

A Short Ecumenical Journey!

Harry Hagopian

Harry Hagopian, LL.D. - KSG, is a Public International lawyer who also specialised in Alternative Dispute Resolution and Second-Track negotiations. His website is www.epektasis.net and his You-Tube channel is <https://www.youtube.com/@MyEpektasis3>

A Prolegomenon

Many moons ago, I resolved rather impulsively to leave a prestigious and high-flying job in an international law firm in order to join the Middle East Council of Churches. I simply woke up one morning and decided that I was not getting the fulfilment (or job satisfaction) that I'd anticipated from my work with Intellectual Property cases across the MENA & Gulf regions. I wanted to try something quite different. This something quite different ended up being the ecumenical movement, and I found myself at the Middle East Council of Churches as assistant to Gabriel Habib - himself an iconic general secretary of this regional organisation.

But the challenge was not so much to ditch a gilded legal job for the sake of accompanying more modestly the churches on their ecumenical journeys across the MENA and Gulf regions. The real challenge was selling this impulsive idea to my family! Granted, I was footloose and fancy-free, and therefore spoilt and with little responsibility! But how could I convince mum or dad that I no longer wished to earn much money and be a regional legal beagle but rather chose to "dumb down" and join the ecumenical movement?

The mission was not easy, but my parents realised that I was serious and so to cut a long story

short I managed to get my own way and ended up having an office next to the MECC general secretary for a few years. These years were educational: they taught me about the diversity of churches, about issues they engage with, and also underlined to me the pockmarked nature of some of their questionable characteristics.

But what is ecumenism, you might well ask me? Well, in my basic words, it's an attempt by the churches to work together in order to seek a unity that would fulfil Jesus's wish (Jn 17:21) and also make them stronger. But let me be a bit more academic, since this is not a social media blog but a more serious e-zine.

Global Ecumenism

To talk about unity, ecumenism or its affiliated constituencies, let me go back as far as 1902 when HH Yoachim II, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, issued an encyclical where he raised the matter of intra-Christian relations. In 1920, he followed it up with another encyclical entitled 'Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere' in which he also encouraged the spirit of reconciliation and drew upon the First Letter of St Peter to love one another earnestly from the heart (1P 1:22b).

To look across two millennia of Christianity, a number of people tend to project a waning faith, ever-dwindling numbers in the pews and increasing ructions between the faiths. One article I read some years ago even drew analogies between the faiths and Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations'. I do not think the analogy is valid, any more than it is

valid to compare Jan Kerkhof's 'Europe without Priests' with the faith-based situation across the world.

So let me start with the essential ingredients. We're talking here about the Christian faith, but what is this faith in its essence? What is its definition? In my opinion, it is not enough to discuss the word of God and comment on it. We must carry it also, and bear witness to it in the way we live. There is no original recipe or magical wand here! We Christians must learn to become credible interpreters and disciples of God's love to humankind. I believe that therein lies the secret of a Saint Mother Teresa, a Father Maximilien Kolbë or an Archbishop Desmond Tutu who changed the world around them. In the words of the late Cardinal Franz König, then Emeritus Archbishop of Vienna, we need to transubstantiate faith through love, not institutionalise it. And in the words of St John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople and a contemporary of St Augustine in the 5th century, Christians are called to 'shine like a light in a world of darkness'.

But could such ecumenical proclivities also be dismissed as merely uninspiring and lacklustre?

True, there are a host of historical, theological, dogmatic, doctrinal, cultural and even psychological obstacles hampering this coming together and impeding a unified proclamation of the Gospel to the world. Nonetheless, it is only fair to add that some modest but nonetheless meaningful strides have already been taken in this direction. There is a sense of reconciliation within the Christian world - perhaps out of conviction, but also out of necessity and vulnerability - that is hard to underrate let alone ignore altogether despite the challenges that are strewn in its way at every corner!

To walk together, Christians need to be grounded in the Word of God, the revelation of God's face in Jesus Christ, the renewing force of God's Spirit, the discovery of the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Faith, prayer and common action can make water spring even from the desert rock of bitterness and cleanse the sin of division in Christendom. So, where are we on this road toward an ecumenical recovery that faces up to such daunting challenges? Can we actively live and witness together the belief that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever' (Heb 13:8)?

I do not wish to be carried away too zealously by my own thoughts or words! I still maintain that we are not yet ready to assume fully our ecumenical and grassroots responsibilities in a practical manner. In some sense, I still equate the chequered personality of the Church Universal today to a proto-ecclesial triptych that is the equivalent of Sigmund Freud's id, ego and superego! Indeed, there is still far too much turf staking (despite an ever-dwindling turf) that goes on within many denominations. The Church as an institution - as the body of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ - has to learn to reconstruct itself with more integrity, courage, vision and humility. It also has to learn how to commune more truthfully with its assembly of believers - that vast church outside the walls! It has to learn the message of the Gospels as much as recite its words. In this respect, I remember the stirring words of the philologist Joan Emri in her 1998 book where she averred that, "self-interest, self-involvement, self-indulgence, self-love, self-importance and self-image are too many 'selves' for the Church Universal to carry with it all at once."

Indeed, these self-imposed 'selves' weaken immeasurably the prophetic message of the Church worldwide and diminish its Christian

ministry of love, compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness - ineffable virtues that Christians celebrate at least twice annually during Christmas and Easter. What is helpful here is a love for the other that transcends dogmatic differences. Ergo, what is required is a fellowship not unlike that of the Early Church which is more basic - and therefore more grounded - than theological quibbles in order to guide the relentless dialogue over dogma itself. As an encouragement in that direction, I remind readers of St Augustine's famous phrase, "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee."

What is the Church to make of this contrast between institutional decline, ecumenical obscurantism and re-emerging spiritual awareness? I believe that the major focus of the Church should not lie simply on filling empty pews. Perhaps more serious and certainly more urgent is the realisation that we are not always in sync with the ways in which God the Holy Spirit is communicating with us. In the final analysis, ought we not perhaps recall Thomas à Kempis whose statement might also hold an answer to the present predicament, "An humble knowledge of thyself is a surer way to God than a deep search after learning"?

However, to survive in this century let alone in the next millennium with an ever-enhancing sense of fellowship that comes closer to the logos of the truth, churches and ecumenical movements alike must re-discover the sense of awe that characterises us as Christians. The most perceptive theologians have always insisted that God exists beyond our doctrinal formulations. For centuries, mystics have referred to a 'cloud of unknowing' in which we must wait before we can grasp the divine. Perhaps Christians have to endure such a period of patient waiting before they can re-formulate their sense of the sacred

and re-affirm the God-centred praxis of our common catholic and apostolic faith. Perhaps this should be our goal as we make headway into our new century.

An Armenian Perspective

The Armenian Church is considered one of the most ecumenical among the family of Orthodox Churches. And for this reason, I'd like to refer here to a book entitled *Between Heaven and Earth* by HH Catholics Karekin I of Blessed Memory. The book resulted from a series of conversations that this leader of the Armenian Orthodox Church at Holy Etchmiadzin held in 1998 with Italian historian, researcher and writer Giovanni Guaita. In his book, Karekin I discussed his faith with disarming candour.

But this honest literary legacy was not what distinguished the late Catholicos for me. Apart from being a dear and much-missed friend, he was also a bright ecumenical thinker. I remember vividly when he delivered his paper in Graz, Austria, during the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in June 1997. In a memorable statement, he asserted that "a catholicos [church leader] is a servant, who has to go and be among the people, as Christ did. The Church cannot be a stagnant institution. Today, it must be dynamic."

He also explained the oft-complex relationship between the Council of Chalcedon (the 4th ecumenical council, held in 451 AD, in modern-day Turkey) and the Armenian Orthodox Church at a time when Armenia was involved in a war with the Persian Sasanian forces. The Armenian army led by Vartan Mamigonian was defeated at the Battle of Avarayr. The outcome was that the Armenian Church did not endorse the Council of Chalcedon, nor for that matter did it convert to Zoroastrianism.

Karekin I made it his goal to seek unity among Christians, and his joint statement with St Pope John Paul II on Christology brought a ray of clarity to a centuries-old argument. "History teaches us", he told me wryly once, "that many decisions misunderstood in their own day, went on to obtain significant meaning with the passage of time." For me, this is also one of the secrets of ecumenism - an avant-garde willingness to go the extra mile in return for a broader vision that deepens our faithful love of Christ.

Middle Eastern Ecumenism

For the sake of brevity, let me say that the MENA & Gulf regions are best represented by the Middle East Council of Churches. This regional ecumenical movement sprang from missionary roots, but the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) as an institution today was founded in 1974 at its first General Assembly in Cyprus with the stated purpose of 'deepening the spiritual fellowship among the churches of the Middle East and uniting them in word and deed'. From the outset, the MECC adopted the model of "families of churches". In 1990, the Catholic Churches of the region joined the MECC formally and the organisation became representative of the overwhelming number of indigenous Christians across this whole region.

But if I look at the Middle East today, 44 years on, what do I see from my own experience in the region? I detect signs of hope and despair in equal measure. So let me share some signs with my readers as food for thought and strive to incarnate their relevance to the communities of the faithful in the region.

- I'm acutely conscious of the encouraging fact that indigenous Christians - overwhelmingly Arab in their ethnicity, but also

Iranians, Jews, Armenians and Greeks amongst others too - have continued their faith-centred presence and witness in the region. Granted, most sociologists worth their salt have already pointed out that the number of Christians has dropped dramatically over the past few decades from just under 25% to just over 5% region-wide. Yet, despite the dwindling numbers, alarming as they are in some countries such as in Palestine and Iraq (and now in Syria and Lebanon too), Christians are still very much present in the biblical lands where their faith was born over two millennia ago. Moreover, their institutions that represent the practical translation and preternatural outreach of this ecumenism - hospitals, schools, old peoples' homes, hospices, charities, humanitarian relief agencies, missions or libraries - continue contributing disproportionately to the needs of all the peoples of the region.

- It is also important to underline that local Christianity in the region is decidedly not monolithic. Whilst it is true that there are some core tenets that unite most Christian churches, there are also large divergences in the overall positions of these communities from country to country. The concerns - and thereby priorities and orientations - of a Lebanese Christian today are not necessarily similar to those of a Palestinian, an Egyptian, an Iraqi or other Christians from the region. This is why it might be possible to paint some broad brushstrokes but each country, church and community must nevertheless address its own ethos - its specific fears, concerns, hopes, needs and wants.

- One common denominator that most certainly runs across all Christian communities is that of emigration. This phenomenon which has witnessed countless papers and many conferences is largely - though not exclusively - due to the regional socio-economic or political

conditions impacting its peoples. Christians, with their own sense of global fellowship, as well as contacts and networks, are able to emigrate to the West (largely to North America, Australia and Europe) where they have many relatives and friends who would facilitate their transition to a newer world.

- But apart from socio-economic conditions that affect Christians and Muslims alike in many cases, there are other factors. With Palestinian Christians, for instance, the major compelling force for emigration is an invidious Israeli occupation with its increasingly settler-colonialist let alone apartheid policies against non-Jews. For Lebanese Christians, it is the realisation that they have gradually lost their erstwhile dominance within society since the Sykes-Picot partition (and perhaps even the misapplied Taëf Agreement), let alone the suppurating tensions roiling within their various sectarian communities. Egyptian Christians face problems with a number of Muslims on the one hand and with the state on the other and are disallowed from practising their faith freely and without religious-political interference despite the PR-friendly freedom of worship presumed under the present presidential regime.

- But there are also identity issues. Egyptian Christians - largely Copts - for instance also at times have a problem of defining their identity in relation to the whole country and their sense of almost being meta-Arab. In fact, some Egyptian Copts (mostly within the dominant Coptic Orthodox Church) have pharaonic digressions just as some Lebanese Christians retain Phoenician ones. As for Iraq, the socio-economic meltdown goes hand-in-hand with an insidious persecution against numerically minority communities - including Christians - by followers of a small but powerful brand of radical Islam that is politicised and

does not subscribe at all to a sense of tolerance or inclusiveness but tries instead to impose a Muslim caliphate in the region that would exclude all so-called infidels. We can all recall the dark and treacherous moments that Christians, Yezidis and other communities witnessed under ISIL only few years ago, whether in Mosul or elsewhere. This fear has not been dispelled completely.

- When discussing Christians, it is helpful to make a distinction between those of the region and those in the region - those tracing their roots by birth to the lands of the Bible and those who come from abroad as missionaries, workers, visitors, tourists or individuals. Much as open hospitality must be shown to the latter group, it is vital to stress that an American who comes to, say, Jordan cannot expect to impose his or her views upon locals - be they Christian or Muslim - but should rather join with them in a larger Christian fellowship of equals whose centre remains Christ Himself. In other words, a fellowship of believers working together, not a colonisation by religion, confession or money. This is why I posit that the Gulf - with its growing expatriate Christian communities across all six GCC member-states - should be more actively represented in the life and witness of MENA ecumenical activities. Building Abrahamic mini-kingdoms, with houses and programmes, is fine as a political tool for soft power, but the real challenge is in allowing members of these communities to practise their faith freely.

- Let me also add here one of my own bugbears! Most Christians at times run the risk of allowing themselves to be transported into a heady world of religion that defines, then feeds and sustains, on power. Power - whether exercised over others or upon the laity - becomes dubious if it is the dominant prism through which we witness to our faith.

Power is useful; it is even quite helpful at times to maintain the rule of law and public order, but with it also come responsibilities and a subtle awareness of how or when to exercise it. To bemoan a loss of power in a secular world is wholly justifiable. But it becomes double-edged when applied with spiritual impunity in a religious setting of haves and have-nots.

- Christians in the East have harshly suffered throughout history the consequences of the quest for power by Western Christianity. Today, we are witnessing similar - albeit diametrically opposite - quests for political power by some Jewish and Muslim groupings let alone by some groups of US Evangelical Christians who dismiss Eastern Christianity as redundant or otiose. So the ecumenical movement has a duty to channel away from the theme of post-modern critique thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault who suggest that all claims to truth, including those of theology, are merely secret bids for power. Instead, it should channel the truth toward an apolitical appreciation that real power lies in powerlessness and that the cross gives value to the weaker and poorer brother or sister, for whom Christ died - as St Paul makes clear in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 8:11).

- Finally, let me end my cursory bullet-points with a theological question that often challenges me and that has been addressed by eminent theologians the likes of Revd Dr Mitri Raheb and Revd Dr Naïm Ateek. What is the real significance of the land to Christians? How important is it for our faith, and how organic is it to an understanding of faith? How do we as Christians distinguish ourselves from Judaism and Islam in our perception of land? What is our Temple? And what are the ramifications of the answer to that question as we riffle the

pages of the Holy Bible from the Old to the New Testament?

Ecumenical Buzzwords

Can I perhaps suggest four renewable buzzwords and use them as constant mnemonics in our ecumenical concordance? The first is Metanoia - a sense of renewal and change. The second is Koinonia - an assembly of believers in communion. The third is Kairos - an opportunity in a moment of crisis that translates as a sign of hope. And the fourth is Diakonia - service among others in the fields of education, humanitarian relief and pastoral care. So can the churches help bridge the gap that straddles the practical with the probable and then leads to the possible in our imperfect lives as Christians striving to define our unity? Will the Christian communities - leadership and grassroots together - appropriate this movement and make it their own? Is the Oikumene - our inhabited earth - a reality? Or are we knocking at the wrong doors?

Should Christians not articulate the challenge that the unity of all those who believe in Christ is made visible when Christians truly take up their task in the world in which they are living, when together they speak out against all that destroys the dignity of the human person and prayerfully act together in favour of true peace? In his Letters and Papers from Prison, the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote prophetically that "We have learnt, rather too late, that action comes not from thought but from a readiness for responsibility." Are we collectively ready to assume this onerous responsibility?

Concluding Thoughts

I learnt a lot from my stint at the Middle East

Council of Churches - as I worked in Cyprus, Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine over a stretch of over a decade. During this chapter of my life, I learnt not only that the richness of the church lies far more in its diversity than in its uniformity, but that the churches should first get their own house in order before they engage in meaningful dialogue with Muslims or Jews. In so doing, Christians across the world should learn to liberate the words of Scripture from their constraining pages and learn instead to levitate the message of justice that permeates the pages of the New Testament.

And I also learnt that the Church Universal represents a potent soft power so long as it exercises this power responsibly. In this, the late Gabriel Habib - my boss - was a good teacher and my experiences with him and with other ecumenical associates worldwide helped me in my later political work across the whole MENA region - but perhaps more specifically in the Holy Land of Palestine, Jordan

and Israel. Without his guidance, I doubt that I'd have made it to the many political track-two negotiations where I also contributed a viewpoint on peace, justice, alternative dispute resolution and security issues on behalf of the thirteen traditional churches of Jerusalem.

But as a concluding afterthought, let me end this short ecumenical journey with a niggling question: Were my mum and dad eventually convinced by my foray into the ecumenical movement a few decades ago? Or did they think that this was a hare-brained fad that they simply tolerated as loving parents? Were there nods of approval or raised eyebrows? My questions might sound light-hearted, but they are also deeply Socratic because their answers would reveal our authentic and collective Christian reactions to the real challenges of ecumenism - both in practice and in theory. Are we ready to own it, grapple with it and burnish it, or do we feel that ecumenism is an unnecessary dilution of our faith and a distraction from it?