

TOWARDS CONVERGENCE OF ECUMENISM AND EVANGELICALISM IN POST-EDINBURGH-1910 ERA: QUEST FOR FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN WITNESS TO PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

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INTRODUCTION

Revisiting the World Missionary Conference (WMC) of Edinburgh 1910¹ enlivens us with an opportunity for retrospection with candid and critical minds into the nature and progress of Christian Mission in its multifarious endeavours throughout a century. The Edinburgh Conference was uniquely prevalent because of its ongoing activities anchored by a Continuation Committee, which worked through twelve special committees for promoting cooperation and unity in Mission Work.²

In 1806, William Carey proposed to the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in England that a World Missionary Conference be held in the Cape in 1810, and to be repeated every ten years. Mr. Fuller, the then Secretary of the BMS replied, “This is one of Carey’s pleasing dreams. But, seriously, I see no important object to be attained by such a meeting, which might not quite well be realized without. And in the gatherings of all denominations there would be no unity, without which we had better stay at home.”³ William Carey’s dream was not realized immediately, but from 1825 onwards gatherings of Missionaries took place in India, Japan, China, Latin America and a few other countries in Europe and US, for sorting out various needs and problems of missionary enterprise in their own areas. These conferences were forerunners of the first World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910.

The WMC was not an ecclesiastical body and it had no jurisdiction over the churches. Nevertheless, it was in a position to observe the degree of unity among the missionary agencies. It also reviewed how their relationship grew and how inevitable and practicable it was for people of different communions who associate in Christian work. But, it did not intervene in their differences of faith and order. The WMC was concerned mainly about the strategies of evangelization work among the non-Christians and it devoted much discussion on co-operation among different mission agencies for better administration and result. It

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¹ WMC was organized for Protestant Missionary Societies engaged in ministry among non-Christian peoples. Out of the 1200 delegates, who met at Edinburgh, the majority came from Europe and North America, whereas only 17 of them were from the younger churches, not as representatives of their churches, but as special delegates appointed by the missionary societies. The theme of the Conference was, “The World Mission Conference to consider Missionary Problems in Relation to the non-Christian World.” See T. V. Philip, *Edinburgh to Salvador* (Delhi: CSS& ISPCK, 1999), 27.

² *Ecumenical Review*, vol. XII, no. 4, July 1960, 407.

³ S. Carey, *William Carey* (London: 1926), 249.

talked significantly on the relationship between the missionary and the “native” worker.⁴ Sometimes, this relationship was not a friendly and respectable one, which was sharply questioned by Bishop V.S. Azariah,⁵ as recorded by T.V. Philip, “Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us friends.”⁶

Moreover, several other participants also raised questions on the focus of the Conference, which aimed only on evangelism and that too evangelization only of the non-Christian lands. The missionaries who worked in South America were not invited, as South America was not deemed to be a non-Christian region.⁷ There were also suggestions from different corners of the globe for emphasizing on wider unity without any denominational distinctions. Thus the Edinburgh Conference was of great importance for giving rise to the modern ecumenical movement. In the post Edinburgh era there came up a sharp distinction between the “Evangelicals” and the “Ecumenicals.” The purpose of this paper is to study the polarity and shift towards convergence of the Evangelicals and the Ecumenicals in the post Edinburgh mission endeavours and in the light of their common concern for sharing in the Good News of God’s Kingdom, some efficacious approaches are being outlined in this paper which would be helpful in bearing faithful Christian witness to people of other faiths.

THE ECUMENICALS AND THE EVANGELICALS SINCE EDINBURGH 1910

At times, the Ecumenicals and the Evangelicals conveyed opposed positions, though they are no more exclusive terms. In spite of their polarity, in the course of discussions at various levels, they have tried to understand each other’s position and mutually enriched themselves minimizing their differences. We are attempting to study them subsequently.

The Ecumenicals

The word Ecumenical comes from the Greek noun *oikoumene* meaning “world,” or “inhabited earth”⁸ and gradually it began to mean the “entire humanity.” The first Ecumenical strand was an outcome from the Edinburgh Conference-1910, which gave rise to the World Council of Churches (WCC) that concentrated on the unity and faithfulness of a missionary church in making known the Gospel in a non-Christian society, with a self-critical repentance and urgency of proclamation. In the post Edinburgh periods, the Ecumenicals believed that God’s concern was not primarily with the church, but with the entire humanity. Alan Baileys pointed out, “In ecumenical thinking, therefore, the boundary

⁴ *World Missionary Conference, 1910*, Vol.-2, Page-171. See (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=genpub;idno=1936337>).

⁵ Bishop V.S. Azariah (1874-1945) was a leading Christian of his day and a pioneer of ecumenism. He was one of the founding fathers of National Missionary Society (NMS), established in Serampore College in 1945. He was Chairman of NCC for many years. He was the first Indian Anglican Bishop in Dornakal, Andhra Pradesh. He gave leadership in Church Union Movement for CSI in 1947. See M.M.Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: Senate of Serampore College & CLS, 1976), 76.

⁶ T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh to Salvador* (Delhi: ISPCK & CSS, 1999), 29.

⁷ T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh to Salvador...*, 27.

⁸ Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger and Allen Wikgren (eds), *The Greek New Testament with Dictionary* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983), 124.

line between the church and the world (and thus between salvation history and world history) was becoming progressively vague. God was to be found at work far more in the secular rather than in the religious sphere.”⁹

The ecumenical mission had aimed for the “humanization of the society,” which sought for political and social liberation of all human beings.¹⁰ In later periods, two ethical issues had dominated the ecumenical missions. i) Relation to non-Christian religions and cultures. ii) Relation to political and social revolution, driven by rising nationalism, particularly after World War II.¹¹ Thus, the Ecumenical discussions on mission gradually moved away from a church-centric to a world-centered view. The Geneva Conference of Church and Society in 1966, the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1968, and the Mission Conference at Bangkok in 1972, also thought in the same line, which emphasized not on what God was communicating and doing in the Church, but on what God was saying and doing in the world. Accordingly, the Christian mission was understood as serving the needs of the world and making life on earth more human.¹² James Scherer reiterates, “For ecumenical missionary thinking, Uppsala’s significance lay in the fact that it consolidated the emphasis on mission with the secular world and the focus on the world as the arena for mission, a focus that began shortly after New Delhi Assembly in 1961.”¹³

In 1982, the WCC’s central committee approved the statement, “Mission and Evangelism—An Ecumenical Affirmation, which received wide appreciation from the mainline churches, Anglicans, Orthodox, the Roman Catholics and the Evangelicals. This document focuses on seven “ecumenical convictions” and they are i) Conversion ii) The Gospel to all realms of Life iii) The Church and its Unity in God’s Mission iv) Mission in Christ’s Way v) Good News to the Poor vi) Mission in and to Six Continents. vii) Witnessing among People of Living Faiths. These convictions are in line with the central mission emphasis of churches in the contemporary ecumenical movement.”¹⁴

The Evangelicals

The word Evangelical comes from the Latin word “*evangelicus*” and Greek word “*euaggelion*” meaning “Good News” or “Gospel.”¹⁵ In today’s context, those, whose main emphasis is on evangelism and personal conversion, are called “Evangelicals.” Their conviction is that the Gospel is a message for personal salvation and offers new birth to all, which should be preached to every creature. Evangelicalism is a subject which developed from the roots of the nineteenth century evangelical movements. It emphasizes mission, spiritual unity among Christians, and prayer for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. In order to promote the world-wide missionary outreach, the evangelicals formed some

⁹ Alan J. Baileys, “Evangelical and Ecumenical Understanding of Mission,” *International Review of Mission*, October, 1996, 488.

¹⁰ T.V. Philip, Edinburgh..., 99.

¹¹ John Macquarrie and James Childress (eds), *A New Dictionary of Christian Faith*, (London: SCM Press, 1967), 177.

¹² T.V. Philip, Edinburgh..., 98.

¹³ James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 121.

¹⁴ Eugene L. Stockwell, “Conciliar Missions,” *Toward the 21st Century In Christian Mission* (eds), James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p 21-23.

¹⁵ Kurt Aland..., *The Greek New Testament with Dictionary...*, 75.

associations. The “Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association” (IFMA) was formed in 1917 in North America. In 1945 the “Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies” (EFMA) was formed to accomplish missionary outreach in North America. In 1985 the “Association of International Mission Services” (AIMS) was founded by charismatic leaders to further world evangelization.

Arthur F. Glasser classified the evangelicals into five groups: i) The Separatist Fundamentalists: They preserve hostility with the WCC and the evangelicals who are not on parallel line with them. They are anti-charismatic. They formed “Fellowship of Missions” (FM) in 1972, in order to further the testimony of separation from all apostasy and perversion of the truth, through the Bible-believing missionary or church fellowship in as many countries as possible. ii) The Low-Key Dispensational Evangelicals: They belong to the independent faith missions and some smaller evangelical denominations. They tend to keep themselves away from ecumenical encounters. iii) The Charismatic Evangelicals: This group ranges from traditional Pentecostals to the newer mainline church charismatics. The mainline charismatics hope for bringing renewal to all churches within or outside the WCC and even to the Roman Catholics. iv) The Ecumenical Evangelicals: This group is cautiously open to the positive values of critical scholarship and they feel obligated to pursue ecumenical relations. They also desire to rouse the social responsibility among all the evangelicals. v) The non-conciliar and traditionally orthodox communions: They highly cherish in their rich historic roots. Their main thrust is to preserve those values of the Reformed or the Lutherans, the Mennonites or the Brethren.¹⁶

The evangelicals, particularly Donald McGavran, who had a controversy with the WCC, and who had advocated “Church-growth” theory of mission since the 1950s, sharply differed with the WCC and declared that the primary aim of the mission was to plant new churches in every land rather than to involve in social activities. He was critical of the fact that social services can prepare the way for the Gospel. The evangelicals always compared the best in “evangelicalism” with the worst in “ecumenism.” They charged the ecumenicals for their liberalism, loss of evangelical conviction, universalism in theology, substitution of evangelism with social action, and search for unity at the expense of biblical truth.¹⁷ It is true that in the 1960s the evangelicals had taken a strong anti-ecumenical stand. Baileys wrote, “Evangelism was seen to be more and more militantly anti-ecumenical. Certainly the Conference held at Wheaton (Illinois) and Berlin in 1966 reflected a crusading spirit with the WCC family in its sights.”¹⁸ The late 1960s and early 70s saw the severe attacks and counter attacks by the Evangelicals and the Ecumenicals. The relationship between the two groups worsened during this period.

Transition between the Evangelicals and the Ecumenicals

As the controversies went on, an important congress was organized by the Evangelicals in 1974 in Lausanne (Switzerland). In this “International Congress on World Evangelization”

¹⁶ Arthur F. Glasser, “Evangelical Missions,” *Towards the 21st Century in Christian Mission* (eds), James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 10-12.

¹⁷ Eugene L. Smith, “The Wheaton Congress in the eyes of an Ecumenical Observer,” *International Review of Missions*, October, 1966, 481.

¹⁸ Alan J. Baileys, *Evangelical...*, *International Review of Mission*, October, 1996, 487.

over 2400 participants representing 135 denominations from 150 countries, met for re-evaluating their missionary theology and their relationship with the WCC's Ecumenical Movement.¹⁹ In all their discussions and writings, there was a sign of repentance. John Stott, a leading evangelical theologian and a New Testament scholar, presented in his paper,

We all know that during the last few years, especially between Uppsala and Bangkok, ecumenical-evangelical relations hardened into something like a confrontation. I have no wish to worsen the situation... We have some important lessons to learn from our ecumenical critics. Some of their rejection of our position is not a repudiation of biblical truth, but rather of our evangelical caricatures of it.²⁰

In this conference, evangelicals would seriously think through the position of the WCC with the help of the participants from the third world countries. The participants were greatly influenced by the Liberation theologies. The two-third world evangelicals raised a new evangelical voice that the Gospel should not be limited to spirituality without discipleship and they were successful to make a covenant with an affirmation that:

Evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. Lausanne made it clear that to discuss whether we should evangelize or promote social actions is worthless. They go together and are inseparable. We must not try to justify service for our neighbour by claiming that it will "help us" in our evangelism.²¹

The WCC was aware of the fact that a large proportion of its membership was constituted by evangelicals. It realized that the real issue was not evangelical versus ecumenical any more. The WCC's "World Mission and Evangelism" under the leadership of its director, Philip Potter, undertook a review of the WCC's role in evangelism and sensed that evangelism was a neglected vocation in its life. Therefore, a sincere effort was undertaken to see how the testimony of the Evangelicals could be integrated as essential elements of the ecumenical life. For a genuine self evaluation and amendment, it had examined three questions: i) Is evangelism in the center of the life and work of the Council? ii) What does the WCC mean when it speaks of evangelism? iii) What should be done to manifest more clearly the central concern of the WCC and its member churches for evangelism?²² John Stott, the leading evangelical, suggested some essential elements to be recovered in the life of the WCC, are as follows: i) To accept plainly the lostness of human beings in their sins, and that universalism is opposed to evangelism. ii) To have confidence in the truth, relevance and power of the Gospel of God. iii) To have convictions about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. iv) To have a sense of urgency about evangelism. v) To emphasize a personal knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ for the richness of everyone's own spiritual experience and witnessing.²³

On the other hand, evangelicals were also proposed by Bishop Mortimer Arias to take a holistic approach, which should include the whole Gospel for the whole human beings for

¹⁹ *International Review of Mission*..., 490.

²⁰ Alan J. Baileys, *Evangelical...*, *International Review of Mission*, October, 1996, 490.

²¹ Norman E. Thomas (ed), *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1995), 144.

²² *Ecumenical Review*, No. 20, 1968, 171.

²³ T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh...*, 117.

the whole world. He suggested not to reduce the concept of evangelism only to “saving souls,” or only to involve in service or social action. One of his most influencing convictions was that,

The proclamation of the Good News is not limited to the transmission of the content of the Gospel and of the Christian doctrine, but that loving, quiet, and respectful participation in the life of our neighbours, a readiness to help and to be involved in their everyday concerns, belongs to the very essence of proclamation.²⁴

M.M. Thomas, at this point, declared that the WCC realized that the life and mission of the church need to be understood in the context of human issues in our present historical situation. The contemporary world is ready to listen to the Church’s interpretation of the human issues. But this interpretation should be presented within the context of the Church’s faith for the renewal of all things in and through Jesus Christ. In response to John Stott’s evangelical insistence on the priority of evangelism, M.M. Thomas responded that human beings are not isolated individuals, but they are in inevitable relationships with the social life and structures. If salvation from sin through divine forgiveness is to be genuinely personal, it must express itself in the renewal of these relations and structures. This renewal is the intrinsic part of conversion of the whole human being.²⁵ Thus, the mutual understanding and edification between the evangelicals and the ecumenicals helped them to come closer to each other.

Attempts at Convergence between the Evangelicals and the Ecumenicals

Gradually attempts were made for convergence between evangelicals and the ecumenicals. At this juncture, M. M. Thomas, the chairman of the Central Committee of the WCC, put forward a suggestion for a convergence, but not all evangelicals agreed with him, though the intention was heartily welcomed and appreciated. In the meanwhile, a church-centric view of mission had been developing in the ecumenical movement, and that was carefully criticized by a group of theologians in India during and after the Madras Conference in 1938. The group was known as the “re-thinking group,” which included Stanley Jones, P. Chenchiah and others. They pointed out that the institutional church was trying to usurp the place of the Gospel and the kingdom of God. Chenchiah wrote, as recorded by Robin Boyd, “Christianity took the wrong gradient when it left the Kingdom of God for the Church.”²⁶ Thereafter, the WCC became conscious of it, and in the later missionary conferences organized by WCC, the theme of the Kingdom of God was affirmed, such as, “Salvation Today” was the theme in Bangkok in 1972, “Your Kingdom Come” was in Melbourne Conference in 1980, and “Your Will Be Done” in San Antonio in 1989.²⁷ The reports of these conferences certainly talked about witnessing to the Kingdom, which declared that the Kingdom of God must give direction and shape to the activities of every church, particularly in the most important areas of worship, fellowship, learning, service and witness.²⁸ Hence,

²⁴ *International Review of Mission*, No. 257, January 1976, 38.

²⁵ T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh...*, 123.

²⁶ Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: CLS, 1969), p 159-160.

²⁷ *Your Kingdom Come*, Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism (Geneva: WCC, 1980), 8.

²⁸ *Your Kingdom Come...*, 30.

here is an occasion for us to look forward to Edinburgh 2010 with great joy and hope that the two different paths of ecumenicals and evangelicals have come nearer and their hindrances and opposed positions have been minimized. Suggestions began to come for better understanding and coordination between the two. There arose long awaited possibilities and directions for new partnership between the evangelicals and the ecumenicals.

New Partnership between the Evangelicals and the Ecumenicals

The ecumenicals began to accept the evangelicals as serious dialogue partners in Christian Mission instead of treating them as “problems.” Kiyoshi Seko pointed out,

A prevalent attitude among Ecumenicals is to dismiss them as “reactionary,” “fundamentalist,” “superstitious,” “other-worldly” (or “too worldly”), etc., or more concisely, anti-ecumenical, anti-social and anti-academic.... Thus, Evangelicals stayed outside the scope of “ecumenical radar for long, and not a great number of scholars and church leaders had seriously considered the coming impact of the immense popularity of Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism.²⁹

In fact, evangelicalism and Pentecostalism had grown rapidly and now they constitute the second largest group in the world (and the largest in USA) after Roman Catholicism. In Asia, Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and Federation of Asian Bishop’s Conference (FABC) have already begun to work in collaboration with the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia. Besides, WCC, along with the Vatican, has stepped into the Global Christian Forum, which is a remarkable progress in the ecumenical movement. It is significant that the evangelicals are also seriously thinking to bring all Christians together and deepen the fellowship among them for the unity and common witness. There is a greater openness among Pentecostals in the southern part of the world toward the ecumenical endeavours. Evangelicals have become keenly aware of the social implications of the Gospel. The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has declared at its General Assembly in 2001 that,

As a Global Christian community seeking to live in obedience to Scripture, we recognize the challenge of poverty across God’s world. We welcome the international initiative to halve world poverty by 2015, and pledge ourselves to do all we can, through our organizations and churches, to back this prayerful, practical action in our nations and communities.³⁰

The WEA, together with Micah Network, launched Micah Challenge, a global campaign to mobilize Christians in order to fulfill the UN Millennium Goals 2015. Through this, the Christians are challenged to explore and embrace an integral mission, which is a new understanding of Christ’s mission for the Church engaging herself in political advocacy with the poor communities. This, indeed, is a new step to envision a common witness between the evangelicals and ecumenicals.³¹

²⁹ Kiyoshi Seko, “An “Ecumenical” Response to the “Evangelical” Religiosity- Reconsidering Theology and Spirituality for the 21st Century,” *Journal of Theologies and Cultures in Asia*, vol. 7 & 8, 2008/2009, 205-206.

³⁰ Kiyoshi Seko, *An Ecumenical...*, 208.

³¹ Kiyoshi Seko, *An Ecumenical...*, 208.

Many scholars among the Evangelicals are now more open to the critical approach to the Scripture.³² As evangelicals have broadened their vision and mission, there is a call from the ecumenicals for ecumenicals to introspect and restore spiritual practices and the cultivation of personal intimacy with the divine,³³ for a more meaningful partnership with the evangelicals in joint endeavours of mission. This broadening of vision between them for integral mission paved the way for the dialogical approach in mission.

DIALOGICAL APPROACH IN MISSION

There was an increasing awareness in the Ecumenical Movement that Christians, in a pluralistic world, must go beyond considering people of other faiths as objects of Christian Missions and count them as partners in a global community confronting urgent issues like peace, justice, and the survival of humankind in the world. Dialogue, according to the Bible makes people relational, communitarian and this-worldly. In the light of this biblical approach, Christianity is not individualistic, non-relational and other-worldly.³⁴ In our context, the Asian Christian Theology has taken this dialogical approach seriously, having moved beyond the traditional doctrinal or denominational debates, transcended the barriers of fundamentalism and fanaticism and promoted ecumenical and dialogical theology.³⁵ This dialogical position began to search for new relationships between people of different faiths and ideologies.³⁶ From the Ajalton Conference in 1970, the dialogical strategy was thought to be initiated with new insights. Samartha writes, “With this consultation, dialogue made a provocative entry into the agenda of the World Council of Churches, and became a continuing ecumenical concern for the churches affiliated to the Council.”³⁷ Many evangelicals saw this dialogue programme as having taken away the missionary commitment and lead on to a syncretism. Russel Chandran of India defended the new approach saying that the search for human community with people of other faiths and dialogue with them is not only the consequence of human considerations of tolerance, religious harmony, and peace, but it is also deeply rooted in our confession of Jesus Christ. He felt that our knowledge and experience of Christ can be enriched by the response of the people of other faiths. Witnessing to Christ, for him, was a two way movement of mutual learning and enrichment.³⁸ Regarding the complaint on syncretism, Lynn A. de Silva of Sri Lanka argued that dialogue, far from leading to syncretism, is a safeguard against it, because in dialogue we get to know one another’s faith in depth. For him the real test of faith is the faith-in-relation.³⁹ The Nairobi Assembly in 1975 was certainly a set back,⁴⁰ but it did not stop the ecumenical movement

³² (See, for more information, Grant R. Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 42.2, 1999, 193-210.

³³ Kiyoshi Seko, *An Ecumenical...*, p 209-212.

³⁴ Somen Das, *Dharma of the Twenty-First Century* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1996), 141.

³⁵ Somen Das, *Dharma...*, 281-282.

³⁶ T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh...*, 208.

³⁷ Staley J. Samartha, *Between Two Cultures* (Geneva: WCC Publication, 1996), 49.

³⁸ David M. Paton, ed., *Breaking Barriers* (Nairobi: SPCK, 1975), 71.

³⁹ David M. Paton, *Breaking Barriers*, 72.

⁴⁰ It was a very indecisive Assembly, because it failed to give clear direction for future work. Samartha wrote, “While the representatives of churches gathered in Nairobi, had both the freedom and responsibility to raise questions fundamental to the integrity of the Christian faith, they took no notice of the considerable amount of work done from 1968 to 1978- the word of God studies, the various bilateral and multilateral meetings, and the serious theological reflections that had gone on, the reports of which are available in the form of books and

from its search for wider human community. A consultation was held under the leadership of Samartha in April 1977 at Chiang Mai, Thailand, which helped to overcome some of the pain and doubts after Nairobi, and gave certain direction to the continuing work of dialogue in community.⁴¹ Thereafter, a number of programmes in this area were organized by the CCA. As a preparation for the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991, a dialogue consultation prepared a document on the work of the Holy Spirit in the world with special reference to people of other living faiths.⁴² This dialogical approach in mission motivated the church and the communities to break the barriers of religious hatred and exclusivism and include inculturation of the Gospel.

“GOSPEL-INCULTURATION” APPROACH IN MISSION

The ecumenical discussion was not only on dialogue with people of other faiths, but it also included culture in general as the context for mission.⁴³ The Bangkok conference raised the issue of culture, and the Vancouver Assembly emphasized culture as the context for Christian Mission. The dialogue with people of other faiths didn't get any attention in the Vancouver Assembly 1983.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it emphasized the importance of the richness and variety of cultures. Gill recorded the report of the Assembly,

Culture is what holds community together, giving a common frame work of meaning. It is preserved in language, thought patterns, ways of life, attitudes and symbols and pre-suppositions, and is celebrated in Art, Music, Drama, Literature and the like. It constitutes the collective memory of people and the collective heritage which will be handed down to generations still to come.⁴⁵

The gospel message becomes a transforming power within the life of a community when it is expressed in the cultural forms in which the community understands itself. A number of important discussions took place on gospel and culture before Canberra Assembly in 1991. There was the Asian Mission Conference in Indonesia in 1990, organized by CCA and the WCC committee. At this Conference, Kim Yong-Bock of Korea in his key note address said that, “the peoples of Asia are the children of God. God the creator is God of the suffering and struggling peoples of Asia, no matter who they are in terms of religion, political ideology or cultural differences.”⁴⁶ The World Mission and Evangelism Conference of the WCC held in Salvador, Brazil in 1996 had focused on gospel and culture. Its Theme was, “Called to One Hope: Gospel in Diverse Cultures.” The report says that there is no way of being human without participating in culture. In the past, the gospel had been transmitted or imposed upon

articles.” A Hindu guest present at the Assembly disgustingly wrote, “It is the manner in which Jesus Christ is communicated that creates religious dissensions, and not Jesus Christ. It is the exclusive and imperial attitude of some Christians that threatens the human community; it has even alienated its own young people in the Christian world. If the faith and integrity of other persons are not respected, human community can at best be only a dream. (See Staley J. Samartha, *Between Two Cultures...*, 106-107).

⁴¹ T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh...*, 211.

⁴² Stanley J. Samartha, *Between Two Cultures...*, p 128.

⁴³ David Gill, (ed), *Gathered For Life (Official Report of the 6th Assembly)* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), 32.

⁴⁴ T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh...*, 213.

⁴⁵ David Gill, *Gathered For Life...*, 32.

⁴⁶ *Peoples of Asia, People of God*, Report of the Asian Mission Conference, 1989 (Christian Conference of Asia, 1990), 12-13.

the converts in the covering of the western culture. P.G. George felt that the reassertion of new cultural contexts for interpreting the Bible and doing theology is a search for freedom with new time and space. He also thought that the time and space so far have been shaped by a conquering and possessing civilization. Peoples of different cultures were denied their own time and space.⁴⁷ Duraisingh saw it as a shift in missionary thinking from colonial to post-colonial and Euro-centric to polycentric.⁴⁸ The conference stressed the creative activity of the Holy Spirit in all cultures. The subject of discussion was divided into four sections:

1. **Authentic Witness within each Culture**: People usually accepted Culture as something outside the Gospel and they wanted to confront and convert it by proclamation of the Gospel. Witnessing from within does not mean displacement or elimination of all that is not Christian in cultures, but renewal of cultures through the transforming work of the spirit.⁴⁹

2. **Mission and structural dimensions of culture**: Culture is not only a vehicle of meaning, but also a structure of symbols through which people express relations of power and status. It gives identity to people and groups as well as it defines community. On the other hand, marginalization has taken place through economic, political, cultural and religious forces in all societies. An African woman, Kanyoro, reported that African women are marginalized and their identities crushed because of their age, gender, caste, race and ethnicity. She mentioned that they have “unquestionably obeyed all that the society prescribes for them in the name of culture. Child marriages, female circumcision...whether useful or harmful, are imposed on African women simply because it is “our culture.”⁵⁰ The conference suggested that the Christian Mission has to do with identifying and even suffering with those whose identities have been denied.

3. **Local Congregations in Pluralistic Societies**: The local congregations are situated in, and always facing the presence of, plurality of cultures, tensions and conflicts arising out of the situation and they are to implement the transforming power of the gospel. The local congregation can play the role of “Inculturating the Gospel,” which is, making the gospel meaningful in its own context. The report suggested that it is necessary to impart relevant education for mission at various levels of the church, so that Christians may indeed live and witness to the inclusive communities of love and reconciliation.⁵¹

4. **One Gospel and Diverse Expressions**: In the present context, the gospel is being witnessed to more diverse languages and cultures than ever before. In the ecumenical movement the diversity is considered not as any hindrance, but as a gift from God. Cultural contextuality in Christian mission does not mean any isolated or self-contained expression of the gospel, but an affirmation of the gifts of each culture for the proclamation of the gospel. Mission is people’s corporate response to challenges of the gospel in constant dialogue with religious and cultural situations in which they live.

⁴⁷ Christopher Duraisingh, ed., *Called to One Hope: The Gospel in Diverse Cultures* (Geneva: WCC, 1998), 143.

⁴⁸ Christopher Duraisingh, *Called to One Hope...*, 194.

⁴⁹ Christopher Duraisingh, *Called to One Hope...*, 205.

⁵⁰ Christopher Duraisingh, *Called to One Hope...*, 104.

⁵¹ T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh...*, 225. (See also Allan Starling, (ed), *Seeds of Promise* (California: William Carey Library, 1981), 79-83.

It may be noted that the Conference was not unanimous on certain points, which are as follows: **i)** There is a conflict between the views that, on the one hand there is only one gospel derived from Jesus Christ and on the other, human understanding of the gospel varies in terms of the diverse cultural forms of it. **ii)** Instead of a non-dual relation between the gospel and culture, there is a dual relation that is, the gospel stands apart from the culture. It is said that the gospel challenges, endorses or transforms the cultures, while the cultures can give a clearer understanding of the gospel. The gospel neither becomes captive to a culture, nor becomes alienated from it, but each challenges and illuminates the other. **iii)** It was admitted that there is presence of God in societies, cultures and religions independent of the presence of a church, whereas the confession was made “we cannot point to any other salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God.” **iv)** There is an interrelationship between our commitment to witness to Christ and our determination to dialogue with people of other faiths and cultures, whereas the view was that this dialogue can be seen as preparation for the proclamation of the gospel, which may lead to open conflict with other religious traditions. **v)** The meaning of Christ and the Christian Gospel has to emerge in the process of an intercultural, interreligious communication, in the process of the so called “syncretism,” but syncretism was not favoured. **vi)** It also pointed out that peoples globally faced the destruction of their population by colonization and the degradation of their spirituality, which emphasize interconnectedness with nature and solidarity with the whole of creation.⁵²

FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN WITNESS TO PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

How can we be faithful to our Christian confession while we are open, adventurous and discerning in our encounter with representatives of other religions, is a fitting question to ask at this point. It calls us to search for some possible faithful Christian approaches for witnessing to people of other faiths. Along with the ongoing Dialogical and Gospel Inculturational approaches, I would like to note a few approaches that will be helpful for faithful Christian Witness among people of other faiths.

i) Inclusivistic Approach of Witness: In this approach people are open in acknowledging that there are elements of truth in other religions also, while believing that all elements of truth are fully revealed in Christ or Christianity. Gavin D’Costa writes, “This approach affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions, while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God.”⁵³ So, Christian men and women will have respect for all people of other faiths having salvation in them, while they believe that Christ is the only Saviour who is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God. The Christians owe the message of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ to every people. True witnessing is not one-way, but two-way. Christians need to become aware of the deepest convictions of their neighbours, while they are able to bear an authentic witness in a spirit of openness and trust with deepest commitment to Christ who calls others to himself.

⁵² K. Aleaz, *Theologies of Religions* (Calcutta: Moumita Publishers, 1998), 213-221.

⁵³ Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 80.

ii) Diakonic Approach of Witness: The word “Diakonic” derives from the Greek word *diakonia* meaning “ministry,” “service,” “help,” “support,” etc. Jesus said, “...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Accordingly, the early church gave importance to *diakonia*.⁵⁴ So the world-wide church and mission agencies from the beginning, have been taking the “Diakonic” ministry seriously for dialogue and involvements in social structures through various compassionate services in continuation with Jesus’ ministry of love, care, kindness and justice. *Diakonia* is in integral relationship with *dikaosune* implying “righteousness” and “justice.” The diakonic witness emphasizes on the righteousness and justice of God. This approach can be adventurous in and through effective interactions with people of other faiths. In a pluralistic country like India, hundreds of mission agencies have been witnessing through their diakonic services to people of other faiths and are experiencing meaningful interaction and transformation. The missionaries considered the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the basic means of bringing individual and social transformation.⁵⁵ Millions of people have been transformed by the transforming grace of Christ through such diakonic involvement.

iii) Ecumenical-Evangelical Approach of Witness: The two powerful approaches, Ecumenical and Evangelical, need to be seen and understood as integral. They both are engaged and helpful for meaningful and effective sharing of the Good News of God’s Kingdom in a pluralistic context. In this approach, it is humbly expected that the ecumenicals need to become more evangelical and the evangelicals need to be more ecumenical in their personal and social life and approach. Kiyoshi Seko presented a sharp comparison that the Evangelicals are:

Content about their religion and their personal relationship with God, and are ready to talk about it and share their experiences with others. Instead, “ecumenicals,” if not all of them, seem to be somewhat shy in this area. While it is understandable that they are often put off by an Evangelical talk, which seems to connect every little thing with God, Christ and one’s own salvation, it is equally understandable if Evangelicals are not impressed by Ecumenicals for not finding anything particularly Christian in their “socially-oriented” approach.⁵⁶

Though they may appear to be different, yet they have a common goal in their approaches, the goal of sharing in the Good News of God’s Kingdom. Hence, the combination of the rich experiences of both the approaches can create more meaningful and relevant scope of witness. A person balanced with these intrinsic characteristics may experimentally be called “Ecu-gelical,” who will imbibe both evangelical and liberal qualities to be faithful to Christian confession, as well as open and discerning in their encounter with people of other faiths.

iv) Christocentric Approach of Witness: One of the best approaches that one can be equipped with for meaningful witness in a pluralistic world is to have a Christocentric life

⁵⁴ Dipankar Haldar, *New Testament Revisited* (Raghabpur: Raghabpur Seva Niketan, 2008), 18-42.

⁵⁵ Pratap Chandra Gine, *The System of Elementary Education of the Serampore Mission* (Jorhat: D.R.Gine, 2001), 29.

⁵⁶ Kiyoshi Seko, An “Ecumenical” Response..., 209-210.

and approach. Christ represents and maintains a unique unity in the Triune God. In his theocentric approach, Jesus attempts to bring unity among all God's children, as John testifies, "...Jesus was about to die for the nation, not for the nation only, but to gather into **one** the dispersed children of God" (John 11: 51-52). As a dynamic and exemplary leader, Jesus Christ showed us how to relate to, and behave and work with people of diverse cultures, traditions and religions. He appreciated the goodness in the "other," mingled freely with people of all walks of life, showed mercy to all people equally, gave special attention to the poor, oppressed, marginalized and women who were in the periphery. He was intrinsically ecumenical, evangelical and dialogical. Therefore, a Christocentric approach can help us to have a faithful and meaningful encounter with people of other faiths.

CONCLUSION

As Christians, we confess that we have often tried to find the worst in others. We have often passed negative judgments upon other religions. We need to witness to our neighbours with humility, repentance and a spirit of happiness. God is at work constantly in many places and in many ways, which are beyond human understanding. We need to join hands with our neighbours to work together for enhancing freedom, peace, justice, love and mutual respect in all our communities. We Christians need to become even better Christians day by day. Hence, we need to transmit to our next generations the best teachings of our faith, centered in Christ; so that we may continue to be faithful, generations after generations, and we together gradually become more and more transformed and Christ-like.

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