



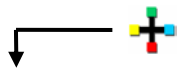
A Missionary's Dream

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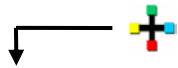


The Editor has invited me to join in a "dialogue of dreams and visions" about the future of the ecumenical movement and of the WCC. According to the prophet Joel I should confine myself to dreams, leaving visions to my younger colleagues. I have a lot of diffidence about joining the dialogue but I will tell my dream.

A changed context

Because I have been a missionary for most of my working life, and because I was involved in the merger of the International Missionary Council with the WCC thirty years ago, I begin by asking: "How far have the concerns of these two bodies become one?" And, of course, if the answer is not a total affirmative, I am the first culprit. The IMC, formed after the Edinburgh conference of 1910, was born in a vision of the world won for Christ. Christendom was still a "home base" for the world mission of the church, even though Christendom was full of old and new evils. The vision was that every people should hear the good news of Jesus. It was ecumenical because it was missionary, because the whole world belonged to Jesus and must be reclaimed from the hostile powers that have usurped his dominion. It was therefore primarily concerned with bringing those who did not know Jesus to know him.

One could say that the WCC was born in the death-throes of "Christendom". Life and Work and Faith and Order were dealing with people who were already Christians. But these Christians were slaughtering each other in bloody wars. They had failed to address the monstrous evils of their own societies. They were fragments and unable to speak and act together. Both, in their different ways, were movements for the reformation of the churches of the Western world. The churches of Asia and Africa were hardly present to their minds. They were not chiefly concerned with the question which was primary for the IMC, the question: "How do people who are not Christians become Christians?" Evangelism was marginal. Even though many of the same people were involved in these movements and in the missionary movement, the fundamental thrusts were different.

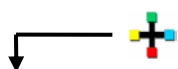


The original base of both movements was in the large churches of Western Europe and North America, the bodies which we used to call "main line" churches. These bodies have been in decline for most of this century and the decline is now accelerating in North America where they have been strongest. Meanwhile there has been a rapid growth of conservative evangelical movements, sometimes embodied in large, wealthy and powerful organizations (typically in North America) but also in a proliferation of small independent local groups gathered around charismatic leaders. The original base of the IMC/WCC has shrunk dramatically.

Meanwhile the whole oikoumene, the whole inhabited earth, has become locked together into a single economic-financial-technical unit in a way that would have been scarcely conceivable in 1910 or even in 1948. Until the collapse of the "command economies" of Eastern Europe in the past twelve months this single economic/financial complex could only claim part of the world (euphemistically "the free world"). Now there seems nothing to prevent it becoming global. With the new developments in information technology the whole financial-economic system takes on more and more the aspect of an impersonal entity which human intentions may wreck but cannot control or direct. Peoples who have for millennia organized their lives on the basis of different beliefs are inexorably sucked into the operation of this global economic complex by a process known as "development". Resistance is usually ineffective.

The human aspect of this is the development of beliefs, attitudes and skills which together enable people to enter into the process of "modernization". "Modernization" is the displacement of ancient cultures by the particular kind of human culture which has developed in Europe and its cultural off-shoots in the course of the past three hundred years. Missionaries were among its earliest carriers. It has its deep roots in the old "Christendom". Its birth and growth would have been impossible in any other milieu. But in its full development it has a unique power to disintegrate and dissolve ancient belief-systems, including the belief system from which it originally sprang. Walter Lipman's oft-quoted phrase, "the acids of modernity", makes the point. Modernization is primarily an affair of the cities, which are also the centres of power. Rural areas remain more rooted in traditional culture. Perhaps the fundamental divide in our world is not between east and west, or between north and south, but between the city and the village.

While the old "Christendom" has been in decline, new and powerful centres of Christian culture have developed in other parts of the world. To an astonishing extent the call for "the evangelization of the world in this generation" has been honoured – if not in one generation, at least in one century. The vigorous missionary outreach is now mainly from the churches of the "third world". Not only is the rapid growth of the churches in many areas the result of the evangelistic outreach of the local churches, but in the field of international and cross-cultural mission new and powerful thrusts are coming from such burgeoning churches as those of Korea. By contrast, it is now typical to find in the old "main line" churches an acute embarrassment about missions, partly the result of guilt about the wrongs of colonialism, partly a fundamental loss of nerve which manifests itself in all aspects of "Western" culture outside of its science and technology. The traditional "main-line" missionary societies are now mainly agencies of interchurch aid. The vast new missionary challenge, namely that presented by modernization, is one that they find it hard to respond to because they are part of it.



Towards a missionary encounter with modernity

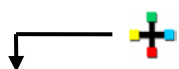
How is the WCC to respond to these vast changes from the days of its conception and birth? How is it to represent, to focus, to inspire the witness of the universal church to this new global

situation? The great danger which faces an organization like the WCC is what the first general secretary of the British Council of Churches, Archie Craig, called "omnipotent mediocrity", the danger of trying to respond to every issue at the expense of decisive leadership on the crucial issues. What are the crucial issues for the WCC as we look forward to the third millennium of the church's story?

The WCC's basis commits the member churches to seek to "fulfill their common calling" to the glory of the Triune God. That calling is to continue the mission of Jesus, according to his word: "As the Father sent me, so I send you." The WCC has to be a focus and inspiration of world mission. It must have at the heart of its life the passion that those who do not know Jesus as Saviour and Lord may come to know him and to serve him. There are two things that I do not mean by saying this. I do not mean that evangelism should be treated as a priority in distinction from all those actions through which the church has to embody the wrathful love of God in afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted. The mission of Jesus was not only a verbal proclamation of good news but also the embodiment of good news in a life and death which were God's sovereign rule in action. The mission of the church, following that of Jesus, has to be both word and deed and the life of a community which already embodies a foretaste of God's kingdom. And, secondly, I do not mean giving primacy to what are called "unreached peoples", although that is also a proper and necessary part of the church's mission. I am thinking more of those who have already been all too effectively reached by the forces of modernization, who are being locked into the global system which dominates the life of the world. I am asking that the WCC should be and should be seen to be an enabler of the church's universal mission to make Christ known, loved and obeyed throughout this entire global city of which we are all a part. And I am asking that the WCC recognize that it is not enough to address the symptoms of modernization; we have to address the causes, the underlying belief systems which sustain it. We need a theological clarification of the issues involved in a global missionary encounter with modernity.

As modernity extends its hold over all peoples, locking them more and more tightly into a single global economic-financial complex, two consequences are so obvious and so universal that they shout for attention. One is the polarization of the world into a rich part which grows richer and a poor part which grows poorer. This polarization takes place both within nations and between nations. It seems to be an intrinsic element in the development of the type of economic and financial system which has become global. The other consequence of the system is the destruction of the environment. It is now widely recognized that if "development" should advance to the point where all peoples shared the life-style of the most affluent, the planet would quickly become uninhabitable. It seems natural that these two issues, the issue of justice for the poor and the issue of responsibility for the environment, should be seen as the most urgent issues facing an organization which takes the whole world for its concern. It is not difficult to convince thinking people that these are the urgent issues, though it is more difficult to move them to action about them.

The danger, however, is that we attend to the visible phenomena and not to the less visible realities which underlie them. The culture which developed in western Europe



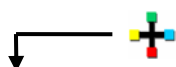
from the eighteenth century onwards and which now – under the name of modernization – is becoming the global culture that dominates the centres of power throughout the world, has within it a body of beliefs which shape and sustain its outward forms. It is this body of beliefs which has to be addressed as an essential part (not the whole) of the church's response. But it is very difficult to address them for two reasons. One is that modernity pretends to have no creed. It pretends to stand for an "open" society in which all creeds are tolerated. It applies to itself the adjective "secular" with the implication that it is neutral in respect of beliefs which come under the name of "religion". In this way it conceals from its adherents the fact that it is itself based on a particular

view of the human situation, a view which is open to question. It claims to be ready to question every dogma, but it reveals its own dogmatic basis when it is faced by a firm affirmation of another belief. The adjective "fundamentalist" is available to dismiss any confident affirmation of transcendent truth. At the heart of modernity is the assertion that human reason, apart from divine revelation, is capable of finding the truth and coping with the world. The contrary affirmation, namely that God has in fact revealed his nature and purpose, is tolerated as a private opinion but not if it is offered as public truth to govern the public worlds of education, politics, business, culture.

The second reason why it is difficult for the church to face modernity is that the creed of modernity has made such deep inroads into the life and faith of the churches in the Western world where it had its origin. Those of us who, like the present writer, have been shaped from childhood by the assumptions of modernity, have tended to adjust our Christian believing to the supposed requirements of modern thought, rather than subjecting modernity to radical and sceptical questioning from the point of view of the gospel. And we have been eager to share our findings with the churches that live in more ancient and stable cultures. The result is that much of the leadership of the worldwide church shares this syncretistic relationship to the creed of modernity. Two different creeds compete within us and there is need for a very difficult and sometimes painful effort to recognize and face the half-hidden credo.

The calling to seek justice

In one important respect I think the global situation which the WCC faces is going to change drastically. During most of the present century the main global alternative to Christianity has been Marxism. Marxism seemed to offer a practical, this-worldly hope of bringing into being the just society which Christians prayed for but seemed powerless to produce. Marxism was, like capitalism, a product of the European Enlightenment and it claimed to be able to bring down to earth what Christians looked for in heaven. The claim has proved false, as it was bound to do, but the claim of freemarket capitalism to produce a free society is equally false. I think that in the twentyfirst century the main global alternative to Christianity will be Islam. Islam is now, with a renewed confidence and with great material resources, making a global claim to offer a kind of society in which God is affirmed as sovereign, and all human life, public and personal, is ruled by revealed law. This claim comes into head-on collision with the claim of modernity to provide an open society in which all creeds are tolerated but none except its own is allowed into the public domain. Islam will not accept relegation to the private sector as Christianity has – in many societies – so tamely done. Islam, like Marxism, seeks to identify ultimate truth with actual political power.



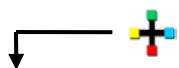
The union of truth with power lies beyond death, and in that sense Christianity has to be other-worldly. The City of God cannot be built by human hands on earth but is a gift from heaven. But the Muslim challenge will compel Christians to question the privatization of their faith and to challenge also the idea that public life is an arena from which the truth-claims of the gospel are excluded.

I am not here talking about what are called "Christian values". "Values" are merely what some people choose, unless they are based in some reality which is independent of people's personal wishes. When a society begins to talk about values, this is probably a sign of approaching death. Values have no substance unless they are rooted in some reality, something which exists apart from the personal preferences of individuals. I am talking about the truth-claims of the Christian gospel, about the affirmations which the church must make about God, human life and the created world, affirmations which are at present excluded from public doctrine in "modern" societies.

Christian involvement in issues of justice for the poor has been considerably influenced by Marxism. This influence is likely to decrease. There will be a new urgency in clarifying the Christian belief about what are the possibilities and the limits of human well-being on this side of death, about the relation between God's justification and human justice, and about the role of the local eucharistic community in every place as a foretaste and sign of God's justice, as well as an instrument of that justice. Marxism has not been able to deliver what it promised – a human society which had overcome the evils of capitalism and created a just and free society. Capitalism has not delivered such a society. Adam Smith himself was clear that free markets would not work except in the presence of a certain moral framework, and when modern capitalism began to develop in the Western world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it very quickly became clear that free markets could not ensure a minimum of humane treatment for workers. The market had to be controlled in the interests of human good. The market is the best means available for continuously balancing supply and demand, but it cannot be the ultimate authority over human life. Everything depends upon the fundamental beliefs about human nature and destiny which permeate the society in which the market operates. There will always be need for controls of the market. We certainly cannot seek the kind of theocratic society which Islam represents. But we can and must affirm that every local eucharistic community in which we celebrate the acts through which we are enabled to participate in God's justice and God's mercy is a centre from which can radiate the kind of human behaviour in which markets can operate for the common good. They can be places where people are delivered from the ideology of capitalism and can make markets human. To multiply such centres throughout the world must surely be the first priority for a world council of churches. In other words, the question "How can modern people be enabled to know Jesus and put their trust in him?" must become the very central issue on the agenda of the Council.

The calling to care for creation

In respect of the other great global issue, namely the threat to our human environment, there has been no major alternative to Christianity in this field because the issue has only come into full consciousness recently. Neither capitalism nor Marxism has shown any capacity or inclination to deal with it. A purely secular ethics,



with no transcendental reference, finds it hard to give any valid reason for curbing our own desires for the sake of remote descendants who have no power to exert sanctions on us as our contemporaries do. Moreover, the natural science upon which we depend for our public doctrine assures us that the universe in which we live is on a descending path to total entropy from which nothing can save it, as our own bodies are on a similar path to decay. If the human race is to perish anyway, why not sooner rather than later? Whence can the motive come for caring for the planet?

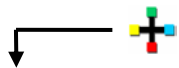
It cannot come only from nostalgia for a lost security in the womb of nature. It is understandable that modern people feel this nostalgia. We have treated the natural world as something at our disposal. We have forced it to answer our questions and used the answers to manipulate nature in accordance with our whims. We have therefore become alienated from nature, and we feel the pangs of bereavement when we see "primitive" peoples who have escaped modernization. So it is understandable that there are "New Age" movements which invite us to turn back and become again part of nature, seeking to unite ourselves again with the cosmic forces in ways that bypass our arrogant rationality. Astrology and transcendental meditation become big industries, and long-forgotten pagan rites are celebrated again in Europe. But the New Age is a very ancient blind alley. Nature is not a source of ethics. There is no right and wrong in

nature. Its governing realities are power and fertility. To make nature our ultimate is to be delivered to death. Nature's smile can be charming, but her teeth are cruel.

Why should we care for the planet which is doomed in the end to decay and death? The answer must be, because it is the place which God has created to be cherished and husbanded by his human family as the theatre of his glory, because God delights in it and has created human beings to share his delight; because in his incarnate Son Jesus Christ he has himself taken created nature upon himself to fulfill and glorify it; and because in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead he has given us the pledge and proof of his purpose to bring a new creation out of the death and decay of the old. It is hard to see what other ground there can be for a real commitment to care for the created world even when this means the giving up of present advantage. We have little experience to help us here, for the ecological crisis is a new one. Until recently there seemed to be ample room on the surface of our planet for all its inhabitants, and room to dispose of all our waste. It is only now, in this generation, that we are forced to ask the question: "Why should I put the care of the creation above my own present advantage?" The answer to that question has to be so based in reality that it can halt the accelerating rush of modernity to carry to the limit human power to exploit the natural world.

Conclusion

I have taken these two issues, justice for the poor and care for the creation, as the two most obvious issues thrown up by the global spread of the process of modernization. Modernization submerges ancient cultures and sweeps more and more people into a single process. The role of the church must not be simply to address and seek to alleviate the symptoms – although it must certainly do this. But, more fundamentally, the church has to bear witness to the truth which unmask the illusions and falsehoods of modernity. And the WCC, leading and focusing this witness of the churches, must take this as its central task. Centrally, basically, primarily, the WCC must stand for the



worldwide communication of the good news of the human situation as it is embodied in Christ. It must be, and be seen to be, a leader for the churches in their global mission. This does not now mean primarily the kind of cross-cultural mission for which the IMC was the enabling agency. It must be the enabler and inspirer of the local eucharistic communities in every part of the globe to bear faithful witness to the truth as it is in Jesus.

For this to happen, there has to be a great effort of theological clarification to help all the churches to see what this mission involves. The present work of Faith and Order on clarifying the one faith which we confess is very important. And the WCC has one great resource that the IMC never had – the presence of the Orthodox. The modernity which now dominates the world had its origins in Western Christianity and largely in the Protestant part of it. It seems to me that the radical individualism which is so central to modernity has something to do with the fact that Western Christianity has not taken the doctrine of the Trinity as seriously as Orthodoxy has done. If the ultimate source of all being is the communion of three persons in one God, then human society cannot be what modernity conceives it to be. Now that the pressure of Marxism on the greatest of the Orthodox churches has been (to some extent) lifted, I hope that the missionary thinking and action of the WCC will gain new strength and coherence from the Orthodox witness.

There are a thousand issues which a world council of churches could legitimately take up, and hundreds which the WCC is pressed to take up. But there must be a focus. For the WCC as it looks beyond the seventh assembly and into the next century, I would plead that the focus must be this: to help the whole church to bring the whole gospel to the whole world by helping each local eucharistic community to be faithful to that gospel

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