



## HOW WORLD CHRISTIANITY SAVED THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT<sup>1</sup>

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### COMO O CRISTIANISMO MUNDIAL SALVOU O MOVIMENTO ECUMÊNICO

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#### Abstract:

The following article examines how the expansion of world Christianity in the course of the twentieth century contributed to change and renew the ecumenical movement. This article argues that an expanded notion of the *oikoumene* and the ecumenical which takes into account social, economic, and cultural differences is crucial for the future of the ecumenical movement. The article highlights the challenges faced by the modern ecumenical movement and examines its historical roots in eurocentric conceptions of mission and unity, which informed, among others, the World Missionary Congress in Edinburgh (1910), and its subsequent ramifications, including the 1916 Panama Congress on Christian Work in Latin America. Bringing attention to a decolonial shift in world Christianity that challenges the hegemonic approach to ecumenism, the article diachronically points concrete cases such as the Tambaram World Missionary Conference, Vatican II, the formation of EATWOT, the Global Christian Forum (GCF), and Pope Francis' declaration "Querida Amazonia" to illustrate an alternative ecumenical model impacted by what was once seen as the margins. By looking at these examples, the article attempts to show that the turn to the indigenous in world Christianity offers another possible ecumenical path, carved through an intercultural hermeneutics that decenters colonial Christendom, relocates the Christian loci of enunciation, and engages dialectically with multiple cultures, traditions, and religions as they manifest their own pretension to universal truth.

**Key Words:** World Christianity; Ecumenism; Interculturality; Indigenous; Decoloniality.

#### Resumo:

O presente artigo examina como a expansão do cristianismo mundial no decorrer do século XX contribuiu para mudar e renovar o movimento ecumênico. Este artigo argumenta que uma noção ampliada de *oikoumene* e do ecumênico, que considere as diferenças sociais, econômicas e culturais, é crucial para o futuro do movimento ecumênico. O artigo destaca os desafios enfrentados pelo movimento ecumênico moderno e examina suas raízes históricas em concepções eurocêntricas de missão e unidade que informa, entre outros, o Congresso Missionário Mundial em Edimburgo (1910) e suas ramificações subsequentes, incluindo o Congresso do Panamá sobre Trabalho Cristão na América Latina, em 1916. Trazendo atenção para uma mudança decolonial no Cristianismo mundial que desafia a abordagem hegemônica do ecumenismo, o artigo aponta diacronicamente para casos concretos como a Conferência Missionária Mundial de Tambaram, o Vaticano II, a formação da ASETT/EATWOT, o Fórum Cristão Global (FGCF) e o Papa Francisco 'declaração "Querida Amazônia" para ilustrar um modelo ecumênico alternativo impactado pelo que antes era

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visto como margens. Ao olhar para esses exemplos, o artigo mostra que o giro indígena no cristianismo mundial oferece outro caminho ecumênico possível, esculpido por uma hermenêutica intercultural que descentra a cristandade colonial, realoca os loci cristãos de enunciação e se engaja dialeticamente com múltiplas culturas, tradições e religiões à medida que manifestam sua própria pretensão à verdade universal.

**Palavras-Chave:** Cristianismo Mundial; Ecumenismo; Interculturalidade; Indígenas; Decolonialidade.

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## INTRODUÇÃO

The origins of world Christianity as a field of study are deeply interconnected with the ecumenical movement. Dale Irvin has made two important contributions to this conversation by arguing that (1) “As a field of study World Christianity has its historical roots in the disciplines of missions, ecumenics, and world religions,”<sup>3</sup> and by making the additional claim that (2) the phrase world Christianity could be seen as a rebranding of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement.<sup>4</sup> As he reminds us, Henry P. Van

Dusen, one of the great ecumenists of the twentieth century, used the expression “world Christianity” in his 1947 classic book *World Christianity: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, to advance the organic connection between Christian mission and Christian unity.<sup>5</sup> Considering these claims of connection between world Christianity and ecumenics, this article examines how the expansion of world Christianity in the course of the twentieth century contributed to change and even renew the ecumenical movement.

The reference to salvation in the title of this article is provocative and demands some explanation. Why did ecumenism need to be saved? From what? Why and how the development of world Christianity has come to help? What about the argument that the turn to world Christianity has in fact weakened ecumenical commitment? Is not the ecumenical movement in the midst of a crisis? These are some of the questions I will address in the following paragraphs.

## THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AS THE ECUMENICAL GOLDEN AGE

In the mid 1940s, Archbishop William Temple made the famous declaration that the ecumenical movement was “the great new fact of our era.”<sup>6</sup> At the time, ecumenism was indeed one of the most vibrant and necessary tasks in a century that had seen two world wars and in a world that was deeply fractured. The range and reach of that burgeoning movement would continue to expand at least for other three decades.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Uruguayan theologian Julio de Santa Ana spoke of the previous century as “*the time of ecumenism* in the history of Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> Both enthusiastic

<sup>3</sup> IRVIN, Dale. “World Christianity: An Introduction,” *Journal of World Christianity* 1/1 (2008): 1-26. p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> IRVIN, 2019, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> VAN DUSEN, Henry P. *World Christianity: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1947, as per IRVIN, 2019, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> TEMPLE, William. *The Church Looks Forward*. New York: Macmillan, 1944, 2. Cited in BURROWS, William R., GORNIC, Mark R. and MCLEAN, Janice A. *Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Works of Andrew F. Walls*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011. Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 2888.

<sup>7</sup> SANTA ANA, Julio de. “The Ecumenical Movement at the Crossroads,” *Student World*, 2003/1, p. 11-23. p. 11. [Emphasis is mine]

assessments reflected the important expansion and achievements of a relatively young From an ideal, an aspiration, a utopia nourished especially among young Christian leaders in the second half of the nineteenth century,<sup>8</sup> the ecumenical movement came of age between the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (1910) and the foundation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. By the second half of the century, it had formed solidly institutional structures based on the three main streams of the modern ecumenical work: Faith and Order, Life and Work, and the International Missionary Council.<sup>9</sup> Undeniably, ecumenism had become a worldwide reality.

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century ecumenical movement represented the peak of an important era in the history of Christianity. As John Mackay rightly stated, ecumenism was a child of the Protestant missionary movement and an expression of its success.<sup>10</sup> Like Temple, Mackay celebrated the missionary success. For the first time in history one could speak of Christianity as, in fact, a world religion.

The Edinburgh World Missionary Conference (1910) is considered by many the bedrock of the contemporary ecumenical movement. That conference was a moment of celebration and assessment of the Christian mission in all continents, with a focus on the least Christianized lands. Among its objectives was to extend Christendom once and for all throughout the world. Brian Stanley describes this evangelistic impetus driving that conference:

Edinburgh 1910 was conceived as a great deliberative council of the Church Protestant that would prepare its missionary armies to launch a concerted and final onslaught on the dark forces of heathendom that still ruled supreme beyond the frontiers of western Christendom.<sup>11</sup>

The centrality of western Christendom to that gathering and how it understood its mission is revealing. The conference that gave birth to the modern ecumenical movement was, at the end of the day, one of the final and decisive events of an era of western Christian expansionism. The unity it proposed to create was, therefore, culturally and epistemologically exclusionary, and its understanding of unity was shaped by the Christendom ecumenical project.

In 1964, Mackay articulated the argument for a science of the church universal to address the new global reality of the Christian faith. The Christian Church was now a worldwide phenomenon and should be conceived as such. Echoing William Temple's earlier celebratory tone, he stated:

A new reality has come to birth. For the first time in the life of mankind (*sic*) the Community of Christ, the Christian Church, can be found, albeit in nuclear form, in the remotest frontiers of human habitation. This community has hereby become "ecumenical" in the primitive, geographical meaning of that term. History is thus confronted with a new fact.<sup>12</sup>

While Mackay was right about the worldwide reach of Christianity, his rhetoric displayed a certain *naïveté* about the new challenges the recent expansion of Christianity presented to the

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- <sup>8</sup> I am referring particularly to movements such as the YMCA, YWCA, WSCF, and also the Sunday School Movement.
- <sup>9</sup> When the IMC was integrated into the WCC in 1961, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) was created to continue the strategic and programmatic work for world mission.
- <sup>10</sup> FEY, Harold C. (Ed.). *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, volume 2 (1948-1968)*. Eugene, OR: WIPF & STOCK, WCC Publications, 2004. p. 51.
- <sup>11</sup> STANLEY, Brian. *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Studies in the History of Christian Missions (SHCM)). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmann, 2009. Kindle Locations 168-169.
- <sup>12</sup> MACKAY, John. *Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Universal*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964, p. 8.

understanding of the “ecumenical.” Whereas he pointed towards a more expansive understanding of the *oikoumene*, he still missed the cultural and epistemological long-term implications of that event.

Despite all missionary misgivings, most of the growth Christianity experienced in the twentieth century took place in the global south, where the often called younger churches were beginning to stand on their own, particularly in the postwar. That emerging self-awareness among global south churches would impact the Church worldwide. Among other things, it led to the rise of new theologies (which many in the north Atlantic called “contextual”), and new Christian expressions that no longer depended on or were defined by the European denominational breaks of the past.

In fact, a number of those global south churches—particularly in parts of Asia and Africa—were not actually “younger.” Some of them could be traced to as far back as the fourth century. However, since the rise and spread of Islam starting in the seventh century, they became a religious minority in regions that once had been early centers of Christianity. In addition to that, as the epicenter of world Christianity moved to western Europe in the following centuries, many of those churches in the east and the south were ostracized. Little by little, European Christianity became the center and the standard for the rest of the world. The recent revitalization of the global south Christianities, among other things, challenges that eurocentric self-understanding of Christianity and Christian theology, defying, in particular the misguided perception of Christianity as a Western religion, in spite of the fact that all the modern European imperial powers self-identified as Christian. The boom of global South Christianities also shows that the efforts towards Christian unity worldwide need to take multiple kinds of difference—not only confessional, but also social, economic, and cultural—into account.

As these changes began to impact the life of Christian communities and institutions more broadly towards the end of the twentieth century, what had earlier been seen as a blossoming ecumenical era soon began to show signs of frustration and distrust, leading some to perceive the situation as an ecumenical crisis. Towards the end of the twentieth century, some ecumenical leaders and scholars even asked whether the ecumenical movement could still be a vital and significant force in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Was the ecumenical movement going through an “ecumenical winter?” If so, why? In the following paragraphs, I will show how the significant shifts which took place in world Christianity in the past century have impacted the ecumenical movement. While arguing for its continuous relevance—particularly in light of a world increasingly fractured and polarized—I suggest that an expanded notion of the *oikoumene* and the ecumenical is crucial for the renewal and efficacy of the ecumenical movement today.

## THE MODERN/COLONIAL RACIALIZED ORDERING OF THE WORLD

When the western missionary agencies met in Edinburgh in 1910 to discuss a collaborative strategy to evangelize the non-Christianized parts of the world—particularly in Africa and Asia—the dominant paradigm they were operating with was that of a Eurocentric Christianity. They could not anticipate the impact of what they called younger churches—or the non-Western churches—on the future of the Church universal (to recall Mackay). That operating paradigm had been evolving for

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<sup>13</sup> See KINNAMON, Michael. *Can a Renewal Movement be Renewed? Questions for the Future of Ecumenism*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014.

centuries—even though it was not always the mindset informing Christian expansion and movement across cultural and geographical borders.

As Todd Johnson and Sun Young Chung have shown, in the first centuries of the common era most Christians were not located in Europe. Christianity’s demographic epicenter at that time was located in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>14</sup> Since its inception, Christianity had been translated into a variety of languages and cultures in places as diverse as Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, and India. As it continued to expand towards the northern hemisphere, though, overtime a growing number of Christians were located in Europe. The Europeanization of Christianity reached its peak in the sixteenth century, when 92 percent of all Christians were now Europeans.<sup>15</sup>

In the centuries leading to that point, an important shift took place in the nature of Christianity. According to Enrique Dussel, European Christianity experienced a fundamental inversion in the fourth century, distancing itself from the earlier messianic Christianity born in the Middle East. Embraced by the Roman empire, it became a triumphant Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Whereas that earlier Middle Easterner Christianity evolved around a messiah resembling Isaiah’s image of the “suffering servant,” the triumphant Christianity that emerged in the fourth century advanced the image of the “*Pantokrator*: the all-powerful [God] of the Byzantine basilicas.” Dussel describes it as “the God who founded the Empire, in whose name the Roman armies confront slaves, the Germanics, the barbarians, the rebellious farmers, and the slaves that pretend to be free;” “a God of the oppressors;” and “an idol.”<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the fifteenth century, the once peripheric Latino-Germanic Christendom had expanded through the south of Europe—by the way of the Atlantic—to become the metropolis of the emerging colonial Christendom in the “New World.”<sup>18</sup> At this point, western Christianity and the European colonial project had merged.<sup>19</sup> The expansion of European colonial power and the beginning of the missionary era went hand-in-hand.

The assumption of the spiritual and cultural superiority of Western civilization over the colonized cultures and religions informed the modern missionary enterprise, forming what Diego Irarrazaval called “missionary colonialism.”<sup>20</sup> Most people living in the “darker nations of the world”<sup>21</sup> were seen as people without history and without religion. This was, in particular, the missionary perception of the African peoples and of the native peoples of the Americas.

The task of evangelization was understood as central to the civilizing mission. Conversely, the conquest was also seen as a Christian act. As Luis Rivera-Pagan notices, in his letter to the Spanish Crown in 1493 Christopher Columbus explained how he laid claim on the lands he encountered. For him, that was both “a juridical linguistic act and a liturgical enactment, a

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<sup>14</sup> JOHNSON, Todd M. and CHUNG, Sun Young. Tracking Global Christianity’s Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33-AD 2100. *International Review of Mission*, 93/369, p.166-181, 2004. p. 166.

<sup>15</sup> JOHNSON, 2004, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> DUSSEL, Enrique. Epistemological Decolonization of Theology. In: BARRETO, Raimundo and SIRVENT, Roberto (Eds.). *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019. p. 25-42. p. 27-28.

<sup>17</sup> DUSSEL, 2019, p. 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> DUSSEL, 2019, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> MIGNOLO, Walter. “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of Decoloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21/2-3 (2007): 449-514.

<sup>20</sup> IRRARAZAVAL, Diego. Mission within Cultures and Religions. *Exchange*, 30, no. 3, p. 229-234, 2001. p. 230.

<sup>21</sup> A reference to the racialization of the “Third World.” See PRASHAD, Vijay. *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World*. New York/London: The New Press, 2007.

ceremony, in which royal banners are displayed and some kind of religious ritual is performed (prayer, invocation of the divine name, erecting a cross) for it is in the name of God, and not only of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand that the event takes place.”<sup>22</sup> As Ondina and Justo Gonzalez correctly assert, “Columbus’s assumptions [...] [and] attitude reflected deeply held European views on how the world was ordered, the place of Europe in the world, and its responsibility to Christianize all whom it encountered.”<sup>23</sup>

In one way or another, the majority of the indigenous population who survived the conquest and the majority of enslaved Africans taken to Latin America were Christianized. The underlying assumption in that sort of evangelization was that those saved souls in racialized bodies would mimic the Western way of life. But even when they did, they still remained among “the marginal elements of the new society.”<sup>24</sup>

## WORLD CHRISTIANITY AS A DECOLONIAL PROJECT

While the history of Christianity in the non-western world has often been told through the lenses of western missionaries, the recent rise of world Christianity as a new field of study recovered the centrality of indigenous agency in Christian narratives, and recentered indigenous cultures, values, and traditions.<sup>25</sup> The reassessment of indigenous culture in this emerging field of study advances along with the efforts to overcome centuries of Eurocentric epistemic hegemony. The origins of this turn can be tracked back to the anti-colonialist struggles in Africa and Asia and the liberationist movements in Latin America and the Caribbean.

As Enrique Dussel has shown, the inversion of the messianic Christianity of Jesus was completed when metropolitan Christendom extended its reach to dominate “the oppressed colonies in the name of the gospel of the crucified one.” In other words, it “crucified the indigenous in the name of the one that was crucified.”<sup>26</sup> Its ultimate goal was “the ‘universalization’ of Christendom in the entire world.”<sup>27</sup> The Latino-Germanic Christendom, now turned into a colonial Christendom, was the basis for “the destructive modern utopia.” By contrast, the resilience and resurgence of the indigenous cultures of the south offers an alternative utopia, while challenging Christendom’s pretension to abstract universality. Thus, even if indirectly, one can connect the rise of world Christianity with the counter-colonial/decolonial project. In fact, the late Lamin Sanneh, one of the founders of this new field of study, tacitly admitted:

Under Christendom the basis and rationale for transmitting the gospel were colonial annexation and subjugation, with the church as an afterthought. Native lands and labor were expropriated, commercial and administrative agents appointed and deployed, mission stations set up, and church life and practice regulated. That way “Europeandom” as the faith and politics of early modern Europe spread abroad and was legitimized by the sacraments of the church. But with the shift into native languages, the logic of religious

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<sup>22</sup> RIVERA-PAGAN, Luis. *Essays from the Margins*. Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2015. p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> GONZALEZ, Ondina E. and GONZALEZ, Justo L. *Christianity in Latin America: A History*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008. p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> DUSSEL, Enrique. *A History of the Church in Latin America* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> For a more extensive treatment of this theme, see BARRETO, Raimundo. Decoloniality and Interculturality in World Christianity: A Latin American Perspective. In: FREDERIKS, Martha & NAGY, Dorottya (Eds.). *World Christianity: Methodological Considerations*. Theology and Mission in World Christianity. Leiden, NL: Brill, 2021. p. 65-91.

<sup>26</sup> DUSSEL, 2019, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> DUSSEL, 2019, p. 34.

conversion assumed an internal dynamic, with a sharp turn away from external direction and control. *Indigenizing the faith meant decolonizing Christian theology*, and membership of the fellowship implied spiritual home rule. World Christianity was thereby weaned of the political habits of Christendom, even though the mental habits die hard.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas colonial Christendom project presented an ecumenical vision that promoted a misguided approach to universalization, the turn to the indigenous in world Christianity offers another possible ecumenical path, carved through an intercultural hermeneutics that decenters colonial Christendom, relocates the Christian loci of enunciation, and engages dialectically with multiple cultures, traditions, and religions, enabling them to manifest their own pretension to universal truth. This is why the inversion of Christendom's inversions, to use Dussel's language, is important, since it derives from the resilience and resistance of those who continue to be crucified and whose pretension to universality has been repeatedly negated.

Although the academy has only noticed this revival of indigenous voices in the last few decades, we must see it as the latest culmination of the five-century old indigenous and African resistance. Contrary to the *tabula rasa* assumption of the colonizers, conversion to Christianity in Abya Yala most times did not entail the abandonment of indigenous or African cultures and spirituality. In some cases, conversion was an outward move, or a survival strategy. In other cases, while conversion to Christianity was sincere, it did not happen on the terms set by the missionaries. By indigenizing Christian symbols and images such as popular devotions to Mary (under local names such as Guadalupe and Aparecida) and Jesus (also connected to local names or titles), indigenous cultures and spirituality adapted and remained alive. In its encounters with indigenous cultures and religions Christianity often changed too. Evangelization was never a one-way process. By dislodging eurocentric Christianity and shifting the starting point to the indigenous, "Christendom-less" Christianities have emerged contesting the imposition of Christendom's hegemonizing truth.

## WORLD CHRISTIANITY AND ECUMENICAL TENSIONS

In the beginning of the twentieth-century, Christian mission was for the most part understood through eurocentric lenses. That was the dominant mindset when the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference was convened in 1910. Similarly, that was also the case in the 1916 Panama Congress on Christian work in Latin America. Concern for unity in both events was first and foremost for the sake of evangelization. Most participants in both events were missionaries. English was the official language in both gatherings—even though the gathering in Panama city was called to deliberate on Christian mission in a region where English was barely spoken. In the case of Edinburgh, representatives from the "unevangelized continents" were in attendance—Latin America was left out because it was viewed by the Anglicans as part of Christendom.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> SANNEH, Lamin. *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. p. 24. Italics mine.

<sup>29</sup> As Brian Stanley explains, the situation of the Pacific islands of Polynesia and Micronesia, and the Caribbean, was similar to that of Latin America. They "were all substantially excluded from the terms of reference of the conference on the grounds that they were, like Europe or North America, deemed to be part of the territorial entity known as Christendom, and hence beyond the horizons of Christian mission." STANLEY. *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Kindle Locations 279-281). The North American missionaries' disagreement with the assessment of the Christian status of Latin America and the Caribbean was at the root of the North American response that led to the formation of the Committee for Cooperation in Latin America, and the organization of the Panama Congress in 1916.

Most of the representatives from Africa and Asia in Edinburgh were white North American and European missionaries.<sup>30</sup> After all was said and done, the ecumenical vision informing the conference in Edinburgh did not challenge the Christendom project. On the contrary, it was mainly interested in addressing matters of concern to the Western churches. In the following decades, the ecumenical movement slowly became more dynamic and inclusive. The networks that were formed after Edinburgh made room for competing priorities and interests to work concomitantly through the incipient ecumenical structures. The International Missionary Council, the Life and Work Movement, and the Faith and Order Movement became key hubs housing the organizations forming the complex web that continue to characterize the ecumenical movement to this day. That multifaceted international structure was complemented and expanded through regional and national initiatives and the structures subsequently created on those levels.

Such developments, though, were not smooth. They took place amid many tensions. At least two competing ecumenical projects coexisted side-by-side and in tension with one another. On the one hand, Christendom ecumenism, the efforts towards the unity of the Christian Church based on the eurocentric assumption of universality—i.e., the universalization of its local biases—remained an important force. On the other hand, an alternative ecumenical aspiration rose from the life and faith of Christians living in multiple cultures and social contexts, particularly in formerly colonized countries. This renewed ecumenical spirit arose in tandem with the drastic demographic and cultural changes in world Christianity. Contrary to what many expected, the presence of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans in the ranks of “the Christian Church” did not simply represent an addition to Christendom. They infused the Christian churches with new stories, experiences, and concerns. Their contribution to shape the ecumenical movement increased overtime as more Asians, Africans and Latin Americans engaged more extensively with the ecumenical movement on the global stage. The World Missionary Conference the International Mission Council (IMC) organized in Tambaram, India, in 1938, show how the increasing tensions between these competing ecumenical visions in display. As Diana Eck notices, the organizers of this global meeting in Tambaram believed in the superiority of Christianity over other religions. The “great fact” they celebrated was the “discovery of a worldwide family of Christendom.”<sup>31</sup> Tambaram is often remembered in connection with Hendrik Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*.<sup>32</sup> As Eck asserts, “in preparation for that meeting, Kraemer, who had been a Dutch missionary in Indonesia and who, in 1937, returned to Leiden to take Brede Kristensen's chair in Comparative Religion, was asked to write a book discussing ‘the evangelical approach to the great non-Christian faiths.’”<sup>33</sup> Citing the minutes of an IMC meeting from 1936, Kraemer himself mentions what was expected from him: the book should state “the fundamental position of the Christian Church [...] towards other faiths, dealing in detail with the evangelistic approach to the great non-Christian faiths.” In other words, “Evangelism, or the witness of the Church in relation to the non-Christian faiths, has therefore to be the main concern of this book.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> According to Brian Stanley, “of the 1,215 official delegates, 509 were British, 491 were North American, 169 originated from continental Europe, 27 came from the white colonies of South Africa and Australasia, and only 19 were from the non-western or ‘majority’ world (18 of them from Asia).” STANLEY, 2009, Kindle Locations 270-272.

<sup>31</sup> ECK, Diana. The Religions and Tambaram: 1938 and 1988. *International Review of Mission*, 77/307, p. 375-389, 1988. p. 376. Here she cites an unnamed sermon by Bishop J. E. Lesslie Newbigin.

<sup>32</sup> KRAEMER, Hendrik. *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1938. This book was written at the request of the IMC to serve as a resource for the Tambaram Conference.

<sup>33</sup> ECK, 1988, p. 380.

<sup>34</sup> KRAEMER, 1938, p. v.



Because Kraemer's book gained so much attention, it is easy to forget "that there were many other voices in the Tambaram debate, some of which radically disagreed with Kraemer."<sup>35</sup> Tambaram was significantly more international than Edinburgh. According to Karl Hallencreutz, the Chinese delegation, led by Chin-yi Cheng, general secretary of the Church of Christ in China and deputy chairman of the International Missionary Council, had forty-eight members. The Indian delegation was even larger, with at least sixty-one members. Africa and Latin America were also represented.<sup>36</sup>

The significant number of delegates from the emerging "Third World" helped change the dynamic of the conversations. Besides the larger numbers, the credentials of many of those delegates were also important. Hallencreutz highlights those credentials as follows:

The most distinguished Chinese theologian in the delegation was T.C. Chao from Yenching University. [...] Bishop Azariah and the professors D.G. Moses and H. Sumitra qualified the Indian presence, Azariah in fact as fraternal delegate of Faith and Order. I do note with interest also that Pandeppi Chenchiah was part of the Indian delegation, while Professor P. D. Devanandan of United Theological College, Bangalore, was in charge of the stenographic staff. Three very distinguished members from Africa should be mentioned: The Rev. C.G. Baeta, the doyen of African theology, from Ghana, and Albert Lutuli and Miss Mina Soga from South Africa. There were twenty-three delegates from Latin America. Here I single out two: The Rev. A. Parajan, from Managua, and the Rev. Dr B.F. Stockwell, principal of what became ISEDET in Buenos Aires and father of the present director of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.<sup>37</sup>

M. M. Thomas, who would himself become a prominent Indian ecumenical voice in the second half of the twentieth-century, underscored the contrast between Edinburgh and Tambaram by mentioning that the Asian voice was hardly heard in the earlier gathering. As he underscored, "Edinburgh 1910 was almost totally a gathering of western missions and missionaries who took for granted the continuance of the western domination of Asia as a framework for mission."<sup>38</sup> By contrast, "Tambaram 1938 took place at a time when the churches of Asia were awakening to the need of a selfhood oriented to witnessing to Jesus Christ among Asian peoples who were themselves struggling for self-identity and for the renaissance of their nations in the world of nations."<sup>39</sup> The Asian "march towards authentic Asian selfhood," was, therefore, crucial for the challenge some Asians posed to Kraemer's approach to other religions, and for a shift in the ecumenical approach to interfaith engagement. Most Asian participating in the Tambaram gathering did not see themselves as a simple addition to Western Christendom. On the contrary, they were primarily searching for their Asian-ness. For them, in order to be authentic Asian Christians, they needed to fully participate "in nation-building and dialogue with religions and secular faiths within that context."<sup>40</sup>

The coming-of-age of the churches of the global south intensified in the second half of the twentieth century. The efforts from previous decades culminated in the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. Despite the greater centralization the WCC brought to the

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<sup>35</sup> ECK, p. 380.

<sup>36</sup> HALLENCREUTZ, Karl F. Tambaram Revisited. *International Review of Mission*, 77/307, p. 347-359, 1988. p. 353. The internationalization of the ecumenical debate was a process in the making, which had also been noticed in the previous World Missionary Conference in Jerusalem (1928).

<sup>37</sup> HALLENCREUTZ, 1988, p. 353-354.

<sup>38</sup> THOMAS, M. M. An Assessment of Tambaram. *International Review of Mission*, 77/307, p. 390-397, 1988. p. 390.

<sup>39</sup> THOMAS, 1988, p. 390.

<sup>40</sup> THOMAS, 1988, p. 397.

coordination of the ecumenical movement on the international level, that did not prevent a number of regional and national initiatives from flourishing and impacting the international ecumenical agenda in a variety of ways. The expansion of ecumenical networks reached an important milestone when the Eastern Orthodox Churches joined the WCC in the early 1960s. New accommodations also became necessary with the post-Vatican II involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in ecumenical relations, particularly through bilateral dialogues, the WCC Commission on Faith and Order, and the Catholic participation in a number of National Councils of Churches. While the WCC became the most visible face of the ecumenical movement in the postwar period, one must not mistake it by the entire ecumenical movement. Much of what was accomplished in the second half of that century came to existence through the complex networks formed on the national, regional, and international levels.

The demographic configuration of world Christianity changed dramatically when the Christianities of the global south became more autonomous and self-conscious — a phenomenon that cannot be separated from the struggles for political and economic emancipation of formerly colonized nations. The rise of the global south agency on the international stage allowed for countless Christians in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean to see themselves through perspectives that were no longer significantly dependent on western missionary narratives. This shift in self-understanding and perspective has contributed to expand the nature of ‘the ecumenical’ and of the understanding of ecumenical relations per se.

As the meeting in Tambaram began to show, the ecumenism that emerged in the global South in the twentieth century was no longer as ecclesiocentric as that which resulted from the modern Protestant missions. The social, economic, political, and cultural demands that the newly formed nations were facing led many Christians in those contexts to consider new questions of identity and belonging. The association of Christianity and the western empires at the heart of Christendom provoked resentment among many leaders in the formerly colonized nations. Many of them perceived Christianity as the religion of colonialists, the religion of empire. For numerous Christian leaders in those nations, there was an urgent need to respond to that charge by showing that they were committed to participate in the building of the new nations.

The efforts to respond to such challenges were not uniform, varying from region to region and even from country to country. In fact, the internal tensions between the two competing ecumenical projects remained alive. Efforts to expand Christianity from the top down, and from a self-proclaimed center to the peripheries, continued to happen. Tensions between missionary agencies and national Christian leaders caused splits, and encouraged the rise of independent churches in the global south. Theological and ecclesiological initiatives rooted in the southern Christianities have contributed to significantly change the face of the ecumenical movement.

## **THE ECUMENICAL IMPACT OF THE THIRD WORLD**

The postwar world was polarized between the western capitalist empire (The First World), and the eastern communist empire (The Second World). The nations struggling for autonomy in Asia, Africa, and Latin America were expected to fall in line, siding with one of the two major blocks. While that ideological divide impacted them, a growing sense of the need for new spaces to coordinate their agency and advocate for specific interests gave birth to a number of articulations, conferences, and networks, which became known as the “Third World.” As Vijay Prashad

underscores, “The Third World was not a place. It was a project.”<sup>41</sup> What united this group of non-aligned nations was the anti-colonial struggle. Together, they created a number of organizations through which they articulated their hopes and demands. They also organized important conferences. “In Bandung (1955), Havana (1966), and elsewhere, these leaders crafted an ideology and a set of institutions to bear the hopes of their populations. The ‘Third World’ comprised these hopes and the institutions produced to carry them forward.”<sup>42</sup>

The Bandung Conference (1955) and two other follow-up gatherings, one in Cairo (1961) and other in Havana (1966) became the landmarks of the movement. The Third World project combined economic, political, and cultural concerns. On top of the demands for political autonomy on the state level and “political equality on the world level,” the Third World pushed for the creation of specific international platforms to address their demands, focusing particularly on the United Nations.<sup>43</sup> Moving beyond the political, they also advocated for “the redistribution of the world’s resources, a more dignified rate of return for the labor power of their people, and a shared acknowledgment of the heritage of science, technology, and culture.”<sup>44</sup>

As Prashad rightly points out, the Third World project was at the end of the day a battle for the future, the dream of a new world order. In their incessant struggle against colonialism, “the peoples of Africa, Asia [...] longed for dignity above all else, but also the basic necessities of life (land, peace, and freedom).”<sup>45</sup> While this collective struggle for autonomy, freedom, and liberation was not able to deliver the new world order they dreamed about, it became pervasively inspirational among people struggling for liberation anywhere in the world. It is not a coincidence that Martin Luther King Jr., in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1964, connected the ongoing African American antiracist struggle to the battles for independence taking place in Africa and Asia. For him, both were manifestations of a *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, which, according to him, had been in a crescendo in the previous decade.

Something within has reminded the Negro of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the *Zeitgeist*, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers in Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice.<sup>46</sup>

This *zeitgeist*, which I am identifying here with the Third World spirit, became also influential among a number of global south Christian leaders, leading them to dream of a Christian Bandung.<sup>47</sup> Such aspirations were particularly in display in ecumenical and Catholic international gatherings, which provided opportunities the articulation of their dreams of global solidarity with the poor and the formation of liberating international networks. The articulation of those liberating hopes impacted the ecumenical movement on at least two fundamental levels: (1) Its agenda and priorities; and (2) its self-understanding and structures. While one can see the impact of the “Third

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<sup>41</sup> PRASHAD, Vijay. *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New Press People’s History). The New Press, 2007. Kindle Edition. Location 93 of 7821.

<sup>42</sup> PRASHAD, 2007, Location 93 of 7821.

<sup>43</sup> PRASHAD, 2007, Location 105.

<sup>44</sup> PRASHAD, 2007, Location 115.

<sup>45</sup> PRASHAD, 2007, Location 93.

<sup>46</sup> KING, Martin. L. Jr. Martin Luther King Jr. – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Wed. 30 Dec 2020. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>>

<sup>47</sup> See BARRETO, Raimundo. Vatican II, Medellin, and Latin American Ecumenism: a Brazilian Protestant Perspective. *Journal of World Christianity*, 9/2, p. 187-202, 2019.

World” spirit upon the ecumenical agenda and priorities in a variety of ways, including its impact on theology per se,<sup>48</sup> in what follows I will focus on how it impacted some important events.

One must not take the impact of world Christianity on the ecumenical movement for granted. Its influence on the agenda of the ecumenical movement derives from the insistent efforts on the part of African, Asian, and Latin American ecumenical leaders to bring the concerns and demands from their people to the fore. M. M. Thomas, one of those global south actors in this process, brought attention to “the need for ecumenism to be concerned with the ethos and structure of the emerging world community,” affirming that the existing ecumenical structures of his time giving expression to that idea are “very rudimentary.”<sup>49</sup>

Amid heated debates and institutional struggles, the structures of a movement originally conceived in the modern Protestant era began to make room for the new concerns and challenges coming from the Third World. One moment when such an influence became amply evident was during the 1966 World Conference on Church and Society, held under the auspices of the WCC in Geneva. Among the described purposes of the conference, the following was listed:

[To examine] the liberation of peoples from various kinds of dominance, together with their new expectations of a fuller life; the growing division between the rich and the poor countries; and the conflicting interests and consequent power struggle of the nations in an increasingly interdependent world.<sup>50</sup>

According to Paul Abretch, the Executive Secretary of the WCC Department on Church and Society, this was the first meeting of the kind “to achieve an international and ecumenical balance, taking up not only European concerns but those of the ‘Third World’ as well.” In tandem, he mentioned the participation of representatives from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.<sup>51</sup> Those participants and their communities enormously contributed to shape the entire conference and its agenda.

Prior to that ecumenical conference, a somewhat similar situation took place during the Vatican II, a council meant to be ecumenical both in the geographical sense and in terms of its welcoming of representatives from other Christian churches—even though the non-Catholic participants attended the council only as observers. The number of delegates from the global south was by far the largest in any Catholic council. The participants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America used both their official platform and unofficial gatherings in-between meetings to lift up the need for the Church to stand in solidarity with the impoverished masses of the world. One of those voices was Cardinal Valerian Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay, who called for unity in social action, interpreting the Decree on Ecumenism<sup>52</sup> through the lenses of the service to the poor. For him, “the

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<sup>48</sup> Stephen Bevans’ conclusion that all theology is contextual is an example of how pervasive the Third World influence became in North Atlantic theological circles. In Bevans’ words, “There is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only contextual theology: feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-American theology, African theology, and so forth.” See BEVANS, Stephen B. *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002. p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> THOMAS, M. M. Ecumenism and the Cultural Revolution. *Religious Education*, 62/2, p. 93-97, 1967. p. 94.

<sup>50</sup> EVANS, Archibald A. The World Conference on Church and Society. *International Labour Review* 96/1 (1967): 24-42 (24)

<sup>51</sup> ABRETCH, Paul. Report Responses to the World Conference on Church and Society 1966. *The Ecumenical Review*, 20/4, p. 445-463, 1968. p. 460.

<sup>52</sup> Vatican Council II. Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (21 November 1964) At The Holy See. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html). Accessed on January 10, 2021.

well-nigh universal phenomenon of poverty and misery” was the common enemy of the Gospel, which Christians must unite in order to defeat.<sup>53</sup> His words represented the emerging understanding of ecumenism among the delegates from formerly colonized nations, heavily influenced by the Third World project, which was not ecclesiocentric. In fact, during the council, a group of bishops discussed the possibility of creating a coalition of “Third-World” Christians to stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed of the world and unite for their liberation. Brazilian Bishop Helder Camara described that effort as an aspiration for a “Christian Bandung.”<sup>54</sup>

Some of the bishops attending the Council gathered to form what became known as “the Church of the Poor” group. This group lobbied the council to turn the Catholic Church into a serving and poor Church.<sup>55</sup> In tandem, on November 16, 1965, a group of forty-nine bishops celebrated the Eucharist in the Catacombs of Saint Domitilla, where they firmed the *Pact of the Catacombs*, a life commitment to nurture a special sensibility to the poverty of the Church and the evangelization of the poor.<sup>56</sup> In the latter part of the council, Camara, a key participant in those efforts, urged Pope Paul VI to create a special secretariat to address the matter of hunger and impoverishment around the world.<sup>57</sup> In the end, the Pope did not form such a secretariat. He, nevertheless, created the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace and addressed the economic inequalities in the world in the post-council encyclical *Populorum Progression* (1967).<sup>58</sup> All these events evince how a group of bishops from the global south sought to impact the agenda and priorities of the Vatican Council II. Whereas the impact of the reception of Vatican II at the episcopal conference of Medellin (1968) is widely known, the extent to which the Council itself and the developments that followed thereafter were impacted by the “Third World” spirit deserves greater attention. The concern with the poor raised during the Vatican II expanded and deepened in Medellin (1968). In line with the Third World project, Medellin extended a word of hope to the oppressed while unabashedly denouncing “the international sin of colonialism.”<sup>59</sup>

The subsequent rise of numerous liberation theologies—including Latin American liberation theology, black liberation theology, Dalit theology, Minjung theology, and Womanist and Mujerista theologies— starting in the 1970s further impacted Christianity and Christian theology worldwide. Since then, we have also witnessed the emergence of indigenous or aboriginal theologies in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean, and Latin America, which offer a key toolkit, among other things, for intercultural and inter-religious dialogues. The intercultural and inter-religious interactions emerging in these contexts are in part responsible for the cultural and epistemological turns Christian thought and praxis have experienced in the past three decades.

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<sup>53</sup> GRACIAS, Valerian. *Serving the Poor Together*. In: KUNG, Hans and O’HANLON, Daniel. *Council Speeches of Vatican II*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1964, p. 202-205. p. 203.

<sup>54</sup> MARQUES, Luiz Carlos Luz. *As Circulares Conciliares de Dom Helder*. In: LUZ MARQUES, Luiz Carlos and DE ARAUJO FARIAS, Roberto (Eds.). *Dom Helder Camara: Circulares Conciliares Volume I*. Recife, Brazil: Companhia Editora de Pernambuco, 2008. p. 52-70. p. 68. For more on Camara’s articulation of this vision with Bishops from Asia and Africa, see BEOZZO, José Oscar. *Dom Helder Câmara e o Concílio Vaticano II*. In: ROCHA, Zildo (Ed.). *Helder, o Dom: Uma Vida que Marcou os Rumos da Igreja*. 2. ed. Petropolis: Brazil: Editora Vozes, 1999. p. 102-110. p. 106.

<sup>55</sup> BEOZZO, José Oscar. *O Pacto das Catacumbas: Por uma Igreja Servidora e Pobre*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2015. p. 11-12.

<sup>56</sup> BEOZZO, 2015, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> BEOZZO, 2008, p. 68.

<sup>58</sup> ABALOS, David. *The Medellin Conference*. *Cross Currents*, 19/2. p. 113-132, 1969. p. 113-114.

<sup>59</sup> NEELY, Alan. *Liberation Theology and the Poor: A Second Look*. *Missiology: An International Review*, 17/4, p. 387-404, 1989. p. 388.

As Anibal Quijano points out, epistemological decolonization “clear[s] the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality”.<sup>60</sup> The move from totalizing universality to intercultural universality requires the liberation of “intercultural communication from the prison of coloniality” to the extent that all peoples are free “to choose, individually or collectively, such relations.”<sup>61</sup> In recent decades, Latin Americans have approached interculturality through the lenses of decoloniality to develop a liberating decolonial interculturality that takes power disparities—the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being—into account, thus turning intercultural relations into a liberating praxis.

Such liberating interculturality impact the study and self-understanding of Christianity, which can no longer be understood apart from its relationships with other religions/traditions. In Latin America, this new emphasis has led to a historiographical shift—from a focus on ecclesiastical history to a history of religions.<sup>62</sup>

The relocation of previously ignored and sometimes suppressed theological voices to the centerstage of contemporary ecumenical debates allows for what used to be the peripheries of Eurocentric modern Christianity not only to fuel fresh agendas but also to propose alternative ways of being Christian—and of being human—in the world.<sup>63</sup> The impact of world Christianity on ecumenical structures and conversations has triggered a broader sharing of previously unheard, overlooked, and unexplored Christian stories; narratives that enrich and expand Christian self-understanding in the contemporary world, making room for creative reconstructions and reinventions of religious identities. Such a move dislodges the hegemonic status of western rationality, legitimizing what Latin American decolonial thinkers call *otros saberes*, forms of knowing an knowledge deeply connected to the experiences and histories of the subaltern. In other words, a liberating interculturality privileges the interweaving of different rationalities, emphasizing respect, solidarity, conviviality, dialogue, and collaboration, without overlooking matters of cultural asymmetry and injustice.<sup>64</sup>

It is not enough for subaltern communities to be able to tell their own stories. Of equal importance is the task of resituating themselves vis-à-vis hegemonic narratives, which, if unchecked, will continue to promote and increase epistemological and cultural disparities. That is why, in contrast to those who see the ecumenical movement as passé, this article insists on the continued significance of a modified and expanded ecumenical ideal, which is intercultural and decolonial in nature, privileging the voices and experiences of previously ostracized Christianities (and traditional religions), and building its pretension to universality dialogically and interculturally. As Enrique Dussel has suggested, the Global South—a rebranding of the Third World—must claim protagonism in designing new methods and advancing a new agenda for an intercultural dialogue “that is critical of and goes beyond the European ‘I’ which, by virtue of its colonial history, has asserted itself as the universal standard of humanity and philosophy.”<sup>65</sup> Such a dialogue has its starting point among the formerly colonized peoples, their traditions and stories.

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<sup>60</sup> QUIJANO, Anibal. Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality. *Cultural Studies*, 21/2-3, p. 168-178, 2007. p. 177.

<sup>61</sup> QUIJANO, 2007, p. 178.

<sup>62</sup> For more on this topic, see BARRETO, 2021, p. 65-91.

<sup>63</sup> AGUILAR, Mario I. “Public Theology from the Periphery: Victims and Theologians.” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1, p. 321-337, 2007. p. 324.

<sup>64</sup> ZWETSCH, Roberto E. (2015). Apresentação. In: ZWETSCH, Roberto E. (Ed.). *Conviver. Ensaios Para uma Teologia Intercultural Latino-Americana*. S. Leopoldo, Brazil: Editora Sinodal/EST, 2015. p 17-23. p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> DUSSEL, Enrique. Agenda for a South-South Philosophical Dialogue. *Human Architecture*, 11/1, p. 3-18, 2013. p. 3.

## CHANGING AND RENEWING ECUMENICAL STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONS

The rise of new subjects in the ecumenical movement created new ecumenical networks and renewed existing ones. One of the most significant of those networks, particularly in terms of facilitating south-south ecumenical interactions, was EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), formed in 1977.<sup>66</sup> EATWOT can be credited with enabling much of the theological exchange and cross-fertilization among Asian, African, and Latin American theologies in the past forty years. In 2005, another similar network, the World Forum on Theology and Liberation (WFTL), was formed in close collaboration with the World Social Forum (WSF). Its initial task in its first meeting, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, was to articulate the hope for a better world proposed in the WSF slogan “Another World is Possible” in theological terms.<sup>67</sup> These networks formed by individuals deeply rooted in grassroots movements, churches, and faith-based organizations exemplify the multitude of similar ecumenical and interfaith networks formed on the international, national and local levels. They are among the first Christian faces people living in distress as victims of structural violence encounter in different parts of the world. In many ways, they represent the new shapes and forms of ecumenicity in the world Christian era.<sup>68</sup>

A final example of ongoing efforts to expand the ecumenical table comes from an initiative involving the WCC, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the Vatican, and the Pan-Orthodox Council. The Global Christian Forum (GCF) was formed in 2007 as an attempt to bring representatives not only of the major institutions sponsoring the initiative but also of independent Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian leaders who have grown suspicious of the ecumenical movement closer to one another. The formation of the GCF as a less-structured ecumenical space, sponsored but not controlled by the World Council of Churches, has proven to be an effective way to bring more representatives of independent churches, especially the ones in the global south, to

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<sup>66</sup> JOSEPH, M. P. *Theologies of the Non-person: The Formative Years of EATWOT*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. ix.

<sup>67</sup> TOMITA, Luiza E. Brief Historical Introduction to the World Forum on Theology and Liberation. In: BOODOO, Gerald (Ed.). *Religion, Human Dignity and Liberation*. Sao Leopoldo, Brazil: Oikos, 2016. p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Numerous ecumenical and inter-religious forums and networks such as these have emerged in recent decades. For the sake of illustration, I will name two of those spaces formed only in the last decade, and which I have experienced in person. Churches Witnessing with Migrants (CWWM) is an ecumenical and interfaith network originated at the initiative of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, which has grown into an international, interfaith and tripartite group of migrants/refugees, migrant-serving institutions, and religious bodies focused on the plight of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, trafficking in persons—with focused attention to forced mobility or forced migration. It is a network that brings religious leaders, scholars, activists and migrants together, and which, although started in the global south, has brought North Atlantic churches such as the United Methodist Church and the American Baptist Churches onboard. These “older” churches are no longer at the center of the discussion, but have become participants on a rearranged ecumenical table. For more on the CWWM, see <http://nccphilippines.org/cwwm/>. On the regional level, I have also been following closely a Latin American ecumenical initiative called Red Continental Cristiana por la Paz (RECONPAZ), formed due to efforts led mainly by the Christian Ecumenical Council of Guatemala, but which has a focus on indigenous Christianities in the region, and gather people from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Chile, and Brazil. Like the CWWM, this is a fluidly structured network that brings voices from churches, social movements, and the academia together, decentering western hegemony without excluding its churches and individuals. Most of its activities address various forms of systemic violence that kill black and brown people in Latin America every single day. Global Ministries (the common missional witness of the Christian Church and the United Church of Christ in the US), the International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches, and the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America have joined the efforts of this indigenous ecumenical network as partners and sponsors. There are many ecumenical initiatives such as these flying under the radar of most ecumenists.

the ecumenical table.<sup>69</sup> I attended its third global assembly on April 24-27 in Bogota, Colombia. One of the images that repeatedly emerged in the plenary and small group discussions I attended was that of the GCF as an open window. That image highlights the nature of the forum as an open and creative space where fresh perspectives and ideas are welcome. Others spoke about it as a journey. In that common journey, we are all reminded that we don't know everything. Our traditions and perspectives are limited, and the call to discipleship means a call for openness, to be always a student or learner. The ecumenical journey is understood in that kind of space as one of mutual and continuous learning. It demands an attitude of openness and humility of all its participants.

The Forum's main methodology is storytelling. The conversations start with personal stories which enable mutual connection on the more fundamental level of our common humanity and shed new light on the basic aspects of our different perspectives on the Christian faith. The relational nature of ecumenical interactions in this setting is certainly one of the fresh contributions the Forum has brought to the ecumenical movement.

The testimonies shared in Bogota were not only personal but also represent collaborative efforts not as commonly found in institutional ecumenical spaces. One of the most moving stories shared during the gathering in Bogota came from an African Pentecostal pastor in the UK and a Taizé brother. They spoke about the evolving relationship and partnership between an African Pentecostal church in the diaspora and a French ecumenical monastic community. This sort of partnership illustrates the paradigmatic shift that world Christianity brings to the ecumenical movement. It contributes for ecumenical relations to develop beyond ecumenical institutions. The assembly also provided opportunities for regional gatherings. One of the participants in the Cone Sur regional group reminded his interlocutors that those stories shared during that assembly usually do not get the attention of the larger public, urging all to map local and regional similar initiatives in the spirit of the Global Christian Forum.

## IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Cuban-American historian Justo Gonzalez has argued for the resignification of the changes we are seeing nowadays in the cartography and the topography of Christian history.<sup>70</sup> Gonzalez refers not only to the need to revisit geographical maps, but especially to the mental maps that inform our thinking and the way we see the world. The demographic and cultural shifts world Christianity has gone through in the past fifty years demand new mental maps, which may help us move away from western captivity and embrace the rediscovered polycentric nature of world Christianity.

The rise of global south Christianities on the ecumenical scene has contributed to reinforce the understanding that ecumenism is not only about church unity. At the end of the day, ecumenism aims at the reconciliation of humankind and the interconnectedness of all life. Andrew Walls, one of the forerunners of world Christianity, contrasts the idea of ecumenism based on "confessional comprehensiveness" with an emerging ecumenical criterion based on "ethnic, cultural, and geographical comprehensiveness."<sup>71</sup> While acknowledging the remaining significance of the ecumenical movement, Walls rightly predicted that ecumenism in this century would "no longer

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<sup>69</sup> JONES, Sarah Rowland. *The Global Christian Forum, A Narrative History: 'Limuru, Manado and Onwards.'* *Transformation*, 30/4, p. 226–242, 2013.

<sup>70</sup> GONZALEZ, Justo. *The Changing Shape of Church History*. Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002. p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> WALLS, Andrew F. *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001. p. 57.



relate [exclusively] to confessional and denominational issues.” Instead, he said, “The great ecumenical issues will be about how African and Indian and Chinese and Korean and Hispanic and North American and European Christians can together make real the life of the body of Christ.”<sup>72</sup> Focusing on cultural differences, though, Walls did not address the socioeconomic disparities that divide humanity more than ever before.

The Third World movement and multiple theologies of liberation have tried to address that particular fracture, building on the long-standing prophetic tradition. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the most eloquent public theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, called upon those living in situation of privilege “to bridge the gulf between the rich minority and the poor majority.”<sup>73</sup> For him, the principle underlying concern for the poor was ecumenical; i.e., the interrelatedness of all life:

[T]he rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied in a single garment of destiny. All life is interrelated, and all men (*sic*) are interdependent. The agony of the poor diminishes the rich, and the salvation of the poor enlarges the rich. We are inevitably our brothers’ (*sic*) keepers because of the interrelated structure of reality.<sup>74</sup>

The efforts to stand in solidarity with the poor and combat systemic injustice are among the most important tasks for the contemporary ecumenical movement, and one of the reasons why we cannot let it go. The ecumenical movement remains a valuable source of human solidarity, rights advocacy, and peace and reconciliation around the world. Ecumenical accompaniment programs are more important than ever.

However, the ecumenism that came of age in the first half of the twentieth-century must change if wants to remain significant to current challenges and realities. Despite all its problems, there are signs that changes are on the way. Last year, the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region gathered at the request of Pope Francis to reassess the relationship between the Church and the peoples of the Amazon. The synod’s final document calls for “an integral conversion,” making listening to the cry of the poor and the cry of earth the starting point of a new pastoral journey. This call for a pastoral conversion demands not only full acknowledgement of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious reality of the Amazon,” but also “an open attitude to dialogue, fully recognizing the multiplicity of interlocutors,” including the indigenous peoples, the river dwellers, peasants and afro-descendants.<sup>75</sup>

In his response to the synod, Pope Francis acknowledged the colonial roots of the devastation of the Amazon environmental system and its peoples, and similarly called for “a radical change in attitude and for true openness to inter-religious and intercultural dialogue; one that fully recognizes all subjects, especially the indigenous peoples, the river dwellers, peasants and afro-descendants.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Wall, 2001, p. 69.

<sup>73</sup> KING, Martin Luther, Jr. The Quest for Peace and Justice, *Nobel Lecture*, Nobel Peace Prize, 1964. [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html). Accessed on Jan 10, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> King, 1964.

<sup>75</sup> Amazon Synod, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology –final document of the Synod of the Amazon*. <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> FRANCIS, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, “*Querida Amazonia*”, 12.02.2020. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/02/12/200212c.html#>. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

This apparent openness to conversion to those who have been othered hints towards the kind of engagement with global south theologies this article calls for. Francis himself is an Argentinian native. In his plea for a “social dialogue,” he resorts to “the preferential option on behalf of the poor, the marginalized and the excluded,” the widely known phrase from the 1979 CELAM conference in Puebla, bringing a priority born in Latin America to bear on the current task of the whole Church.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, in a nod to the rising Latin American *Teologia India*, described as “a theology with an Amazonian face, and popular piety” and developed in dialogue with “the indigenous world, its culture and spirituality,”<sup>78</sup> Francis reaffirms the need for an interculturality that truly values the indigenous peoples’ cultural identity prior to and apart from any interaction with Christianity or the west. Finally, in tune with the eco-theologies of the south, he reminds his readers that culture does not stand on its own. It is instead a part of the symbiosis that constitutes the broader environment. That is why the conversion he calls for must be also ecological.

This sweeping call for integral conversion has also an epistemological dimension. One of the most significant affirmations Pope Francis makes in *Querida Amazonia* is that the Church must follow the lead of the indigenous cosmologies and stop seeing the forest as a resource, perceiving it instead as a being or a collection of beings “with which we have to relate.” While these changes in discourse must be translated into the institutional life of the Church, these documents initiate the important task of drawing new mental maps to guide that path. What is most remarkable about these two documents, though, is not necessarily their contents, but the dialogical and inclusive process that produced them, which in itself reveals a pathway for increasing interculturality and change.

In the past couple of decades, many scholars have spoken about an ecumenical crisis or winter, based on the alleged decline of influence on the ecumenical movement in both church and society. While that understanding of an ecumenical crisis is not unwarranted, I hope this article has shown another face to the idea of a crisis, which at the end of the day can produce renewal to a movement that remains as needed as it was in the past century. The golden ecumenical era is usually associated with the years when the ecumenical movement was haunted by Christendom. The rise of world Christianity and the decoloniality the Third World project and its heirs sprang have contributed to an revision and expansion of the ecumenical ideal. While the existing ecumenical institutions will need to continue reinventing themselves in the years to come, ecumenism will remain an important factor in the foreseeable future. In order for the existing ecumenical structures to remain relevant to the new demands of our time, they must listen closely to, learn from, and partner with the fresh ecumenical initiatives taking in emerging networks around the world, with special attention to what is happening in the global south and its diasporic communities.

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<sup>77</sup> FRANCIS, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> AMAZON SYNOD, 2020.

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