
Ecumenical Theology: Part II

Eryl Davies

In Part I, **Lesslie Newbigin's** autobiography **Unfinished Agenda** (SPCK, 263 pp. £7.50, pbk) was reviewed in detail and also a brief introduction was provided to **JOHN R. MOTT, 1865—1955: A BIOGRAPHY** (C. Howard Hopkins, Eerdmans, 816 pp., £19.95, hbk). This book will now be considered in more detail.

Converted at the age of thirteen, helped later by Christians in College and D.L. Moody's College Students' Summer School, Mott eventually became a travelling secretary and then a senior leader of the YMCA in the United States. This youth movement was a major contributory factor in the development of the ecumenical movement and the young Mott appreciated its strong interdenominational emphasis. He was actively involved in work amongst students and as early as 1894, convinced that "the time had at last arrived when a world-wide union of Christian students might be achieved" (p.111) so he travelled overseas extensively during the following years in order to achieve this goal. "If the students of the Protestant world are linked together by the power of the Spirit in this Movement, it will greatly hasten the establishment of Christ's kingdom throughout the world"; this was Mott's conviction and motivation. But Mott was determined to include Roman Catholic and Russian, Eastern Orthodox Church students within his new students' fellowship.

For example, when the **World Student Christian Federation (WSCF)** was formed in Scandinavia in August 1895, the basis for membership was to be "flexible enough to bring students of Orthodox and R.C. Churches and non-Christian countries into an ecumenical fellowship".

John Mott certainly had a passion for evangelising the world and in the 1900 'Ecumenical Missionary Conference' in New York he spoke on the obligations of his generation to evangelise the world. An important agency in this evangelism was the **Student Volunteer Movement**. The World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 was a "watershed in missionary discussion" and again Mott was a key figure both in preparations for it and participating in it. Mott was a member of the international planning committee and also chairman of Commission I, '**Carrying the Gospel to all the World**' and he was also invited to chair the conference sessions. Prior to the conference, the different study groups or commissions were warned that 'no questions concerning doctrine or church polity' would be accepted in the conference and this was a necessary rule to ensure Anglican representation there. Once again John Mott had a crucial role in the negotiations that persuaded the Archbishop of Canterbury to support the Edinburgh Conference.

One of the most important decisions at Edinburgh was that of establishing a 'Continuation Committee' to implement 'co-operation and the promotion of unity'. The chairman? Well, John Mott, of course!

Within months this important committee was meeting in London and at Auckland Castle, Durham, conferring with and gaining the active support of Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who himself stressed the need for “better understanding, better feeling and better relations between Christian Churches everywhere”. Handley C.G. Moule, Bishop of Durham, hosted the Committee and “in four days Mott moved the Committee through eighty-eight items of business at sixteen sessions” (p.378). Some important decisions were made as well. It was decided, for example, to initiate the now famous **International Review of Missions** and also to invite John Mott to give most of his time to “visiting the missionary field, acquainting missionaries and native leaders with its work and plans ...” (idem).

Mott soon felt that it was right for him to respond positively to this invitation and he threw himself even more whole-heartedly into the work. Another world trip in 1911 was “a prime ecumenical venture outside the limits of Anglo-American Protestantism” and he visited several of the Patriarchs from various Orthodox Churches in the East, including Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III in Constantinople who remarked to Mott, “Your work is apostolic ... it will have the blessing of God and I shall follow it always with prayer”. Successful attempts were then made by Mott and others over a long period to bridge the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant divide and to include their members within the World Student Christian Fellowship and eventually the basis of membership was broadened in order to ensure this “wider fellowship”.

Due to the 1914-18 war, the Continuation Committee did not meet after 1913 and the move towards unity was temporarily slowed down but only after numerous international and national ecumenical bodies and conferences had been established throughout the world. The Edinburgh message and vision had been taken as far as China and Japan by Mott so that in 1913 the younger churches there were caught up in this drive for unity.

Soon after the 1914-18 war, plans were resumed for establishing a permanent international organisation geared to both unity and evangelism. In June 1920, therefore, an international conference was convened at Geneva in Switzerland and John Mott was appointed chairman of the Business Committee and plans were made immediately to establish an **International Missionary Council**. This was constituted in October 1921 and so the dream of Edinburgh 1910 had become a reality. By 1948 the membership of the IMC had increased from 17 to 30 national or regional organisations/societies and John Mott was the leader of the IMC until 1941. The IMC held a number of important conferences; for example, in 1928, 1938 and 1947 and its influence was considerable.

Not all the Protestant missionary agencies joined the IMC partly because of its compromised stance in relation to doctrine so that the movement tended to be dominated by Anglicans, including many Anglo-Catholics, Baptists, Quakers, etc. The IMC influenced the growth of young churches in the Third World, encouraged religious liberty, nourished and supported interdenominational cooperation in evangelism. On matters of doctrine, the IMC was deliberately neutral and refused to enter the territory of the **Faith and Order** movement so

a cleavage between some liberal and conservative leaders emerged but Mott was not interested in systematic theology and believed it was his duty to spur the IMC and other organisations for which he was responsible into social action. His biographer acknowledges that it is correct to describe Mott as a “liberal-evangelical” and even in the early 1920’s he was heavily committed to co-operating with many non-evangelical churches such as the Eastern Orthodox. Mott took no part at all in the doctrinal controversies of the twenties and yet was fascinated by the newer theological trends.

During the early thirties, the ecumenical movement went through a period of uncertainty and confusion. There were new leaders, money was in short supply, the movement was not rooted in the churches and there was the added problem of a multiplicity of ecumenical organisations — e.g. World Student Christian Fellowship, Faith and Order, Faith and Work, the IMC and the World Alliance of Friendship through Churches. Some form of integration of these groups was deemed necessary if the movement for unity was to succeed. Further discussions took place and in a meeting with Archbishop William Temple in 1933 a group of ten were united in their determination to create a large umbrella organisation which would be universal and all-embracing. In 1937 the actual title the **World Council of Churches** was proposed by an American and Visser’t Hooft was invited to become its General Secretary. The intention was to inaugurate the WCC in 1940 or 1941 and, in the meantime, representatives of the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements formed themselves into a Provisional Commission of the WCC in Process of Formation. John Mott agreed to lead a joint commission of the IMC and WCC in order to encourage the younger churches in Third World countries to affiliate to the WCC.

The Second World War clearly delayed the implementation of those plans and it was not until the 23rd August 1948 that the World Council of Churches was constituted in Amsterdam. Mott helped extensively in preparations for Amsterdam and he chaired the business committee at Amsterdam before he was made Honorary President of the WCC for his “unrivalled contribution to the growth of the ecumenical outlook and of ecumenical activity” (p.697). Mott was also the first speaker at Amsterdam.

Despite his age, Mott attended the WCC central committee near Lausanne and in 1954 the WCC Assembly at Evanston, Illinois. He died in 1955 at the age of ninety.

This is a book of major importance and the author is commended for his meticulous and extensive research into Mott’s life and work. In many respects it is a sad story as this young, converted man, although eager to evangelise and proclaim Christ as the unique Saviour of sinners, became increasingly deceived by liberal theology and was indifferent to crucial matters of doctrine. His life is a clear warning to us today but his passion for evangelism is a powerful challenge as well.

In addition to the excellent biography, there are forty pages packed with notes to chapters, sources, a bibliography and a 35 page index which further add to

the value of this competently-researched book.

I want now to refer to another book, namely, **THE ECUMENICAL MOMENT: CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CHURCH**, (Geoffrey Wainwright, Eerdmans, 263 pp., £7.95, pbk).

The author, a British Methodist and now currently Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, reflects in this book over his twenty years of active involvement in ecumenical work. He is convinced that “the church stands before a moment of critical opportunity, a *kairos* which includes a *krisis*” (p.vii).

Against the background of global crisis, the emergence of the World Council of Churches, the “great contribution of the Eastern Orthodox Churches to the modern ecumenical movement ” (p.3, ‘their strong awareness of a unified patristic heritage ... enabling Roman Catholics and classical Protestants to go back behind the Western distortions and counter-distortions to join with themselves at a place where differing theological voices can be combined in a symphony without disrupting the unity of the faith ... their presence in the WCC in recent years is a counter to the liberal Protestant tendency minimising questions of doctrine’), and the 1982 **Lima** text on ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’, the author concludes that “the opportunity is unprecedented. Never has such a wide range of churches had the opportunity explicitly to own such a broad measure of agreement on these matters ... From many different points of departure, responsible Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Anglican, Methodist, Disciples and Pentecostal theologians have, over three generations and with increasing participation from Africa and Asia, elaborated a document which comes as close as we are historically likely to come to substantial and practical agreement on the stated themes” (p.6). The Lima text is clearly a compromise statement in more senses than one but Wainwright claims it “is a mature fruit of the biblical, patristic, liturgical, and ecumenical movements of the twentieth century that have provided the churches with a vocabulary and concepts within the framework of which they can attain consensus; it is now the time to pass to the deeds of greater mutual recognition and ever increasing sacramental and structural unity”.

By now you will probably have realised that the author conceives of the church in sacramental terms and we need not describe his position in detail. He concedes a lot of ground to Rome and, amazingly, imagines “there is a high degree of compatibility between the soteriological accents of Methodism and Catholicism”.

Chapter Two deals with the subject of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. Rather ambiguously and inadequately he notes four marks of the Church — unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. Concerning the latter, the author quotes the WCC distinction between “succession of the apostolic ministry” and “apostolic tradition in the Church” (p.28). Very little is actually said here about the work of the Holy Spirit except to suggest that His work is tied in with the sacraments. It is no surprise, therefore, that under the title **Baptism and Unity** the third chapter boldly assumes baptismal regeneration. Chapters

Four and Five touch on the Eucharist and once again the author disappoints the reviewer with his unbiblical and syncretistic approach which results in universalism.

Another controversial question is discussed in Chapter Six, namely, the Ordained Ministry. "One of the chief gifts of the modern liturgical movement to the Western churches", affirms the author, "has been the return of Hippolytus' **Apostolic Tradition**" (p.95) and his reflections in this chapter are based on an ordination prayer of Hippolytus.

He assumes there is a general agreement in most church traditions about what he calls an "essential ministry" marked by ordination whether in Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian or Baptist contexts. Quite obviously he assumes too much and fails to grapple with the biblical teaching.

Chapters Seven to Nine continue the theme of the sacraments while Chapter Ten discusses **Mary and Methodism**. He pinpoints six of the doctrinal or spiritual emphases characteristic of Methodism and then looks for the nearest corresponding feature in the Roman Catholic attitude toward Mary and, finally, he assesses to what extent Methodism can accept this Catholic approach.

One Methodist emphasis is 'Faith as active receptivity' which Wainwright feels has a close correspondence in the Roman Catholic stress on Mary's fiat at the Annunciation (Luke 1:38,45). Another Methodist distinctive is **Entire Sanctification** which the author relates to the R.C. dogmas of Mary's immaculate conception and assumption. There are still objections to the Roman dogma, he insists, and that "only the obedient Christ has reversed the trespass of Adam (Romans 5:12-21)". In other words, the Roman dogma "of Mary's immaculate conception seems to deny that 'all people need to be saved' on account of sin 'in Adam' and the dogma of Mary's assumption seems a case of over-realized eschatology" (p.176).

Assurance is the third Methodist distinctive and Wainwright regards the Catholic equivalent in Mary's role as mediatrix! "Psychologically", he tries rather pathetically to tell us, "she brings warmth and comfort and the sense of 'being her children' "(p.177). The fourth Methodist distinctive referred to is **The Universal Offer of the Gospel** which he suggests finds closest correspondence in Mariology, namely, that Mary is the mother of humankind. One is relieved at least to find the author acknowledging that Protestants find this refinement unacceptable. "Through Christ to Mary is not a slogan which commends itself to Protestants whose theology and spirituality depend on the **direct** relation between Christ and the believer" (p.180). Fifthly, the **Social Implications of the Gospel** find a correspondence in Pope Paul VI's **Marialis Cultus** in which he underlined the social and political clauses of Mary's Magnificat. Finally, the Methodist emphasis on the **Communion of Saints** is briefly mentioned and somewhat provocatively the question is asked: 'Could we accept that Mary is their queen?' His conclusion in this chapter is: "If Catholics and Methodists could join together in a search for the truth concerning Mary, surprises might happen on both sides" (p.187). Earlier, the author hints that perhaps Methodists should "bring themselves to 'tolerate' Marian

devotion among Catholics while dispensing themselves from sharing in it” (p.16). Chapter Eleven is a critical assessment of the author’s Methodist ecclesiastical tradition.

Altogether the reviewer was disappointed in the book; it leans heavily and somewhat uncritically on the Lima text and sacramentalist theology and if this is what the author calls **The Ecumenical Moment**, I appeal to readers to give it a wide berth and regard it as a non-event. I did find the notes and bibliography at the end of the book informative and helpful.

Although published six years ago, I want to draw your attention now to a book which I regard as extremely useful and important. The book is **EVANGELISM IN ECLIPSE: WORLD MISSION AND THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES** (Harvey T. Hoekstra, Paternoster Press, £7.00, 300pp. pbk).

The book is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the WCC nor of missionary work as such. It is “limited to tracing the new concept of mission that has emerged within the structured offices of the WCC. The study will examine the historical context in which this concept evolved and it will identify theological and ideological assumptions underlying this concept. It will also look at key world meetings of the missionary and ecumenical movements ...” (p.11).

In many respects this is a frightening book with its account of the way in which the WCC lost the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ by re-interpreting ‘mission’ radically in terms of its message and methods. To those tempted to compromise by becoming involved in a broad, ecumenical-type evangelism, this book should serve as a deterrent and yet also as an incentive to more vigorous involvement in thorough-going biblical evangelism.

Briefly, we can remind ourselves of the facts:

The Continuation Committee appointed by the 1910 Edinburgh Conference eventually found more adequate expression in 1921 when the **International Missionary Council** was established. The purpose of the IMC was to encourage and help churches and mission societies in their missionary work. In 1957 an assurance was given by WCC leaders to the IMC that it would be able to achieve more for “missions and evangelism” from within the WCC than by remaining outside. At Ghana that same year “the fateful decision” was taken by the IMC to integrate itself into the WCC and in 1961 at New Delhi the IMC officially became the **Division of World Mission and Evangelism** within the WCC. The purpose of this integration was to place the missionary obligation of the church right in the centre of the Ecumenical Movement. What happened later, of course, was very different — the actual demise of mission.

How did this happen? New member churches of the WCC — including some Eastern Orthodox — now began to challenge the traditional view of mission and they objected to their own people being proselytised. There were other significant changes in theology also. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, for example, felt his own missiology to be too exclusively church-centred. “Only a fully Trinitarian doctrine would be adequate, setting the work of Christ in the context of the overruling providence of the Father in all the life of the world and the

sovereign freedom of the Spirit who is the Lord and not the auxiliary of the Church” (Unfinished Agenda, SPCK, p.199). The process of secularisation in theology was accelerated, particularly after the full meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) at Mexico City in 1963. The new, radical theology of the sixties made the Commission members doubt whether secular man needed God at all. This shift in theology and in the understanding of mission was more apparent at the fourth WCC Assembly held at Uppsala in 1968 when evangelism was identified with relieving the poor and the oppressed. Familiar theological words were now re-interpreted and not once in the Uppsala Assembly was the real Gospel declared.

“Uppsala had compassion”, declares Hoekstra, “and rightly voiced it powerfully. This compassion was for the hungry millions and for those deprived of justice and equality ... It had no compassion at all (in its written report) for those deprived of the knowledge of God’s love made known in Christ and condemned to live in fear and superstition or by a false faith ... It had no sense of urgency for preaching the Gospel where it had never been heard” (p.84).

Hoekstra describes the Conference organised by CWME under the title of ‘**Salvation Today**’ in Bangkok in 1973 as being “pivotal in the history of world mission” for it decided against a biblical understanding of mission. Instead the CWME “was to take its place and fulfil its role for harnessing the energies and resources of churches in social struggle in order to bring about a just, sustainable and participatory society” (p.99). Nor was the Fifth WCC Assembly at **Nairobi 1975** any better. The Assembly theme was: ‘Jesus Christ frees and unites’. The official report of the WCC General Secretary was most revealing for he acknowledged the acceptance by the WCC of a new theological understanding of the Church-world relationship. The aim of the WCC now was “a new kind of world order along socialist lines”!

The final chapter of the book contains the author’s ‘**Reflections and Recommendations**’ in which he accuses the WCC of having “eclipsed the missionary task” of the Church (p.148).

Although writing as a member of the WCC, the author writes honestly and passionately concerning the failure of this movement to preserve the true Gospel and to retain the vision for reaching a lost world with the glorious and unique Gospel of Christ. His recommendations to the WCC are good but inadequate and, in some respects, naive. If the constituent member-churches of the WCC are unbiblical in their theology and particularly concerning the nature of the Gospel, how can believers or churches continue to remain within such a pluralist organisation?

Let the last words be from Hoekstra himself who warns: “Churches that fail to be concerned with the unfinished missionary and evangelistic task become little more than religious clubs or political and social action groups. Such churches soon divide and shrivel” (p.200).

This is an excellent book and its contents deserve to be shared with the officers and members of your church. Thank you, Dr. Hoekstra, for such a compelling, honest and informative book.