

# Ecumenical Movement in Asia: Can We Make a Difference?

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Ecumenical movement in Asia has gone through many changes. In our journey together we have encountered many obstacles, problems and opportunities. What were the driving forces that united us in Parapat, Indonesia?<sup>2</sup> What have we achieved during the last 50 years? What are the challenges of our present time? How do we raise our prophetic voice ecumenically in the present context of our time? How do we uphold ecumenical movement as “People’s Movement”?

## The Need for a New Paradigm of Ecumenism

The current global context of our time calls for a paradigm shift in ecumenical engagement. Why do we need to search for a new paradigm? Christianity has legitimized and continues to support the ruling and powerful class, and manipulate and exploit God’s creation through globalization. The history of ecumenical movement shows the misuse of religion, especially Christianity, as an instrument or agent to protect the interest of the rich and colonial power. Some examples to illustrate this are the following:

(1) Since the time of the first ecumenical Council of Nicea, Christianity has consistently maintained religious legitimacy of the Empire. The poor Christians, the uneducated, untouchable from Bethany and the neglected villages in and around Jerusalem and Galilee claimed that at the Pentecost, the royal symbol of God was placed on them through the outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and thereafter to express resistance against the power of mammon, they practiced common ownership of property and sharing of wealth. This became a threat to the empire. When the Council of Nicea was convened, it rejected and suppressed the claims and practice of the poor Christians and established religious hegemony of the empire at that time. Gradually, faith became an obligatory state religion to express loyalty to the empire.

(2) The history of Christian countries in the west shows that Christianity was used as an instrument to expand imperialism. The Crusade was waged nine times by Christians against Muslims and Jews. Indigenous Christian communities were also not spared. The crusaders killed those who resisted, and destroyed and confiscated crops and properties by force. The Pope blessed the soldiers, offered forgiveness of sins to all soldiers, and the soldiers who died during the Crusades were elevated as martyrs of faith. The Crusades were war of invasion to obtain supremacy of empire and to control the Mediterranean trade.

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<sup>2</sup> The East Asia Christian Conference (former name of the Christian Conference of Asia) was conceived at a conference in Parapat, North Sumatra, Indonesia in 1957.

(3) Western Christianity has been closely associated with colonial expansion. Using military force, Christianity spread in Asia, Latin America and Africa. They considered colonial expansion as providence of God to take the good news to the so-called heathen world. The colonizers not only invaded territories, but also forcibly proselytized the people. Though some of the missionaries were critical of colonial interests, most of them conspired and cooperated with the colonial governments. Some missionaries acted as government agents rather than as messengers of the gospel. Most missionaries participated in the process of colonization of Asia and used it to support their cause. That is the reason why we do not see any resistance movement against colonialism in the history of Western Christianity. The crusades and colonization have two things in common—to recapture the holy land and expand Christianity by means of violence and military might. The crusades and colonization were vile wars characterized by cruel killing, plundering and destroying of the cultural heritage.

It was in this imperial historical context that Edinburgh Conference took place in 1910. The conference was held under the patronage of colonial powers. The people who sent greetings to Edinburgh Conference included the King of England, the President of USA and the rulers of colonial powers. The Edinburgh Conference clearly acknowledged that colonial expansion was God's providence to spread the good news to the so-called uncivilized and demonic world. The *Oikoumene* of Edinburgh pretended that Christian unity is possible even without removing and transforming the structures of oppression and exploitation. The Edinburgh Conference co-opted the poor and marginalized into the scheme of the Western empire. Without much alteration, we simply follow the tradition set by Edinburgh Conference. Often the ecumenical movement acts as an agent of empire. The recent statement of WCC on the issue of nuclear program in Iran clearly shows that WCC is still within the Edinburgh paradigm till today. The statement condemned the nuclear program of Iran whose annual expenditure is less than 4 million per year, but did not question the Americans who spend more than 498 billion dollars per year on weapons. Most countries in the world consider America as threat to world peace and security. The ecumenical movement should not be reduced to the ruling class movement and to serving the needs of the empire. It must take the position of and be the voice for the poor and exploited. The paradigm of Edinburgh *oikoumene* is not relevant in Asian context and so we must seek a new paradigm of ecumenism.

### **Imperial Theology and Ecumenical Movement**

Under the patronage of empire, we also see a theological discourse that supports imperialism. Since the time of Constantine the Great, theological metaphors developed in the churches have supported male rulers and oppressors. In other words, the theological concepts developed under the imperial regime not only legitimized a religion for the one who is the master and the ruler, but also sanctioned to exploit and manipulate all segments of God's creation to extract maximum profit. There is no place for the people who have been ruled and oppressed for centuries. We may cite three examples:

(1) *Concept of God*. Theology is God-talk, discourse on God. The discourse is based on a language which is symbolic and metaphorical. Metaphors are constructed out of a cultural or social environment and context. The dominant images of God developed

during the imperial power were images such as ruler, Lord, master and warrior. They are all patriarchal, political and military images. These images have made Christianity a religion of, and for the ruler, elite and the upper-class. The theological concepts or images of God which we uphold today are in deep crisis because they are not capable of liberating the poor and marginalized people from unjust system and practice. The burning of innocent children and women in Lebanon, Iraq, etc., the mass destruction of property and infrastructure, invasion and aggression of sovereign countries in the name of liberation, freedom and peace have proved that we still uphold an imperialistic concept of God. Such ruler's theology supported colonial governments, war, invasion and unprecedented exploitation of earth's resources. The imperial construct of the concept of God will not be able to liberate the people who are the victims of power.

(2) *Understanding of mission.* The discourse on God as ruler and master has reinforced a success oriented or triumphalistic mission. Language like "Mission Crusade", "Mission Campaign", "Home Penetration", "Mass Evangelization", etc. are all military language and concepts. Christians by and large engaged in denominational expansion rather than God's mission. Success in mission is measured by how many churches have been planted, converted and baptized. Mission has been very exclusive and never recognized God's revelation in other religious traditions. Yet mission is God's mission; God is the owner of the mission, not the churches. The churches are sent to be missionaries to witness compassion and justice with the poor and the victims. The ecumenical calling is to witness compassion and justice with the poor. But Christians have manipulated and acted as if we are the owner of mission.

(3) *Understanding of creation.* Western Christian interpretation of creation is anthropocentric —i.e., the human is the reference point of all realities. Thus, nature exists for human. Apart from rational beings, other segments of God's creation cannot come under the scheme of salvation. There is nothing sacred or mystery in nature, but it can be manipulated and controlled for the benefit of human beings. Consequently, this goes with the view that to exploit nature is divine will. This one-sided theological interpretation justifies expansion of colonial power and exploitation of nature. The ideology of globalization and the expansion of global capital market are deeply rooted in this interpretation. The unprecedented exploitation of nature and present ecological crisis testify to the failure of the Christian understanding of creation.

Therefore, we need a new ecumenical paradigm where God is perceived as fellow sufferer, a great comforter, divine power that is not dominating or controlling or as dialectical power in weakness but as liberating and transforming power that is effective in compassionate love, care and service. Mission is also to be understood as "servant-hood" in God's liberating act. We need a radical departure from the imperial theology of the ecumenical movement because Christian values are used to support rulers and oppressors, and perpetuate unmindful exploitation of earth's resources.

### **Ecumenical Movement in Asia**

The ecumenical movement in Asia has struggled and continues to struggle against this imperial ecumenical framework and theology till today. People are confused theologically.

The churches in Asia came together in Parapat with the conviction that dissection of the body of Christ is a scandal of faith and imperialism is contrary to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. When the EACC was conceived in Prapat, the leaders were careful not to submit their association as subordinate entity or branch of the World Council of Churches or any denomination. They deliberately chose the term "Conference" instead of "Council" to maintain the spirit of movement. The spirit of Parapat was that "the churches of Asia, sharing the ethos of that time, grasped the vision of the peoples of Asia sharing a single hope, bearing a single destiny, and sought the make distinctive contribution, deriving from and contributing to the Lordship of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

The two key words that united and overwhelmed the spirit of the first Asian ecumenical gathering were *Parapat* and *gotong royong*. *Parapat* means "come together" and *gotong royong* means "working together for common task/goal". These two words were the driving force of Asian ecumenism: "Come and work together for common task/goal". It is in this spirit that many ecumenical leaders supported the national independence struggle because of their conviction that imperialism is contrary to Christian faith, principles and practice.

However, we need to note that nationalism in Asia was primarily a bourgeois nationalism, created and financed by the respective national bourgeoisies. For example, in India, the Dalits and Tribals were always kept outside the framework of the Congress Party. The EACC Assembly in Bangkok in 1968 emphasized the significance of Asian people's movements and struggle for justice and freedom and asked the churches to stand ready to endorse the responsible use of civil disobedience in cases where law and distribution of power were unjust. When authoritarian regimes, most often the military or with the support of military, assumed power in several Asian countries in the 70's, the EACC called the churches to listen to the voices of the suffering people under those regimes. In spite of many failures, the message of EACC was very clear: the confession of Christian hope should be set in the context of the aspiration of the people themselves. The framework of ecumenical movement was "people", namely the oppressed and those who have been denied of justice. We have a lesson to learn from the past experience to strengthen our present ecumenical movement in Asia.

### **The Present Context of Ecumenical Movement in Asia**

We have moved from the colonial to post-colonial (some may call it post-modern) context where the global empire and globalization are the main players. We are now in a new context and are confronted with new challenges. To raise prophetic voice requires serious engagement in the new context of the people. The most obvious global sign of the time is the symbiosis of the global empire and economic regime (globalization). The global empire and the greed of global capital are destroying and threatening all life, especially the poor and marginalized.

The global empire has absolute power to dominate all other political powers of the world, and it seeks such hegemonic domination. It has no rivals, nor can it allow any. The global

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<sup>3</sup> Ninan Noshy, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, Vol. 1 (Hong Kong: WSCF-YMCA-CCA, 2004), 130.

military regime with its imperial strategy is totalistic, limitlessly destructive, and homicidal in character. The empire justifies its power and actions in pseudo-religious terms, misusing Christian values and demonizing other religious expression of resistance to its imperial power. The military regime has inflicted and continues to inflict the most vicious and brutal forms of violence and adverse humanitarian impact to the people, e.g. the genocidal war in Iraq, and now in Lebanon and Palestine, and brazen human rights violations in many Asian countries. We need a decisive prophetic voice against the global empire.

Globalization is a new form of colonialism. The global market turns human beings and their cultural activities and the earth's resources into commodities for profit. The weak, namely the migrant workers, farmers, consumers, small entrepreneurs and the whole ecosystem are victims of globalization. Asia has become a source of raw materials, cheap labor, and food needs. The unjust financial system, ever increasing ideology of consumerism, materialism, individualism, competition and greed erode life-affirming values, fragment communities, and increase poverty. Therefore, the future of ecumenism in Asia lies in its ability to create counter movements against globalization and empire. This counter movement is possible through strengthening and building grassroots or local ecumenical movements.

### **Jesus' Paradigm of Ecumenical Engagement**

We have inherited an ecumenical movement and theology that support and protect the rich, ruler, elite, master and empire. We still struggle with this ecumenical framework and theology. However, ecumenical movement in Asia can make a difference by turning and rerouting to the Jesus of Galilee movement. In Jesus' movement, we see a decisive reversal from empire to people in pain, from ruler to ruled, from oppressor to oppressed. Jesus' movement was people-centred movement against the power of destruction and death. He stood for a different value system—i.e. peace, love, service and liberation of the poor; not the power, sword, military and mammon. Jesus became the voice of the oppressed and voiceless. Since Jesus stood for the people against the powers and principalities of the Roman Empire, he was crucified, his disciples became martyrs, and his community of faith bore the wounds by the empire. His movement was anchored in the hope of resurrection of all living beings. To resist against the empire for the liberation of the poor is the imperative and theo-praxis in our context.

### **Rerouting Ecumenism in the Jesus' Movement**

Though Jesus stood for the universal salvation of all people, he deliberately took the side of the oppressed to liberate and redeem them. The option of and for the "people in pain" as the locus of the ecumenical movement requires sacrifice and radical departure from power, institution and mammon. We must reroute our mission in the context of people in pain like the three wise persons (magi) from Asia. The three wise persons were asked by the empire to report on the birth of Jesus. But instead of obeying the imperial instruction, they left through a different route, a route to Galilee to protect the life of Jesus. They chose life rather than imperial order. The Ecumenical movement should become a movement that protects life from death.

The two disciples of Jesus were walking to Emmaus. It was the place to flee to; a safer place for refuge. It was a time when the disciples of Jesus were facing threat to their lives. But when they recognized that the one who walked, talked, listened and shared sorrow with them was none other than their Master Jesus, they decided to return to Jerusalem. This was the place where Jesus was crucified by merciless rulers, the place of crosses, the suffering, the major and minor injuries; it was the place where people were tortured, subjected to fear and hopelessness. It was here that people were oppressed, made powerless, discriminated and roped by merciless rulers through unjust system. The two disciples returned to Jerusalem to struggle with people in pain. They chose struggle and hardship rather than comfort and safety. If we want the ecumenical movement to be prophetic, it has to take the position of the three wise persons and the two disciples of Jesus. They took the position of "people in pain." We can make a difference in our ecumenical engagement by choosing the way of Jesus.

### **Issues for Reflection**

1. Relationship between money and ecumenism. It is often said that the ecumenical movement has assumed itself to be an NGO, a faithful NGO who functions as sub-contractor of the project designed by those who hold capital. This is becoming a reality. What do we do to liberate ourselves from dependency? How can we make "people in pain" and their aspiration central in the ecumenical movement?
2. Ecumenism and interfaith relationship. Asia is a multi-religious context. Religions face conflict because of the misuse of religious values and success—and market—oriented mission. Why and how can we promote interfaith dialogue for world peace?
3. The global empire and globalization is reality of our times. How can we de-legitimize the power of the empire and the greed of economic capital? What is the role of the ecumenical movement?
4. The present and future health of ecumenical movement lies on ecumenical and ministerial formation program. A very visible trend in many countries is that theological education program is gradually becoming a middle class profession and an agent of modernity. How can we transform theological education to be relevant to the poor and oppressed?
5. How can we empower and sustain people's movements and organizations within the ecumenical movement and institutional structures of ecumenism?
6. Violence, economic injustice, poverty, ecological destruction and migrant issues have