

ECUMENISM IN PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION
Problems, challenges and prospects

His Holiness Aram I
Catholicos of Cilicia

Moderator of the Central Committee
Of the
World Council of Churches

Consultation on Ecumenism in the 21st Century
Chavannes-de-Bogis, Switzerland

30 November 2004

ECUMENISM IN PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION

Problems, challenges and prospects

The repercussions on the ecumenical movement brought about by the radically changing circumstances of the world and the rapidly changing picture of world Christianity have prompted the WCC leadership to engage in a process of reflection aimed at discerning the future course of the ecumenical movement. The consultation held in Antelias, Lebanon, 17-21 November, 2003, was the first common attempt to set the process and prepare the context to involve, at a later stage, the churches and the ecumenical partners and organizations in this challenging venture.

This common attempt was defined at its initial stage as a "reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement". It is now also referred to as "ecumenism in the 21st century". The perceptions and approaches implied by these definitions are indeed legitimate. However, the challenges posed to the ecumenical movement are far deeper and more complex. I prefer to describe the process as the "ecumenical movement in transformation". This approach takes us beyond merely mapping the Oikoumene and shaping its future configuration "to discern[ing] the promises and challenges of a new century" (CUV), to identifying the core issues, hard realities and critical problems of the ecumenical landscape and to articulating a common ecumenical vision for the 21st century.

In all its aspects, dimensions and expressions, ecumenism is being transformed; and out of this transformation, a new image of the ecumenical movement is being formed. The ecumenical movement is called to renew and redefine its nature, its goals and vision through a self-critical approach and in response to the global changes and challenges. If this is not done, the ecumenical movement may soon find itself stalemated.

My intention is to share with you, at the beginning of this consultation, a few basic concerns and perspectives, which I hope will help us to read clearly the "ecumenical signs" of new times and to move forward realistically.

A BALANCED APPROACH TO "MOVEMENT" AND "INSTITUTION"

The ecumenical movement is a movement by its inception and nature. Any attempt to compromise this unique character of the ecumenical movement would be simply the end of it. In the last 50 years the ecumenical spirit and vision were almost suffocated by an aggressive institutionalism. Re-structuring, evaluation, financial crises and management-related concerns forced the World Council of Churches and ecumenical organizations to deal mainly with the institutional aspects of ecumenism and to look for immediate solutions.

The de-institutionalization of Christianity, a phenomenon affecting many churches and regions, is giving a speedy pace to the de-institutionalization of the ecumenical movement. People are tired of institutional ecumenism. They are looking for new ways of expressing their ecumenical commitment. They are challenging the ecumenical movement to liberate itself from the narrow confines of institutions and to reaffirm itself as a future-oriented movement. As a movement that deals with human response to God's call in Jesus Christ in a given time and in a given place, the ecumenical movement is in a continuous process of self-expression and self-realization. This implies constant change and renewal. We must keep this understanding of ecumenism close to mind as we endeavor to scrutinize the present ecumenical situation.

We must not ignore the fact that the ecumenical vision was given concrete manifestation through institutional ecumenism, which played a pivotal role in promoting inter-relatedness among the churches, by calling them to grow together through a common life and witness. A vision demands a programme to articulate itself; a movement requires structure to survive; and a fellowship needs conciliar framework to grow. We must revitalize and sharpen the ecumenical movement. Yet, we must somehow keep our impatience and criticism concerning the institutional ecumenism under control. A total and uncritical shift from institutional to non-institutional ecumenism might well polarize members of the movement. In my judgment, what is needed is a holistic, balanced and interactive approach, one that will enable us both to preserve the movement character of ecumenism and give due consideration to its institutional expression.

IS THE "ONENESS" OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN JEOPARDY?

The churches constantly remind themselves of the "oneness" of the ecumenical movement. The question is: how can this essential oneness of the ecumenical movement be ensured, safeguarded and manifested? The present ecumenical picture clearly indicates that the gap between the theory and praxis, the approach and vision is widening.

The multiplication and diversification of bilateral theological dialogues undoubtedly gave a new dynamism to ecumenical life. But if these dialogues do not converge towards a reception-oriented process, they may, sooner or later, endanger the integrity and oneness of the ecumenical movement. Trends towards proliferation and multi-centredness, which acquired a focal attention in the last decade, are indeed positive. They may significantly help to ensure diversity and wholeness by generating creative interaction between the local and the global, the bilateral and the multilateral. Yet, they may also become a potential source of polarization if they are not given a clear orientation and are not underpinned by a common vision.

The Harare Assembly revised the article II of the WCC Constitution by spelling out clearly that the WCC serves and strengthens the one ecumenical movement. The question is not merely one of coherence and collaboration between ecumenical actors and actions. It is far beyond that. The danger lies in the increasing incompatibilities, inconsistencies and incoherence between the ecumenical goals. The "oneness" of the ecumenical movement has become loose and ambiguous. By ecumenism we mean different things. It has different connotations and implications in different confessional and regional contexts. Do we have a common understanding of ecumenism? How must the "oneness" of the ecumenical movement be articulated? The CUV defines the oneness of the ecumenical movement as a "‘common calling’, ultimately assured by the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the manifold manifestations of the moment". (CUV 2.10) This interpretation deserves our serious attention.

FELLOWSHIP-ORIENTED ECUMENISM FACING CHALLENGES

The de-institutionalization of the ecumenical movement is already having negative repercussions on the fellowship character of ecumenism. Some feel that identifying ecumenism with fellowship distorts its nature as a movement. Others feel that the fellowship concept of the ecumenical movement has failed to lead the churches to take concrete steps towards visible unity; hence, they are seeking different alternatives. And, there are those who do not want to associate themselves with any institutional form of fellowship.

What are the reasons behind these approaches? Let me single out some of them.

- Fears arising from globalization have led many churches and communions to strongly affirm their identity. For these churches and communions, multilateral ecumenism is seen as a potential source of danger.

- An increasing number of churches are reluctant to respond to the moral, financial and, in a sense, ecclesiological implications of membership in a fellowship. They are attracted to an easy, non-committal type of ecumenism.

- Some churches find the ecumenical fellowship insecure ground because, in the ecumenical fellowship, the agenda priorities, conditioned by missiological and ecclesiological self-understandings, often clash rather than interact.

- "Conciliar ecumenism", as a concrete expression of the multilateral ecumenism that has marked our ecumenical life in the last fifty years, is losing ground in many church and ecumenical circles. "Ecumenism of negotiation", strengthened by the increasing pace of theological dialogues, is affirming its predominance both on global and regional levels.

- Confessional ecumenism is also gaining ground. The churches feel themselves more secure within their confessional boundaries.

Is the ecumenical movement only a "space" where the churches meet for mutual consultation, dialogue and collaboration, or it is a fellowship that must be deepened and broadened? In my view, true ecumenism aims at fellowship

building. Through fellowship, interdependence and mutual accountability are created among the churches and diversities are preserved and enhanced. What kind of ecumenical vision should we develop for the 21st century, one that is fellowship-oriented or one that is movement-oriented? My answer would be both. They are closely interconnected and they enrich, strengthen and complement each other. If a movement-oriented vision of ecumenism is not sustained by a fellowship-building ecumenism, the ecumenical movement will lose its ecclesial nature and marginalise the centrality of unity. On the other hand, if a fellowship-based ecumenism remains totally conditioned and overwhelmed by its institutional expressions and does not open itself to larger spaces and broader horizons, then it becomes self-centred and static.

BROADENING THE ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIP IS A MUST

The churches played a significant role in shaping and expanding institutional ecumenism. For many years ecclesio-centric ecumenism, dominated by euro-centrism, impacted all aspects and domains of ecumenical life and witness. However, the churches' claim that they owned the ecumenical movement was not matched by a firm commitment to its goals. Moves to broaden the scope of the ecumenical agenda and partnership were often encountered by church resistance.

The ecumenical landscape is undergoing major changes. Christianity is changing its image and locality. In the north, Christianity is declining; the center of Christianity is shifting to the south. Mainline Christianity is giving way to a more non-institutional expression of Christianity. The Orthodox Churches are becoming self-contained and nation-oriented in spite of their global presence, and the Roman Catholic Church is becoming more sensitive to the growing charismatic movements within its fold.

It is evident that broadening the sphere and changing the nature of the ecumenical partnership has become imperative, particularly for the following reasons:

- The decline of institutional Christianity and the growth of the Pentecostal-charismatic form of Christianity and resurgence of religious

movements has had, and will certainly continue to have, with far-reaching consequences, a direct bearing on the future course of the ecumenical movement.

– The continuing transformation of the ecumenical movement, expressed mainly by the steady move from global to regional, from multilateral to bilateral, from inter-confessional to confessional and from euro-centred to multi-centred ecumenism, calls us to review the existing ecumenical paradigms and perspectives.

– With their professionalism and large financial resources, the ecumenical agencies, specialized ministries and Christian NGOs are moving from the periphery to the centre stage of the ecumenical movement, and the ecumenical interests and commitment of institutional churches are declining.

Probably the time is not yet mature for the Roman Catholic Church, which is deeply engaged in ecumenism on national and regional levels, to enter into a fellowship-based ecumenism on the global level. As for Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, they have their own perceptions of ecumenism. However, closer collaboration with these churches, expressed through joint initiatives and actions in specific areas, is crucial for the future of the ecumenical movement. A strong partnership with ecumenical actors is also imperative, not only for professional and financial reasons, but also to ensure the oneness and vitality of the ecumenical movement and to make it more participatory and inclusive. Because of their different nature, institutional interests and priorities, it is often difficult for the churches and ecumenical stakeholders to have a coherent and organized working relationship. We must develop a new perception and vision of partnership, which, first, does not marginalize the centrality of fellowship, second, considers ecumenical actors an essential part of the common ecumenical witness, and third, challenges the ecumenical partners to work to strengthen both the multi-centredness and integrity of the ecumenical movement. Indeed, broadening the ecumenical partnership and deepening the ecumenical fellowship must go together. They are interrelated dimensions of one ecumenical vision.

TOWARDS PEOPLE'S ECUMENISM: STRATEGY AND VISION

Particularly in the last decade, parallel to and sometimes over against the ecumenism of institutional churches, we have been witnessing the emergence of the ecumenism of people, which is more spontaneous and attractive than institutional ecumenism. Indeed, the ecumenical movement is shifting from ecclesio-centric to people-centered paradigms within and outside the churches. Clergy-based ecclesiastical ecumenism is fading away, and the new expressions of ecumenism, such as spiritual movements, networking, advocacy groups and the global ecumenical forum, are moving to the fore of ecumenical life. The very ethos of the ecumenical movement is rapidly changing. What are the major thrusts and characteristic features of people-based ecumenism?

- It takes the ecumenical movement beyond the narrow boundaries of institutional churches and seeks dynamic models, forms and ways of articulating the ecumenical vision.

- With its holistic vision it promotes multi-centredness in ecumenical life, and encourages inclusiveness in ecumenical reflection and action.

- It creates interaction and interdependence between local, regional and global ecumenical expressions, concerns and priorities.

- It takes us beyond reception and consensus-oriented models and methodologies to fellowship-building strategies, particularly on the local level, by generating mutual trust among people at the grassroots.

- it grows from the bottom to the top and calls to accountability the ecumenism that is imposed from the top to the bottom.

As the gift of the Holy Spirit, the ecumenical movement belongs to the whole church. By the whole church I mean the whole people of God, a larger ecclesiological reality than simply the institutional expression of the church. Institutional ecumenism and people's ecumenism should not be opposed; they belong to and strengthen each other. Because they also contain the seeds of potential conflict, I hope that, through a critical process of mutual challenging and accountability, we will promote an integrated ecumenical strategy and vision

based on a holistic and people-centred perception of the church and the ecumenical movement.

A RESPONSIVE AND PROPHETIC ECUMENICAL VISION

Tensions and uncertainties are integral to the nature of any movement; the ecumenical movement is no exception. The concerns and values that have motivated the formation of the ecumenical movement are being replaced by new perspectives and priorities. The movement must remain alert to the changes in its context and time and must constantly transform its vision and action. We are facing a new ecumenical situation, one that calls us to a new vision, a prophetic vision that is responsive and relevant to the new concerns and expectations.

An ecumenical vision for the 21st century must be Gospel-centered and mission-oriented, and it must take into consideration the following factors and imperatives:

- The ecumenical movement is caught in a world where fragmentation and polarization, on the one hand, and interdependence and integration, on the other hand, are in continuous tension. The ecumenical vision must be able to provide creative alternatives to globalization by entering into critical dialogue with it and challenging its values.

- The ecumenical movement displays a wide range of dichotomies: unity-mission, institution-people, ordained-lay, man-woman, local-global, etc. How can the ecumenical vision overcome these dualities and polarities? “Coherence” and the “integrated approach” that the WCC has been working toward in the last decade must be given due consideration in this context.

- The ecumenical agenda requires a critical scrutiny. Ecumenism and globalization have qualitatively different visions of the world. The ecumenical agenda must be determined by a life-centred, faith-sustained and future-oriented ecumenical vision. This agenda should be pro-active, realistic and prophetic, and should focus on people rather than on institutional interests and should invest in issues rather than in programmes. Such an agenda would significantly help to ensure the specificity, vitality and credibility of the ecumenical movement.

– The churches and Christians are tired of ecumenical clichés. They are looking for a new language, a new look, a new culture, and even for new people. They are seeking ways of doing ecumenism that are more accessible, relevant and attractive.

– Dialogue with other living faiths has become an existential concern for the ecumenical movement. We cannot ignore its urgency nor underestimate its complexity. We must seriously address the challenges posed by pluralism and the vision of “wider community” and consider their strong impact on our ecclesiological and missiological self-understanding.

A responsive ecumenical vision with a prophetic vocation must be able to embrace all these tensions and challenges as a source of strength.

"BEING CHURCH": A CENTRAL ECUMENICAL ISSUE

The question of “being church”, which the WCC identified after the Harare Assembly (1998) as one of the foci of the ecumenical agenda, in my view, will continue to remain a major ecumenical concern for the coming period. What kind of church do we want to have for the 21st century: a church that lives within its established walls, self-contained and self-content, or a church engaged in the daily struggle of its people, in critical and creative interaction with the society, and bold enough to face the challenges of new times? We cannot separate the vision of the church from the ecumenical vision; “being church” and “being ecumenical” are closely interconnected.

The forces of globalization and secularism are strongly impacting the life and witness of churches. Christian values, which have shaped our identity and sustained our societies and cultures, are disappearing from our families, organizations and communities. In the midst of growing ambiguities, uncertainties and meaninglessness, the churches are challenged to articulate clearly what “being church” means. The increasing tensions within the same churches, new developments in church-state and church-society relations are forming new models for “being church”. The forceful entry of religion into the public life and growing concern for “broader community” are raising fundamental questions. These developments call the churches and the actors in

the ecumenical movement to reconsider the ecclesiological perceptions that have defined the churches' doctrinal positions and their attitudes towards each other and towards the society at large. In fact, new ways of “being church” will help us to discover new ways of working together ecumenically, and vice versa. The ecumenical movement must constantly grapple with these issues and assist the churches in their struggle of “being church” in a new world context.

*
* *

These emerging concerns, briefly outlined, touch the very nature and vision, as well as the future course, of the ecumenical movement. Any attempt to reconfigure ecumenism or redefine the ecumenical vision must take these realities very seriously, and we must avoid easy answers and short-term solutions. The issues pertaining to this process must be addressed in a broader perspective, with an interactive approach and on the basis of a long-term strategy. In my opinion, the aim of this process must be to give a comprehensive and coherent articulation to the ecumenical vision for the 21st century. Reconfiguration is only one important part of it.

**ARAM I
CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA**

*November, 2004
Antelias, Lebanon.*