

# Andrzej P. Perzyński

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## Unity and Mission the Origins of Ecumenical Movement

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KS. ANDRZEJ P. PERZYŃSKI

*Wydział Teologiczny*

*Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego*

*Warszawa*

## UNITY AND MISSION THE ORIGINS OF ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

**Key words:** a divided Christianity, ecumenical movement, unity, mission

1. Introduction. 2. The institutional face of ecumenism. 3. Ecumenism and Orthodoxy.  
4. Vatican II and Roman Catholic ecumenism. 5. Engaging in dialogue. 6. The hope of ecumenism.  
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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is no mere historical accident that the beginnings of the modern ecumenical movement in the nineteenth century coincided with the beginnings of the modern missions movement. The missionaries quickly concluded that taking a divided Christianity to the mission field harmed their witness for Christ, and some of them issued the earliest modern calls for ecumenical convergence. In 1806, William Carey (1761–1834), a Baptist missionary to India, proposed that „a general association of all denominations of Christians from the four quarters of the Earth” meet each decade at the Cape of God Hope<sup>1</sup>. Carey’s dream was realized in part by the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910 that led to the founding of the ongoing International Missionary Conference in 1921. While these gatherings were initially limited to Protestants, they served as the nucleus for what became the primary institutional expression of the worldwide ecumenical movement<sup>2</sup>.

One of the speakers at the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference was an Episcopal missionary to the Philippines from the United States, Bishop Charles Brent (1862–1929). Bishop Brent urged conference participants not to be content with me-

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<sup>1</sup> William Carey to Andrew Fuller, Calcutta, May 15, 1806; quoted in: T.F. George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey*, Birmingham: New Hope 1991, 163.

<sup>2</sup> K. Karski, *Od Edynburga do Porto Alegre. Sto lat dążeń ekumenicznych* (From Edinburgh to Porto Alegre. A Hundred Years of Ecumenical Aspirations), Warszawa: Chrześcijańska Akademia Teologiczna 2007.

rely seeking greater cooperation in missions among the denominations, for visible unity would require that divisive issues of doctrine and church order be addressed. He called for the creation of an international commission devoted to the ecumenical study of the matters of faith and order that presently divided the churches, and he personally made this proposal to representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and the various Protestant communions<sup>3</sup>.

In 1927, a World Conference on Faith and Order held its initial meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland, with representatives of all major Christian communions, including the Orthodox, but with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church. Two years earlier, the Conference on Life and Work had been founded in Stockholm, Sweden, to seek worldwide cooperation between the churches in addressing social issues. A young Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), whose books *The cost of Discipleship*, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and *Life Together* are now regarded as devotional classics, was one of the early participants in the Life and Work movement<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. THE INSTITUTIONAL FACE OF ECUMENISM

These three complementary expressions of the worldwide ecumenical movement-co-operation in mission, joint exploration of doctrine and church order, and solidarity in social action-ultimately coalesced in a unified institutional embodiment of the quest for Christian unity. In 1948 the Life and Work and Faith and Order movements joined to form the World Council of Churches and in 1961 the International Missionary Conference also merged into the WCC. The ecumenical movement has been its healthiest when these three emphases – mission, doctrine, and social justice – have gone hand in hand. It has suffered whenever any one of those emphases has dominated to the neglect of the others.

The third Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, India, in 1961 also issued what is now regarded as the classic definition of the visible unity sought by the ecumenical movement. Drafted by Methodist theologian Albert Outler (1908–1989), the statement reads:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Savior are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully-committed fellowship, holding the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages, in such wise and that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> A.C. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent, Crusader for Christian Unity*, Westminster–Philadelphia 1948.

<sup>4</sup> E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, transl. E. Mosbacher and others, New York: Harper & Row 1970, 146–153.

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Section on Unity*, in: *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1961*, New York: Association 1962, 116.

The New Delhi definition is now commonly embraced as the best concise explanation of the goal of the ecumenical movement: a visible unity in which all baptized Christians – in every place there are Christians – fully belong to one another in a covenanted community that is both local and worldwide in which they share the historic faith of the church, are able to share in the celebration of the Eucharist together, jointly engage in mission and service, accept the ministers and members of one another's churches as their own, and speak prophetic words to the world with a unified voice whenever God calls them to do so.

### 3. ECUMENISM AND ORTHODOXY

The general view among Orthodox participants in the ecumenical movement is that their contribution has been highly significant. At present, twenty-one Orthodox Churches are full members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and officially take part in the international ecumenical movement. The Churches of Georgia and Bulgaria are exceptions. Of this number, fifteen are Eastern Orthodox and six belong to the family of Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches.

From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Eastern Orthodox have been aware of the issue of the unity of the church to which the encyclical of Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III in 1902 alerted them<sup>6</sup>. His letter was written as a response to the international congratulations he received on the occasion of his enthronements ecumenical patriarch. It speaks of his desire for union with all who share faith in Christ and talks of it as the subject of his constant prayer and supplication. The letter also sets out frankly how the differing doctrinal positions of the western churches create a problem on the way towards any hope of restored unity. Thus, from the very beginning of the Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement, the prevailing theme has been a desire for unity in spite of the challenges that obvious and well-known ecclesiological differences between the churches bring to the fore. In facing up to this challenge of "difference" it soon becomes obvious how the Orthodox ecumenist needs discernment to tell apart legitimate differences of church practice (*Diaphora*) from differences which are "divisive" (*Diairesis*).

Even more significant and overtly ecumenical in tone was the encyclical of Ecumenical Patriarch Germanos, issued in 1920, which was addressed "To the Churches of Christ Everywhere" and which announced its theme in the epigraph taken from the First Letter of Peter: "Love one another earnestly from the heart" (1 Pet. 1, 22)<sup>7</sup>. This encyclical is considered foundational to the ecumenical movement in general, setting forth the very notion of creating a "league" or fellowship of churches. It speaks about the "blessed union" of the churches that awaits the faithful and urges all the different traditions to engage in joint study of the central issues surrounding the concept of reunion. The letter suggests that, as a first step towards union, the foste-

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement: Documents and Statements*, ed. by C.G. Patelos, Geneva: WCC 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. G. Limouris, *Orthodox visions of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports on the Ecumenical Movement 1902–1992*, Geneva: WCC 1994.

ring of contacts between the churches is a most important thing. When the first such contacts were initiated, two prerequisites were asked to be kept in mind: first, “the removal and abolition of all the mutual mistrust and bitterness”; and secondly, that “love should be rekindled and strengthened among the churches”. Germanos then went on to list some eleven fundamental points as a working proposal and agenda for future collaboration among the churches: a list which indeed became the basis of the programmatic work of the WCC at the time of its creation in 1948. Then, only three Orthodox churches participated: the ecumenical patriarch himself, the Church of Cyprus, and the Church of Greece; though the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate in the USA sent representatives.

The spirit of Germanos’ influential agenda was the mutual enrichment of divided Christians through the sharing of experience, the common study of existing problems, and the charitable recognition of one another at various levels. In its final paragraph the encyclical referred to the fellowships it envisaged growing between the churches by using the Greek word *Koinonia*, which has since become a landmark, a focal idea, in the history of the worldwide ecumenical movement. It was on this encyclical that W. A. Visser’t Hooft, the first general secretary of the WCC, commented: “With its 1920 encyclical, Constantinople rang the bell of our assembling”.

A great deal of Orthodox theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has thus been written in the context of lively encounter with the non-Orthodox, which is especially true of the Orthodox theologians of the diaspora and also beyond (Lossky, Florovsky, Meyendorff, Nissiotis and others). There was a question of some urgency at first in terms of the self-defense and self-explanation of the Orthodox to the wider world (Western Europe and North America) which knew very little or nothing about Orthodox Church. Ecumenical Orthodox theologians of our times, whether from traditional Orthodox countries or not (Zizioulas, Clapsis, Limouris, Alfeyev, and Bouteneff, for example), address theological issues in their ecumenical settings, proclaiming the teaching of the Orthodox Church but also sharing the riches of their traditions with the rest of Christendom.

#### 4. VATICAN II AND ROMAN CATHOLIC ECUMENISM

We’re still a long way from the sort of visible unity envisioned by the New Delhi definition. But it became a less unrealistic hope when the Roman Catholic Church officially embraced the worldwide ecumenical movement at the Second Vatican Council that convened from 1962 to 1965. In preparation for the Council, the Vatican established a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and extended invitations to other churches and denominations to send official observers. One of the most significant developments of Vatican II was the unanimous approval on November 21, 1964, of the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Reintegratio*. After acknowledging that “division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature,” the decree recognizes the modern ecumenical movement that began among Protestants as nothing less than the work of God:

In recent times more than ever before, He has been rousing divided Christians to remorse over their divisions and to a longing for unity. Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day the movement, fostered by grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians... [A]lmost everyone regards the body in which he has heard the Gospel as his Church and indeed, God's Church. All however, though in different ways, long for the one visible Church of God, a Church truly universal and set forth into the world that the world may be converted to the Gospel and so be saved, to the glory of God<sup>8</sup>.

This *Decree on Ecumenism* was the major twentieth-century turning point in the progress of the quest for Christian unity<sup>9</sup>. It acknowledged that all churches, including the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI (1927–) have in fact re-affirmed what the *Decree on Ecumenism* teaches Roman Catholics about non-Catholic Christians and their churches<sup>10</sup>. The degree called for all Catholics, clergy and laity alike, to learn about and learn from the distinctive gifts that the other denominational traditions contribute to the body of Christ. It irrevocably committed the Roman Catholic Church to participation in various forms of the worldwide ecumenical movement, and thus it also opened the way for many other denominations to follow through on their own ecumenical convictions by entering into formal dialogue with Roman Catholicism.

## 5. ENGAGING IN DIALOGUE

The changed ecumenical situation that followed Vatican II fostered numerous bilateral and multilateral dialogues between representatives of various denominations. Over the past four decades these dialogues have produced a rich body of agreed statements that document strides toward unity in faith and practice along with that warrant future dialogue<sup>11</sup>. The Baptist World Alliance, has engaged in bilateral dialogues with the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Mennonite Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and preliminary conversations have been held with the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate<sup>12</sup>. The most exciting outcome of the bilateral dialogues is the *Joint Declaration on the*

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<sup>8</sup> Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, November 21, 1964, Introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. L. Górka SVD, *Od unionizmu do ekumenizmu. Ewolucja myśli ekumenicznej w Kościele rzymskokatolickim* (From Unionism to Ecumenism. Evolution in ecumenical thought in the Roman Catholic Church), w: L. Górka, S.C. Napiórkowski, *Kościół czy kościoły. Wybrane zagadnienia z ekumenizmu*, Warszawa: Verbinum 1995, 19–148.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. John Paul II, *Ut unum sint. On Commitment to Ecumenism*, May 25, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. *The Nature, Goal and Reception of Dialogues*, chapter 6, in: J. Gros, *Introduction to Ecumenism*, New York: Paulist 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Baptist World Alliance and Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, „Summons to Witness to Christ in Today's World: A Raport on the Baptist-Roman Catholic International Conversations, 1984–1988”, in: *Deepening Communion: International Ecumenical Documents with Roman Catholic Participation*, ed. by W.G. Rusch and G. Gros, Washington DC: US Catholic Conference 1998, 343–360.

*Doctrine of Justification* ratified by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 1999<sup>13</sup>. In 2006, the World Methodist Council also became an official party to this consensus on a doctrine that divided the Western Church in the Reformation<sup>14</sup>.

There have also been multilateral dialogues, conversations between representatives of three or more Christian communions, which have borne the fruit of convergence on divisive issues, even if not full visible unity. In 1982, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches issued a convergence statement of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry drafted by representatives of multiple Protestant denominations, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church<sup>15</sup>. Its commendation of two legitimate patterns for uniting baptism, personal faith, and Christian education in the churches' work of making disciples has been the basis of much progress toward unity between churches that baptize only believers who have embraced the faith of their own volition and churches that also baptize infants whom the church nurtures in faith. Multilateral dialogues of a different sort, church union conversations, have resulted in the merger of some denominations with diverse patterns of church life in a number of national contexts around the world.

## 6. THE HOPE OF ECUMENISM

A century ago it would have been difficult to imagine the progress made in the quest for Christian unity in the past few decades.

Cardinal Walter Kasper (1933), head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, represented the worldwide ecumenical movement at its best in his address in January 2008 on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. He said,

Ecumenical dialogue absolutely does not mean abandoning one's own identity in favor of an ecumenical "hotpotch." It is a profound misunderstanding to see it as a form of compromising doctrinal relativism. The aim is not to find the lowest common denominator. Ecumenical dialogue aims not at spiritual impoverishment but at mutual spiritual enrichment. In ecumenical dialogue we discover the truth of the other as our own truth. So through the ecumenical dialogue the Spirit leads us into the whole truth; he heals the wounds of our divisions and bestows on us full catholicity<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Co.–Grand Rapids 2000; S.C. Napiórkowski, *Bóg łaskawy: nad „Wspólną deklaracją o usprawiedliwieniu”*, Warszawa: Biblioteka „Więzi” 2001.

<sup>14</sup> G. Wainwright, *World Methodist Council and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Pro Ecclesia 16 (2007), 7–13.

<sup>15</sup> World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No 111, Geneva: WCC 1982; *Chrzest. Eucharystia. Posługiwanie duchowne. Dokumenty z Limy 1982. Tekst i komentarze*, red. P. Kantyka, S. Pawłowski, M. Składanowski, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2013<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> W. Kasper, *The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: Origin and Continuing Inspiration of the Ecumenical Movement*, in *A Century of Prayer for Christian Unity*, ed. by C.E. Clifford, Eerdmans – Grand Rapids 2009, 38.

In other words, “we’re one, but we’re not the same.” Honestly addressing and coming to appreciate what makes us “not the same” can help the church become whole.

When Cardinal Walter Kasper spoke of “catholicity,” he wasn’t talking about something that belongs already to the Roman Catholic Church but not yet to the other churches. When the early Christians applied to the Church but not yet to the other churches. When the early Christians applied to the church the Greek world *katholikē*, from which our world “catholic” comes and which meant both “universal” and “whole,” they referred simultaneously to the universality of the church and to the wholeness or fullness of its faith and practice<sup>17</sup>.

When some evangelical Christians hear the word “catholic” today, they immediately think of the Roman Catholic Church, which they may have been taught to regard as a false church that teaches a false gospel and has as its head a pope who holds a false office. On the basis of a certain way of reading the New Testament book of Revelation, they may also identify it as the “whore of Babylon” that in the last days will usher in a false one-world church and the Anti-Christ himself. Some who think in this way also see the ecumenical movement itself as preparing the way for this false one-world church. The persistence of a deeply entrenched anti-Catholicism, then, is an additional factor that makes the quest for Christian unity seem humanly impossible right now.

The current ecumenical impasse does require a measure of realism on the part of everyone who longs for the unity of the church. But as Cardinal Walter Kasper also said in the speech quoted above, “If it is true that the Holy Spirit initiated the ecumenical movement, then he will bring it also to its goal”<sup>18</sup>. That is the hope of ecumenism, and we should be confident in this hope. In the meantime, “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15, 5–6).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Ecumenism calls churches and Christians to see global world from the perspective of God’s promise, with all its opportunities and possibilities, tensions, fault lines and divisions, and to change it as “in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Pet. 3, 13). What happens globally is experienced in the local reality. Globalisation and localization are mutually dependent, as shown in the concept of “glocalisation”. This has also opened up new opportunities for national and international cooperation for the churches<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> The earliest usage is Ignatius of Antioch (d. before 118) in his letter to the *Smyrneans* 8.2.

<sup>18</sup> W. Kasper, *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*, in: *Century of Prayer for Christian Unity*, ed. by C.E. Clifford, Eerdmans – Grand Rapids 2009, 30.

<sup>19</sup> On the importance of ecumenical joint action cfr.: *Revisoning Christian Unity: The Global Christian Forum*, ed. by H. van Beek, Regnum Books 2009.



For all people to experience God's saving work in body and soul, a "good life" must be possible for everyone<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, churches are working to eradicate poverty, advocating for the marginalized and exerting their political influence to contribute to overcoming international tensions and conflicts. Human rights, environmental justice, global poverty, displacement and migration, wars and religiously charged conflicts are all challenges for ecumenical work. Ecumenical action and global responsibility are inseparable.

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## JEDNOŚĆ I MISJA. U ŹRÓDEŁ RUCHU EKUMENICZNEGO

### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest udokumentowanie znanego w gronie ekumenistów historycznego faktu, iż początki ruchu ekumenicznego pod koniec XIX wieku zbiegają się z poszukiwaniem jedności chrześcijan na polu ich misyjnego zaangażowania. Współczesny ruch ekumeniczny został zapoczątkowany w obrębie chrześcijaństwa ewangelickiego. Próby podejmowane na rzecz zjednoczenia chrześcijan przed Konferencją w Edynburgu (Szkocja, 1910) zwykło się określać mianem „preekumenizm”. Ograniczały się one najczęściej do solidarności we wspólnym podejmowaniu akcji społeczno-charytatywnych na terenach misyjnych.

Wiek XIX był okresem rozkwitu misji protestanckich. Z terenów misyjnych docierało pod adresem macierzystych Kościołów wołanie o jedność, której brak utrudniał i hamował działalność misyjną. Różnice w wierze i rywalizacja w praktycznej działalności misyjnej budziły nieufność u ludów ewangelizowanych. Wołanie o jedność Kościołów chrześcijańskich, co prawda przede wszystkim w dziedzinie praktycznej pomocy, stanowiło naturalny odruch młodych Kościołów i prowadzących w nich akcję ewangelizacyjną misjonarzy. Głosy te nie mogły pozostać bez echa w Kościołach Europy i Ameryki Północnej, które patronowały misyjnej działalności na terenach Indii, Azji i Afryki.

Artykuł składa się z następujących części: 1. Instytucjonalne oblicze ekumenizmu; 2. Ekumenizm i Prawosławie; 3. Vaticanum II i ekumenizm rzymskokatolicki; 4. Zaangażowanie w dialog; 5. Ekumeniczna nadzieja; 6. Zakończenie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** podzielone chrześcijaństwo, ruch ekumeniczny, jedność, misja