Emergence of modern ecumenical movement

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Emergence of modern ecumenical movement: Evangelical and ecumenical movements of the 19th century

Introduction

Christian church history is the history of divisions where plurality was the norm but dialogues were always continued facing divisions. Historic divisions and their misunderstandings were norm. Yet, side by side, persistent dialogical efforts occurred. Profound expressions of dialogical understanding, calling for common prayer, common witness to the society, desire for reconciliation of the churches and all paved a base for continued ecumenical understanding. These efforts provided impetus for ecumenical movements in the 20th century.

Nineteenth century contexts and trends

A number of factors in the second half of the 19th century renewed contributions to the reconciliatory factors, to the greater co-operation among Christians and between churches. During this time, Western Europe and United states were expanding their influence in Asia and Africa. Along with the imperial expansion, divisions were also brought to the Christian mission territories. Divisions were also preached along with gospel. Developments in the technology made the world smaller. Major political and industrial developments marked the nineteenth century.

Many 19th century events and tendencies are seen as converged to the Edinburgh missionary conference 1910. Individuals and groups, movements and churches contributed to the ecumenical endeavours in the 19th century. Ecumenical movements were deeply related to the social, economic and intellectual background of its time.

Missionary Background of the modern ecumenical movement.

The immediate background of the protestant missionary movement was the evangelical awakening in the protestant churches in the west in the 18th and early 19th centuries. As pietism emerged against the sterility of the German Lutheran Church and it continued in the first half of the 18th century. Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and Herman Franke (1663-1727) were progenitors of this movement. They understood Christianity as life than intellectual disclosure.

Pietism aroused the zeal for mission. Moravian church was the first one who accepted missionary work as being responsibility of the church as a whole. They were willing to go anywhere in the world in service of Christ. They were very much in line for the unity of the church. W.A. Visser ‘t Hooft mentions Zinzendorf; a Lutheran pietist, as the first one who used the word “world-wide Christian church” which points to the zeal for mission and

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establishment of Christian communities all over the world. The unity they envisaged was not organic unity but spiritual unity of all those who have been washed by the blood of Christ who are strewn throughout the world.

**Evangelical revival and inspiration**

Evangelical revival differed in different countries. In Germany, it can be traced to pietism. In Britain, it was through Wesley and Whitfield and also the rise of Methodism and creation of the evangelical party in the Church of England. Through the writings of Edward and through the missionary work of Wesley and Whitefield, conversion and cultivation of the spiritual life were stressed and personal experience became important in the life of the people. As a result, moral transformations resulted and new centres of evangelistic zeal multiplied. In US, Jonathan Edwards made this possible. The form of Christianity practiced was intense and personal through the founding fathers of evangelical movement. The outcome of the evangelical movement was the missionary movement in the 19th century. This resulted in many societies as voluntary movements and organizations to win the world for Christ. The colonial outreach of the protestant European powers expanded the horizon for missionary activities.

**Impact of French Revolution:** French Revolution in 1789 moulded the character and viewpoint of many missionaries. William Carey was one of them, he said about French revolution as “a glorious door opened, and likely to be opened much wider, for the gospel, by the spread of civil and liberty, and by the diminution of papal power”. The spirit of liberty, fraternity and equality found expression in French Revolution.

However, mission separated from church because, most of the mission societies were voluntary societies as they were independent of the church structure. Thus, missionary movement remained marginal to the life of the most churches. Historians points out that this was the result of the theology of the evangelical movement which largely disregarded the denominational and ecclesiastical lines and gave only importance for the salvation of Individuals. This individualist bent in evangelical theology was the outcome of nineteenth century private initiative in business, laissez fair economics with a minimum government control and growth of democracy.

**William Carey and Baptist missionary society**

Evangelical awakening touched William Carey and in turn resulted in the publication of ‘An Enquiry into the obligations of Christians to Use the Means for the Conversion of the Heathens’. In 1792, he prepared sermon from Isaiah 54: 2-3 with theme, “Expect Great things form God, Attempt great things from God”. His endeavours resulted in founding Baptist Missionary society. This marked the beginning of modern protestant missions. Carey’s ‘Enquiry’ influenced missionaries to contribute to the spreading of the gospel without considering ‘home’ or ‘foreign’.

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3 Ibid., 2.
5 Philip, op.cit., 4.
6 Ibid, 5.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 7.
The emergence of modern missionary societies

In the second decade of 18th century and in the first decades of 19th century necessity paved way for co-operation. Nevertheless, as the years passed by, when the missionary boards gained strength they lost the gained momentum in co-operation. In England, London missionary society evolved as the result of Carey’s letter. This society’s inclusiveness was amazing. Congregationalists, Anglicans of evangelical approach, were invited and expected to co-operate.⁹ They resolved not to send any kind of division but the glorious gospel of the Blessed God to the heathen. They even got support from Netherlands Missionary society. Another was the Church Missionary society. Those who were ignited by the evangelical movement but stayed within the church, manifested their enthusiasm for mission. Leaders understood the need and having co-operation. Thus, this urge within the Church of England resulted in founding Church Missionary society. Later for sending missionaries Berlin missionary seminary was established and many were send out and ablest among them were German people. Non-denominational societies were founded. In 1799 Religious Tract society and in 1804 British foreign Society came into being. Next was the Wesleyan Methodist missionary society¹⁰ in 1817-18, it made a partial disintegration of the cooperative endeavour began by the London Missionary society.

Nineteenth century missionary co-operation

By the middle of the nineteenth century, protestant missionary societies began to pursue their own courses independently. The early decisions of co-operation faded. Denominational or regional, all began to send missionaries of their own missionaries. L M S started as a non-denominational society eventually became a Congregationalist board. The Serampore missionaries in India were strict Baptists. In England, they had kept non-Baptist away from Lord’s Table. However, in India under William Carey they tried to keep the catholic nature. This word spoke of openness, wholeness and ecumenism.

Conferences on mission fields: From 1825 onwards gatherings of missionaries of different nationalities and denominational loyalties held in India (Allahabad 1873, Culcutta 1883, Bombay 1893, Madras 1902), Japan( Yokohama 1872, Osaka 1883 and Tokyo 1900), China (1877, 1890 and 1907 at Shanghai) and Latin America. The common ground for all of these conferences was the task of propagating the gospel.¹¹ In these conferences, they could cross the barriers of denominationalism or at least they tried to cross the hurdles on the mission

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⁹ Hogg, op.cit., 9
¹⁰ Ibid., 11.
fields. The prominent motif here was co-operation in mission. These meetings provided room for special fellowship and social intercourse.

These missionary conferences acknowledged disunity as the source of weakness in spreading the gospel and asked each other, whether, was it (disunity) the aim of the mission work? There were efforts to unite in close organic union.

Co-Operative societies

During early 1800s a number of mission societies developed, especially in United States and in Britain. These were inter-denominational having a strong urge for mission. Among them were American Board for commissioners for foreign missions (1810), American home missionary society (1826) and American Bible society (1816), Basel mission in Switzerland (1815) Swedish missionary society (1835)14. They were influenced by their background. The Bible society movement began in 1804 was an establishment of foreign and British Bible society. The societies were not considered to be related to any particular church tradition. Anglicans, Protestants, Roman Catholics and orthodox involved in particular societies in various places. Unfortunately, this thrust diminished by 1826 with the issues of publication of deuterocanonical books. Even the publication and distribution of Bible brought serious unresolved problems.

Evangelical Alliance

Evangelical Alliance was formally established at a conference in London. They stressed evangelical principles, brotherly love and wanted to promote such endeavours where after they can co-operate. Initially, the alliance produced wonderful results of its day. Different conferences of alliance gave impetus for alliances in different countries. Special prayer in the first week of the year was a result of this. This prayer showed co-operation in the midst of divisions. Unfortunately, alliance became a powerful tool of protestant activity.15 Alliance could not take critical issues dividing the protestant of its day. Emphasizing unity of the invisible church, alliance could not make a breakthrough against the divisions of visible church. It pursued objectives at odd. They stressed brotherly love by being opponent to Anglo-Catholic movement within Anglican and Catholicism.

Christian youth movements

Two great youth movements were found in London, Young Men’s Christian Association (1844) and Young Women’s Christian Association (1854). They became international organization and brought many young men and women from different churches and countries. The aim of YMCA was to unite young men who accepted Jesus Christ as personal

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12 Philip, op.cit., 15.
13 Ibid., 16
15 Fitzgerald, op.cit, 63.
saviour according to holy scriptures and to unite them all for the expansion of the kingdom of God. YMCA and YWCA became influential in the late 19th and first 20th century.

World student Christian federation was other movement founded in Sweden in 1895. Its founders were John R Mott from USA and Karl Fries from Sweden. At the beginning it had relation with YMCA and YWCA but later sought to be more inclusive and brought together representatives from different youth movements. Mott recognized that the disunity among christians is tragic impediment in mission. WSCF was not identified with evangelical protestantism and was not a proponent of any particular theological tradition.

**Evaluation and Conclusion**

One way or another way when the church was not ready to take up the commission ‘to go and to be witness’, pietist movement and evangelical awakening urged many to take the Bible and to go anywhere in the world. This resulted in sending missionaries and also constituting missionary societies. Some of them had deep and others not deep, but had relations with the church and the background. Unfortunately they brought the divisions to the mission stations also. Protestant missionary societies had their own agendas as they gained momentum. Thus, division began to surface in the fields. However, evangelical awakening and the struggles pointed to the unity and the need of unity. Unfortunately, no one could hold on to the solutions for division. Evangelicals and missionary societies could think and gather together for this but could not come out of that. This particular situation led people like John R Mott and other leading figures of the first part of nineteenth century through YMCA and student movements to impact the christian world and planned for a World missionary council in 1910.

**Bibliography**


