Editorial – the theory and practice of ecumenism: Christian global governance and the search for world order, 1900–80

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Without religious organizations the current patterns and structures of global governance would look very different. Discussions and policies concerning human rights, the blight of racism, democracy, economic development, war and peace, migration, and climate change have all been advanced by national and transnational religious actors, sometimes from the beginning of such discussions. Though frequently differing from each other about the desired methods and outcomes, these religious actors both competed and cooperated with more secularly minded actors and institutions in the emergence of global governance in the last century or so, a development still often ignored by scholars.

That they have done so should not be surprising. Globalization processes of the last two centuries – made possible by technological innovations, economic integration, and expansion of empires[1] – also transformed religious communities, impressing upon them, from the grassroots level to spiritual leaders, new possibilities to promote their own faith and values, as well as the urgent need to resist the encroachments of their rivals. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish communities all created their own 'religious internationals' that sought common cause with their co-religionists across national boundaries.[2] If often focused on quintessentially 'religious' responsibilities, such as education, mission work, or charitable goals, these religious actors were just as frequently confronted with the political context – local,

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1   These globalization processes exclude others: see Frederick Cooper, 'What is the concept of globalization good for? An African historian's perspective', *African Affairs*, 100, 399, 2001, pp. 189–213; and Lynn Hunt, *Writing history in the global era*, New York: Norton, 2014, pp. 44–77.
2   See the essays in Abigail Green and Vincent Viane, eds., *Religious internationals in the modern world: globalization and faith communities since 1750*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

national, and transnational – in which they had to operate. Over time, for example, they often played key roles in the navigation from colonial to postcolonial structures of governance.

For much of the last two centuries, it was Christian institutions in particular that were best positioned to influence incipient forms of global governance, whether transnational civil society, international conventions, or semi-governmental organizations like the League of Nations. Many of their churches and civil society organizations had close ties to European and American powers, which, through their imperial influence, determined many of the contours of international governance as it began to emerge in the years before the First World War.

The Christian churches were highly successful in establishing their own international networks, most obviously the Roman Catholics. Beginning with Pope Pius IX in the mid nineteenth century, the Catholic Church mobilized believers, centralized clerical authority, and expanded its diplomatic network, thus impacting on world politics in new ways. Concerned about the threats to the church of both fascism and communism, by the 1940s the Catholic Church was playing a crucial role in the creation of transnational networks and institutions that professed commitment to human dignity, democratic governance, and international law. The role of the Vatican as a critical actor in global affairs, especially after the Second World War, and the ways in which its moral voice and church policies both supported and challenged liberal internationalism, can hardly be gainsaid.[3]

The ecumenical movement

The Roman Catholic Church, however, was not the only Christian church to have an impact on global governance. Of very considerable importance, too, was the ecumenical movement, a loose network of predominately Protestant groupings seeking the global unity of Christians, churches, and missionary efforts. Following the idea of the *oikoumene* (Greek for 'the inhabited globe'), the movement established organizational structures and patterns of interaction among religious actors on a global scale. Though dominated by Protestants, ecumenical institutions also attracted many Orthodox Christians in the North Atlantic and Asia, who found in the movement's vision of a worldwide Christian fellowship avenues for battling common rivals of secularism, nationalism, communism, and, for a time, Catholicism as well.

'Ecumenism' has come to denote today an openness toward all faith traditions and backgrounds, including Muslims and Jews in the Abrahamic ensemble, as well as 'world religions' such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, and others, but it began life as a variety of Christian globalism, seeking to make an inter-confessional 'church' of all 'nations, races, and classes' a robust force in world politics, culture, and society. The articles in this issue trace critical moments in its development, showing its entangled history with major twentieth-

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3 Important recent contributions to the growing literature on Catholicism in international politics and society include James Chappel, *Catholic modern: the challenge of totalitarianism and the remaking of the church*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018; Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian democracy and the origins of the European Union*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Martin Conway, 'Democracy in post-war western Europe: the triumph of a political model', *European History Quarterly*, 32, 1, 2002, pp. 59–84; and Giuliana Chamedes, 'The Vatican and the reshaping of the European international order after the First World War', *Historical Journal*, 56, 4, 2013, pp. 955–76. For a study focusing on the French Catholic missionary angle, see the essays in Owen White and J. P. Daughton, eds., *In God's empire: French missionaries and the modern world*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

century political projects, from colonial rule to anti-colonial activism, from human rights to 'Third World' liberation movements, from anti-totalitarianism to religious pluralism.

Initially, this ecumenical movement was strongly oriented toward missions, as demonstrated in a series of missionary conferences (in 1910, 1928, 1938, 1947, 1952, and 1958), and the establishment of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1921. Though missions remained a focal point of the movement, new considerations gradually developed in the course of the twentieth century. For many church theologians and leaders, the experience of the First World War in particular led to increased doubts about the virtues of nationalism, the level of social justice in traditionally Christian societies, the tenability of the imperialist order, and the value of separate religious organizations. The advent of communism and the attraction of other political religions deepened the sense that a revitalized, global church was urgently required to reverse the entropic effects of modernity. Only a Christian ecumenism attentive to a world in 'crisis' and its many needs could hope to offer humanity salvation.

In order to do this, the ecumenical movement had to work in ways that transcended the old boundaries, re-imagined theological categories, and established norms of piety around new forms of institutional practice. Through the ecumenical movement, nineteenth-century ideologies of expansion by conversion gave way to a new universalist ideology, in which Christianity would conquer not territory but the centrifugal forces that lay at the root of the modern, secular temper: nationalism, class struggle, sectarian conflict, and racism. This ecumenical agenda intended to reshape global power structures by unsettling ingrained dichotomies of civilized and backward, installing a North–South divide in the geographical imagination, advocating supra-nationality as a form of international organization, and advancing programmes of indigenization in the colonies. In doing so, the ecumenical governance of persons and institutions did not merely echo the ideals of international organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations, but represented a unique mode of global organization, distinct from the logics of political order (state or empire), the ideologies of the left or right, or economic markets. The creation of the World Council of Churches (1948), the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (1946), and the Christian Conference of Asia (1957) marked institutional articulations of what the ecumenical movement fervently believed it offered: 'a unity of mankind beyond politics, breaking through the idolatry of nation, race and class', to cite one contributor to the founding documents of the World Council.[4]

This search for unity, however, required multiple negotiations that defied easy resolution, as the articles presented here suggest. Should a transnational but primarily Protestant ecumenism close ranks with its old opponents such as Catholics and Muslims, or protect Protestant co-religionists from them? Should the movement associate itself with the broad political struggle against communism, as a necessary corollary to its ecumenical work, or seek to transcend the divide between 'East' and 'West'? And finally, should the ecumenical movement aim to restore what was left of the old moral order after world war, or should it challenge this order by fashioning new ethics of solidarity with the global 'South'? All of these issues were intimately tied to how ecumenical activists imagined emerging visions of world governance.

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4 F. M. van Asbeck, 'The church and the disorder of international society', in World Council of Churches, *The Church and the international disorder*, Norwich: SCM Press, 1948, pp. 68–9.

Ecumenism as a non-state factor in global governance

This special issue analyses the theory and practice of ecumenism as a form of global governance.[5] This approach differs from that of recent historians, who have described ecumenism as a form of 'religious internationalism', in which national actors reach out to new territory.[6] The articles in this volume follow, instead, a movement or movements that attempted to configure power in non-state ways. They do so by recovering the particular discourses on pluralism, progress, social and economic justice, and human nature which the movement's Protestant and Orthodox leadership deployed to govern the *oikoumene*. By bringing this work together, the contributions offered here show how the movement furnished not merely a sphere for contacts, exchanges, and communication, but also specific expressions of power that shaped colonial politics, decolonization movements, international regimes of aid and development, and human rights institutions.

The contributions cover the years between roughly 1900 and 1980, a period in which the ecumenical movement negotiated a Christian search for world order in the international arena. It is now customary for historians to characterize liberalism, fascism, and communism as ideological programmes that competed among themselves, and with others, to define the terms of world order in an age of profound instability and cataclysms, including the world wars and their aftermath, the Cold War, and decolonization. The articles argue that the ecumenical movement constituted a poorly understood rival to these three exhaustively studied programmes, often defining itself against them, even as movement supporters sought mutually convenient arrangements with liberal, communist, and fascist regimes. By reconstructing how the search for a Christian world order took shape in the years before the First World War, and declined for various reasons after the 1970s, this special issue invites a wider consideration of the place of religion in the clash of internationalist visions, which responded to the decline of Europe's global hegemony and the rise of superpower conflict from around the time of the First World War to the 1970s.

These efforts to establish a new internationalist order were not static but changed over time. Initially, in the first decades of the century, the ecumenical movement struggled to establish Christian universals that transcended race, nation, and empire, as well as religious differences that had historically divided the church. Just how far to follow these logics, however, triggered new but stubborn dilemmas. National and other older allegiances proved difficult to entirely jettison, as several of the articles illustrate. But the crisis spawned by the Second World War, the rise of communism, and decolonization further pushed the ecumenical movement. At the midpoint in the century it sought to create a world order on the basis of Christian unity, and a firm stance against anti-religious totalitarian systems, with the hope that such efforts would finally establish a greater measure of peace and justice in the world. As the post-war period progressed, though, ecumenical efforts to forge unity between East and West, as well as between North and South, generated internal critique about the extent to which the ecumenical

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5   The concept of global governance has been used by scholars in multiple disciplines to examine how power transcends the purview of institutions that formally exercise it, for instance in the form of expertise, science, and cultural norms. For a classic account, see Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991; for a recent historical analysis, see David Kennedy, *A world of struggle: how power, law, and expertise shape global political economy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

6   See Green and Viane, *Religious internationals*.

movement was truly universal in character, and whether its stances were not parochially Western. The ecumenical movement in the 1960s and 1970s accordingly gave consideration to new voices that challenged Western hegemony through different expressions of 'revolution' and social change, precipitating a shift in focus no longer necessarily defined by intra-Christian discussions. By around 1980, the fragmentation of the ecumenical movement – paradoxically caused in large measure by the further globalization and diversification of Christianity – diffused its impact.

This special issue, then, comprises the first collection of articles addressing the ideas and practices of ecumenism outside the framework of church history or the history of religion. This is necessary. Too often scholars have approached the history of internationalism with a narrow understanding of politics, either dismissing religious organizations altogether or approaching religion as an independent variable, acting upon power, yet somehow itself insulated from it.[7] These contributions intend to show how influential actors and organizations in the ecumenical movements attempted to reshape international order through the creation of new intersections between politics, society, and religion, leading, for instance, to the rise of new Christian interactions with racial ideologies, imperialism, and Marxism.

Accordingly, the contributors examine the encounters, exchanges, and surprising solidarities that ecumenism furnished among disparate peoples across centres and peripheries, including colonizers and colonized, communists and liberals, and religious professionals and state officials. The issue further shows how the movement's quest for a Christian world order beyond nation-states had unintended consequences. For instance, it shaped Catholic efforts to define alternative visions of ecumenical unity, attempts to reformulate (or jettison) long-held beliefs in Christianity's superiority to other faiths, and growing uneasiness with the very idea of religion as a basis of social order. Finally, the issue sheds light on how decolonization, as well as new formations of global power that emerged in the 1970s, led to the ecumenical movement's waning influence within a landscape of increasingly disaggregated Christian communities and identities.

An overview of the contributions to this volume

The first article, written by Albert Wu, shows the difficulties of overcoming the old divides that many Christian leaders, not least those active in missions, were increasingly recognizing in the first decades of the twentieth century. How and whether to overcome the old oppositions was a conundrum, and not only in Protestant and Eastern Orthodox circles, as the case of the Catholic missiologist Josef Schmidlin shows. Schmidlin recognized the dangers of 'extreme nationalism' – in his later years he opposed Hitler – and believed that only 'cosmopolitan Christianity' that 'transcends nation, race, and language' could counteract such nationalisms. To this end he was more open than most Catholics to a dialogue with his Protestant counterparts. At the same time, however, being deeply informed by his experiences in Wilhelmine Germany, Schmidlin was unwilling to break with either German nationalism or the colonial project as necessary vehicles for both the expansion and defence of Christianity, despite increasing criticisms from other Catholics on these points. His case illustrates why – despite the

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7   Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmeier, eds., *Competing visions of world order: global moments and movements, 1880s–1930s*, New York: Palgrave, 2007.

realization of a changed global dynamic – ecumenical rapprochement across 'nation, race, and language' remained elusive until after the Second World War.

Schmidlin was hardly alone in rooting his own internationalism in more local experiences. A parallel, if rather different, case is analysed by Elisabeth Engel in her contribution. She examines the efforts launched by the IMC in the 1920s to strengthen and expand the churches in black Africa. 'Indigenization' of the Christian church worldwide was recognized by the ecumenical movement as critical in an age when dependence on European missionaries and colonial structures was seen as increasingly problematic for the future. At the same time, the rise of local churches, which broke their connections to older, mostly Western-led churches, was regarded by the IMC as disruptive to its own missionary plans. The answer, at least for sub-Saharan Africa, was stimulating the development of a pan-African church, under African American leadership. Shaped by American civilization and yet racially African, American blacks could give the necessary kind of responsible leadership to a pan-African mission project as agents of IMC-related churches. While consciously attempting to break out of racial and colonial confines in its vision for Africa, the ecumenical movement at the same time racialized its mission strategy, as it tried to steer the process of 'indigenization' abroad, and at the same achieve interracial consensus among the still mostly segregated churches of the United States and elsewhere.

The ecumenical movement, for much of this period focused on missions, could not ignore colonialism or racism as threats to the credibility of the global church. Appearing to threaten the church's very conditions of existence, however, was communism. One of the most important prophets of religious anti-communism in the ecumenist circles of western Europe and especially the United States did not stem from the Western churches but was a Russian, who could claim to know the quasi-religious appeal of communism. Christopher Stroop explores the significance of the Russian exile Nicolai Berdyaev, whose own journey led him to conclude that not only communism but also Nazism were counterfeit beliefs, which could not bring the social harmony that religion – in particular Christianity – could. Already influential in YMCA circles in the interwar period, where some of its influential leaders disseminated his ideas, Berdyaev's impact was particularly strong in the years after 1945, when he informed the influential idea, particularly in American politics, that only a religiously rooted society could withstand communism. In doing so, Berdyaev also advanced ecumenism, by bringing Orthodoxy, Protestantism, and other Christians together in the common cause of finding a compelling theological and social alternative to communism.

If ecumenical theology shaped Cold War anti-communism in the North Atlantic, elsewhere –particularly in eastern Europe and Asia – it enabled surprising syntheses of communist politics and Christian faith. Justin Reynolds' article focuses on the movement's most significant non-Western Marxian of the mid century, the Indian Mar Thomite M. M. Thomas, using his early career and thought to illuminate connections between an ecumenical approach to anti-colonial nationalism and Cold War politics during the 1940s and 1950s. A local product of wartime politics and theology in his native Kerala, Thomas' Marxian-inspired 'ecumenics of suspicion' proved useful to the predominately North Atlantic leadership of the World Student Christian Federation, as it sought to fashion global Christianity into a 'third way' between the West and the Soviet Union. By involving pro-communist Christians like Thomas, and, after 1948, church leaders from communist Europe and China, the movement courted internecine divisions, while at the same time drawing on Marxian concepts to distil common objectives across geopolitical

divides. Communism, in short, was not just an enemy of ecumenical world order, but also a resource in its construction. Reynolds shows that it was one that was critically important in ecumenism's efforts to negotiate Cold War politics, and, after the post-war collapse of European empires, to reinvent itself as an avant-garde of postcolonial 'revolution'.

The church might try to transcend the divisions that afflicted Christianity and the world, but the ecumenical movement in the middle of the century was also concerned about the conditions of freedom for the church itself. Ecumenists actively promoted human rights in the early post-war period, as Bastiaan Bouwman shows in his article, in large part because they were concerned about the perilous state of religious freedom in many parts of the world. Initially, much of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs' concern was directed at Catholic countries, where Protestants had an uncertain status, or at emerging states with a heavily Islamic population, such as Indonesia and Nigeria, where 'totalitarian' religions threatened liberty of worship. By the 1970s, however, the emphasis on religious liberty had been largely replaced by opposition to unjust structures, and support of communal rights. This reflected the great influence of liberation theology and other movements, which stressed not the legal but the situational context of human rights. In doing so, the churches developed a human rights agenda focused on the structural reasons for injustice, trying to find the balance between more liberal definitions of rights and more authoritarian ones, which downplayed individual human rights. In any event, the ecumenical movement's commitment to human rights shifted substantially between the 1940s and the 1970s.

The final contribution to the issue, written by Annegreth Schilling, parallels the developments and conclusions of Bouwman's work, but focuses more on the advent and impact of liberation theology on the ecumenical movement. The World Council of Churches, launched in 1948, had initially stressed the ethical reconstruction of 'responsible society', largely within the context of the nation-state. Increasingly, though, this vision was criticized within the movement as being too focused on harmony, and insufficiently alert to structural injustice. Many thought that it was also too Western, and thus too supportive of neo-colonial inequalities, including the then dominant models of development. Primary drivers of this change in perspective were the Protestant theologians of Latin America, who emphasized the necessity of sensitizing the 'conscience' to injustices in society. These theologians, in a meteoric rise that spanned a few short years, changed the agenda and the theology of the ecumenical movement. Their vision remained contested, but some of its adherents saw the results as not so much a reflection of undesirable divisions, but more an emerging and healthy diversity of perspective in the world church.

Scholars investigating the recent history of global governance tend to focus on the political and the economic; religious institutions and initiatives receive comparatively little attention. That may seem justified in the case of the ecumenical movement: often lacking reliable avenues of access to state power, it could seldom compete with ideologies such as nationalism, communism, or liberalism in the twentieth century. Its premium on transnational solidarity increasingly frustrated ecumenists' ability to forge local political alliances and compromises, a weakness that many in the movement even came to regard as a Christian virtue. What ecumenism did nevertheless furnish was a platform for conceptualizing and analysing global problems – from totalitarianism and revolution to religious and racial conflict – and insisting that their solution could only come through a spiritual renewal. The movement's impact was thus felt not only through the (at times significant) power of international institutions to

mobilize religious constituencies around a set of common concepts, religious 'best practices', and moral vocabularies for connecting local action to global purpose. The movement also shaped itineraries of transnational activism, which resonated outside Christian circles, even as they took on political directions that the movement could never control. In these ways, it impacted the theory and practice of global governance, often in ways that were no longer so recognizably 'religious'.