International Journal of Applied Sociology 2012, 2(5): 47-51
DOI: 10.5923/j.ijas.20120205.01

Historical Survey of the Concept of Ecumenical Movement its Model and Contemporary Problems

Kasomo Daniel[1,*], Ombachi Nicholas[2], Musyoka Joseph[3], Naila Napoo[4]

[1]Department of Religion, Maseno University Kenya
[2]Department of Emergency management, Masinde Muliro University, Kenya
[3]Department of Philosophy, South Eastern University College of Nairobi, Kenya
[4]Department of Humanities, Bondo University College, Kenya

Abstract The term "ecumenical" in theology today generally refers to the movement which seeks to achieve external unity among the world's denominationally divined churches. The original meaning of the word (from *oikeo:* to dwell, inhabit; and *oikos:* house, household; *oikoumene:* the whole inhabited earth[Lk. 4: 5]) has lapsed into disuse, as did the later development of the sense of a common basic attitude or into disuse, as did the later development of the sense of a common basic attitude or doctrinal consensus by the "inhabitants" of the surface of the earth or the members of the church. A more modern, comprehensive meaning has since been developed: "ecumenical" means the entirety of the church, which, looking back to its common original traditional and looking forward to its hope, seeks a commonality in doctrine and in the life of faith. Movement toward unity or cooperation among the Christian churches. The first major step in the direction of ecumenism was the International Missionary Conference of 1910, a gathering of protestant. Several Protestant denominations inaugurated a Life and Work Conference (on social and practical problems) in 1925 and a Faith and Order Conference (on church doctrine and governance) in 1927. After World War II the World Council of Churches (WCC) was established; the International Missionary Conference joined it in 1961. The Roman Catholic church also has shown strong interest in improving interchurch relations since the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 65) and, with the patriarch of Constantinople, has lifted the excommunication of 1054. The Eastern Orthodox church was active in the movement since 1920 and joined the WCC at its inception. The more conservative or fundamentalist Protestant denominations have generally refrained from involvement. Another important factor in 20th-century ecumenism was the creation of united churches that reconcile splintered sects, such as the United Church of Christ (1957) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1988).

Keywords Theology, Ecumenism, Unity, Models

1. Introduction

The ecumenical movement consists of those Churches which "together seek to know Christ. "Such a cooperative attitude includes at the outset several features: (a) the limitation of ecumenism to Christians or to Christian churches; (b) the recourse to a tradition (which at least in the beginning was a common one) of the apostolic witness and its basic interpretation in the primitive church; (c) a principled openness toward the insight that one does not possess the whole truth in all its aspects – that is, an openness toward changes in one's own doctrine and way of life; and (d) the conviction and the hope that the efforts for exchange between, and finally the unity of, the parts of the church are God's will and are even presaged in the unity of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

* Corresponding author:
dkasomocounselling@yahoo.com (Kasomo Daniel)
Published online at http://journal.sapub.org/ijas

2. The Concept

The concept of ecumenism described in this general way immediately poses at least three problems: (a) by concentrating on *Christian* churches, there is a failure to relate to the ecumenical problem par excellence, the separation between Jews and Gentiles (Christians); (b) for the same reason, the relation to other religious traditions is excluded; and (c) the Roman Catholic understanding of truth (and to date, the doctrine of the Orthodox Churches) is opposed to the postulated view that ecumenical endeavour includes openness to changes in doctrine. Because of these immediate problems, the danger is that the understanding of ecumenism sketched out above is limited to certain Reformation churches – a contradiction in itself.

3. Movement

Ecumenism first became a "movement" in the period of evident disruption of the church, especially in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries. Since the beginning of the apostolic period, however, responsible leaders of the church have struggled to overcome differences over doctrine (e.g., Paul in Galatians, Irenaeus against the Gnostics, Athanasius against Arius, Augustine against Pelagius) and to clarify questions of Christian life (e.g., Paul in 1 and 2 Corinthians) and questions of constitution and law in the church (e.g., the treatment of apostates in persecution, standardization of the date of Easter, recognition of decisions of synods and councils). For various reasons, emperors and patriarchs wanted councils. Finally, one can understand all controversies over the primacy of the pope, the Eucharist, the limitation of the freedom to establish new monastic foundations, and even the suppression of reform movements, as being ultimately "ecumenical" in intent. One can say, in other words, that the church action in such controversies attempted to safeguard church unity, even though the methods used in the defence of unity might appear strange today. The search for the unity of the church of Christ was strongly impressed on the churches of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, as the Augsburg Confession and the ecumenical activities of Calvin clearly demonstrate.

With few exceptions, the Jews stand entirely outside the field of vision in all these ecumenical endeavours. The Hebrew Bible was usurped completely by Christians, and the promises to Israel were reinterpreted in a Christian way. Even ecumenical endeavours in the eighteenth century (with the exception of occasional rays of hope in Zinzendorf) and in the nineteenth century (the time of the great missionary activity of the Protestant churches) lacked insights into the links between Jews and Christians. Except in the work of some Enlightenment philosophers, the world religions were also outside the purview of the Christian West (→ religion, religions).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the ecumenical movement gained impetus from three sources: from the division of the churches on the mission field; form insight into the social needs of industrialized nations; and from concern for world peace in the years before 1914. the following can be given as important dates: missionary conferences in London in 1878 and 1888; the Ecumenical Missionary Conference in New York in 1900, which led to the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference (→ world missionary conferences) in 1910. The founding of the YMCA in 1844 and the YWCA in 1855 – which led to the founding of the World Alliance of YMCAs in 1892, the World Alliance of YWCAs in 1893, and the World Student Christian Federation in 1895 – was also essential in the movement's development. Social work in big cities such as London and Berlin led eventually to the Life and Work movement (Stockholm, 1925), whose creation was contributed to by the peace and friendship work of the German and British, and also the French, churches (the founding of the World Alliance for Friendship between the Churches occurred in 1914).

In Edinburgh in 1910, the dogmatic/theological problems were deliberately pushed into the background, and even more significantly so in Stockholm in 1925 (their motto: "Doctrine divides, service unites"). Inspired first of all by Bishop C. Brent of the Protestant Episcopal Church of America's mission to the Philippines, and R. Gardiner, a New England lawyer, the Faith and Order movement (by "order" is meant polity and constitution of the various churches) sought from the beginning to work out the theological differences between the churches. The history of Faith and Order conferences from Lausanne (1927), through Edinburgh (1937), Lund (1952), Montreal (1963), and Accra (1974) to the most recent conferences in Lima (1982), Stavanger (1985), and Campostella (1993) reflects very clearly the various stages of their work in addressing those differences.

Paralleling the series of great world conferences (of the International Missionary Council [IMC], the Life and Work movement, and the Faith and Order movement [the union of the latter two movements in 1948 at Amsterdam and the addition of the IMC in 1961 in New Delhi led together to the founding of the → World Council of Churches (WCC)]), the denominational world alliances offered Christian churches hindrances and stimuli to the movement in equal measure. The oldest is the Lambeth Conference of the churches of the Anglican Communion (1867). There followed the founding of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1875); the establishment of the world alliances of Methodist churches (1881), the Congregationalists (1891), and the Baptists (1905), as well as the World Lutheran Federation (1923), came later. The existence of these joint efforts provided a plurality of opportunities for so-called bilateral negotiations and unions in the ecumenical movement, both of which can create problems as well as point out new paths. For example, there would be problems if, in unions with the Roman Catholic Church or Orthodox churches, historically related sister churches were left out. There are new paths, if new insights are achieved in individual negotiations rather than in the general discussion of multilateral bodies.

Finally, it is worth naming the different national ecumenical bodies: the National Council of Churches of Christ (formerly the Federal Council) in the USA; the British Council of Churches of Christ (which became the Inter-church Process in 1991); and the Co-partnership of Christian Churches in Switzerland and the Federal German Republic. Around 1960, the East Asia Conference of Churches, the All-Africa Council of Churches, the Melanesian Council of Churches, and the Conference of European Churches came into existence. The constitutions, functions, and competence of these bodies vary considerably from country to country. The Orthodox churches are fully represented in all of them, the Roman Catholic Church in most of them, and representatives of Jewish bodies are present as guests in a few of them.

4. History

The historical process of the formation of the ecumenical

movement must be distinguished from the basic theological problems of ecumenism. These problems are for their part tied up in a complex way with the so-called nontheological factors, which can be systematically described in sociologic al, psychological, or economic terms. Hardly any of the theologically defined differences – for example, the principal attitude toward the Johannine scriptures(Orthodox y), the attitude toward the Pauline texts (Protestantism), the tension between a sacramental-sacerdotal understanding of the church and a Reformation one, or controversies over a new form of liberation theology – are to be understood or resolved in exclusively theological terms. There are always other components of the problems involved. This should be borne in mind in surveying the following list of the principal theological problems of the ecumenical movement.

The creation of denominational churches goes back to the possibility of drawing different inferences from biblical texts or theological topics. Deductions which have not been strictly drawn from biblical texts and tradition are the logical reason for the multiplicity of theological opinions and lifestyles. No matter how much false exegesis there is, it is generally not worthwhile to challenge sister churches on points of difference, "false deductions" from the Bible, and the tradition of the early church. Particularly because of the lack of a clear distinction between, for example, genuine biblical and early Catholic doctrines, both the sacramental High Church and the classical Reformation models of the church and ecclesiastical offices can be justified more or less legitimately. Different denominations can be explained, on the one hand, by the different selections and interpretations of the ancient texts that are possible and, on the other hand, by the phenomenon that a freely flowing river of far-reaching consequences for church order and unity will generally be "stopped". Denominations are consequently presentations of "acquired" doctrinal opinions and attitudes to life.

Was there a "five-centuries consensus"? The phenomena sketched out in 3.1 led after the Reformation (e.g., in G. Calixt) and again in the Oxford movement (J. H. Newman) to the hope that the existence of unity of doctrine and life in the church in the first five centuries could be proved historically and utilized theologically for today. The lines of demarcation of the biblical canon were then, so to speak, brought forward from the end of the first century to the end of the fifth. Historical research in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries showed, however, that complete consensus in the early church did not exist at all. Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile today to consider a fresh that, even if there were no historical consensus in the first five centuries, the churches actively engaged in the ecumenical movement today should find common ground by looking back to the early church, rather than in more direct contact with their present-day teachings. The widely neglected study of patristics should therefore receive new attention.

The maintenance of denominational identity is another problem. Instead of blaming the theological programs which first understand faith as the gift of God and second ascribe to the faithful a high degree of shared responsibility in the church ("the priesthood of all believers"), one could well say that the church leaders and clergy are the ones above all who persist in maintaining specific denominational identity. For many of the faithful, the identity received through tradition is only important in moral questions of daily life (marriage, education, social ethics); in the field of doctrine it is often irrelevant. In the United States, church members not infrequently change their denomination after moving or marriage, as do refugees in Africa.

5. Unity

Is the unity of the church "a pretense"? In countless ecumenical publications, one reads of the unity of the church which is already given and willed by God. Because the gift already given cannot be understood historically, there remain only two possible ways to distinguish this axiom from a meaningless, empty formula: the Trinitarian interpretation (God's innermost reality is a prototype of unity) and the reference to God's promise to make unity a reality in the future. The door to an understanding of ecumenism is opened in both alternatives, which makes overcoming the schism between Jew and Christian a matter of importance as an example and also creates a link between "the unity of the church" and "the unity of humanity", without the ecumenical movement remaining a self-contained hope of one of the world's great religions.

The Roman Catholic understanding of ecumenism is contained more dynamically in Vatican II's *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR; 1964) than in statements issued before the council, but it sometimes presents a model with the implicit and partly explicit expectation that other Christian churches should reintegrate into the Roman Catholic Church, a model which differs in character from the various conceptions of the churches represented in the WCC. Nevertheless, among the member churches, the group of Orthodox churches (members of the WCC since 1961) maintains a concept which, with all variables on the theme of the immutability of the teaching of the ecumenical councils of the early church, holds firm to the view that, in this respect also, a "reintegration" of the later doctrines of other churches into the dogmatically fixed treasure of truth of the ecumenical councils appears to be an absolute condition. Ecclesiology and the understanding of the claims to truth of the classical early church are the great problematic areas today of the ecumenical movement. In this problematic situation, the Roman Catholic Church occupies a special place only very vaguely, since, in accordance with its understanding of its own position, it is not a member of the WCC – although it is fully represented in Faith and Order and in many other ecumenical organizations. Moreover, on the practical and personal level, relations between Catholic Protestant theologians, ministers, and congregations are to a great extent very close and exude confidence. Often the differences within a denominational tradition are de facto

greater than between groups and different individual denominations. In this way, the questions mentioned above in section 3.3. concern the upholders of denominational identity. The following models of ecumenism stand out:

◆ An attempt to achieve a full union of all churches, through relativizing doctrinal differences (mainly Protestant inspired). This is a model which today finds very little support.

◆ The so-called Roman Catholic model ofreintegration, in which changes (e.g., extensions) of its own teaching are seen as possible. (There are already observable differences within the Roman Catholic Church today in this respect).

◆ The understanding of ecumenism in the Orthodox churches, which totally excludes changes in the basic body of doctrine.

◆ The model of "conciliar unity" which was reflected in the world assemblies in New Delhi (1961), Uppsala (1968), and Nairobi (1975). This model is widely supported. The "New Delhi formula", which is not dissimilar from the Catholic decree in some respects, strives for mutual recognition of ministries and emphasizes the mutual responsibility of all believers in each place in witness and service, in contradistinction to the universal church.

◆ A model that emphasizes the differences between the above models and fiercer preservation of denominational identities under the slogan, "Unity in reconciled diversity". One sees in this the importance of the insight that the churches are equally guilty in their relations with on another, and that their mutual trust must be based on forgiveness and shared hope, not simply on tolerance.

The contemporary worldwide project "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" and attempts at a "common expression of apostolic faith" (in light of the Nicene Creed) and common witness in mission should be viewed from the perspective of this last-mentioned model. One cannot predict which conflicts will arise with other models.

6. Problems

◆ The following problems are coming to light in the ecumenical movement:

◆ The dominant role of Euro-American theology in the ecumenical movement and the difficulty of expressing the piety and theological articulation to be found in churches of the Third World, the result being that discourse and exchange are problematic.

◆ The cerebral, verbal nature of many ecumenical activities and, at the same time, the often times superficiality of theological analysis (conditioned by the lack of common life – "conviviality" – and by ecclesiastical anti-intellectualism).

◆ The division of the churches of the ecumenical movement into, on the one hand, altar-sacrament and priest chur- ches and, on the other hand, minister-teacher and counsellor-oriented churches ("high" churches and "low" churches).

◆ The continual and recently intensified outbreak of ecclesiastical and national provincialism among ministers and church members in all parts of the world, partly connected to regionalism, which is to be welcomed on other grounds.

◆ The asymmetry in relation to the dominant role of ecclesiastical law as opposed to theology in some denominations.

◆ The cautiousness ofsome established churches toward planned unions with others, at the cost of undermining already existing consensus or chances of convergence (e.g., the retarding effect of caution vis-à-vis the Orthodox on the part of Catholics in questions of ordained ministry).

◆ Hesitancy before the problem of Jews and Christians and uncertainty as to how to relate with non-Christians.

7. Conclusions

Ecumenism is the promotion of unity or cooperation between distinct religious groups or denominations of Christianity. Christian ecumenism is distinguished from interfaith activity. Ecumenism in this broad sense is called religious pluralism, distinguished from ecumenism within a faith movement. The interfaith movement strives for greater mutual respect, toleration, and co-operation among the world religions. Ecumenism as interfaith dialogue between representatives of diverse faiths, does not necessarily intend reconciling their adherents into full, organic unity with one another but simply to promote better relations. It promotes toleration, mutual respect and cooperation, whether among Christian denominations, or between Christianity and other faiths .In light of these problems and in recognition of the danger to the continuing existence of humanity, under pressure from war, famine, and destruction of the necessary conditions for life for present –day and future generations, major practical issues become part of work of fulfilment of the ecumenical movement (strengthening peace, consoling the perplexed, clarifying problems, development work in joint mission). There is also the important matter of setting an example for others (i.e., offering a prototype for conciliar decisions in parliaments, in the United Nations, in communities, and in families; for relations with minorities and foreigners; of forgiveness and reconciliation; of therapy and aid).

Theology has as much of an analytical as a visionary role in all this: analytical in research into the basis for the existence of specific and differing traditions and in concern for the translation of the language of one tradition into that of another; visionary in readiness for new concepts, the setting of tasks and insights, which are more than a selection, reevaluation, or combination of already known traditions and positions. The realization of ecumenism is, however, not the task of theology as such; rather, living together, building trust, joint action, and joint worship must both *precede* and *follow* any theological activity.

REFERENCES

[1] Borkowski, James D. "Middle East Ecumenism from an Anglican Perspective" Cloverdale Books (2007)

[2] Hein, David. "The Episcopal Church and the Ecumenical Movement, 1937–1997: Presbyterians, Lutherans, and the Fu ture." Anglican and Episcopal History 66 (1997): 4–29

[3] Hein, David. Geoffrey Fisher: Archbishop of Canterbury, 1945–1961. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007. Chapters 2 ("Chester and London") and 5 ("Ecumenical Outreach")discuss relations between Anglicans and Free Churches, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox in the period 1940 to 1961

[4] Hein, David. "Radical Ecumenism." Sewanee Theological Review 51 (June 2008): 314–328. Proposes that mainline Prot estants, such as Episcopalians, have much to learn from heirs of the Radical Reformation, including the Amish

[5] A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill (Philadelphia: Westmin ster Press, 1954)

[6] The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement, volume 2, 1948-1968, edited by Harold E. Fey (London: S.P.C.K., 1970)

[7] A History of the Ecumenical Movement, volume 3, 1968-2000, edited by John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Georges Tsetsis (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004)

[8] Kasper, Walter, That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity Today (London: Burns & Oates, 2004)

[9] Kasper, Walter, Harvesting the Fruits: Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue (New York: Continuum, 2009)

[10] Mackay, John A., Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Uni versal (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc: 1964) Mastrantonis, George. "Augsburg and Constantinople: The Correspondence between the Tübingen Theologians and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople on the Augsburg Confession." Holy Cross Orthodox Press (1982), reprinted (2005)

[11] Metzger, John Mackay, The Hand and the Road: The Life and Times of John A. Mackay (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)

[12] Ut Unum Sint ("That they may be one"), an encyclical by Pope John Paul II of May 25, 1995 on commitment to ecumenism.

[13] Unitatis Redintegratio ("Restoration of Unity"), Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964

[14] Visser 't Hooft, Willem Adolf, "Appendix I: The Word 'Ecumenical' – Its History and Use," in A History of the Ecu menical Movement 1517-1948, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 735-740

[15] Weigel, Gustave, S.J., A Catholic Primer on the Ecumenical Movement (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1957)

[16] McSorley, Harry J., Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumeni cal-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work,The Bondage of the Will, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Augsburg Publish