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 authority 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) 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 homelands. 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. 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 has to be born there from within and not simply exported from outside.

Today within several traditional Christian denominations there are serious conflicts and many of them are 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. etc. Even within the Roman Catholic Church some of the issues are very serious and sometimes the internal differences within them 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 the emergence of a '*Post-denominational Christianity*.'

3. Emerging Ecumenical Trajectories Today

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 objectives, 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.¹³

¹³An earlier version of this part of the article was published in *Jeevadhara* 46, 274 (2016), "Future of the Ecumenical Movement."

3.1. 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. Any visible institutional religion without the core-element of religious experience is an empty shell. A religious and liturgical celebration which does not raise the participant to the higher realm of 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."¹⁴

Religious experience and its peak of mystical experience are not self-centred or 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/her 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 dimensions of the same religious experience. Devotion to God and compassion to one's fellow humans are the hallmark of all genuine religious leaders.

The ecumenical movement today is at a turning point. Its activities, projects and programs for the institutional and visible unity 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 today has to be alert and open to combine the spiritual and the prophetic.

¹⁴Sebastian Painadath, "Interreligious Relations in Civil Society," *Jeevadhara* 44, 262 (July 2014) 60.

3.2. From One and the Only Definitive Meaning to Plurality of Meanings

Official Teachings of the Church and its interpretation has been always a dividing issue 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 though they teach that the perennial tradition of the Church bequeathed by the Apostolic Church as the deposit of faith 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.

I have already indicated in the first part of this article the issue of cultural transition. In today's postmodern cultural ethos the emphasis is not on the 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.¹⁵

3.3. From the Centre to the Periphery

Basically, the ecumenical movement has been always a search for the centre and a return to it. This centre is always 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? How is he present? Is the presence in the same way or in different ways, sacramentally and spiritually? These are all areas of debate and topics of ecumenical discussion.

¹⁵See Kuncheria Pathil, "Church in the Postmodern Cultural Process Today," *Jeevadhara* 45, 268 (2015) 6-82.

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. According to them the Protestant 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 it 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. And yet, the doctrinal consensus among them and the goal of visible unity always eludes, and for many we have reached a *cul de sac* or a stalemate. What is the way ahead for practical purposes? Pope Francis' pastoral approach of accepting all with openness and compassion and bracketing the doctrinal and theological differences among the Churches gives some hope and pastoral guidance. Once he jokingly remarked that when Jesus Christ will arrive in his 'second coming,' the theologians and Church leaders will be still discussing on doctrinal and theological issues between them!

In the present Postmodern cultural ethos, as we have indicated in the earlier section of this article, meta/mega narratives and such centralized systems are very much suspected as the products of dominating cultures and dominant groups who exclude smaller people and smaller cultures and traditions. The postmodern culture is a call to rediscover the smaller people and smaller cultures. 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 at large are struggling for their legitimate human rights, food, clothing and shelter; millions of poor, oppressed, orphans, migrants, refugees and Dalits 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 peripheries 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 (Ex 7-15).

3.4. Movements towards Indigenous Christianities

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*.'¹⁶

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 local 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. With Mao and the Communist take-over Christianity in China became marginalized and most of the Christian Churches either went underground or were subjected to persecution. 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 1998 their number was calculated to be 16.7 million. In 2014 China has a population 1.35

¹⁶Miikka Ruokanen and Others, "Is 'Postdenominational' Christianity Possible?," *Ecumenical Review* 67, 1 (March 2015) 77-95.

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.¹⁷ By all evidences the future of Christianity in China seems to belong to the indigenous Churches. 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.

3.5. 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 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 it *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 intention 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 an impossible task today in the ecumenical movement.

What is the way ahead in this matter for ecumenical movement? I would like to suggest two points. First of all, approaches to intercommunion and its practical negotiations must be shifted to the bi-lateral level, i.e. between the Orthodox and the Catholic, Catholic and Anglican, Anglican and Lutheran and so on. This is the only practical way to arrive at concrete solutions and to reach tangible results. I am aware that in many of the recent bi-lateral conversations this topic has been taken up and some progress has been made. Secondly, 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

¹⁷See all the articles in *The Ecumenical Review* 67, 1 (March 2015) *Christianity in China*.

and speculative. Intercommunion at the universal level by a common statement or declaration by all the Churches concerned seems to be practically an impossible ecumenical task.

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 in the common commitment of the local Churches. 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

The ecumenical movement has arrived at a point of stalemate or impasse in our Postcolonial and Postmodern cultural and religious context. The century long 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.¹⁸ All Churches must move from the centre to the peripheries

¹⁸Konrad Raiser, the former Secretary General of WCC points out that since the publication of the Roman document, *Dominus Jesus* (2000) and the subsequent decree of the CDF on "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church" (2007), Vatican officially holds a very "restrictive interpretation" of Vatican II on the Church, namely, the Churches of the Reformation cannot be called Churches in the proper sense due to the absence of the sacramental priesthood and therefore they have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery" (Reference is to the CDF document on "Responses to Some Questions..."). The WCC holds an ecclesiology that recognizes the plurality of the local Churches and an ecclesiology of communion which tend to recognize all Churches as part of one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. See Konrad Raiser, "Fifty Years after the Second Vatican Council: Assessing Ecumenical Relations from the Perspective of the World Council of Churches," in *Ecumenical Review* 67 (July 2015) 285- 294.

and prophetically involve 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 not be limited simply to the visible unity of all Churches, but 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.