



Ecumenical Amnesia

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A Review of *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* By Konrad Raiser. (Geneva: WCC, 1991). See also Raiser's (1994) and a rejoinder by Newbigin (94rtkr).

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This is, by any reckoning, an important book. Konrad Raiser has an intimate knowledge of the working of the World Council of Churches (WCC) over the past twenty-five years that few can match, and as the recently appointed general secretary, he will certainly have a big part in shaping its future course.

Raiser identifies areas of uncertainty that have created an impression of crisis in the ecumenical movement. These are about its goals (church unity, the tension between the struggle for justice and the search for reconciliation, and the quest for a spirituality adequate to the Christian's calling), about its methods, and about whose movement it is – the churches', the ecumenical organizations', or the mushrooming grass-roots movements'. Raiser senses a profound paradigm shift (following Thomas Kuhn) from what he calls "Christo-centric universalism" to a Trinitarian model, which has as its counterpart the concept of conciliar fellowship within the whole human household, the oikoumene. Raiser sees the Uppsala Assembly (1968) as the point at which there was a decisive break from the old paradigm and the beginnings of a vision of the new. This Uppsala meeting symbolized "the expansion of the ecumenical perspective universally to all humanity" (p. 54).

Christo-centric universalism is indeed a true description of the dominant model in the formative days of the WCC. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, whose mind was more influential than that of any other in shaping its early development, loved to speak of the ecumenical movement as the work of the one Good Shepherd who draws to himself the members of his flock in order that he may draw all people to himself. From early days there have been criticisms of this model, notably that of H. Richard Niebuhr, though these did not always offer a Trinitarian model as an alternative. During my involvement in the integration of the International Missionary Council

with the WCC, I was working with this model, but I became convinced that a full Trinitarian theology was needed for an adequate missiology; I thus published, shortly after the New Delhi Assembly, a book with the title *Trinitarian Faith for To-day's Mission* (1963). But a Trinitarian perspective can be only an enlargement and development of a Christo-centric one and not an alternative set over against it, for the doctrine of the Trinity is the theological articulation of what it means to say that Jesus is the unique Word of God incarnate in world history. Of course Raiser knows this well, but one has to ask whether, in his development of his thesis, the truth in the former paradigm is developed or obscured. A review of three areas of ecumenical activity as discussed in the book will help to answer this question.

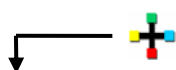
The Form of Church Unity

Raiser fears that the Christo-centric model has given rise to a model of unity that is hierarchical and potentially oppressive. "The Lordship of Christ over the Church and the World" – the title of one of Visser't Hooft's works – suggests a model of unity that, in Raiser's view, requires institutional structures of power. The model of the Trinity suggests a different kind of unity, of which the ecclesiastical form is conciliarity and the method is dialogue-not dialogue as a means to an end, but as a way of life-in fact "the sharing of life."

The statement of the New Delhi Assembly, which pointed to full organic union as the goal, was not acceptable to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches because it was described as "God's gift and our task," something still to be realized. For these Christian traditions unity is already as fact present in their life. Here, says Raiser, the old model breaks down. The new model offers the possibility of seeing the WCC itself as having ecclesial reality because it is a conciliar fellowship of churches that can also be in a relation of conciliar fellowship with the Roman Catholic Church, even though the latter is not a member. (Raiser does not refer to the statement of the Nairobi Assembly that defined conciliarity as a relation between churches that are themselves locally united, thus maintaining the New Delhi emphasis on "all in each place.")

I agree with Raiser in his opinion that the WCC cannot simply stay with the Toronto Statement of 1950, which affirmed the absolute neutrality of the WCC in respect of the varying ecclesiologies of its member churches, but I do so for a different reason-which I stated in my comment on the Toronto Statement at the time (*Ecumenical Review*, April 1951, pp. 252-54). The WCC cannot be permanently neutral about the form of Christian unity because it is itself a form of Christian unity, and it is the wrong form. It must move, I then argued, in the direction of full organic union. Raiser, in contrast, wishes to acknowledge the kind of unity that now exists among member bodies of the WCC as a proper form of ecclesial being.

In a brief article it is impossible to do justice to Raiser's whole treatment, but I want to raise the central questions about the consequences for ecclesiology of putting a Trinitarian model against a Christo-centric one. At the heart of the church's life is the Eucharist, as Raiser constantly and rightly insists. But what does it mean to share in the Eucharist? It is the memorial of Christ's passion and his action in making me a participant in that passion so that I may be a participant in his victory. Surely the heart and mind of the one who receives the body and blood of Christ is overwhelmed by the sense of absolute obligation to Jesus. "I have been crucified with Christ, yet I live; yet not I but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God, who



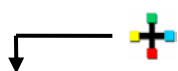
loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). That overwhelming obligation to the one who gave himself for the sin of the world is surely at the heart of the being of the church. Raiser speaks often of the incarnation but not about the atonement. I miss this deep sense of that absolute sovereignty over my heart that Jesus has won, which makes it intolerable that I should be unable to share the Eucharist with everyone for whom Christ died. That is how I understand "Christo-centric universalism."

Of course it is vital that we remember that Jesus did not seek to take control of world affairs but lived and died in total love and obedience to the Father whose rule is over all. And of course it is vital to recognize that the Spirit whose presence Jesus promised to his church is not domesticated within the church but is free and sovereign to range far beyond what the church knows and does – yet always proving to be the Spirit of the Father by leading men and women to acknowledge the Son. We do need the full Trinitarian framework for proper understanding. But there can be no true understanding of Christian unity that fails to have at its center the mercy seat, that place where – at inconceivable cost – our sins have been forgiven and we are able to meet one another as forgiven sinners who must embrace one another because we have been embraced by the divine compassion in Jesus Christ.

Let me suggest three ways in which this bears on Raiser's thesis. First, it is right to see the Blessed Trinity as the true paradigm, to recognize that ultimate reality is not to be understood in monistic terms but in terms of relationship. All things and all human realities are to be understood not in terms of the smallest atomic units that can be identified by analysis but in terms of their mutual relationship. But one cannot transfer the mutual indwelling, the communion of the persons of the Blessed Trinity, directly to the life of the church. The church is a body of forgiven sinners who are still sinners even though forgiven. There is lordship and discipleship within the church. When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he did not renounce lordship but defined it (John 13:12-14). The same passage warns the apostles that their authority must be exercised in the same way, but it does not deny their authority. The church cannot be understood as a wholly unstructured fellowship whose authority resides within itself.

Second, this also has a bearing on the understanding of dialogue. It is true that at the end of his book Raiser speaks of dialogue in terms of the "struggle for truth," but in the major part of his work he strongly rejects any instrumental view of dialogue and sees it as "the sharing of life." This is uncomfortably reminiscent of a great deal of contemporary talk about the "richness of diversity," which is proper in respect of some aspects of human life but not proper when it is merely an expression of indifference to truth. In the contemporary breakdown of the self-confidence of "modernity" and the widespread acceptance of a total fragmentation in human perception (a reaction against the Enlightenment project for the universal rule of human "reason"), this kind of language must be challenged. From the beginning, I believe, there has been at the heart of the life of the WCC the challenge to accept mutual correction in the light of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Scriptures. If this mutual correction gives way to the relativism of postmodern culture and dialogue is seen simply as the "sharing of life," something has gone badly wrong.

Third, Raiser seems to say that the New Delhi picture of organic union as "God's gift and our task" has failed because it comes up against the Roman Catholic and Orthodox conviction that the unity that God wills and gives is already fully present in



their own ecclesial life. No one can deny the reality and the strength of this position or the formidable barrier that it presents to any talk of organic union. But if we view this in the perspective of the whole history of the ecumenical movement, we shall recognize that we are here not dealing with something new but with the most formidable example of that which the ecumenical movement has faced from its beginning. No one can with integrity be a member of a Christian church without believing that this is the church of Jesus Christ. All of us begin our ecumenical journey with the belief (even if not too openly stated) that the others must come to see the reality of the church as we have been brought to see it. We do not and cannot begin by making a distinction between our Christianity and our churchmanship. Yet, as barriers crumble and we begin to meet other Christians at a deep level, we are compelled to acknowledge the reality of the presence of Christ in other communions.

Everything now depends on how we interpret this situation. One way is to settle for mutual recognition and coexistence, for a relationship of conviviality but not of total mutual commitment. This is the easy way, which evades the pain of mutual criticism and mutual correction. It calls for no reformation. It is cheap, and (one is bound to say) it almost inevitably tends to reduce the value of what it deals with. It risks making the question of truth less serious than it is.

Another way, the opposite of this, is to insist that Christian doctrine is an integral whole, no part of which can be surrendered without corrupting the whole, or at least that there are "essential" elements that can never be compromised.

But there is a third possibility, and it depends absolutely on the centrality of Christ and his atoning deed. It is to see the entire Christian church as a company that lives only by the grace of God to sinners, a company that does not possess in any of its divided parts the fullness of what is "essential" but that God nevertheless in his mercy sustains as witness to and foretaste of his blessed reign.

This third way of understanding creates the possibility and the necessity both of radical mutual criticism in light of what we believe to be God's intention for his church and of mutual acceptance as those who have been accepted by God in his mercy to those who fall short of his purpose. I know, of course, that this way of understanding the movement toward unity is not now acceptable either to Roman Catholicism or to Eastern Orthodoxy, but I believe it is the only dynamic that can keep the ecumenical movement moving. I think it would be the signal for a halt, for an abandonment of the true goal of the journey, to settle for a conciliarity that does not continue to call all Christians to the goal of full communion in the Eucharist, and therefore to a life of full mutual commitment – however far we may yet be from seeing precisely what the form of that unity must be.

At each of these three points it will be seen that the (literally) crucial matter is the centrality of Jesus and his atoning work on the cross, that work by which he has won lordship over the church and the world.

The Church in the World

For Raiser the Uppsala Assembly of 1968 symbolized "the expansion of the ecumenical perspective universally to all humanity" (p. 54). This is a remarkable statement in that it illustrates Raiser's almost total neglect of the missionary factor in the ecumenical movement. It is often forgotten that the title originally adopted during the planning stages of the 1910 Edinburgh conference was "The Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference." The modern ecumenical movement was born out of the vision of a whole world brought to Christ as Lord. The famous watchword that fired the ardor of the first pioneers was "The evangelization of the world in this generation." It was a vision for all humanity, or it was nothing. But this vital formative factor in the birth and rise of the ecumenical movement is wholly absent from Raiser's vision.

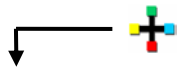
One could almost agree with Raiser in taking Uppsala as the point of crisis for the former paradigm because it was the occasion of an almost total denial of that vision. For me the most painful experience of that assembly was the struggle of the section on mission to overcome the almost implacable resistance of the drafting group to include any reference whatever to the duty of the church to bring the Gospel to those who had not heard it. My other most vivid memory is of the whole assembly listening with rapt attention while the singer Pete Seeger sang that old mockery of the Christian eschatological hope "Pie in the sky when you die." I had never thought that the WCC could sink to that level of banality, but it was typical of the utopian enthusiasm of that gathering.

Raiser is very rightly concerned to remind us that the word *oikoumene* refers to the whole inhabited world and not the church. He quotes the statement of the Rolle meeting of the Central Committee (1951) that stressed this point (p. 84), but (as the one who drafted that statement) I cannot forget that it was John Mackay (then chairman of the International Missionary Council) who insisted on this point. Raiser develops the vision of the *oikoumene* as the household,

consisting of "men and women struggling to become what they were intended to be in the purpose of God" (p. 85).

But the necessary distinction between church and world is obscured. The word "solidarity" is constantly used rather than the word "love," and this is surely a sign of the problematic character of the vision here offered. Love, if it is first love toward God and then toward the other, is compatible with the call to repentance and the offer of forgiveness. "Solidarity" suggests a too-naïve acceptance of all human struggle as being directed toward the will of God. For Raiser the task of the church is not to Christianize the world but to change it (pp. 104-5), and it is the *oikoumene* (not the *ecclesia*) that comes down as a city from heaven (p. 87).

Raiser, of course, is absolutely right to protest against an ecclesiocentric concept of mission, as though the church were the author and the goal of mission. But this whole vision is too much



shaped by the ideology of the 1960s with its faith in the secular, and in human power to solve problems. The thesis is heavily marked by a model not explicitly referred to but tending to dominate the WCC from Uppsala onward, a model that interprets all situations in terms of the oppressor and the oppressed and that tends to interpret the struggles of the oppressed as the instrument of redemption. This model owed not a little to Marxist thought, and the collapse of Marxism as a world power has created a new situation with which the WCC has to come to terms.

It is one of the most pressing tasks for the immediate future to rediscover a doctrine of redemption that sees the cross not as the banner of the oppressed against the oppressor but as the action of God that brings both judgment and redemption for all who will accept it, yet does not subvert the proper struggle for the measure of justice that is possible in a world of sinful human beings. And this leads to my third concern.

Mission and Evangelism

One of the most important documents produced by the WCC in the past three decades was entitled "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation." This was developed during the years 1976-81, and was approved by the Central Committee in 1982. In his wide-ranging study of the work of the WCC, Raiser does not mention this document; it is briefly referred to in a quotation from the Roman Catholic ecumenist Thomas Stransky. Indeed this total amnesia in respect of the missionary and evangelistic work of the churches is (for me) the most remarkable feature of the book. Raiser speaks much of the basic significance of the confession of faith and baptism as the realities that must be the foundation for the ecumenical movement. Yet there is no sign of any concern about the fact that the great majority of the world's people have not made this confession and have not been baptized. It is surely important to ask about the means by which people may become Christians. It is here that the thoroughly Eurocentric character of the book becomes clear. No one shaped by experience of Asian and African religions could have written this. When Raiser says that "awareness of religious pluralism is a development of the last twenty years" (p. 57), it is clear that we are speaking within the horizon of European culture. The profound experience of the missionary movement over the past two or three centuries is ignored.

I have to confess to a deep personal concern here, for if the vision for the WCC that this book represents were to be realized, then the bringing of the International Missionary Council into the WCC would have to be judged as having been a mistake. The two other original components of the WCC – Faith and Order, and Life and Work – each took for granted the existence of the churches and challenged them in respect of their disunity and of their social irrelevance. It was part of Visser 't Hooft's "Christ-centred universalism" to insist not only that the lordship of Christ must relativize all denominational divisions and challenge the domestication of the churches within Western society, but also that it must challenge the church as such to accept its worldwide missionary obligation and not to leave that task to other bodies. To allow the worldwide

missionary and evangelistic calling of the church to disappear from the agenda of the WCC (as this book effectively does) is much more than a "paradigm shift."

I do not wish to deny the elements of truth in the vision that so captivated the 1960s. I tried to acknowledge these in the little book I wrote at the time (*Honest Religion for Secular Man*). And I do not want to endorse all that is done by the churches and movements that bear the name "evangelical." But it is a very important fact that these bodies are the ones that are growing and showing increasing breadth of vision in their approach to the whole range of contemporary human problems, while the bodies that hold the doctrinal position represented in this book are largely in decline.

The WCC must see itself as the meeting place for all who make a Christological and Trinitarian affirmation along the lines of the WCC Basis. However sharp the disagreements are, the WCC cannot accept a less demanding role. A body that ceases to be concerned about communicating its faith to others is on the way to death. It would be heart-breaking if the WCC should in truth become, what some already claim to see in it, only the organ of those parts of the Christian church that are in decline. God grant it may not be so.

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