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The World Church—Yesterday and Today

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I WANT in this article to accomplish three purposes. The first is to give a layman's view of the ecumenical movement. The second is to dwell on some of its significant background. The third is to make some comments on the present state and growth of the movement. In the course of this journey, I may make some guesses about the prospects and snags of the movement, always remembering that in this uncertain world, guesses are dangerous, even if dignified by the high-sounding title of prophecies.

Why is it that the ecumenical movement has a strong appeal to laymen, or, at least, ought to have? In the main it is because most men who are interested at all are more interested in Christianity than in the Churches. We live in times when the Christian faith is sharply challenged both as to its claims to revelation and its intellectual content, and as to its effectiveness in the lives of men as individuals and in society. The credentials of the Christian faith are not infrequently a subject for discussion among men with whom contact is frequent in business or leisure. At least, it is not difficult to turn the conversation in such ways that the topic comes under discussion and criticism, by no means always unfriendly criticism. But on the points on which discussion most often turns, the particular tenets of the different churches are largely irrelevant. They are not wholly so, and it is not difficult to show to an intelligent but uninformed person that the historical differences between the churches reflect divisions of thought and conviction which derive from vital insights about the nature of man, his relation to God, his Creator and Redeemer, and the relation of the State to religion and society.

But in the presence of the oppositions which Christianity has to face, these differences do seem *largely* irrelevant. Those who dwell on them to excess seem like watermen marking out the little channels for the pleasure yachts when the great fairways for the liners need charting and clearing. To those who hold the scientific view of the universe, who believe in the all-inclusive competence of unaided man to define the ends of his existence and choose the means to achieve them, these differences are of no account. To those who believe in the materialist interpretation of history and in the indefinite perfectibility of man along the path of progress, they seem to show a strange lack of proportion. So long as they are a major subject of ecclesiastical preoccupation, the witness of the Churches to the faith of the Church is bound to be impaired.

Therefore the divisions of the churches are a major obstacle to their evangelistic effectiveness. But this in itself is not a conclusive reason for assuming that they must not exist. If they correspond to really fundamental and necessary differences in our understanding of the faith they must remain, for, in the long run, nothing is gained by

ignoring truth for the sake of unity. The impatience of the layman, must, therefore, be limited by an appreciation of all that is valuable in the truths, witness and insights of the Churches. The ecumenical movement is a serious attempt to dig deeper into these very things, since those most immediately concerned with its theological studies are as determined to face the differences of the Churches, as they are to examine their Biblical and historical foundations, and to seek understanding by processes which conserve the true and essential, and minimise the irrelevant and non-essential. It follows, of course, that the ecumenical movement is an attempt to seek something new in the modern history of the Church, namely a unity which is not a uniformity, a pattern which is not in monochrome or a monotony.

If this attempt succeeds, the world may find in the Church something that it deeply and instinctively demands. It cannot find it in Christianity without a Church. All the evidence is that Christianity without the Church would wither away, since it would be bereft of the means of its fellowship and the corporate demonstration of its own life and witness to the powers and institutions of the world. The task to which the World Council of Churches has to contribute is a double one, to save the Church for the world, and the world for the Church. It is obvious that to undertake it otherwise than in humble dependence on the Holy Spirit would be folly and spiritual pride. It is a long and difficult task. The divisions of centuries are not bridged in months, and the alienation of the world from the Church is so great that before evangelism, in the normal sense, can be really effective, a patient labour of restoration of confidence has to be pursued largely by methods which will never reach the public eye or find the official approval of committees.

I

It is all to the good that the ecumenical movement owes a considerable debt to the missionary movement. It is hardly necessary to comment on the great missionary activity of the last 150 years by which the Church has become planted among the nations. Some of this Christian expansion has been primarily the accompaniment of the migrations of peoples, as in the case of the British Dominions, or the spread of Orthodoxy through Siberia to Japan. Much of it has been due to the persistent labours of men fired with evangelistic zeal who, not infrequently in the early years, had to suffer the criticism, or even sneers, of ecclesiastical potentates.

The contribution of the modern expansion of Christianity to the ecumenical movement has been various. Without the Younger Churches any world council of Churches would lose a significant part of its meaning. If Christianity in Asia or Africa had still to be represented largely by local missionary committees or foreign agents, the fellowship of the Churches of the world would be considerably weakened. Again, the connection between the ecumenical movement and the expansion of the faith will for a long time ensure that the essential task of evangelism will not be lost sight of. Evangelism is an urgent priority in Europe, where defection from the Church has been so marked in recent decades, and it may well be that we of the West can learn

important lessons from the witness of the Younger Churches. Next, it is of paramount significance that the Churches of Africa and the East should meet in equal fellowship with those of the West, because of the rise of the East in the modern world. China and India, the Netherlands Indies, Burma and other eastern states and territories are passing through great changes. A large proportion of the population of the world is in these countries, and no one can foretell just how the balance of relationship and the distribution of power between the nations will be affected. Finally, the missionary movement itself has made considerable adventures in ecumenical co-operation, the lessons of which are available for the larger experiment.

This needs a little more comment. The missionary societies or boards of different churches have been able to work closely together, mainly for three reasons. In the presence of non-Christian societies they have been very deeply impressed by the irrelevance of the divisions of Christendom. The magnitude of the total task made any thought of competition between them appear frankly absurd; and the needs of the nations constantly 'threw up' particular educational or medical or social opportunities which could be tackled best by joint action, and to which ecclesiastical distinctions had nothing to say. There is not a Methodist way of draining a marsh as against an Anglican one. Thus missionary co-operation was to some extent the imposition of external circumstances: unity of attack was demanded by the vastness of the enterprise. But this was not by any means a satisfactory position, and many missionaries have deeply felt the shame of the Church which arises directly from its divisions and obscures the completeness of its obedience. In general, missionary co-operation, and that which is illustrated in the national Christian Councils affiliated to the International Missionary Council, is a co-operation in the true and practical sense of the word. It is not co-ordination, and it is not unity. It is the doing of specific tasks in unison because they are tasks which all can better do together than each separately. Such co-operation is eminently practical.

But man cannot live by the practical alone. It was almost inevitable that such co-operation should sooner or later raise in forcible terms the relation of working together to believing, thinking, and, above all, worshipping and communicating together. Otherwise, practical co-operation would itself in due course create the frustration that it was in part designed to avoid. When men's actions point to deep motives, but these remain uncovered, there is always frustration. The situation becomes rather like the technique of alliances in war. Nations, that are otherwise 'strange bedfellows', fight together in a common emergency. But as soon as the release of pressure allows them to express untrammelled the principles of their own national life, they are bound to face an altogether new problem of unity.

It is the task of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to examine these matters. Section I of the Amsterdam Assembly dealt with them, and its report represents an advance over most previous statements of the sort for its candidness and clarity. But, having endeavoured to stress the importance of theological understanding, perhaps I may be excused for adding that

it is sometimes difficult for an ordinary man to keep patience with a theologian. These men talk as if all the world thought theology was worth studying. What is more peculiar, they talk at great length. Natural common sense would seem to say that as clergy are preachers, they are necessarily practised masters of concise, clear and succinct exposition. But this is not so. Most are dear men, but many turgid. The Amsterdam statement is an exception, making it particularly useful. Even so, some of the representatives of the Younger Churches were clearly somewhat restless. The divisions of the Western Churches, stated in theological terms, were little more to them than the reflection of a tempestuous and variegated history, which was not theirs. At least, if they were, indeed, indigenous churches let them create their own heresies, even if they had to produce specially trained theologians for the purpose.

This is by way of digression. It is the International Missionary Council which has expressed and advanced missionary co-operation. What then is to be done with the International Missionary Council now that the World Council of Churches has come into being? The problem has been solved on the principle of "Let 'em all come"; in other words both bodies are with us. This is stated in a formula which reads 'the World Council of Churches in association with the International Missionary Council', or, if you wish, 'the International Missionary Council in association with the World Council of Churches'. Clearly, human wisdom could hardly be more ingenious. But there is some reason in this polite partnership. If the I.M.C. were to merge with the W.C.C. then it is quite likely that the particular evangelistic problems of the Younger Churches, and of the great missions that work in close accord with them, would not get sufficient attention. Moreover, the I.M.C. is a Council of councils, and it is of the essence of the W.C.C. that it is a Council of churches, but this is a problem of organisation rather than of principles. So for the time being the two bodies will knock along together. The I.M.C. has the wider experience. The W.C.C., differently constituted as it is, can hardly be expected to develop with such restraint and sanity. The partnership will take time to work out, and the next step is hard to see. Meanwhile, the personalities on either side will pay homage to courtesy, and keep their counsel when it so suits them.

In addition to this missionary contribution, the W.C.C. has drawn its inspiration from two other sources. These are the movements known as 'Life and Work' and 'Faith and Order' which were promoted between the two world wars. Each had a major conference in 1937, the first being the Oxford Conference on 'Church, Community and State' and the second the Edinburgh Conference on Faith and Order. Prior to these conferences a meeting of representatives of the two movements was held at Westfield College in London when it was proposed that the interests of both should be combined in a new body to be directly representative of the Churches. Accordingly, a meeting was held at Utrecht in 1938 when a draft constitution was prepared for submission to the Churches and a provisional committee was established. Then came the war; communications were interrupted and further constitutional action was suspended. Nevertheless the war years

and the immediate post-war period threw up certain practical tasks which had to be tackled on the basis, so to speak, of provisional authority. These included the Department of Reconstruction and Inter-Church Aid ; work for prisoners of war and refugees ; the establishment of the Ecumenical Training Institute at Bossey, near Geneva; the formation of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs ; while the Study Department made extensive preparations for the First Assembly.

II

This, as is well known, was held at Amsterdam in August 1948. It was a gathering of well over a thousand persons, of whom, however, under 400 were appointed as full delegates of the Churches, on a system of numerical allocation which had been carefully worked out beforehand. The Church of England had twenty delegates. The list of Churches represented included most of the major Protestant and Anglican Churches of the world ; a number of the Orthodox and so-called Eastern Churches, such as the Churches of Greece and Ethiopia, and the Syrian Churches of India ; and certain of the Old Catholic Churches. Among those who had accepted invitations but were not represented were the Coptic Church of Egypt ; the Patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch ; and certain churches in Rumania, Yugoslavia and Poland. It had been hoped that the Russian Church would be present, but shortly before the Assembly a communication was received from the meeting of its Bishops in Moscow declining participation, but asking that the Patriarch be kept informed of progress. The letter explained that the Russian Church was bound to regard the World Council in its present form as a body more concerned with the acquisition of political and social influence than with the unity of Christendom. It had been decided to invite a certain number of unofficial Roman Catholic observers, but, at a later stage, the Holy Office announced that permission would not be granted to anyone to attend in such a capacity.

The major theme before the Assembly was ' Man's Disorder and God's Design ', a comprehensive portmanteau of a title which could hold almost anything. For the purposes of discussion, the Assembly broke up into four sections. The first dealt with the questions of faith and order that divide the churches ; the second with the evangelistic task of the Church ; the third with the task of the Church in a society puzzled by profound ideological divergencies and acute economic difficulties ; the fourth was devoted to the responsibilities of the Church in international affairs.

These main topics are, I understand, to be the subject of comment elsewhere in this issue. Therefore, it is unnecessary to deal with them here. But a few comparative impressions may be useful. On the whole it is, perhaps, the report of the third section that has been most extensively discussed, particularly in America. It refused to identify the Church with any particular political or economic system. Its criticisms of both *laissez faire* capitalism and of extreme state regimentation was resented in some quarters as implying that the Assembly was evading its responsibilities and pointing to a middle way which

did not exist or could only exist as a temporary solution. The section suffered, as, indeed, did other parts of the Assembly's work, from a relative absence of laymen experienced in these affairs. Nevertheless, its analysis of the evils of modern society commanded a wide degree of assent.

The first section defined the chief differences of faith and order of the churches and divided them into two main blocs of those who accepted the Catholic view of the ministry, Church and sacraments, and those who took the Protestant position, with important qualifications as to the sense in which those terms were used. There was a general feeling that these differences could not be transcended by a mere process of synthesis which meant little more than searching for a highest common factor. They required a deeper understanding of the reasons behind each view, an understanding which had to be laboriously sought each of the other.

The second section seemed to experience greater difficulty in finding agreement between members and securing that of the Assembly than any other. At first sight this seems strange, as the evangelistic task of the Church is commonly recognised to be of extreme urgency. But there are important differences in approach between the evangelistic outlook of, let us say, the Orthodox Churches and the Younger Churches. Moreover, although it is usual to observe that the Churches, the world over, are facing a common secularism, there is a special task, which is that of the Younger Churches facing a massive non-Christian environment which differs from the problem of Churches struggling to regain and extend their influence in a 'post-Christian' society. What men have not heard, they will sometimes unexpectedly heed; what they think they have heeded, they will not admit that they have not heard.

It is difficult for me to assess fairly the work of the fourth section. The debate was throughout lively and sometimes vehement. The pacifist position was vigorously argued, for the vehemence of pacifists contrasts curiously with the moderation that peace demands for its achievement. Some delegates felt strongly the betrayal of justice of Munich, 1938; others felt the shocking destructiveness of Hiroshima, 1945. This debate was largely carried on by American and British representatives, with a few quiet contributions from men who spoke out of experiences of the 'Resistance' in Europe. But in an Assembly experience does not necessarily weigh as much as eloquence. Perhaps the more valuable part of the Section's discussion was concerned with the international regulation of common interests, with the problems of sovereignty, with the definition and advancement of Human Rights, and the condemnation of totalitarianism, and of discrimination on grounds of race and colour. The Assembly adopted a carefully worked out declaration of religious liberty, and the resolutions passed have proved of decisive value in arguing the case for religious liberty at the Commission on Human Rights.

A vast deal of other business was transacted. A series of committees sat in the afternoons and handled miscellaneous subjects, as well as recommending the main form of the organisation of the Council, its membership, rules and budget. Indeed, the general feeling was that

the programme was overcrowded. But the Assembly was a constitutional body meeting for the first time. This necessarily meant that time had to be spent in approving the constitution, rules and main arrangements.

III

The year that has passed has confirmed in my own mind certain observations made at the time. The Assembly was a markedly ecclesiastical body. It had to be, for the churches, very naturally, have to be run by the clergy, but a more real sense of meeting between the Church and the world would have been achieved, had there been a larger lay representation. The time involved, however, makes a heavy demand on those who are not professional church workers, as, no doubt, it also does on these.

As providing a great occasion for collective worship, it may be doubted if the Assembly was all that could be desired. It was painfully obvious that not all could partake of Communion together, and those who could not invite others to their Communion naturally felt reluctant to accept invitations. So a common service of preparation for Holy Communion was the best we could manage. The daily services were held after the manner of different churches, and they were very skilfully arranged, in most instances with taste and with devotion. But whether the total result was very satisfying is an open question. However, these are more matters for the clergy to settle and the laity to accept. I think I should have preferred a group of services in the Anglican manner, a group in the Reformed, and so on, even if it meant that some traditions could not be represented until another Assembly.

The Assembly has probably remitted to the World Council too many things to do. They will be done, if means permit, but it does not follow that the doing of them will fulfil the best purposes of the Council. Restrained and cautious development is usually desirable for central bodies, for their main problem is to retain the confidence of their members. If this can only be done by a programme of action rather than unhurried cultivation, it frequently means that things are done for the sake of activity, and some good things are done of which the further effect, not to speak of the ultimate result, is not so good. But this is, in any case, a frustrating age, and we do not know how much of it remains to us.

Moreover, the problem of interesting the ordinary church member in the ecumenical movement remains. Ordinarily men concern themselves with what touches their self-interest, and this is usually true of the average man in the church, although not admitted in so many words. But it is also true that men are increasingly conscious of wider interests. If the quarrels between the nations mean bombs upon homes, then the quarrels become a matter of concern for everyone. Thus the world society comes home at home. It follows that the prospects of the universal Church should engage some of the attention of every Christian, for it is the universal Church that must challenge and contribute to a world society. To the general conviction that this is so, is due, no doubt, the appeal that the ecumenical movement has already made. There is considerable need and favourable opportunity to develop and deepen this appeal.

A warning of a different kind is also needed. A world fellowship of the churches easily gives the impression that Christianity is well established as a world religion. That it is established is well recognised, but the butter is spread pretty thin. The claims of the ecumenical movement should not be allowed to distract attention from local evangelism. A fellowship of stagnant or declining churches is itself liable to stagnate. It is one of the declared constitutional purposes of the World Council to support the churches in their task of evangelism. It is a corollary that the churches support the Council in its task of unity. But a due proportion must be observed.

The main governing body of the World Council is the Central Committee which consists of some 90 worthies elected by the Assembly, and meets once a year, with a small cloud of consultants and secretaries. It so met immediately after the Assembly and has recently (July 1949) assembled in Chichester under its chairman, the Bishop of Chichester. This occasion was an interesting one, as it provided an opportunity to estimate the Council's progress. A very high proportion of the members was present, including representatives from Ethiopia and Egypt, from China and Japan, with the usual contingents from the Continent, America and Great Britain.

Many reports came before the Committee, but the major debate which occupied a considerable proportion of its time was on the Churches' approach to international affairs. The principal point at issue was the situation created by discrimination against, and persecution of, the Churches behind the ' Iron Curtain '. There was much discussion of the nature of the policy being pursued, whether it was the conformity or the extermination of the Church. The general opinion was that it was the former ; the latter had been tried already in the U.S.S.R. and had not been wholly effective.

Eventually the Committee adopted a brief statement, mainly directed against the practice of totalitarianism of any kind. It also received and commended to the churches a longer summary of the main questions at issue in this conflict. Like all committees, this one chose to act entirely by pronouncement. It gave no instructions which might be helpful to those charged with handling these matters. It did not condescend to examine what were the most effective procedures. It did not ask if vastly greater resources were not necessary if real influence was to be exercised. It assumed that if the Churches made a pronouncement, the nations would take action. Such an assumption is pleasing to those who make it, and satisfactory to those who ignore it.

Bishop Berggrav, of Norway, was absent through illness, but had written to ask that the Committee should give special attention to the whole subject of the application of natural law to international affairs, as a basis on which the Churches could find common ground with the nations. This commended itself to the Committee ; it had in any case been decided to hold a conference on the subject in 1950. In my view, something of value, but not much, will come of this. Communism denies the very idea of the rational creature's participation in the divine law ; it has, therefore, no place for natural law. In Islam the law of the Koran and the will of the State are inextricably intermingled. It would be more reasonable in the confused world of

to-day to start at the other end, and, with the aid of competent lawyers, to examine the present state of international law and estimate the sources from which it derives its substance. There would then be a basis of relevance for the theologians' principles.

The Central Committee discussed the race problem, looked at the question of Germany, took stock of the fight to secure adequate drafts on Human Rights at the United Nations, and, in fact, clearly felt that a World Council of Churches ought to have something to say, perhaps even to do, in regard to international relations. They were right so to think, but wrong to suppose that the Churches were at present well equipped for this work. Nevertheless, it was a common observation that the report of Section IV of Amsterdam which, at the time, did not attract much comment, seemed to have *worn* better than some other reports of the Assembly.

The Committee received reports from all departments of the Council. Here reference can only be made to the presentation by Dr. Hendrik Kraemer of the work of the ecumenical conference centre at Bossey. Dr. Kraemer brought forward an interesting scheme for regional conferences of Christian laymen, to be held in different countries, in order to discuss the Christian task of the laity in the world in which they live. This should be a fruitful field in which different experiences can be valuably stated and compared. This preoccupation with the laity is symptomatic of the emptiness of the churches, but it is by no means unnecessary or unimportant. Laymen are in short supply; their market value is, therefore, high; and they must be suitably flattered and displayed. When they become plentiful their stock will fall.

The World Council of Churches is still a junior, but it expresses an old and deeply felt desire of many Christians and an intention to unite which I cannot believe to be altogether alien to the will of God for our day and time. What it does must be judged not only by the effectiveness of the deed in its simple purpose, but by the degree to which the people of God are brought together in the doing of it. But doing things together must not be a substitute for praying together and communicating together: this it can readily become in an age which honours the deed above the thought, and finds it difficult to believe that in life the former is only effectual when it expresses the latter. If this is not so, then life is certainly a succession of lunatic furies and fantastic gesticulations, signifying nothing. To the World Council we look (and not in vain) for better things, and things that accompany salvation.